

Untold Italy Episode 310: How to Modernize the Classic 10 Day Italy Itinerary

There are 847 blog posts and counting about the perfect 10-day Italy itinerary and they all say pretty much the same thing. Rome, Florence and Venice. It is the classic Italy itinerary that people have been following for centuries. But a few things have changed since then. So today I'm sharing how to use this itinerary plan the modern way. So it is less like a checklist and more about what you want from your trip to 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:

Ciao friends. Hope you are keeping well. I'm Katy, the founder of Untold Italy and we're a modern travel company that assists 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 to the toe, including the islands. We also host intimate small group journeys across regional Italy to places like Sicily, Puglia and Piedmont. For curious travelers who want to feel part of Italy today, I wanted to share some ideas on one of the hottest topics that we see and have seen over the past eight years of running Untold Italy and that is itinerary planning. This is where so many travelers get stuck and overwhelmed and I think that's perhaps why people turn to online blogs and social media, including ours, for ideas for planning theirs.

Katy Clarke:

And I reckon there might be a billionty (yes, I made that up) Italy itineraries online and what you can create with AI tools like ChatGPT. I know I created at least seven of them, which you can look up if you go to our Untold Italy website. And here's the thing, most of the Italy itineraries follow a well-established path that has been followed for hundreds of years in fact. So, that's Rome, Florence and Venice with maybe a side of Cinque Terre or Lake Como or Sorrento. This is nothing new. And what we're going to do today is have a look at this in a bit more detail and break it down so that you can understand how you can apply this to your trip, but also not get stuck in the series of checklists about what are the must-sees.

Katy Clarke:

Now, otherwise known as the Grand Tour, this was a path that was followed by young aristocratic British men from the 17th century onwards as part of their classical education, where they really wanted to go back to ancient Greece and ancient Rome and get all those

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deep and meaningful and art conversations happening. So a very good example of this is the poet Lord Byron and other English writers of that era, who understandably fell in love with the landscapes and people and infinitely better weather and food and wine they found in Italy and as a result did the world a big favor by writing about Italy in their beautiful Prose. Around the 19th century, young women and American tourists also joined the grand tour. And this is immortalized best in one of my favorite books and movies of all time, *A Room with a View*. I talk about this movie a lot, but it is truly magnificent. It's a great piece of cinema starring Helena Bonham Carter and Daniel Day-Lewis. Plus, as an added bonus, which is really the icing on the cake, Judi Dench and Maggie Smith, they are unbelievable. So much talent.

Katy Clarke:

Sadly, Julian Sands, who plays George Emerson, passed away a couple of years ago in really tragic circumstances, actually, but his portrayal of George Emerson is quite the revelation. It's one of those rare films as well that truly does the book justice. So go ahead and watch that and I'd love to hear back from anyone who has watched it for the first time recently and what they think, because it's, I think it's absolutely beautiful. Now, the difference between the 1890s and now when the 1890s was when the book and the film was set and now is, it's actually huge. There's such a big difference. But one point really, really worth noting is that these people, thanks to their resources and the prevailing transport conditions, which were mainly horse-drawn carriages, they spent a month or so in Florence alone. I mean, what a dream. How lucky were they? In the early 19th century, there were around 5,000 tourist visitors to Italy.

Katy Clarke:

5,000. And there was a bit of an outrage towards the close of the century as that had doubled to 10,000 visitors a year. I mean, that's just incredible, actually, when you think that... and hold on to your hats here, over 60 million people, 60 million people! visited Italy in 2024. And I think what's even more amazing is that most of them are still following the same itinerary, the Rome, Florence, Venice itinerary that people have been following for centuries. Of course, much more has changed. Italy's population has doubled to around 61 million. We have airplanes, fast-speed trains, Internet and online bookings, a simple currency in the euro and all sorts of efficiencies. Yet once again, we still follow the same itinerary and I guess no wonder everything gets really crowded.

Katy Clarke:

What I want to do today is just have another look at this itinerary and see how we can adapt it for modern life. And don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that we shouldn't follow this itinerary because it's epic and wonderful for a reason. Rome, Florence, Venice, some of the most beautiful, enchanting and important cities on earth, especially in terms of Western civilization. But I feel like it might be time to adjust our approach to experiencing them. And by that I mean let's not follow the exact same paths everyone chooses and maybe add in a little surprise to keep things interesting. So let's start with beautiful Rome, where I cannot wait to return in a few months. Rome, of course, is an open-air museum and it's one with pure

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magic around every corner, a fountain, a statue by Bernini, the exact spot where Julius Caesar was murdered.

Katy Clarke:

Does that give you chills? I can't get enough of that. Most people will spend three days in Rome on their classic Italy itinerary, which often is the first time as Italy itinerary. So you want to make it count, right? If you do some research about the city, you will quickly discover that the ancient and baroque cities covered a lot of ground. So there are many, many interesting places to explore that are not as obvious as, say, the Colosseum, Vatican Museums and the Pantheon, for instance. And there are also ways to explore those sites that might appeal more than simply jumping online and booking a ticket or tour and hoping for the best. If we think about Rome, there are so many checklist items to do and I just mentioned them quickly. So we see Colosseum, Vatican Museums, Pantheon, Piazza Navona, Trevi Fountain, St Peter's the list can go on, but they are the main ones. And I think let's start with the Colosseum because it is on most Italy checklists.

Katy Clarke:

And yes, it is amazing and it is an incredible testament to architecture and the longevity of the Roman building practices. And it is one of the world's most iconic structures. Everyone wants to go, but. And I'm going to get really honest here and spill some tea and tell you that the experience is not fantastic. I personally visit the Colosseum each year with our partners, who all do a phenomenal job, I would add, under really tough circumstances and working conditions. And to just give you an idea of how tough they are, one of the guides, not from our partners, but one that was working in the Colosseum, actually died or passed away while she was working at the Colosseum last year. So it's really tough there. And, you know, the problem is that the site itself is pushing way too many people through the arena, and it's crowded and difficult to find out what's going on and what you're looking at.

Katy Clarke:

So, you know, if you're going to visit the Colosseum and you're really passionate about it, I'd strongly recommend going with a small group or private tour with a license guide. They're all licensed, but just make sure that you're not buying it from outside the front - you've actually booked online, and they'll help you bring Colosseums to life with lots of stories, and they'll really make sure that you have the best possible experience. Also, unfortunately, you need to go as early as possible or in the later afternoon, because when it's very busy and the Colosseum is at capacity, the guides have to spend a lot of time on logistics and making sure they move guests around really effectively. So, yeah, like I said, go as early as possible for the best experience. But of course, there is logistics of getting the tickets or tour, and there's a premium to pay for that if you're going to be doing the earlier tours because they have less people on them, and, you know, that might not be in your budget. And I'm starting to find this a little bit frustrating because it appears people are being priced out of some experiences. That's why I want to do this podcast today, because I want to show you that there is ways to get experiences that are, I think, as special, even more special if you attack things in a different way.

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Katy Clarke:

So I would go as far to say... skip going inside the Colosseum. Unless you are really obsessed with gladiators and the stories of how the Colosseum was built, you can just go over there to the outside, take photos. There's some really great spots that you can find on the Internet where you can take really great photos. And you can choose to spend your three hours in Rome doing something that you would truly enjoy. And remember, that doesn't include being squashed like a sardine through an ancient building. I feel like everyone thinks I have to go. But you do not have to go inside the Colosseum if you don't want to. And there are plenty of other things to do in Rome to get an ancient history fix.

Katy Clarke:

Or if that doesn't interest you, please don't feel obligated to go. I'm a nerd about that stuff, so I will be going. One of the things that I wanted to make sure that people knew is if you're interested in ancient history, when you get the Colosseum ticket, you can go inside the Roman Forum and Palatine Hill area. And they are fascinating and ongoing archaeological sites and so, so interesting. And I have seen so many people give up on them after their Colosseum experience because they are completely exhausted from the Colosseum crowds, and it's such a shame. And also it's really sad for the tour guides, who are some of the most educated and interesting people I have ever met. And it's because we're all focused on the Colosseum that they don't get a chance to tell you so many other stories and histories that could be told.

Katy Clarke:

Some of the sites apart from the Colosseum, Palatine Hill and that area that you could consider, and then maybe not as iconic as the Colosseum, because, let's face it, what is? But they are so interesting. And I can really remember a lot more about my time in those places than I can about the Colosseum, because I was really focused on logistics and trying to get around. And they are the Baths of Caracalla, which were the former public bars of Rome, which are just incredible sight. Also Palazzo Massimo, which is a museum that holds ancient relics like mosaics, frescoes. It's a stunning collection. I've never seen anything like it, actually. So that's a really great place to go. And also the Domus Aurea, which is Nero's golden palace, which is just over from the Colosseum.

Katy Clarke:

Unfortunately, that one's only open for reasons known only to themselves on the weekend, but it's just over the road from the Colosseum and it's incredible. So go check them out and report back if you love them. I really promise you won't be disappointed and you will get a similar experience to the Colosseum, just in a different way. Now, I am going to repeat this advice for the Vatican Museums. Honestly, unless you go really early or late or in the off-season, I'm talking February. So right now this is being recorded. It can be a very average experience. It's like being stuck in a sardine can, to be honest.

Katy Clarke:

It's gross. There's no air conditioning in summer, and it's just thousands of people ramped into a small space trying to look at beautiful art. This is not the fault of the people trying to guide you because they do an excellent job. The blame lies squarely with venue operators who just let too many people in. I experienced that firsthand when I first visited in the 1990s, but I was there last year and it's worse. I think it's terribly sad, and I have had some incredible experiences, but they are/have been very early in the morning when you're walking through the galleries by yourself.

Katy Clarke:

But again, that comes at a premium and not everyone can afford to do that. So what I want to do again is give you some alternatives for seeing some of this beautiful artwork that doesn't involve half your trip budget to go see. The alternatives are, if you're interested in art, you should go next door to St. Peter's, which is free, to see Michelangelo's dome. And so you can see it from the bottom looking up. Or you can pay a little bit extra to go and climb the dome or to take the elevator up there if you want to go see Raphael's stunning frescoes. The Villa Farnesina in Trastevere is almost always empty, and the gardens are gorgeous, too. There are 400 churches in Rome bursting with art that you can just pop into.

Katy Clarke:

We've got a few articles on our site where you can find places to go and you can search online, but you don't need to go into the Vatican Museums to see art. It is an incredible art collection, but there's some other options, too. And a space that manages visitors way better is the Villa Borghese, which you must book in advance. But it's an amazing, incredible collection, full of Bernini, Caravaggio. It's very contained. So if you get that overwhelmed feeling when you're in an art gallery, it's a really great museum to go to. And, you know, some of the best moments I have ever had in Rome and the ones that I really remember very clearly are the ones that I've had at these smaller spaces.

Katy Clarke:

And I can even remember the name of the guide I had at the Borghese Gallery five years ago - ciao, Marco! Because I just really wanted to be there and enjoy it. And he just gave an absolutely incredible presentation of what we were seeing in the context of what was going on. And I've mentioned this before on the podcast, but there was a teenager on that tour, and the body language before, let's just say, was pretty closed and negative. But by the end, Marco managed to turn him around and it was actually fantastic to see. So there are other options than being squashed through the Vatican Museums.

Katy Clarke:

And, yeah, do consider that, because I think, you know, especially parents think very, very hard about taking your kids to these places, especially if they're younger than, say, around 12, because if you're trying to keep them engaged and keep an eye on them. It's really hard to do that in a crowd. Plus, enjoy it yourself.

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:

And there are so many creative ways to explore Rome with kids these days, and one of my favorites is to go marble animal spotting as you wander through the historic center. Turtles on fountains, elephants on with obelisks on their back, dolphins, deer and lions. It's so fun and it's free. So when we've got a budget for our trips, and I think everyone has a budget unless they're Kim Kardashian who gets free access to the Sistine Chapel. Anyway, you know, like we're all in a bit of a budget and we have to make choices. So like let's make some choices that are really aligned to what's going to be the best fun for everyone. Now some cool things to do in Rome, where you can still get that first-time in Roman Grand Tour experience is to take a wander through Piazza Navona. And there are some excellent lesser-known museums nearby, including one dedicated to the Stadium of Domitian, because actually Piazza Navona is built on the site of a chariot racing arena.

Katy Clarke:

And even just walking through the Centro Historico is fun. Dipping in and out of churches and cafes and discovering fountains. We have several episodes and articles on things to do in Rome on our website, but you get the idea and we've got tons of stuff on our app. It doesn't have to be the top sites that everyone says that you should do. There are plenty of options. And if I could be bold, if you're the type of person who likes to plan travel and you're saving social media posts and other ideas, then while you're doing that, get out Google Maps and plot the things you are interested in as you go. Or you can also bookmark them in the Untold Italy app so you can find them as you're wandering around. So I know some people are already starting to think, oh, this is getting a bit overwhelming.

Katy Clarke:

So if you want help with planning, we are here. I made someone laugh the other day when I told them that I hired a travel planner for our trip to Japan that we're doing later in the year and they said, oh, you've got a travel business, don't you? And I said, yes, I do. I do have a travel business, but I don't know much about Japan. And to be honest, I have way too much going on with the kids at school, aging relatives, building a house and a business to run to go into full travel planning mode for that trip. I just want to enjoy our vacation and adding the extra pressure of planning the trip on top of everything else was all just a bit too much for me, so I've outsourced it. Anyway, point being, these days I'm going to ask for help when I need it and you should too. Life is way too short to be stressed about planning a holiday okay, my best ever suggestion for planning your classic and maybe first time Italy itinerary is to try and make an unexpected element to your trip. And that's a place that you had not yet heard of, or somewhere in the countryside, somewhere just a little bit different.

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Katy Clarke:

This really gets you thinking about experiencing something new, which I think is one of the best bits about travel and it's also really inspiring and it's usually the things that I remember the most. I'm going to share some ideas as we go along that map very easily into this traditional itinerary. So it's stops that you can map in with a train or rarely a car - I think when you're first time in Italy or you know you're doing this classic itinerary, you don't really need to rent a car, but I'll give you one car option. So on the way to Florence from Rome, there are a few lovely stops in the region of Umbria such as Perugia, Assisi and Orvieto, which will give you a completely different perspective on Italy after your time in the major tourist areas. These are places where people live and work and they are not really a tourist machine serving millions of people. We are a little obsessed with Umbria on this podcast and at Untold Italy and we have a lot on our site on the app and everything you can look into it, but you can reach all the places I mentioned by train. Some other side stops or day trips in the Lazio region, where Rome is the capital, include Viterbo, Frascati and the Sabina Hills.

Katy Clarke:

Or here's another option and this is the only car option I'm going to give you because I think it's just so easy to get around by train and you don't really need to drive if you don't want to. So there is one option. And if you're going from Rome to Florence, you can drive up through Tuscany and stop in southern Tuscany. It's just absolutely magical. But, yeah, you don't need to. I'm going to give you lots of options. So moving on to Florence, the next stop on the Grand Tour, and where people often stay for a month or more.

Katy Clarke:

I mean, just ridiculous. Imagine that typically in these days, in 2026, we have only a few short days and you might have guessed. I have some suggestions. So the checklist items in Florence are usually visiting the Uffizi Galleries, seeing Michelangelo's David, the original one at the Accademia Gallery, visiting and or climbing the Duomo and walking over the Ponte Vecchio. These are all fabulous and highly recommended. But also, there are some ways to do this which are a little less like a checklist.

Katy Clarke:

In my opinion, there's nothing better than seeing the sunrise over the Arno River. And that means an early morning walk is always on my agenda when I am in Florence. You can head across the Ponte Vecchio at dawn. And so it doesn't have to be at dawn, it can be a little bit after, because most Europeans don't really start moving around until about 10:00 am, I found. So if you get there around, you know, 7 or 8:00:00, you're in for a really good time. You can go across the Ponte Vecchio and just marvel at this magical city before everyone arrives. And it's really like walking through a painting. It's just stunning.

Katy Clarke:

And when it's time for a coffee, you can just head to the Sant Ambrogio market and watch the locals shop for dinner and pop into the Santo Croce church close by. This is a very famous and

beautiful church, but a lot of people miss it because they are so focused on other places. And it's much quieter than the Duomo, and you can pay your respects to many famous Florentines memorialized there, including Michelangelo, Da Vinci and Machiavelli. It's really a who's who of the Renaissance. Florence is also such a great place to make a base to visit towns and cities in Tuscany, and people have known this forever. Pisa was on the Grand Tour circuit thanks to the Leaning Tower, and it attracts a lot of visitors and almost endless photo opportunities to this day. But if there is one place that has turned itself into a tourist machine, it is Pisa, unfortunately. Because most people, people dip in and out quickly to get photos and it can be a bit of a crush.

Katy Clarke:

Find this very sad as the site is actually known as the Piazza Dei Miracoli, or the Field of Miracles, for good reason. The architecture is spectacular, but it's really tourist hell, unfortunately. Anyway, you can go by train to other cities in Tuscany, like Lucca and Arezzo, very easily from Florence, and see another side of the country and this region and a different perspective on how Italians live and how they go about their lives.

Katy Clarke:

So after Florence, you could go directly to Venice, which is the next stop on the Grand Tour. But why not add a stop in Bologna, the red city? Bologna is on the train line from Florence to Venice, and it's also on the train line from Florence to Milan, so you can easily make a stop there, even for the day, just leave your luggage at the station or you can stay overnight, which I do recommend. This is a university and foodie city and it's really bustling and fun. There's some great shopping and it's becoming more popular thanks to its local markets, architecture and food. But it definitely does not have the same tourist infrastructure as Rome or Florence.

Katy Clarke:

And so that gives it, like, such a lot of charm, I think. Or if you want to try something really different. Ferrara and Padua are also on the train line to Venice directly from Bologna, and they're both beautiful cities with so many unexpected things to see and do. We have guides for both those cities on our Untold Italy app, which is quite hard to find information on those cities. So if you're interested, you can go there to check it out. You can also travel to Venice via Milan for some shopping in one of the world's fashion capitals, or take a detour to Turin or Torino, an elegant city in the foothills of the Alps. There's so many different options to add something a little bit unexpected in.

Katy Clarke:

And just I love... trust me on this one, because it's. They are the places that really stay with you, I think, and people will talk to you about Rome. Oh, did you love this in Rome? Did you love that in Florence? Did you love that in Venice? And you'll say, yes, yes, and you will. You will love it. But the bit that will stay with you in your heart will actually be these smaller places. I am happy to be corrected. So please reach out if you think I'm wrong.

Katy Clarke:

I love having a discussion about those things with people. So one of the other cities that I recommend that's actually on the train line through to Venice from Milan is Verona and it's one of my all-time favorite cities. That is just, it's just beautiful. And it comes complete with a working Roman amphitheater, a fort overlooking the city and the beautiful Adige River markets, delicious food and wine, lots of rice for our friends with gluten intolerance. And it's just an incredibly charming city and I absolutely adore Verona. So yeah, definitely, as you make your way across Italy, let's just see if we can add in something a little bit special. You only need to stay a night.

Katy Clarke:

It'll - that'll have the world of difference, I think. So for the final stop on the Grand Tour, we make it to incomparable Venice, which is sadly misunderstood a little bit these days due to the aforementioned tourist machine. The checklist items here can theoretically be knocked off in one day, which does cause a lot of problems with... It's coupled with the fact that it really is a very small city. So people are just kind of jammed into this one sort of route up and down the city, which is really challenging in a lot of ways. But anyway, those sites are San Marco, Piazza San Marco, the Doge's Palace, Rialto Bridge and the Grand Canal. But you know, of course, there's so much more to Venice and my best tip here for you is to go to those places in the evening once the day trippers clear the city.

Katy Clarke:

Venice is absolutely stunning at dusk and nighttime when it comes into this beautiful mood of its own. It's mysterious, it's dripping with faded glory and hidden secrets and just little side laneways you can dip down and you know, it's just a beautiful place. During the day, you can explore the back canals, go bar hopping or over to some of the lesser-known islands like San Giorgio Maggiore for one of the best views of the city. You can visit some of the lesser-known museums and galleries like Scuola San Rocco if you want an art fix. But really, Venice is a place to sit and ponder and enjoy. I cherish every second of the time that I'm there because we don't know just due to the way that it's been built, how old it is, how many people are being pushed through there, just how long it's going to last that way. I mean, I have a lot of hope for the resilience of the city and I did a really fabulous interview with journalists from CNN last year about the resilience of Venice as a city over the many centuries.

Katy Clarke:

And it's really, really - go have a listen to that if you're interested in Venice because it change your perspective on how like it's not just a tourist city, it's a place where people live and work and it's a really beautiful place that has a lot of lessons for us in terms of resilience. We have a lot of information on things to do in Venice and you will find ideas all over the Internet and social media. The trick is again to anticipate where people are likely to go and make some slight adjustments to your plan so you see the highlights which are indeed popular for a reason, but also find your own piece of the city that is special to you and that you can't wait to share with others. So there are some ideas for the updated classic Italy itinerary. Rome, Florence, Venice, and some little unexpected surprises in between. It's a version for 2026

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where we soak up all the culture, the sights and the magic that is Italy, but in a way that suits us and our travel style. I hope in this episode I've shown you ways that you can easily move beyond a checklist style of travel towards something that adds a little bit more of extra adventure.

Katy Clarke:

Ultimately, you, our listeners, are all very smart people who know how to plan trips, know what you like and how you would like to travel. We are simply here to give support and suggestions based on decades of experience traveling in and living in Italy. I like to think that we open the door to your Italy, the one that you have in your mind and the memories that you will make there. And that's why I always get such a thrill when people mention that they found our content and services useful, even if it's online or in person. And just this week a woman at my Pilates studio who had returned from some time in Florence told me she loved the hotel I recommended and her husband, who travels a lot for work, said it was the best one he'd ever stayed in. And it's really moments like this that drive our passion at Untold Italy for creating this podcast, our app and services so you can have a wonderful time in Italy, whether you're doing a grand tour or a version of it, or you're going really off the beaten path path over to places like Abruzzo, Sicily, and really getting stuck into regional Italy. We're so thrilled to be able to have this job and have this opportunity to help people travel in a really thoughtful and considered way.

Katy Clarke:

And we just want you to have a wonderful time in Italy, enjoying everything that we have loved about it and more. As always, we have put the transcript and suggestions that we mentioned on this episode into the show notes on our website at untolditaly.com/310 for episode number 310. You will also find links to download our app and access details of our services. Remember, it is okay to get help if you need it. No one will care at the end of the day, but they will remember the wonderful time that you all had in Italy. Next week, we are taking a trip to a magnificent central Italian city with one of our tour hosts who is excited to share how she would spend her perfect day exploring there. But until then, it's Ciao for now.