

# Untold Italy Episode 300: How Italy changed me

Italy is beautiful, inspiring, fun and a little crazy. It's not just a destination for many of us, it's a place that has and continues to influence the way we see and interact with the world. For our 300th episode, I'm sharing all the ways Italy changed me and how it might change you, too.

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:

Italy is beautiful, inspiring, fun and a little crazy. It's not just a destination for many of us, it's a place that has and continues to influence the way we see and interact with the world. For our 300th episode, I'm sharing all the ways Italy changed me and how it might change you too.

Katy Clarke:

Ciao, friends. Welcome to another episode of Untold Italy. Today we are celebrating 300 episodes, and I admit that that's quite amazing for a whole bunch of reasons, not the least of them being that we show up every week to bring you, our listeners, a little slice of traveling in Italy through the voices of those who are passionate about their country or travels there. I'm very, very proud of what we create here each and every week on Untold Italy. And I know that some of you have been here listening from the very start, from the very early days of Covid when we all struggled with our relationship with the world around us and an uncertain future. And that's carried on all the way through the euphoria of going back to Italy and the last years of exploring more and more. I've met some of you in various places around the world and it's been an absolute pleasure and my honour to spend so much time with you, whether we've met in person or you've been walking, driving, commuting, cleaning your house with my voice in your ears, but always dreaming of Italy. Grazie Mile. Thank you so much for tuning in. It means the world to us.

Katy Clarke:

Now, for those of you who are new here or perhaps haven't listened to all 300 episodes, and you're forgiven, I don't blame you. It's a lot of episodes. This podcast started almost six years ago at the beginning of the Pandemic with my friend Josie. And since then, we've covered all sorts of topics, from what to see and do in Rome, Florence and Venice and the major cities, to logistics and transport, information and tips, Italian language lessons, food and wine to try, and my favourite episodes, the ones where I chat with local Italians about the places that they love and the experiences that they would like travelers to have when they visit Italy. 300

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is a lot of episodes, and it's not easy to find specific topics on the podcast app. So I recommend that if you're looking for something specific, you go to our website [untolditaly.com](http://untolditaly.com) and do a search for the topic that interests you.

Katy Clarke:

Or we have everything nicely categorized in the ad free format on the premium version of our Untold Italy app. For example, transport Rome, Sicily, wine, and you get the idea. So now, as this is a special milestone for this episode, I thought I'd share why Italy is so important to me and how my relationship with the country I've visited most and enjoyed has changed me in ways that I never expected. But first, I want to preface this conversation with an acknowledgement of just how fortunate I am to have the ability to travel to Italy frequently. This is an opportunity that's not open to most people, and I'm very, very grateful to be in this position. And I do hope that this podcast, while it helps travelers to Italy, can also offer a little escape for those of you who travel vicariously for whatever reason and aren't able to make it there in person. For those of you who are in that position, I really wish I could take you all with me. So thank you again for tuning in because, you know, sometimes it's hard not to be able to do the things that you want to do. Now, of course, Italy as a catalyst for change is nothing new.

Katy Clarke:

Most famously, Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love* explored so many themes and stories that resonate with all of us. Who can forget the pizza scene from the movie starring Julia Roberts, where she shares her newfound wisdom about enjoying food and life with her Swedish friend Sophie at that oh so famous pizzeria in Naples, which is now turned into a bit of a tourist attraction. But the pizza's still good there if you want to go try it out. Elizabeth's story is forever etched in our collective consciousness thanks to the book and the movie of the same name. So *Eat Pray Love*. It's the ultimate travel reinvention story. And that's because she was really lucky enough to have a publisher funded four month break.

Katy Clarke:

I'm not casting any shade here, but she was very lucky to have that, and I think we can all agree that we would all like one of those. Another familiar story where Italy is the protagonist is Frances Maye's *Under the Tuscan Sun*. For her, Italy is a journey of healing and rediscovery. As she moves on from her divorce, renovating her home in Tuscany is a metaphor for rebuilding her life. So this book and the movie of the same name is less of a travel story and more of a life story. But I always enjoy rereading the slow discovery she makes as the seasons unfold in her pocket of Tuscany, which, if you don't know where that is, is actually near the village of Cortona, which is in southern Tuscany. So I think a lot of people, when they want to go to Italy or Tuscany and they want to go and see that area, it's actually not that close to Florence. So it's actually between Florence and Rome.

Katy Clarke:

So just in case you were wondering, look it up on the map, the town's called Cortona and you can actually even go and stand outside that villa. Now, I know the stories from Elizabeth

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Gilbert and Frances Mayes resonate with so many of you because you're all curious travelers and you want to keep returning to Italy again and again, despite knowing how wonderful other countries are to travel around. It becomes a little obsession trying to visit each region and discover every little Italian corner. And for those of you who may not quite understand why just yet, I'll try and describe what happened to me and the changes that I've noticed over the years. Because, you know, for me it wasn't really a big bang moment of revelations and discovery. Like, I mean, of course there's artistic license that's carried out in those books, but they are based on real life stories. But for me, it's a million things that change me gradually over time. It's those little experiences, the day to day life.

Katy Clarke:

And even though I see the day to day life only in microcosm and only in short snippets, it's really had a big impact on me. In a way that's an evolution, not a revolution, if you want to put it that way. So my Italian story started well before I even set foot in the country. And that was thanks to my wonderful high school history teacher, Miss Barclay, who opened up a workshop world of Florentine and Venetian Renaissance mystery and intrigue. We read the primary sources and journals of merchants, Pitti and Dati, and delved deep into the political machinations of the elite ruling classes of the Venetian Republic. Let's just say it was a far cry from my suburban life. And maybe I wasn't unusual as a 17 or 16 year old back then, but I was really inspired by learning about all these things and seeing that a whole world of possibilities was laid out before me.

Katy Clarke:

But even before that, I was lucky enough to learn a few words of Italian in our primary school Italian classes. And so I'll never forget the word 'tombola', which I guess is a bit like bingo. It's a game so we had to match pictures of animals and shout out the name of the animal, like 'gato' for cat. And whoever matched the most up first would win. I think everyone's early memories are so formative, aren't they? So I'm sure it's no accident then, because I was doing this tombola game at school for about six years or seven years, that Italy was simmering under the surface all along. I eventually arrived in Italy in 1993 via Switzerland on a big bus tour from London, where I was living at the time. So I was always quite adventurous. And I did leave Australia when I was 18 and went to move to the UK.

Katy Clarke:

So at this stage, Europe had already blown my mind. The contrast to our life in Australia was like chalk and cheese. The buildings, the food, all the languages, the currencies back then, the clothes, even the color of the sky was different and the strength of the sun. Our first stop on that first tour to Italy was Lake Garda. And it really was a revelation. We don't have big lakes and mountains like that where I'm from. And I was awestruck.

Katy Clarke:

Next up on that trip was Verona and finally Venice. And I can only say that I loved what I saw and craved more. What I do have is a journal from back then and I'd read from it, but it's actually pretty embarrassing and a little boring. So it's very descriptive. I think I made it for

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my parents actually back home in Australia and my brothers. But it's very descriptive and sort of like factual based and doesn't really have a lot of story. Although, you know, I think I was a little bit shocked about the time that they started drinking wine in the afternoon. But apart from that, it's very like, "oh, there was a statue of Dante looking brooding over the piazza".

Katy Clarke:

So I'll spare you from that. But you know what? I didn't know it then, but arriving in a place that's completely unfamiliar, apart from a few paragraphs written on a tour brochure, is an experience that most people will never have these days. Because now you can look up everything on the Internet or listen to things online like this podcast. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I'd only really seen maybe pictures in a brochure. I had no expectations and really no idea what to do. So what I did was I just got out and about and walked about and probably if I could give anyone advice about how to do traveling is that's what you should do, just get on the streets and go.

Katy Clarke:

So curiosity got the better of me. I kept wandering and exploring, not stopping to look at maps or even read a guidebook. If I felt anxious, I didn't know it or didn't think about it. These days I can feel a little anxious in places that I've never physically been before, so perhaps too much information is the source of some anxiety. I don't know. Anyway, in any case, my innate sense of curiosity was ignited and to this day I need to try new things, meet new people and visit new places. And I really hanker actually for those days where I didn't have any fear and I would just go and walk off in any town and I just feel like the younger generations, it's something that they're going to miss out on and I feel a little sad about that.

Katy Clarke:

But anyway, you can still recreate that if you go into a tiny town where you can't get any information on the Internet. Now, lucky for me, Italy is like 20 or more countries to explore in one neat package. From the sun drenched beaches of Puglia to the mountains of Piedmont and the rolling hills of Umbria and Tuscany, the contrast couldn't be greater. On one hand you've got Adriatic coastal charm and lots of seafood and, you know, a very relaxed way of living. And in the middle you've got these rolling hills, charming medieval towns and more of a rural atmosphere. And then when you head up to the north, you get that northern Italian refinement and beautiful, rich, luxurious dishes and wine and gorgeous clothes and outfits. And I love comparing and contrasting regions in Italy, finding out what unites them, which, you know, it's always food, but we'll have to argue over who does it better. And of course, the formal Italian language.

Katy Clarke:

But I love the differences too, the dialects, the different ways people can say ciao is unbelievable when you think about it, it's not such a big landmass, especially compared to where I'm from here in Australia. So other differences. Pasta made with egg and served with truffles is an entirely different dish, even though it's pasta to the simple orecchiette with cime di rapa in Puglia. So you've got a very rustic dish in Puglia that sort of speaks to the land

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around it. And then you have a very, very luxurious and rich dish from Piedmont, which again reflects the landscape and the just the general vibe. I love all these differences. It makes me so excited and I can't wait to discover all of the regions and sub regions among them. But you know something that has changed? Well, you know, I do really love to go exploring and I'm really curious.

Katy Clarke:

But what has changed is that now I recognize that instead of hoovering up and going to different places like I did in my 20s, there's really beauty and joy in getting to know a place deeply. And that brings me to Rome, which was a city that I visited a few years after my first Italian trip and which I actually had no desire to return to after my first trip. I arrived with not a lot of cash, like I was dirt poor as far as compared to what I am now. And I had no extra money, like there was barely money to get dinner. And I also was there with a soon to be ex boyfriend. And so let's just say it was no Roman Holiday. We tramped the streets angrily, you know, having petty fights and ate dodgy pizza from places near the station. And to this day, eating from dodgy places near the station is still a no, no, that's 30 years later.

Katy Clarke:

So a big tip for you, something that shouldn't be too surprising, but if the pizza is really cheap and covered in a thick layer of cheese, it's not that good. I think it's pretty obvious, but just so you know. So on that trip we ticked all the boxes, of course. Colloseum, Vatican Museums, Pantheon. And you know, the Vatican Museums was crowded and squashy even then. And for whatever reason, surprise, surprise, I was not enamored with Rome. But I'm so glad I persisted because now that I visit the Eternal City sometimes twice a year, I just couldn't love a place more. I have my favorite coffee spots, restaurants, shops, neighborhoods and walks.

Katy Clarke:

And I love crossing over the Tiber river at Isola Tiberina from Trastevere and walking over to Testaccio to meet friends and have dinner. And you know what? I always try to visit somewhere new on each of my trips to Rome because as I mentioned before, curiosity is always a motivator. And the last time I did that, it was the Palazzo Massimo Museum, which is overflowing with ancient treasures.

Katy Clarke:

I would definitely recommend a visit and go check it out. If you love ancient history, I couldn't believe it. It's just floor after floor of mosaics and sculptures and artwork and everything to do with ancient Rome that's been collected over the years. It's just magnificent and I've never seen anything like it. Italy does reward curiosity and you will never be bored. If you love history, it's all around you. If you live for food, you will eat better than you ever had before. If you're inspired by art and architecture, it's there too, as well as jaw dropping landscapes and people who are really genuinely excited when you try to speak to them in Italian and who are very curious and pleased that you made the effort. Imagine if you love all of these things, Italy is the perfect package to unleash that curiosity. And again, it rewards persistence. So I

am so happy that I persisted with Rome because if I had have left on that first impression where you know less than ideal circumstances, I would have missed out on so many things.

Katy Clarke:

Now, if my solo Italian adventures brought out curiosity and taught me the benefits of persistence, traveling Italy with my family taught me the Italian concept of slowing down. Piano. Piano. Enjoying la dolce vita, the suite life. Seeing it all with twin toddlers in tow was quickly no longer an option. Instead we needed to take our time and ease into vacations in a very different way. So back living in London, I'd been living in London. I came home to Australia and then I went back to London with my husband and children when they were just little. We got into the habit of driving to Italy from the uk, stopping over at my cousin's place in Switzerland before settling into a smaller town in the north of Italy for a week or so.

Katy Clarke:

One September we hunkered down in Santa Maria Ligure on the Italian Riviera. The tourist force had returned home and we enjoyed the local life. The kids were fussed over by the local nonni and we shopped for dinner at one of the most enchanting and full to the brim providore you'll ever encounter. Honestly, this place is magnificent. It's like an old school providore and it's got a wine section, a cheese section. It's really lovely. I can't remember the name off the top of my head, but I will ask Katie to put it into the show notes. We would walk along the Lungomare at Santa Maria Ligure and stop to look at the boats bobbing in the water and stroll up to the castle on the hill.

Katy Clarke:

Life is pretty simple when you've got a couple of twin toddlers now. One day as we were having our little walk or passeggiata, we stumbled upon a local music festival in a tiny little piazza. Our daughter has always loved dancing and she started bopping along to these jazz grooves that were coming from the little band that was playing in the piazza. And she was really cute, she really was. And she must have caught the eye of a little boy who decided to make his move. And what he did was he walked up to her, pinched her cheeks and planted a kiss on her. And she literally let out the most - hugest scream that I've ever heard.

Katy Clarke:

So, good for her. She's got an inbuilt consent mechanism and, you know, she did not cons. So therefore, there was the scream. The little boy, whose name turned out to be Giacomo, was a little bit stunned, and his mum swept in, apologizing profusely. Giacomo got a good scolding. But after all the excitement of her first kiss, on the Italian Riviera, no less, my daughter got back to laughing and dancing and enjoying the music. And we all did, until the sun dipped below the horizon and it was definitely time for some more pasta al pesto. What did I learn from this? Well, for my travels, I'm very sure that's an experience I wouldn't have had without the kids in tow.

Katy Clarke:

We likely would have stayed somewhere different and probably would have had been getting ready for dinner or exploring another town when that concert was happening. Enjoying this slow moment in a regional Italian town was magic. But it also reinforced something I already knew deep down, that most people have the same core desires, no matter where they are in the world. To enjoy those simple moments with family and friends and music and laughing and dancing, and also to not have their kid embarrass them in public. We've got so many lovely family memories from our travels in Italy, from mega highlights like boat trips around Capri to simpler moments like cuddling baby goats in Tuscany and my son doing his Roman pasta challenge earlier this year. He's also got a very strong connection with a place in Emilia Romagna, which he always wants to go back to, that revolves around balsamic vinegar, which he's obsessed with. So we have a really strong connection as a family to Italy, and I can't wait to see how that evolves.

Katy Clarke:

After all, these children are half Italian, and while they're currently in their zooming around, wanting to see the whole world era, I'm quite sure that Italy will lure them back. Now, if you would like a more introspective and deeper look at the profound ways exploring Italy with children can impact you. Anthony Doerr's memoir, *Four Seasons in Rome*, captures this beautifully. He relates the beauty and frustrations of raising his young twins, and they were literally infants when they got there. Over a year spent in Rome And I loved reading this perspective and his unfolding appreciation of Italian life. It's definitely worth a read, even if you are not the parent of twins yourself, because he writes absolutely beautifully. Another way that Italy has made an impact on my life is a deeper appreciation for attention to detail and quality and the commitment to tasks necessary to make make products that last. Our world in Australia can be very much about fast paced efficiency and low cost options.

Katy Clarke:

It's so easy to fall into a rut and rely on Amazon orders and home delivery for all manner of things. When I'm in Italy and surrounded by centuries old architecture, some standing for over a millennia, it always makes me stop and reflect on whether the things that we create today will last and be considered as beautiful as we find those remnants of the past. I love the quiet, nonchalant confidence of Italians who simply know that their heritage is there right in front of them, waiting to be enjoyed and admired. This commitment to tradition is something that I deeply respect. From the costumes the locals wear in the festivals in South Tyrol, to the meticulous management of balsamic vinegar barrels and Parmigiano Reggiano cheese in Emilia Romagna and the Saints day rituals in southern Italy, these practices are slow, methodical and committed to quality and a deeper experience. You can't rush these things to make them better. So how do they know that in Italy? Well, I guess Italians have been working at celebrating in this way for centuries. So whether it's perfecting the latest Barolo vintage or selecting the most suitable fruits and vegetables at the market, I love watching Italians go about their day or making something unique with an eye to longevity and traditional.

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Katy Clarke:

These days when I'm in Italy, I try and bring back some of that commitment home with me, whether it's an item or a feeling. So one time I bought a tablecloth made from Umbrian linen that we use for special occasions in our family. But often it's the special memory of watching and listening to someone take immense pride and pleasure in creating something for others to enjoy, whether that's a delicious cheese or a ceramic bowl. But certain traditions in Italy can also be a little frustrating. Watching the famous bureaucracy grind away and having to adapt to infrastructure, run on truly antiquated processes and ideas can almost tip you over the edge, especially if you run a business that relies on those things working. But what I've learned from traveling and being in Italy is that sometimes and somehow this stuff magically comes together at the last minute the way that it always has. Bringing your type A control freak tendencies to an Italian negotiation is not going to get you anywhere. So where we assume in our culture that everyone's looking for a growth opportunity.

Katy Clarke:

As a general rule, Italians are looking for an enjoyable and relaxing life. So if you're ever worried about robots and AI taking over the world, go to Italy. They are all stuck in the early 2000s when it comes to Internet infrastructure and other consumer technologies. Well, I'm probably a bit exaggerating, but they don't actually seem to be motivated to change those things all that much. There are exceptions, of course, and, and let me be clear, Italy is a very modern country in a lot of respects. It has an outstanding engineering and technology talent and some incredibly, you know, high end and high tech businesses. You just have to look at Ferrari and Lamborghini to see that. But for the most part, Italians are quite happy, it seems, doing things that they've always done and things that will continue that way as far as the eye can see.

Katy Clarke:

I guess living in places that have endured for centuries largely unchanged, will do that to you. I love this and I love to, you know, really take stock and take that home. But even in the highest tech industries, people in Italy stay connected to traditions, daily rhythms of the land and people. I'm generalizing, of course, but I'll never forget an Italian boss that I had when I was working in the tech industry, who was generally inspired by all the possibilities of automation and engineering, but whose favorite thing to do ever was to go home in August and spend a simple Ferragosto summer break with his extended family by Lake Garda. Simple dishes, long conversations that went well into the night, spending time with family and friends and being in nature were his numero uno priority. He simply would not adjust his schedule if it meant missing out on this for at least two weeks a year, preferably a month. I've seen and heard this from Italians from all walks of life, and it's not performative.

Katy Clarke:

Where we like to go out, we'll out with decorating and up in the ante on dishes that we're making, Italians have an easy rhythm that goes lockstep with traditional. Dishes come out for Christmas in the same way that they have every year, since anyone could remember based on what's available at the time, not what can be flown in. At certain times of the year, you'll find

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special cakes at the Pasticceria that are simply made at no other time of the year, no matter how delicious they are. Pandoro and Panettone are for Christmas. Sometimes you see them at Easter, but that's something to look forward to and cherish and to argue over who makes the best one. That's another thing I love about Italians. They love to argue, but it's in a very friendly way. Moving with the seasons and connecting to that rhythm is something I appreciate more thanks to spending time in Italy.

Katy Clarke:

Spring in Venice looks and feels different to autumn and fall. There's a different energy. So in spring you've got like a rebirth, a renewal. And it, you can feel it in everywhere that you go. Like streets start to become buzzy and more energetic. In winter, everything is like a little bit languid, slower pace, but in a cold weather kind of way, not like it is in summer. Seasons are important and they provide a reset point for whatever came before and what's coming next. It's comforting and predictable and it's really much more so than rushing about.

Katy Clarke:

Now, I don't want to sound like I'm romanticizing Italy too much. It is a country just like all of ours that is full of contradictions, politicians behaving badly, power imbalances and wealth inequality and, you know, corruption and all of those things. As tourists or travelers, we might not see this side because in truth, we're not really looking for it. We want that escape and that feeling of wonder and awe. But once you've visited a few times, you might pick up on this a little bit more. An ill kept beach, unnecessarily overcrowded attractions, frustrated teenagers with too much time on their hands and few opportunities, or trash piling up on street corners. What this has emphasized to me is that nothing is black and white and two or more things can be true at the same time. Italy can be glorious, inspiring, full of wonder and excitement, but at the same time can be frustrating, annoying and bewildering.

Katy Clarke:

And I think it's because of these contradictions that I keep going back. There's no yin without yang. Or to put it another way, how can you appreciate beauty if you haven't seen the ordinary or ugly? At its most intriguing, for me, Italy is a place where curiosity and persistence are rewarded, tradition is enhanced by innovation, and people connect over micro moments and community and where you never know what's around the corner. It's the place that inspired and nurtured countless artists, writers, architects and designers. But it also holds its communities and traditions close. So there you have it. That's my Italian story. It's one of incremental change and unfolding discoveries.

Katy Clarke:

I know that fast and quick, revelatory stories are what's popular these days. But you know, that's not my experience, at least when it comes to Italy. With each interaction with Italy, I've grown and changed and I wouldn't have it any other way. For me, Italy was never a therapy project. Although to be fair, at times it has been therapy. And let's all pay respect to that life changing cheese. Instead, Italy has become my work and community and has fueled my creativity. And for that I will be forever grateful.

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Katy Clarke:

What would my life be without Italy, I wonder. We'll never know. But the beauty is that for sure, Italy has given me more than I will ever share back. So tell me, how has Italy changed you? Was it a lightning bolt impact or has it been a slow burn of discovery? I'd love to know. Everyone has a unique perspective on their travels, depending on where and when they go and their situation in life. And that's why there is no right or wrong way to travel and experience things. You do you. Go your own way and have those moments of curiosity and discovery. If you're in your fast speed, curiosity driven travel era, go for it.

Katy Clarke:

If you prefer a slower pace, you do you too. There's something there in Italy for everyone. So that's a wrap for today. There's only one more thing left to do now and it's very important and that's to thank our incredible Untold Italy team. The other Katie Clark on organizing everything and the podcast notes that are so good they even get their own reviews. Thank you, Walter the Pole Vaulter from Canada. We really appreciate that review that you did recently. We also have Mark on audio editing and making everyone sound fabulous.

Katy Clarke:

Cassie who looks after our app and making sure you know that the podcasts are available there. And then there's Olivia and Andrea from Italian Wine Tales and our tour team as well, and our trip consulting team. None of this is possible without them, so I say Grazie Mille to them and to all of you. It's no coincidence that most of these people I've met through this podcast and they share of course our wonderful connection with Italy. So that's one more thing to add to the list to be grateful to Italy. For next week, I'm introducing you to one of our favorite guests who has joined us on several tours. Always fun and with an unmatched passion for Italy. You're going to love her.

Katy Clarke:

But until then, it's ciao for now.