

Untold Italy Episode 304: Essential Tips for Your 2026 Trip to Italy

Thinking about a trip to Italy in 2026 and not sure when to begin your planning? Right now is a great time to start. In today's episode, we're walking through the steps to build your plan, what travelers should know about traveling to Italy in 2026, and how to set your trip in motion.

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:

Hi, I'm Katy, the founder of Untold Italy. We're a modern travel company that hosts intimate small group journeys across regional Italy. We also assist independent travelers with one-to-one trip planning services, and our travel app is full of curated recommendations for the whole of Italy - from the top of the boot to the toe.

Every week on this podcast, we talk with locals, fellow travelers and experts so you can learn more about Italy and focus on the experiences that matter to you. Let's get into today's episode.

Katy Clarke:

Ciao friends. if you're new here, benvenuti, welcome and we are so thrilled to have you join us as you plan your trip to Italy. And thank you to all our regular listeners for joining us from all corners of the earth. We just love our global community of curious travelers keen to open their hearts and minds to Italian culture and way of life.

The time just after Christmas, when this episode is first coming to you, is peak travel planning season for the year ahead. So today I thought I'd get you started with our top general tips for planning your Italy trip, but also some must-know information for 2026 specifically.

I am going to give you our general philosophy on planning and enjoying travel in Italy, and our step-by-step guide to getting your trip planning and booking organised so you can make the most of the time you have available now and can relax knowing you have something wonderful to look forward to in 2026.

If you're still thinking about going to Italy in 2026, this will be useful for you too and what I would say is.. Just do it. There is no best time or year in your life to take the trip. You won't regret going, but you WILL regret not going. Every year, things come up at work or at home, prices go up, the world goes a little crazy or even crazier, but spending time in a different country, absorbing another culture and taking time out from your everyday life is actually priceless and you'll feel ready to take on any challenges you face when you get back home. And Italy, in particular, has a way of soothing the soul like no other place I know.

So do it, go to Italy and enjoy every last minute. Because life was meant to be lived, not trudged through.

Now, before I dive in, we will cover a lot of things on the podcast today, so what I suggest is to listen and absorb and when you're ready, all the information we discuss is available for you as always on the episode show notes on our website and there's a link to them in your podcast app listing too.

So andiamo, let's go!

Katy Clarke:

straight up. I want to address the elephant in the room and that is how much information, advice and opinions are out there on how to plan your trip. It can be completely overwhelming, especially when the advice is contradictory. And I think we all know what I'm talking about. We're in an age of information overload and it actually stops people from following their travel dreams.

Katy Clarke:

We had a few clients this past year say exactly that they desperately wanted to go to Italy, but were so overwhelmed by choices and information that they just didn't go in previous years. And that's a little heartbreaking, don't you think? But I completely get it. Between Google travel websites, Instagram and TikTok, which just seem to spew forth travel ideas like a perpetual fountain, it can be completely overwhelming even for someone who knows Italy well, let alone if you're a first timer to Italy or haven't been back for a decade or two. On any given day, I'm seeing thousands of restaurant recommendations, unbelievable views, and travel tips. Do this, don't do that. Everything looks simply amazing and you don't want to forget anything you saw just in case it's critically important. So you create a saved folder of ideas in various apps and the ideas just seem to multiply, like breeding bunnies. And then what happens is you go to plan your trip and you don't know how to pull it together into a cohesive plan that suits your timeline or your budget.

Katy Clarke:

And so you throw some ideas into ChatGPT, hoping for the best. Or just copy an itinerary someone made online because surely they know what they're doing. But here's the thing, people, they might know what they're doing for the type of trip that they want, but is it actually what you want out of your trip? Online itineraries and ChatGPT force people down

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quite a predictable path, and that means you end up following the crowds and/or the logistics don't quite work out, or it's just not realistic for your budget. So what we're going to do here today is break things down into manageable chunks so you can get to the outcome - a booked trip to Italy that you are completely excited about, one that makes your heart sing, that is at a pace that is right for you and is on budget. And if you're new here, you're probably thinking, "Why should I listen to this Australian woman? Isn't she just adding to the noise?" And to that I'd say, of course, we create a lot of content here online, on the podcast and on our other platforms. But ultimately, what we try to do at Untold Italy is give you a thoughtful and curated approach to your trip planning, whether you're traveling independently or joining us on one of our small group tours. My team and I have been doing this since 2018 and helped thousands of travelers plan their trips to Italy each year.

Katy Clarke:

We are either regular travelers to Italy, and by that I mean several times a year, or we live there. Among us, we have decades of travel experience across the 20 regions of Italy and have all traveled in different ways over that time. We've been solo travelers, journeyed as couples with friends and family, with babies and kids and aging relatives on tight budgets and with luxury in mind. We travel by train, we drive, we go on tours. I think you get the picture. We have a lot of experience and the one thing that we know is that there is no right way to travel Italy or any other country, for that matter. The only way to travel is the way that suits you and the people that you're traveling with. So it is critically important that you know what you want out of your trip and what an amazing time feels like to you.

Katy Clarke:

Many people want to see the highlights in Rome, Florence, Venice, the Amalfi coast and Tuscany. And that is the classic first-timer's trip. But how you see them is where things get interesting. Do you want to go super fast and see as much as possible, or are you craving quieter moments where you can relax and enjoy your surroundings? Do you love art and history and want to delve into the context behind them? Or is your idea of a good time zipping around Rome on the back of a Vespa? There's no right or wrong answer here. What I suggest avoiding is building an exhaustive list of places. And this might also surprise some people, but also a huge list of experiences or activities. We are in an age of experience-driven travel. And let me tell you, at any given moment in any city in Italy, you can do a cooking class where you will learn to make spaghetti pomodoro, that's just spaghetti with a simple tomato sauce and tiramisu, which my 8 year old could make, or go on a wine tour or a market tour, or explore an ancient site.

Katy Clarke:

I get the feeling that some people think that they are missing out or doing it wrong if they don't do some or all of these activities. And that couldn't be further from the truth. At its most wonderful, travel is what is meaningful to you. Italy called you with a feeling. Lean into that and go from there. If you have zero interest in ancient sites, but are obsessed with trying five different carbonaras until you find your favorite, then that's exactly what you should do. Skip the Colosseum tour and eat your way around Rome.

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Katy Clarke:

If you're looking for a relaxing vacation, skipping the crowded big cities might be the best idea that you've ever had. What feels right to you might be a week in a villa in Tuscany or a Masseria in Puglia, where you gather your friends and family and make little forays into the countryside for adventures. Maybe you're traveling with your elderly parents who have always dreamed of seeing Italy and you want to make that happen. Well, what you can do is help them help you and ask them what is their real dream. It might be as simple as sitting in a sunny piazza and wandering around small villages. And that's a lot easier to organize than logistics around Rome and Florence and Venice. And if you want to feel part of Italy and don't want to drive or don't know how to access the local experiences you've heard about, then there are options for you too. Once you work on what you really want out of your vacation, then you'll be able to zone in on places and experiences that are important to you.

Katy Clarke:

And you can ask better questions of friends, planners, Google and AI tools to get you started and to help you pull your plans together. At this point, you should start zoning in on when you want to go and your budget. This will help refine things further. The good news is Italy is amazing at any time of year and you can do it on a pretty small budget, too. I can think of many great options for every season and every budget. And that's really the beauty of Italy. Because it is so diverse from region to region. The feeling that you're chasing is there to be found somewhere.

Katy Clarke:

Spring is one of my favorite seasons to visit because the place is jumping with energy. Wildflowers are in bloom and it's not so hot or crowded. Plus, for all you vegetable lovers, it is artichoke season and there are so many different ways to try them. Autumn or Fall is fantastic for the harvest and cooler temperatures. I also love the festivals at that time of year and it's perfect pasta-eating weather. Go for a long walk, eat a plate of pasta and then go for another long walk. It's just my idea of heaven, really. And earlier this year, we spent some time in Rome and the Dolomites in winter and we had the most wonderful time.

Katy Clarke:

Italian ski resorts are so friendly and fun and Rome was buzzing with locals. It's really not even that cold there in Rome in winter, actually, there's lots of blue sky and crisp sunshine, which is the type of winters that I really like. If you can only travel in summer, there are important things to know about closures and places that get very hot and crowded. They are not trip killers, but they're just good to know. So we've got lots of resources on our website that can help with that. Be super realistic about your budget. Italy can hit the wallet hard, but equally, you can find alternatives that are much more affordable. We have a budget calculator on our website that can help with this, your main cost will be accommodation and transportation.

Katy Clarke:

So if you don't move around so much, you can reduce quite a few big chunks of cost that way. And accommodation can be as varied as you like. So here you have a good foundation to start from. You have the feeling that you want from your trip. You have when to go and a rough budget. So what you can do from there is really zone in to your desires and then refine things a bit further. So, as an example, if you want a quiet summer beach vacation in Italy, but are on a tight budget, the Amalfi coast might not be the best choice. In fact, it definitely isn't.

Katy Clarke:

Your hard-earned bucks are going nowhere fast there. There are plenty of other options. For example, just south of the Amalfi coast is the Cilento coast, which is absolutely beautiful and far less crowded and expensive. And from there you can even dip into the Amalfi coast and see what all the fuss is about from a less crowded ferry or even by renting a boat. So you see here that a bit of thought can help drive better queries for your research. And in this case, I'd be looking for budget alternatives to the Amalfi coast in summer rather than looking at Amalfi coast trips, for example. Once you know what you want out of the trip and you have your timing and budget all organized, the logistical planning can really begin. The first part really doesn't need to take long at all, maybe even an hour or so, but if you skip it, you're going to go round and round in circles.

Katy Clarke:

So I really encourage you to really have a think about what you want out of your trip. Have a good think about when you can go or when you want to go, and also the budget. And at this point I would get out your map or Google Maps and start plotting your rough ideas out. It is absolutely critical that you do this, as you might have found, say, a good price for flights into Milan. But it is a four-hour train journey to get to Naples from there and then another couple of hours travel to get to the Amalfi Coast. So you see that logistics can put a spanner in the works sometimes. Now, most flights into Italy from outside Europe - arriving to Rome and Milan, but there are decent connections to Venice, Naples and Catania in Sicily also. And later on in this episode, I'm going to tell you about some new flights that are coming into Italy, which are quite exciting, actually.

Katy Clarke:

So, like, it's really good to have an idea of where the flights are going, but not get too hung up on that because, as I said, most arrive in to Rome and Milan, and it's generally best to fly direct into Italy, as there will be options that might be cheaper to transit through Europe. But you know, this is where things go a little bit wrong, I find - when you're trying to swap planes or carriers in Paris or Amsterdam or Berlin or somewhere like that, it can be a bit messy. So if you're just staying in Italy, I would suggest flying straight into Italy and choosing train transportation from there. And just on the subject of trains, you'll need to work out if you want to really travel by train or by car or a combination of both. And if you've been listening along for a while, you'll know that the general rule is that if you're traveling between the major cities and tourist areas, the train is the best and the most efficient option. If you want

to see the countryside, you'll likely need a car or expect to be spending a lot of time in transit. And this is where compromises need to be made.

Katy Clarke:

If you have a two-week trip planned, it's generally best to visit three to four places if you like a medium-paced trip. And then from there, working out a logistics plan is really important. This is where a lot of people get tripped up and it's actually the main reason why people hire us to help plan their trips and a big reason for joining one of our small group journeys around regional Italy. And honestly, this is where travel planning services are so useful. You can save yourself hours going around in circles trying to figure out travel routes, which, a lot of the time, I've got to tell you, are not well documented on Google for a variety of reasons. But number one is that a lot of the Italian transport companies do not publish their schedules the way that we kind of expect they would, especially if you're going outside the major tourist areas. But so yeah, if you're getting stuck, there is a reason and it's not you. And it's a good idea to get help at that stage.

Katy Clarke:

But once you have a rough plan in place, then it is a very good idea to book your flights. A general rule of thumb is around six to eight months out from when you're due to travel is when you will find the best prices. But if that's not possible, don't worry. Just set up a Google Flights alert for your dates that you want to travel and you may be able to catch a bargain.

Katy Clarke:

Now I'm going to cover things that you need to think about for 2026. And this time last year, everyone was bracing themselves for chaos in 2025, thanks to the Vatican Jubilee. But in the end, it turned out to be a travel year just like any other in Italy, except a little busier in Rome, especially around the Vatican. But that was to be expected. The popular places were popular and crowded, as always. And the Vatican Jubilee year finishes actually in 2026, January 6th. So for most of us, it will be over and it'll be kind of like a normal travel year. I don't know what that is really, but we'll find out, I guess. There are some big events happening in 2026, though, that are good to know about so that you can adjust plans as necessary and be prepared.

Katy Clarke:

And first up is the Winter Olympics, which is going to be held in Italy this year from February 4th to 22nd. And that's going to be in and around Cortina d'Ampezzo, up in the north of Italy and close to Milan. So if you're traveling around this time, there will be some traffic and congestion, no doubt. And, you know, they're generally places, though, that are visited by skiers and winter sports lovers, so it doesn't include general tourist traffic. What I would say is in Milan, which is honestly one of the world's most expensive cities when it comes to accommodation, I think - they are trying to coincide some of the Fashion Week activities around this time also. So if you're thinking of going into Milan, I would be getting on to booking your accommodation very, very quickly. And also, if you're considering a winter or skiing trip to Italy in the coming years, watching the coverage is going to be so much fun, as

you're going to get a lot of great ideas. It is really, really fun to be up in the north of Italy in winter.

Katy Clarke:

They do everything incredibly well. Everything is so clean and organized and tasty, and it's just, I think, some of the very best bits of Italy, actually. Don't tell anyone I said that, because I'm not supposed to have favorites. So after the main Winter Olympics, the Paralympics will follow those events in March, and again, there'll be additional traffic in those areas. Also in 2026, Venice Carnivale, which is their big celebration that they have every year that runs the 7th to the 15th of February. So that's smack bang in the middle of the Olympics, and it looks like northern Italy will be the place to be. If you're a lover of the Vespa scooter brand, true icon of Italy. They'll be celebrating their 80th anniversary in 2026. And there are a series of events known as Vespa World Days planned in Rome from June 25th to 28th.

Katy Clarke:

I think that's going to be very cool and fun. I was hoping I'd be there for that, but I think I'm going to miss it. And another very impressive anniversary is the 800th anniversary of the deaths of St. Francis. This is a very significant event or series, events that will be marked across the country because St Francis is the patron saint of Italy and he's very important to Italians, not just from a religious standpoint, but also culturally. So we'll be doing a full episode on this topic in a few weeks because even if you're not Catholic, it's really very interesting to learn about the philosophies of St. Francis and how his teachings have shaped Italy as a country and the way it is today.

Katy Clarke:

So really, the main major events will happen in the first quarter of 2026, and then we will roll into more of a standard travel year. And as I said, who knows what that means? Ever since I've been doing that, we've had all sorts of crazy things happen. But, yeah, I think it'll be - there won't be too many disruptions as there have been in previous years. And if you want to stay on top of what's happening around Italy in terms of local events, we keep the premium version of our Untold Italy app updated with local food and community festivals and more. And often it's hard to find these online because - you can ask Cassie on our team because she lives in this small town in Abruzzo, and she said to me, oh, I think it was around the middle of December - I think we're going for a meeting to discuss what's happening about Christmas. And that was like, as far as everyone here was concerned, Christmas is already halfway through. So Italians don't really, you know, they don't really advertise some of the fun local festivals that are fun to take part in.

Katy Clarke:

So you definitely want to know them. And we do our very best to keep people updated by the app. Some things to keep in mind for 2026 that are not event-related, but they are some changes happening to required documentation and rules to travel to Italy and travel around Italy. So if you haven't traveled to Italy in the last six months or so, There is a new process on arrival, which is the EES or the European Union Entry and Exit System. And this is basically

collecting passport and biometric data when you arrive. And it's a standard process now in many countries, including the United States. And it's not something you can opt out of. So it's good to be aware because it may delay some of your processes going in and out of the country.

Katy Clarke:

Something people got a little bit anxious about last year due to exaggerated media reports. But it is actually likely to happen later in 2026. And that is the introduction of the new ETIAS, or visa waiver system. And this is essentially an online pre-registration system that is similar to ESTA, which travelers from many countries need to use to enter the United States or the UK, ETA to enter the UK. There's no official start date or confirmation of the process at the time we're recording this, but it's just to be aware of and it's really no big deal. You'll just have to enter your passport and travel details into their system and pay a small fee and the waiver will be issued. That applies not just in Italy, but across the European Union. And like I said, we will let you know as soon as the rollout dates are announced and it's official because that's what we've always done here at Untold Italy. We do not report rumors. So when it's ready to go, we'll do an announcement on our channels. It's probably likely only going to affect people that are traveling later in the year.

Katy Clarke:

A process that is expanding to 60 days now is the Venice tourist tax collection. And this tax targets day-trip visitors to Venice. And the number of days it applies to has grown for 2026 to up to 60. We'll link to our article on this tax in the show notes so you can check the dates. But it's worth noting that you do need to apply for a waiver if you're planning to stay overnight. Even though it's a tax on day trippers. You won't need to pay a fee, but you do need to show that you have an exemption. But don't worry, they have other ways to tax you if you're staying overnight. Of course.

Katy Clarke:

Now, something new that will be implemented from 2026 is an entry fee to access the front area of the Trevi Fountain in Rome. This is very new news and it was announced by the city's mayor about a week ago. And it's designed to protect the monument from the 30,000 plus daily visitors, which is an incredible number of people. And I think last year they said they had a total of 9 million visitors.

Katy Clarke:

And if you've been in that area, it's really quite small. Like it's not a stadium size to hold that many people, so you can imagine that they're trying to think of ways to keep people moving. Around 400 people will be able to access the front of the fountain at any time, which I guess is good for photos, but maybe not for the vibe. So to be clear, you'll still be able to see the fountain from the existing barriers. You'll just need to pay if you want to get up close. It was announced that the fee would apply between 9 am and 10 pm, so I think we can all have a good guess at what will happen in the morning. Anyway, there are no further details as yet on how the implementation will work and we will keep you posted.

Katy Clarke:

Another development in Rome, which as a train and archaeology nerd, I'm pretty excited about because I actually think this one has been over 20 years in the making. Very exciting news - the Colosseum Metro Line C station is finally open. Now the line C isn't particularly useful currently, unless you're staying in the Pignetto district, but it will be an important link through Rome when new stations open at Piazza Venezia... sometime in the next 20 years. I guess the challenge has always been the need to navigate, investigate the ancient Roman ruins of the area before tunneling through to create the Metro line. And fortunately, the Italian government take this very seriously. It's really important, I think, to preserve their heritage. The new Metro station is like a mini museum showing artifacts found in the construction, so it's pretty cool.

Katy Clarke:

Now lastly, there are some new flight routes announced going into Italy, including direct flights from JFK Airport into Bari in Puglia starting in June with Italian air company Neos and Newark to Bari on United starting in May. If you're flying from Canada, there will be flights direct to Palermo in Sicily from Montreal on Air Canada for the peak season. And for our friends on the U.S. West Coast, Alaska Airlines will fly direct from Seattle to Rome starting at the end of April 2026. Most of these new flights will be running seasonally from May through to end of October, which gives you a very good idea of when peak season is. No doubt there's going to be more things to consider that will come up throughout the year, and of course, we keep you updated via the podcast, our newsletter and alerts in the Untold Italy app. There is a lot of things to stay track of in travel generally. So it's always a good idea if you are traveling. You want to sort of balance the bit about being overwhelmed with just having a good idea of what's going on.

Katy Clarke:

Now I want to take you through a rough order of when to book things for your trip and we have this nicely laid out in lots of detail in our article on how to book an Italy trip. But here is a quick summary and this is based again on years and years of experience. If you're joining a tour or a trip that travels around parts of Italy or like a cruise, lock in those dates first. Otherwise, the first step is to book your flights. Accommodation is next. And you know, at this stage of the planning, because things can be a little bit fluid and you might need to change. We always try to get flexible cancellation if possible. These days, I personally prefer hotels over Airbnbs and apartments, but if you're going down the short-term rental route, then make sure you understand the cancellation clauses very clearly. There have been some tightening of the rules in Italy lately.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, you just want to make sure that you know exactly what you're going into. All of those activities, flights and accommodation are best done well in advance. And I would say as soon as you know, or six months at least, if you have that opportunity - is a great buffer time. I wouldn't leave it much longer than that. Especially if you are traveling between May and

October and you've got some really specific places that you want to stay or you're particularly fussy, you're going to have the best choice if you book those now or as soon as possible for summer. If you plan to rent a car, do this as soon as possible too. Especially if you're traveling at peak periods and or you want an automatic transmission as those get snapped up pretty quickly as they're not the most common type of car in Italy. Trains can be booked weeks out, but I tend to do them about three or four months out - as can activities like tours of the Colosseum or Vatican Museums.

Katy Clarke:

If you do have a specific time in mind though, it's best to book early and with the transport, you can get some savings by doing that. Lastly, very popular restaurants may need to be booked six months in advance. Also, my classic example of Rosoli in Rome is just. It's impossible to get into now, really. So I've. I've let it go. I've let it go. I can't get organized to do it.

Katy Clarke:

So sorry, Roscioli. It's just it's a little bit too hard. Anyway, if you plan to travel this spring or summer to the major tourist areas, the time to act is now, I would say. And that is now is the end of December and first few weeks of January, I would say. This is also the case for the autumn and fall season. So September and October are becoming very, very popular months to visit, thanks to the really lovely weather and perceived fewer crowds. Well, there are fewer Europeans traveling, so that's probably why people are choosing those months. Of course, if you're going to lesser-known areas, the timing is not as urgent, but we still do see accommodation in Puglia, in Tuscany, in particular, get booked up very early, sometimes 12 months in advance.

Katy Clarke:

Now here's the thing. Some people love trip planning and getting in the weeds with transport booking systems and logistics. And for others, it's the thing of nightmares. While they simply don't have time or don't know where to find the places and experiences that they have in mind. In this case, it is absolutely the best idea to call in the professionals who will get you organized in no time. Of course, our travel planners are ready to help with any of your trip planning needs across Italy, we have an unparalleled depth of experience and knowledge that we are able to share across team members that other planners and travel agents may not have. And as I mentioned, we love to help people realize their Italian dreams and help you travel in the way that you want to. We're not here to tell you what to do.

Katy Clarke:

We respect your travel style and are here to enhance your experience in Italy by smoothing out logistics and finding those special accommodations and activities that fit your group perfectly. You come with the ideas, and we help you make it happen. And if you simply want to relax in to Italy and feel part of it, the ultimate escape is to join one of our beautifully hosted Untold Italy tours in the regions of Italy like Tuscany, Puglia, Sicily and Umbria. You can simply skip the noise and join us, or they're also planned so that they depart from the

larger cities like Rome and Florence. So that way, you can get your big city thrills first or when you finish the tour, but in the meantime, we whisk you away into the countryside where we have an Italian adventure like no other. Our incredible, wonderful hosts are there to make sure that you have the experience that you've been dreaming of. If that's one where you escape to the beautiful countryside or coast and you feel part of the Italian lifestyle.

Katy Clarke:

Our tour itineraries are planned, but there's always time for spontaneity. So if a guest wants to hug a giant olive tree or go off with their partner for a little gelato walk or coffee or drink, or find a special place that you know that they want to find a special place related to something that they've read that's on our route, we'll do our very best to make that happen. Your host knows how to read the room and always finds ways to surprise you and they are the ultimate gateway to your experience in Italy. Many of our guests and clients try a mix and match approach, which, in fact some people have called an Australian style of travel. Well, I don't know if it's Australian, but it makes sense to me. You can plan some things on your own and then get some help for other things or have a fully hosted experience. Like I said, we just want you to have the best time. So you choose the way you want to do that. And if we can, we'd love to help you.

Katy Clarke:

And the reality is, whichever way you like to travel, there is an option in Italy for you. If you're traveling independently, we've got carefully researched and updated resources on our website and app to smooth out your planning and if you need some help, we're here for you, too.

I hope you're now well-equipped to start planning your 2026 trip. Use the downtime between Christmas and New Year wisely and you'll be all set. Italy is waiting and as always, you'll find everything we mentioned here on the episode show notes on our website at untolditaly.com/304.

Wishing you many happy travels in the year ahead and let us know where you went and the experiences and places you loved. It's so fun to hear where your Italian journeys take you!

Coming up next week, we're taking a trip around Sicily, but until then, it's Buon Anno, Happy New Year and "ciao for now".