

Untold Italy Episode 303: The most Christmassy towns in Italy

From snow covered villages in the Alps to the place of the original Nativity and of course, Rome, the home of Christianity in Europe and the sparkling lights of Milan, Italy is bursting with the spirit of the season. So if you're thinking of a festive trip to Italy, listen on. We're sharing the best places to find the Christmas spirit in Italy.

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:

Buongiorno a tutti. Welcome friends, to the Untold Italy Podcast. I'm Katy Clarke, your host, and my team and I are obsessed with helping you discover the Italy that we love - unhurried, special and full of wonder. From the beautiful landscapes and architecture to each delicious dish and drop of wine. We run boutique small group tours across regional Italy and offer personalized planning services. We also created an app that helps you with curated choices on the go. This podcast brings all of our passion and knowledge together with real conversations, clear advice and stories that help you build an Italy trip that fits your style. Andiamo. Let's begin today's episode, the last one before Christmas.

Katy Clarke:

So, like we've done each year since we started the podcast, we're celebrating Italian style with a look at the most Christmassy towns you can visit across Italy. And if you're a Christmas lover, you're going to want to listen right to the end because I'm making a special announcement that I know a lot of you have been waiting for. Now, if you've been listening along for a while, and I know many of you have been here from the start, thank you so much for that, you will know that I think that Italy is generally very terrible at marketing, and Christmas is probably the best proof of that. Most people know about the Christmas markets in Germany and Austria and other parts of Europe, but they've never really heard what happens in Italy at Christmas time, which is kind of surprising since Rome is really the center of all of the celebrations from the Catholic perspective. So what I'm going to do today is let you in on a little secret. An Italian Christmas is nothing short of magical, especially if you venture away from the big cities and into the countryside and smaller cities and towns, because this is where you'll find the traditions and rituals of the season that are unique to each region and town, that go back generations.

Katy Clarke:

They're not part of a huge Christmas market scene full of thousands of people. They are small, community oriented and rooted in history over many, many centuries, in fact, and I'm going to share a few of them with you so that you know what to look for if you decide to travel during the Christmas season and you're the type of traveler that likes to connect with local culture and people. I caught the back end of Christmas in Rome and in South Tyrol earlier this year, and it was such a fun and festive time and so charming and unique. And that's because the Christmas season goes on until January 6th, actually, when it all wraps up with the Epiphany. Now, as a bit of a Christmas junkie, I've been to a few Christmas markets around Europe and I think the Italian Christmas experience is my favorite. And that's probably not going to be any surprise to anyone, but I've been to many of the big German Christmas markets and also Montreux on Lake Geneva, where Santa whizzes over the lake in his sleigh, which is pretty cool, actually. I do know I could be a bit biased, but objectively, I think the scene in Italy is very special. And not to put too fine a point on it, of course the food is a lot better unless you are a big fan of German sausages.

Katy Clarke:

So let's dive into the various spots you can visit, how you can build a Christmas itinerary and really experience an Italian Christmas. And spoiler alert, they may not be the obvious places that you see on social media, but I'm going to take you on a trip from the heel of Italy's boot to the top and share some very special places that are charming because of their community spirit and traditions. But before we start our south-to-north journey through Italy's most Christmassy towns, let's talk about what to expect in Italy's major cities, as most trips will start in these places. And it could be a good idea to maybe start with some of the big Christmas experiences in a city like Rome or Milan and then go on to these smaller towns so you get a bit of a contrast. So first up is Rome, the Eternal City, and there can be no discussion about Christmas in Italy without understanding what happens in Rome. The Eternal City, being the home of the Catholic Church for 2,000 years, has a very special relationship with this holiday. There are over 900 churches in the city and Christmas being one of its major celebrations, you can expect them to be dressed up for the occasion and hold many concerts and services that happen in the lead up to the big day on the 25th of December. Of course, the main event is at St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City, where the Pope delivers midnight Mass, which is very, very special if you're able to make it there. And even if you're not religious or Catholic, it's worth paying a visit to St Peter's in the build-up to Christmas to see the giant sparkly Christmas tree at the front.

Katy Clarke:

And inside, they have a very large Nativity scene that's inside the basilica itself. We're going to talk about the Nativity in a little bit more detail later, but if you want the real deal, you'll find branches said to have been from the original Holy Crib at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. And that's not all in Rome, if you like a big Christmas event, there's the Christmas World Fair, a Villa Borghese with rides and stalls. This one is popular with locals, but it's not traditionally Italian. You can kind of expect, you know, the local Winter Wonderland type experience that you would see, say, in London or New York or any of the big cities around the

world. The market in Piazza Navona is a little bit more traditional and it attracts big, big crowds. There are craft stalls and a vintage carousel, and we stopped by there last year and it was very, very busy with Europeans and Italians.

Katy Clarke:

It's a really lovely, buzzy atmosphere and very pretty and it's well worth a visit, but it is very crowded as well. Also very pretty are the giant Christmas trees outside the Colosseum and Piazza Venezia. But if you're looking for a more local feel, head to Trastevere and Monti districts where you'll find a little more villagey atmosphere. Now, late afternoon is the best time of day to be wandering around Rome as the sun sets and the festive lights are turned on. So put on your boots and coat and join the Italians enjoying the festivities as this gathering of Romans doesn't happen really during the warmer months as they're way too busy and the city is too crowded. Now heading north to Florence, and in keeping with its reputation, the city leans into its artistic heritage. Apart from the beautiful trees in front of the Duomo and Piazza della Repubblica, the Ponte Vecchio is lit up with an interactive artistic light display each year called the Luminari, and it's very beautiful. They project lots of different images onto the bridge and you can see it from lots of different vantage points throughout the city.

Katy Clarke:

There's also a German-style Christmas market. I don't know why they want to do a German-style one, though, in Piazza Santa Croce. So like I said, I'm not sure why they do it, but it's cute, if not very typical to Florence. In Venice, the Piazzetta on the Grand Canal always has a beautiful, beautiful tree. And the city looks so pretty with the light strung up across the narrow streets and canals. They also have an ice rink at Campo San Polo. But my favorite thing is the annual Babbo Natale regatta.

Katy Clarke:

Babbo Natale is Santa Claus and that's the Santa Claus boat flotilla. So on 21 December this year, a parade of decorated boats with rowers dressed as Santa will make its way down the Grand Canal. So you have to love that they put a Venetian spin on things. Elegant Milan always looks gorgeous at Christmas. The tree inside the Galleria Emanuele is considered one of the most beautiful in Europe. Every year there's also one in front of the Duomo, so you don't really need to go far to get your Christmas fix. And don't forget to stop for a coffee and slice of Panettone at one of the historic cafes. This is, after all, the home of Panettone, so you must try it there.

Katy Clarke:

Out of the center, the Navigli canals are strung up with lights and there's a general festive feeling in the air. I love the antiques market there at this time of year and the whole festive vibe at the bars and cafes there. Now, all of these cities have mostly what you'd expect from Christmas decorations and activities in any kind of city around the world. But when you head down south to Naples, things start to get a bit more typically Italian. And I mentioned the Nativity before and in Italy they are called Presepe and displays depicting the birth of Jesus that often include the wise men, shepherds and various characters from the Christmas story.

This is a centuries-old tradition begun by St. Francis that is extremely important to Italians and it's grown into something that's much bigger. Now the Nativity scene includes a cast of thousands, from bakers and butchers and candlestick makers.

Katy Clarke:

It's like a little world made of miniature figures depicting scenes from daily life. You'll find these Presepi or nativity scenes in churches. And if you're in Naples, the cloisters at Santa Chiara in Naples, there's a beautiful one there. And you also find them in public spaces in places around Italy. And in the way that we have Christmas trees, Italians have their Presepi and will collect pieces for it over the years and hand them down through the family. So there's a very special street in Naples where you can buy these figurines. It's called Via San Gregorio Armeno and it's the place to go to acquire your presepe pieces. It's open year-round, but at Christmas time it's absolutely heaving with locals.

Katy Clarke:

You can buy your own little pieces as they make a great souvenir. My daughter has a miniature fruit stand, which is so cute. It's got little oranges and lemons and lots of different fruits, grapes and the like. And if you're going there, you know, you can pick up lots of these things. They've got, even got like a water mill with running water. I mean, it could get, you know, kind of out of control if you don't stop buying them. But they're not the cheapest souvenir, but they are a good one. If you're going there and you get a handmade version, you can expect to pay around €40 to €50 for a small piece and you know, thousands for a full scene.

Katy Clarke:

Unfortunately, there are some cheap knockoffs that are targeted at tourists and they are generally found at shops with miniature cartoonish figures of well-known politicians and football players. And I'll just leave it at that. So if you go down this street without knowing the context, you might think, oh, this is really cute and think that it's nice to have all these like mini, it's like, I guess it's like a mini Sylvanian families. But you miss out on the story behind the Presepi, which I've told extremely briefly here. And it's really, really important and significant to Italians. So if you want to learn more, definitely read up on Presepi because it's, it is very interesting. Now let's head out of the big cities with their bright lights and big Christmas trees and head out into the countryside where the festivities may not be as grand in execution, but they will surely give you the feeling that you have stepped into a fairy tale full of wonderful characters and magic. I think it's so lovely to see the contrast between the celebrations in Rome and the cities compared with the smaller towns.

Katy Clarke:

And in fact, I think it would be a shame to miss this contrast because then you can appreciate just how special it is when you experience communities coming together to celebrate with time-honored traditions as they have over many generations.

Katy Clarke:

Our first stop is Locorotondo in Puglia, which, in my opinion, wins Christmas decorating every single year. I'm of the opinion that Christmas decorations should be classic and classy. Don't tell my kids. We're still in the phase in our house where we have to put on the decorations that they made when they were three. So we're still there and one day I'll get to my classic and classy treat. But in the meantime, I will admire Locorotondo. So here they have the situation perfectly sorted, because Locorotondo is a whitewashed town and the perfect backdrop for decorating. But in December, it becomes a glowing maze of arches, stars, garlands and handmade decorations, all in red and green.

Katy Clarke:

So you've got the white backdrop and the red and green decorations and the sparkly lights.

Katy Clarke:

Time for a quick break, shorter than your morning espresso. If you've been dreaming of experiencing Italy the way it's meant to be lived, slow, unhurried and with locals who open their homes and hearts. Our Untold Italy tours are now open for 2026 and beyond. We handle every detail, so you can just show up and soak in the magic. Spots are limited and many fill months in advance. Check the link in the show notes or visit untolditalytours.com for details.

Katy Clarke:

But the reason that it's special isn't just that it looks good, but it really does look good. But the real reason that it's very special is that it's created by local groups and the community comes together to celebrate the season and present their town in the most beautiful way. So this is not something, you know, like people independently going out putting on their decorations. It's very thought-forward. Everyone's coming together to make sure they present their town in the best way possible. It's so lovely. Every street that you wander down is very pretty and thoughtfully dressed with local crafts and decorations. And you know, that wouldn't be possible without a huge team effort.

Katy Clarke:

They're not doing it for tourists; they do it for themselves. Next, we visit Greccio in the Lazio region. And it was here that St. Francis staged the very first live Nativity back in 1223. This is amazing. This is a tradition that's gone on for 800 years or more. And it was a radical move designed to inspire the local people by relating the Christmas story back to their own lives.

Katy Clarke:

We'll hear more about St. Francis in an upcoming episode as the 800th anniversary of his death will be celebrated. Not celebrated, but commemorated in Italy in 2026. But for now, it's enough to say that this living Nativity inspired many thousands across Italy for centuries. And the tradition of Presepi that I talked about earlier today, the town enacts the original Nativity each year, just as it did over 800 years ago. And the ceremony is built on faith, community and tradition. So if you're drawn to the spiritual and historic side of the season, rather than the markets and celebration, then visit Greccio belongs on your list. Heading

further north into the Marche region, Candelara hosts a candle festival where at certain times of the day the electric lights are switched off and the town is entirely lit by candles. Under candlelight, you wander between stalls and Nativity scenes, enjoying live performances under candlelight.

Katy Clarke:

It's really intimate and a little theatrical. And again, this is a community effort that has a lot of thought and consideration put into it. All across Marche and Italy, communities come together like this in celebration. We've already mentioned Florence, that is a city of lights at Christmas. But other towns in Tuscany celebrate in a similar way. So in Arezzo, they have the Citta del Natale, which fills the Piazza Grande with wooden huts and Tyrolean-style stalls. There are light projections on the medieval buildings and plenty of local food and wine. Empoli also puts on a beautiful display in their medieval town center.

Katy Clarke:

Now these light projections are something I've only really seen in Italy, apart from maybe big mid-winter festivals that you might get at home. And they are absolutely beautiful and they're free to experience because they are part of a local community event. So local artists work on the light projections and they may include famous artworks from the Renaissance or more modern designs. And I just recently saw an example further down south in Bari, in Puglia, on Instagram, I think recently with the cathedral all lit up in a stained glass light display design, it was very, very beautiful. And what I especially love about these installations is that they're not just a bunch of cheap plastic that is going to go into landfill at the end of the season. This is a truly special and unique way to showcase the local community and the season. And it's environmentally friendly too. So, you know, we're just projecting light, we're not actually consuming anything.

Katy Clarke:

And I think that makes it even more special.

Katy Clarke:

Now, we can't mention Christmas towns without taking a trip to Gubbio in Umbria. This city is famous for the world's largest Christmas tree, which is in fact an enormous light installation shaped like a Christmas tree on the slope of Monte Ingino. When it lights up, the whole town glows beneath it. It is dramatic and a bit quirky. And our local resident, Untold Italy team member who lives in Umbria, Sarah. She lives not far from there, and when she first moved to Umbria, she told me she thought it was a little bit cheesy. But I spoke to Sarah just a few days ago after this year's lighting ceremony of the big Christmas tree, and she told me that it's now one of her favorite times of year because once again, the community comes together to celebrate and admire the work of fellow locals who pull together to make the spectacle happen.

Katy Clarke:

Sarah said it was shoulder to shoulder in Gubbio at the ceremony, and it was absolutely beautiful. And her teenage daughter was, you know, determined to attend, so that's why they all went down there. And I love when teenagers are involved in this type of celebration because, you know, I think they do like that sense of tradition, and I think it's an important way that we can maintain our communities by getting the younger people involved and including them and making them excited about things like a giant Christmas tree on a hill. And this, for me, is the true spirit of Christmas. People coming together to be grateful for each other. And, yes, a giant Christmas tree light installation.

Katy Clarke:

Magnifico. And for our last two towns, we're heading north near the border with Austria to the South Tyrol region. Unique in Italy thanks to its Alpine culture, which is a lovely mix of Italian generosity and Germanic efficiency. Plus, with their very own traditions and language that can't easily be defined. Visiting this area at Christmas time is truly magical and dramatic, with the Dolomites mountains looming in the background and snow floating down around you. But you won't be surprised to learn that it's the community spirit that I love. There, from cheese makers to wood carvers, you'll find the whole raft of the community involved in celebrations. And it's a really special time to visit a truly spectacular area. The town of Bressanone or Brixen is the Austrian version.

Katy Clarke:

And a lot of places have two names in these parts, the sort of Germanic one and the Italian one. And this town has one of the prettiest settings in South Tyrol. It often appears on the top list of places to visit in Europe at Christmas time. And it's really special because its Christmas market sits in front of the cathedral there. And in the evening, the Bishop's palace turns into a stage for a light show that changes every year. It's a small, walkable and very charming town with a typical blend of Italian and German culture that you can taste in local dishes like the Tyrolean apple strudel and mulled wine. And you can admire in local crafts like wood carving. And there's so many cute little decorations made out of wood and like little carvings, and it's really special. In Bressanone, Christmas stands for togetherness, and this theme is an important one and very typical of South Tyrol, where there's a strong commitment to locally sourced food, wine and crafts.

Katy Clarke:

So everyone supports each other and mass-produced items are strongly discouraged. So, you know, it's absolutely gorgeous in so many ways. Everyone's coming together, supporting each other, and living in the shadows of this amazing natural backdrop. Now, the very last town that I'm going to mention, the seventh town, is probably a bigger one and probably the best well-known in Italy and in Europe, but Bolzano is one of the Christmas market towns in the Dolomites, and I just loved it. This city is the gateway to the Dolomites, and it's easy to reach from Rome or Milan and Venice via Verona by train. And here, the main square, Piazza Walther, fills with wooden stalls selling ornaments, woolen hats and scarves, and local treats. There are bands playing carols and a beautiful tree.

Katy Clarke:

And all the while, the snowy mountains rise in the background. I'm not ashamed to admit that I went a bit nuts shopping at the market. I got the cutest handmade felt slippers with edelweiss flowers embroidered on them. And edelweiss is really the symbol of South Tyrol. So it's such a cute little flower and it's so emblematic and you'll find it on everything there. And they also have beautiful Christmas decorations, and again, they're not selling junk here. It's all beautifully crafted and special. We even found a little skating rink in Bolzano where our kids joined in with the local kids.

Katy Clarke:

And, okay, they didn't really skate, they staggered around holding onto the edge because we don't get a lot of skating practice here in Australia, as you can imagine. The best fit, though, was heading up the mountain and finding a tiny little cafe that serves local sparkling apple juice and native wines, all the while watching snow fall while we listened to the owner tell us about her town. That was after she told my kids off for asking for a Coca Cola. And you know what? I love it. They're so proud and protective of their local culture in these parts. And to be honest, the apple juice was extraordinary and we didn't mind the lecture at all. So I'm not going to forget it or her in a hurry.

Katy Clarke:

So these are some, you know, of the beautiful towns in Italy. And as an Australian, we think of these white Christmases something that's just something to be coveted. And, you know, Christmas up there in the mountains, in the Dolomites, is very, very special. So now it's time for the special announcement that I promised at the beginning of the episode. Drumroll, please. I know that there are many of you who would love to experience the Dolomites in winter for yourselves and are a bit discouraged because it really is quite the effort to arrange, unless you have connections and are prepared to drive in snowy conditions. And I would really hate for anyone to miss out on this very special experience. So we created our new Christmas in the Dolomites tour.

Katy Clarke:

And this very special experience is taking you deep inside Latin culture. Visiting the unique local markets and small towns, getting to know the people who live in this extraordinary environment and their customs. We'll be tasting the sparkling apple juice, hearing local stories and getting to know this region through its wintertime traditions. And of course, visiting those Christmas markets that I just mentioned, those Christmassy towns, Bressanone and Bolzano, and some other very cute towns as well. As always, we'll be traveling in a small group of 12 or fewer people and everything is taken care of so you can relax and enjoy being in Italy at this very special time. And unlike Germany and Austria, there are very few tours that you can take to visit the Christmas markets and towns, let alone meet the locals and get a deeper understanding of their fascinating culture. We're not going to be pushing you off a bus to wander on your own, although you will get plenty of time to do that. Instead, we give

you the context and guidance to help you understand the motivation behind these local celebrations, what to look out for, the local treats to try, and special places to visit.

Katy Clarke:

So if you're brimming with festive spirit, come along and join us next December when we visit Bolzano, Bressanone and several other dreamy spots in the South Tyrol region, where you'll discover deep and long-standing local traditions, seasonal food and wine, and stories that will stay with you forever. If you've ever dreamed of a white Christmas in Italy, then this is your moment. Head on over to the Show Notes for the full itinerary and trip details. We can't wait to hear those sleigh bells ringing. And yes, we will be going on a sleigh ride.

Katy Clarke:

So that's all for this week. I hope you enjoyed our look at the Christmassy-est towns in Italy. As always, we put the town detail details into the show notes and you'll find them on our website at undolditaly.com/303 for episode 303. We're taking a little break next week to prepare for travel booking season, which starts in the New Year. I know many of you love to spend the post-Christmas period planning your trips, so if you think you would like some help with the planning, it's best to book your slot in with our trip planners now, as they are very popular. We cut through all the noise and get you from overwhelmed with options to booked and organized in no time. So all the details of what to expect and how to book in for your session are also in the show notes. We'll be back on December 26th with our very best tips for planning your 2026 trips, but until then, it's ciao for now.