

# Untold Italy Episode 245: Siena - Medieval Wonders, the Famous Palio, and Sweet Treats

This is the Untold Italy Travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 245.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy Clarke:

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti, welcome to your regular dose of Italian dreaming. As we head into the harvest season in Italy my mind always turns to Tuscany and today we're visiting one of the region's most favorite and beautiful cities - Siena.

Most visitors will dip their toes into this lovely Medieval city for only a few short hours on a day trip from Florence. But here's the thing Siena has a rich and interesting history that is worthy of a deeper look. It's a place where competing neighborhoods vvy for supremacy in a hundreds of years old tradition replayed twice each summer and where locals wait for upcoming seasons so they can try their favorite sweet local treat.

Joining me today is local guide Annarita Ferranti who leads tours through the city and has a passion for its history, culture and traditions. I truly love these conversations as I always learn something new, so let's jump in and hear all about Siena with Annarita.

Katy Clarke:

Benvenuto, Annarita. Ciao. And welcome onto the Untold Italy podcast.

Annarita Ferranti:

Buongiorno. Hello.

Katy Clarke:

It's so lovely to have you here with us today, Annarita. Siena is a huge favorite of so many listeners and travelers to Italy, and mine too. And we can't wait to hear more from you. But before we dive in, can you tell everyone listening something about you, your story, and what you do?

Annarita Ferranti:

My name is Annarita, but everybody calls me Anna, which is easier to remember. I moved to

*Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes*

Siena when I was 18 years old for studying. I studied at the University of Siena Humanities. I got a graduation in what we call, Lettere Antiche, the old literature, translation, Greek, and Latin, and so on. And after this, I started, studying art during my PhD that I did in a partnership between the University of Granada and Siena. I spent there a few years, then I came back in 2013, and I finished the PhD. I started studying - I started teaching, actually, in the high school of Italy, but it was too hard for me to complete the process because it's very complicated in Italy to teach. So what I did, because during the university, I always studied abroad, Erasmus in England and then a PhD in Granada, So I started, a new life in tourism and when I was about 27.

Annarita Ferranti:

And I first, became a tour leader. So I used to lead groups through wineries in Tuscany, because, I'm a sommelier, so I love wines. And after this, I worked for a huge company of producer of wine in Italy in this area in the in the department of public relation, and it's there where I started my experience as guide. So after this, after a while, I decided to become a tour guide. First, I attended a private course in Firenze, in Florence, with a focus on Firenze and the province. And after this, I did one in Siena, which is the city where I live. I actually live in Colle di Val d'Elsa, close by San Gimignano, and now I'm working as a tour guide, as a professional tour guide in Siena and the province, and I really enjoy it.

Katy Clarke:

Amazing. Graciae. I Annarita. We so love having local guides like you on this show, as there are no better people to share the history and culture of regional Italy. I just love all your passion. And so now, you know, you were very educated person as well, so we're very lucky to have you here with us today. I just love the dedication to learning. It's so amazing.

Katy Clarke:

So now let's find out about Siena. So most people know that it is a city in Tuscany, but can you tell us where exactly it is in relation to Florence and maybe Rome?

Annarita Ferranti:

Siena is in the center of Tuscan region. Tuscany. Toscana. We are about, 60 kilometers, south of Florence and about 250 kilometers from Rome. We are right in the middle between Florence, which is closer, and Rome. It's not so easy to get to Siena, and that's a problem since the Middle Ages because the highway connecting Siena to Florence is very, very busy, so you might find traffic. The train connection is so-so, and the bus bus connection is good. But if you get highway or motorway, if you find traffic, you are in traffic. So what I suggest is usually to rent a car and maybe get secondary roads in the countryside, like, for example, the Chiantigiana, connecting Siena to Florence, that goes through amazing little towns of Chianti, famous for the wine and famous for the history. Siena is not so big.

Annarita Ferranti:

It's, of about 60,000 people, so it's very small. The city center is quite small, and, it takes about half an hour to proceed from the north to the south, but it's full of history. Why?

*Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes*

Because Siena is a competitor of Florence since the Middle Ages. Even now, we compete a lot now for reasons, because they are in a division, Fiorentina, very famous, and we are in C or D or I don't know. So we went down in the last few years, but in the past, they were strong rivals. And so we see it in Siena. We see they try to get, the capital of Tuscany, but it was unsuccessful because at the beginning of 1500, Siena was invaded basically by Firenze, by Cosmo the 1st. And after that, we lost the independence.

Annarita Ferranti:

But until that time, we were strong and, also independent. We were a republic.

Katy Clarke:

It's amazing. Like people think of Republic as not, I mean, some people might think of the Republic as a relatively new concept, but it's actually very old in Italy. There's been several Republics and Siena is one of them. And like you mentioned, it's in a strategic position, right? So you're in the middle between Rome and Florence, but as you said, it's difficult to get to. So you've managed to retain a unique identity. That's separate to Florence, which is really important. And you can really tell that too, when you go to Siena, it's got its own vibe, its own culture. And I love that about this city.

Katy Clarke:

So, so what are some of the parts of the history that have shaped Siena to be the way that it is today?

Annarita Ferranti:

So basically Siena is very famous for the tradition that takes place here as it was in the present since the 1600s, but it comes from the middle age again, which is called the Palio, the Palio, the horse race. Let's say that the Palio is the main topic, and I usually spend a lot of time talking about it because people can't believe that is a tradition, very well conserved, and still, a personal passion of every single person from there. People think that it's just an entertainment for tourists, but it's not. Not at all. So let's say that the Palio we can't skip the Palio. When you are in Siena, you have to know about it. Then Siena is very famous for another reason, for Santa Caterina, Saint Catherine from Siena, which is the patron saint of Italy and Europe together with the Saint Francis. So I usually start the tour from the church of San Domenico, which is really beautiful.

Annarita Ferranti:

It's a gothic church where you can see the relics, such as the head and the finger. And then we have the historical bank, the Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena founded in Siena in 1472 and still working, still alive, still active in Palazzo Salimbeni, which is a noble building facing the main road of Siena Via Banchi di Sopra. So this is what we usually do during a tour - 3 hours or 2 hours tour, you discover it, but there is much more to know about Siena. We have more churches. We have the church of Santa Maria dei Servi, where we host one of the oldest medieval paintings, and from there, which is in the city center, you can see a very nice landscape of Siena. Then we have the church of San Francesco, which is in the opposite side

*Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes*

of San Domenico that is, amazing for the art, of course, the medieval art, but also because it's, in 2 different territories of the contrade, the neighborhoods of Siena competing during the race because the church is divided between the caterpillar contrada, and the giraffe. So they were competitors.

Annarita Ferranti:

They were rivals in the past, and now they are not anymore. They are neutrals, but the church is in the middle between the 2. I suggest to people coming to Siena only for a couple of hours or 3 hours is to come back and stay for a few days and to use Siena as a base for exploring the surroundings, which is amazing. We are surrounded by Val d'Elsa, the valley where I live, where we have, Colle Val d'Elis, Casole d'Elsa, and Radicondoli, amazing little towns full of history. Then we have Val d'Orcia in the south, famous for Pienza, Montalcino, and Montepulciano, which is almost in Val di Chiana, another valley. And then we have San Gimignano, which is a UNESCO site that, you know, very popular everywhere. So if you come to Siena and stay in Siena, you have the chance to see fantastic countryside that is not so much touristy as Florence and Chianti Classico area is. So this is what I suggest.

Katy Clarke:

We need to know more. It's so fascinating because when you're walking through the city with a tour guide, they can, you know, understand your interests and pick up what, you know, the things that you're interested in and explore that a bit more deeply with you. So why don't you tell us a little bit more about the Palio? What is, what is it exactly? Because maybe some people have heard of it, but maybe they don't know exactly.

Annarita Ferranti:

So the Palio is a horse race that takes place, twice a year in Piazza del Campo. Piazza del Campo is the main piazza, the main square of Siena. 'Campo' is 'field' because actually in the past, the Piazza del Campo was not the main square, it was just a field outside, the first, city walls. The Palio is, simple and complicated at the same time, because, behind the Palio, behind the minute and a half, because the Palio only lasts a minute and a half, is only 3 laps around yesterday's camp clockwise behind it, we have our entire life because people from Siena are baptized into one of the 17 districts that are called, in our language, contrade. For the rest of our life, we belong into the same one Basically, which is your contrada is a family decision, so it's according to your family tradition. There are rivals contrade, allied contrade. You can imagine that, we have many travels during the Palio days related to the contrade. I really love this tradition because it's authentic, and I really recommend everybody to come once in life to see it.

Annarita Ferranti:

The Palio, as I told you, takes place on July 2nd and on August 16. They are both dedicated to the Virgin Mary, but to enjoy the Palio atmosphere, I recommend to come to Siena at least a week before because, you can see the setting up of the square, how we put sand around the square, and see the different appointments and, ceremonies that we do during the days before. During each Palio, only 10 of the 17 districts, get to compete because the space is too

narrow for the 17. And, during the official dates, the day is quite long because we start with the historical parade, which is quite long during the afternoon before the race. And then there is another moment that is the crucial one, which is the negotiation of the jockeys. The jockeys are professionals. They ride bareback. They are usually from Sardinia, the most famous.

Annarita Ferranti:

In Sardinia, the men are very small, and they are very good in riding. That's why we pick from there. And, during the negotiation, because they are professionals and they ride for money, they can be corrupted, and we know it. We know everything is allowed. And during the negotiation, you don't know what is going to happen. We hope that the behavior of the Houdaki is correct and according to the strategy that the contrada wants for that Palio, but you never know. Money is money. We really want to win the Palio. Each contrada wants to win the Palio, for the honor to receive a new Palio.

Annarita Ferranti:

Paleo is the name of the event, but also the name of the prize, which is a big canvas made of silk painted each time by a different artist. In July, it's from a local artist, in August can be international, even Botero, imagine the famous Colombian artist, realized the Palio many years ago. So that's our aim, to have a Palio, to get a new Palio that we collect after many celebrations and parades into our museums. That's why what I recommend during a tour is also to visit a contrada museum, because in into each contrada museum, you can discover and learn about the history of, that territory.

Katy Clarke:

Amazing. I didn't know any of that, actually. So that's so interesting. And I think that it's sort of sometimes when we're visiting places only for a few hours, you skip these really deep cultural meaning, which is a real shame. And I have to say that last time I was in your beautiful, countryside, we were there on the day before the Palio, and it's a very big party. Isn't it?

Annarita Ferranti:

Usually, we arrange a dinner outside, into each territory, and it's possible to take part at the dinner. And it's amazing because there you can see the politicians representing the Palio, each contrada, sorry, and the jockey speaking in front of, in front of the people from the contrada and the tourists - promising a good behavior for the for the next day, but then you don't know if, it is going to be or not. Because as I told you, they can get to be corrupted from another one, and the other one can be a rival or an ally of the rival and so on. I usually start the tour saying that the Palio is a horse race, but I usually finish the tour saying that the Palio is not a real horse race. The Palio or among the different contrade that you can understand only if you know which are the rivals and the allies competing the same time during that horse race that you choose to go.

Katy Clarke:

I love it. A bit of intrigue. This is the thing that makes the world go round and it's been happening for 1000 of years. And it's so exciting to hear in a really tiny city that, you know, 60,000 people. So the, I mean, there's like, you know, just over 3,000 people in each contract are maybe like, this is really small.

Annarita Ferranti:

There are smaller and bigger. So, yeah, but they're communities.

Katy Clarke:

So tell me, Anna, is it in the, you know, a lot of Italian cities, being maybe people are being driven out of the towns by tourist accommodation. Is that happening in Siena? Because it sounds like not so much.

Annarita Ferranti:

Unfortunately or fortunately, I don't know. It's happening even in Siena. Let's say that Siena, after the crisis of the banks, you know, of the of our bank in 2009, that's changing a lot. Siena was very healthy, and generations and generations got the opportunity of a good job for the bank. Now not anymore. Let's say that the bank is not living his best moment in his history. We hope for for a better future. And nowadays, many of the of the local people rearranged their life using their sources, working in tourism, basically.

Annarita Ferranti:

The local people are moving, and we employ our apartments or for the tourists, Airbnb or whatever, hotels, little hotels - for the students of the university. Because in Siena, we have an important university, actually. So many students from the south or the north of Italy moved to Siena for studying like I did many years ago. And they live in the center. In Italy, we are not used to have campus like you have. So our universities are into very old buildings in the center, except the scientist ones, like medicine, you know, that's in the hospital of Siena outside, but the others are in the center, so the students live in the center. And, because of Siena is very quiet, many students come and choose Siena.

Katy Clarke:

I love a university city. I think they're always most fun because young people bring such an energy to a place. So it must be beautiful. So another really important building in the city is the Duomo, isn't it? So that's right up on the hill. And one of my favorite things to do is you can go up on the rooftop up there. And I love that because you can see straight into the Piazza del Campo. What else is special about this cathedral in Siena?

Annarita Ferranti:

The cathedral of Siena, in my opinion, I studied art a lot, is one of the best in Italy. I really love explaining it because it's, a mix of many different styles. The architecture is Gothic, but the inside was decorated by many different artists, the most famous artists of our Italian culture. What people should know about it? Yes. The general information that you can find

*Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes*

everywhere. Okay. The architecture and so on. But what is very helpful to know is that for few weeks during the year, it's possible to see the Duomo with the uncovered floor.

Annarita Ferranti:

The floor of our Duomo is amazing. It's a unique masterpiece of art decorated by many artists during 400 years from the Middle Ages, from the Renaissance time, from the 1400s till the 1800s. And, when it's completely uncovered, it's amazing to visit it and, climb up the terraces and see it from the top. But also a normal visit of with a tour guide or with an expert or with a book, reading what you have. What you have is a mix of literature and art because you have a selection of the protagonist of the classical literature, even pagan protagonist of the classical literature with an inscription in Latin. And that's the result of a partnership between the artist and the intellectual who had the knowledge to to read the Greek and Latin books in that time. I really recommend it. And another characteristic of our Duomo is the unfinished Duomo, which is on the side, on the right side of the actual Duomo and is a big architecture without the roof, but with the facade that was supposed to be the new entrance of a new Duomo that the very healthy Siena, tried to realize right before the black plague of 1348. They never finished because of the plague, but it's really amazing to see how they wanted to do.

Annarita Ferranti:

And now from the museum, which is there that was realized later, it's possible to climb up the facciatone. Facciatone is how we call it and see a view. Siena of the surroundings of the city center and so on.

Katy Clarke:

It's a really interesting geography because you've got the Duomo and the church that you mentioned, the San Domenico, the basilica on the side, and they're up high, but then you go down into the city, don't you? It's a little bit steep. The good news is in Siena, they do have escalators.

Annarita Ferranti:

In some points, we do have electrical stairs, but not everywhere. You know? You can imagine that I have different people in the groups. When people don't walk very well, I select, the easiest, way. But, yeah, in Siena, there is a lot of up and down. So you deserve at the end, a Ricciarello or a piece of Panforte. For people who don't know what, they are, Ricciarelli are the typical, let's say, biscotti made, with a paste of almonds, very soft and sweet. And then, we make a fruitcake, let's say, with, candied fruits, almonds, cinnamon in the classical version, which is called Panforte. Panforte means a strong bread, but it's not at all similar to bread. It's just a mix of, of candied fruits, almonds, and spices.

Annarita Ferranti:

We do make also another version of the panforte, which is called the Panpepato with the black pepper. I really love them, and we usually make them in Christmas time, but you can find them everywhere even in other period of the year. So after visiting Siena, you can have

at the end, you can have a try of of them.

Katy Clarke:

It's a taste of the city, isn't it?

Annarita Ferranti:

A taste of the city after the exercise.

Katy Clarke:

I don't think you can say you've been to Siena unless you've tried the Ricciarelli. Like, I think that you must try it. It's really delicious. And is there a favorite bakery that you have or pasticceria that bakes them?

Annarita Ferranti:

I I do have. In Siena, when when you come to Siena, you find a famous pastry shop on the main road, the main avenue, Via Banchi di Sopra, which is called the Nannini. Nannini is famous for an Italian singer, Gianna Nannini. I really love her songs. She doesn't live in Siena anymore. She was born in Siena. Her family used to be the owner of the pastry shop. I usually don't go to Nannini because in my opinion, it's too crowded, but the the pastries are really good.

Annarita Ferranti:

I used to go with with the tourists, to Forno il Magnifico, which is a bakery open from Monday to Saturday, close by the baptistery on Via de Pellegrini, Pellegrini's Road, and, there you find Lorenzo, which is the baker. He works on the back. It's possible to to visit the laboratory or just taste, Ricciarelli, Panforte, Panpepato. And in this period of the year, they made, the Pan Co'Santi, which is a bread with raisins and black pepper and nuts for the holy saint feast. And, I think that that there is not another place where you can find them so good. I really love them. They are generous. They are nice.

Annarita Ferranti:

They offer tastings, and, I really love, going there because I feel like, an authentic atmosphere.

Katy Clarke:

Combining the history and the taste and the art, I feel like that is like the day in Siena and really, I can't stress this enough people. You need to stay overnight because you're going to miss out otherwise. When we went there for the night before the party, the night before we couldn't get a car spot because we were staying in an agriturismo outside, so we couldn't stay for the parties in Siena because there was no car spaces, so I'm very sad about it and I need to come back because it does sound like an excellent party that you must experience. And for me, it sounds like the party is more exciting than the actual race because everyone's together.

Annarita Ferranti:

The party is exciting. I agree. But 1 minute and a half of race. Unbelievable.

Katy Clarke:

Have you been able to get quite close because there's only a few people can really see everything close, right?

Annarita Ferranti:

Do you have the possibility to, to join the the race for free, but to get to Piazza del Campo, if you want a good spot around the edge of Piazza del Campo and see something, you have to get there very early in the morning and the race is in the evening. So it's summertime, so very hot. So that's an option that I usually don't recommend. A stand is more expensive, but a tourist doesn't come every year, so maybe is a good opportunity is to buy a ticket for the wooden stands, which is the cheapest solution around the square, and depending on which point, you pay different amount of money. Otherwise, better solutions can be stay in the balconies or the best, the windows, because you have the chance to watch the race and face, and see the yeah, I don't know, the historical parade when you want. And inside, you maybe have a buffet, wine, air conditioning, a bathroom. So you can rest a little bit and then see the race, when is the moment. Cause tourists sometimes, get a little bored by the, the previous part, and they want the race, soon as soon as possible.

Annarita Ferranti:

I usually stay with them, so I have the chance to see, the race from very nice points of view of the square. And, this is amazing. If you choose the cheapest solution, so to stay in the square, what is good is that you can, at the end of the race, when we know which is the the winner, you can go soon to the party and, take part at the parade, of the winners. So if you stay one of the apartments is not possible, it's just longer because it's very, very crowded. In the middle of square, there are sometimes, up to 20,000 people.

Katy Clarke:

It's a lot of people. And do you have a favorite contrada, or are you not allowed to say?

Annarita Ferranti:

I do have. It's the one where usually the tradition says that the your contrada is the one where you sleep for the first time when you come for the first time to Siena. And when I came, I spent a few days before finding an apartment, you know, and starting my student life was the Wave. She's the one with the dolphin white and blue, so that's the one that I feel closer, and it's on the back of Palazzo Pubblico, the municipality of Siena in Piazza del Campo, so it's very easy to see it. They won the Palio in July, actually. We have to be reminded.

Katy Clarke:

Amazing. Look. I think everyone who goes to Siena I don't know anyone that's been there who hasn't really fallen in love with this place because it is a really beautiful medieval city. And it's very interesting and you've obviously got this big draw, which is the Palio, but you need to

go and you need to spend time there to really understand it. And so, Annarita, how can people join you on a tour of the city and learn more with you?

Annarita Ferranti:

So I'm a professional tour guide. I have an email. Whenever you come to Siena, you can text me. I'm in WhatsApp. Sometimes people coming from outside Europe don't but we really use it, so it's really helpful to have WhatsApp when you travel through Italy. And just, upon availability, I'm available for private tours, of Siena, but also of the province.

Katy Clarke:

So we will provide on our website on the show notes here, we will provide Anna's email address to you so you can get in touch with her and book a tour because it's very interesting and multi layered city, Siena. And, I think she might, if you ask very nicely, she might take you to the pastiche to try always taste treats as well. So Gracia, Anna, thank you so much for joining us on Untold Italy today. We really appreciate you joining.

Annarita Ferranti:

It was a pleasure for me. Grazie.

Katy Clarke:

Siena is one of the best-preserved Medieval towns in Europe. There's no doubt it is picturesque and fun to explore on simply an aesthetic level but it's when you get deeper into the rivalries and traditions of the local people that you really fall in love with the city.

Guests on our Untold Italy Tours of Tuscany join Annarita or one of her colleagues exploring the contrade or neighborhood associations of Siena and learn about why this sense of belonging and commitment to their little pocket of the city is so special to the local people.

If you want to learn more about Siena and find all the places that Annarita mentioned, we've provided her details in our comprehensive show notes at [untolditaly.com/245](https://untolditaly.com/245) for episode 245. We provide these notes so you can relax and listen to the episode. Plus it can be difficult trying to jot down Italian names when you're on the go. I'm sure you'll agree.

Thanks for your ongoing support of Untold Italy. We truly appreciate all of you, our listeners joining us from around the world. If you have a spare moment we would so appreciate it if you left us a 5-star rating and review on your favorite podcast app. That way we can reach more Italy-loving travelers just like you and raise the profile of our wonderful guests like Paulo who you heard today.

Next week we're heading over to Sicily to discover the incredible bounty produced on the slope of Mount Etna. So tune in next week for that information and until then it's "Ciao for now!"

*Untold Italy travel podcast transcript. [Visit our website](#) for show notes and all episodes*