

Untold Italy Episode 316: Italy Travel Stories - How BJ and Chris Found Their Own Version of Italy

What does it take to fall so hard for Italy that you start planning your next trip before you even leave? Today I am talking to a couple who found this podcast in 2020, and have not stopped going back to Italy since. From their first trip to Tuscany and then onto the Dolomites and more. This is the kind of Italy love story I never get tired of hearing.

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 Benvenuti and welcome to the Untold Italy podcast. I am your host Katy Clarke, and today I am talking to BJ and Chris Witkus - a couple from Pennsylvania who have been listening to the podcast since the early days and finally made it to Italy in the way they always wanted to. Not the rush through everything version. The slow it down, go deeper, actually feel it version.

We talk about the Dolomites - the jagged peaks, the thermal baths at Merano, a rowboat on Lago di Braies in early snow, and why the best meal of the trip was a casual beer and pizza at a local joint. We also get into what happens when you sneak behind a parade route and find yourself standing next to cows in flower headdresses while the whole town looks on. It is no wonder they fell in love with the Dolomites

BJ and Chris are heading back to Ortisei this spring on their own, and Puglia is next on the list. I think you are going to enjoy this one. So andiamo, let's welcome them onto the show.

Katy Clarke:

Benvenuti, BJ and Chris! Welcome to the Untold Italy podcast.

Chris Witkus:

Hello, hello!

BJ Witkus:

Hi Katy, it's great to be here. I'm so excited to finally meet you.

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Katy Clarke:

Oh, thank you! It's great to meet you both, and I'm so excited to hear about your impressions about Italy. But before we get started, can you let everyone know a little bit about yourselves, where you are from, and what sparked your interest in travel?

Chris Witkus:

Yeah, so I'll start. We're from the northeastern portion of the United States. Home for us is Pennsylvania. We're fairly close to the bigger cities like New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., the ocean. So we're in a pretty rural yet close enough to some of the big cities to enjoy some of those luxuries. My wife and I are both in our early 50s. We have two adult daughters. Who have moved out of the house and have started their own lives.

Chris Witkus:

So we're getting a kind of an early jump on some of this travel stuff. Been trying to take every opportunity that we can, primarily, I guess, over the past 10 to 15 years, to travel regionally here in the US, but also branch out to a lot of places in Europe and places like that that have interested us. You know, that's kind of a little bit of our history and background in regards to travel. We've had some pretty exciting experiences naturally, recently and a number of years back, but it's been fun.

Katy Clarke:

Exciting. What sort of things when you're traveling, what are you looking for in your travel experiences? What sort of interests do you have?

BJ Witkus:

Definitely good views, good food, good drink, like going for a purpose and seeing things. You know, he likes being active a little more than I do, but we still do a good balance of incorporating that.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, it's hard sometimes to get that balance, isn't it?

BJ Witkus:

Yeah.

Chris Witkus:

And I think we've matured a bit as travelers, you know, in our career as travelers, I guess you'd say 10 to 15 years. You know, we've become more confident in what we do and the places that we go and sort of immerse ourselves in the communities and the people we meet and the small groups we might travel with. It's been fun, I guess, watching our own evolution and how we change and how we interact with the communities and the areas we go to.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, I really love that. I think it's a real journey that people go on because I don't know about you, but when I first started traveling, I was so excited. I was like, this is an amazing world and look at this planet and I just want to see everything. And then you kind of like, as time goes on, you realize that you want to just maybe soak it up a little bit slower. And there are a lot of people that go say travel slow, but I think you have to reach come to your own conclusion on that. And sounds like you did too.

BJ Witkus:

Yeah, like, when - well, growing up, a lot of my vacations weren't vacations like we take. You know, I was visiting family. That was the time my parents had vacation time. You spent it, you went and visited family that were all over. So we had kids, we're like, you're first doing things like the beach and cruises and things more economical. And then over time, we're like - Chris is like, I don't want to just sit at a beach forever, like, for a week, you know, a long time. We want to go do things. So then it was visiting a bunch of national parks and doing hiking and very active things and stuff like that.

BJ Witkus:

And now the kids are out of the house and we want to do - I want - I'll hike, but I don't want to hike, just hike. I want to hike to see a view, you know, something like that. Or he'll camp and hike and stuff. That's not quite for me. But we do a lot of winery visits and stuff and love now doing abroad. So we didn't really get to do that with the kids much when they were little.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, absolutely. It's so interesting. Like, my kids would love to have holidays that we're just sitting on a beach, but um, yeah, everyone's different, and that's, that's what I love about travel and, you know, exploring Italy, because everyone has like a totally different perspective on what they're doing, and I love that about it. So how about Italy? What sparked your interest in Italy?

BJ Witkus:

Neither of us have Italian descent, so it's not a matter of like our families from there, anything like that. I have no idea, but there's just a big pull for me there, and I've - that's definitely been on my list. We had it originally booked with a different company back. And just when we were ready to go, COVID hit. And I was so excited because that was our first time to finally get to Italy and Europe together. And then, of course, COVID kept going. And then I was searching and just devouring everything travel-wise because I was so upset with, you know, the world, you know, was shut down. And that's when I found your podcast and started listening, I think around beginning 30 episodes or something, and then binge that. And I've been listening every week since.

BJ Witkus:

And then we actually ended up changing our original Italian plan to KM Zero because you had Arianna.

Katy Clarke:

Ah.

BJ Witkus:

Because you weren't doing tours yet. So we ended up canceling with our other group and ended up going with her. So when COVID was over, that was our very first trip was through her group. KM Zero was fabulous. Talk about a - it was going to be very different than what it would have been with that other travel agent. More touristy highlights things. And listening to your stuff just got me even more like, we got to go do the wine windows.

BJ Witkus:

Like, I want this like slower thing, and KM Zero was perfect for that.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, that's exciting. Yeah, going deep into Tuscany and meeting the people and having that rural experience is something that I think people really crave. But I think you can probably appreciate this now, it's difficult to do on a day trip. You can't really appreciate the culture of the countryside just by sort of zipping in for a day. I mean, you get the impression, and I think when people do that, they think, oh my gosh, I really want more. Yeah, when you spend a little bit of extra time there, it really makes a difference.

BJ Witkus:

I think over time that's what we've learned too, because at first you're seeing these things we like to try to maximize too and see as much as we can. But you see a lot of these tours - well, how in the world do they get from here at the bottom of Italy up to the north, and you're doing all of that in 10 days? Like, How does that work? The more and more, as we've matured, - nope, do that slower, be more thorough and just do less. And, uh, it's - we just love it. The wines, the food, the people. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

And it's really interesting, isn't it, how different the places are? So when you came on the group with us, you went to the Dolomites, didn't you?

BJ Witkus:

So totally a different area, but that was up our alley with the hiking and the, the views and the, like Everything about it was just magical.

Katy Clarke:

People who haven't maybe traveled to Italy so much may not realize just how diverse Italy is, like from Tuscany rolling hills covered in vines to the mountains covered in vines and castles on the hill.

BJ Witkus:

I mean, yeah, it definitely was a different feel than that first trip where it was very much the more quintessential what I would picture for Italy. And then we got over to Cinque Terre and then like doing the Dolomites. So it's like, wow, all of those felt like such separate locations, you know?

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. Is there one of those places that really stood out for you? Like, is there somewhere that's like you've just really felt, oh, this is somewhere I would like to return to?

Chris Witkus:

Well, I mean, it's funny you say that because we're actually going back to the Dolomite region on our own this spring. So we're going to Ortisei again, which you guys took us to. Me, personally, as soon as I left there, I knew I wanted to go back. Just with the, the ruggedness of the mountains and this influence of the German people in the area, the rolling hills. It really touched me, I think, as a, as, you know, as a traveler, to want to go back there. So as soon as we left, I'm like, I need to take my kids there, I need to go on a hiking trip there, I need to do something there. So we've actually already booked our flights and we're staying in Ortisei. We're going to go back to the, probably the same hotel that you guys have put us up with and we even reached out to one of the guides that had worked with us to see if he could help us out for some day trips or something like that.

Chris Witkus:

But yeah, for me it's Ortisei. I mean, up in that area, the Dolomites, I know it's a huge region, but we're going to take another swing at it. We're going to spend 2 weeks up in that area.

Katy Clarke:

I love it. It happened to me up there, too. I absolutely love it there. And have you been watching the Winter Olympics?

Chris Witkus:

Yep.

BJ Witkus:

Oh yes, yes, definitely.

Katy Clarke:

It was so fun just to watch everything, you know, and you know, I've been to those places and just to see it in winter.

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BJ Witkus:

It was cool because it was a different experience, but I was so looking forward to a lot in Dolomites, but the Seceda walk, the ridgeway, whatever.. Well, when we happened to go, because it was what, September, end of September, and then they had that early snowfall. And so I just - all my pictures in my head was going to be this green and that, the green grass, and it was - it felt like we were there for the Winter Olympics. It was very snowy. We were out there, so we didn't really get to do the hiking walk, like that longer walk. But it was cool because then we had pictures kind of in the snow, which I didn't expect to have. And I probably would go there purposely in winter for that. So it was cool that we got that. But I'm like, we have to go back when there's summer because it's warmer.

BJ Witkus:

And I was like, there should be no snow and I can get that walk in Seceda.

Chris Witkus:

If it snows on us in July, we're just going to take that as a sign that we shouldn't come back here unless we want snow. Unless we want snow.

Katy Clarke:

But I mean, the weather changes so much up there, and this is the thing we had to - I don't know if you knew, but we had to really have backup plans A, B, C, and D, because especially going up Seceda when I went there personally with, with our family, I was watching the weather apps because you don't want to go up there and see nothing. So for everyone listening, this is like an incredible mountain range, all jagged peaks, and you go up to this mountain and it's spectacular. It's one of, you know, the most beautiful views I've ever seen. I think you don't want to get up there and have it be covered in clouds, right?

BJ Witkus:

Right. And I think there were a few times they had to pivot, and that's what's cool when you're not in charge of it yourself, that Olivia and Tyler like did their changing things. I think the one time, whatever we're supposed to do in the afternoon, they switched it to the morning just because of, I think, something with the weather, and then it worked out. But, uh, that, that Dolomite area is just gorgeous. But you said about our favorites, we have quite a few. Like, you fell in love with Florence. Would you love Ortisei and Bolzano? I think were two of our favorite areas up there. But every part of it so far I've loved, you know.

Katy Clarke:

Well, I think what really stands out to me about the Dolomites is like these - the people's passion for their local natural environment and their culture. Yeah, I don't know if you had any impressions about that, because for me that's really stands out.

Chris Witkus:

Yeah, I mean, uh, like, we spent some time in Ortisei and Merano and actually Bolzano, up in the mountains, and with, um, cows they brought down from the hills.

BJ Witkus:

Oh, that festival.

Chris Witkus:

Yeah, it's just - I think that festival was incredible in that we were able to interact with some of the people as the parade was going on, even the local folk. My wife BJ and I went, snuck back where they were getting the cows ready.

BJ Witkus:

Putting the headdress on.

Chris Witkus:

And they were putting the headdress on and the bells. And we saw the little guy, the little children dressed up, and it was just - it was so cool and so just very interesting to see how they really respected the process, respected the parade, and the local people so totally embraced it. And it's just - it was really just cool watching them all interact. And maybe not interact with us, but we were sort of in the background watching it all sort of unfold and be prepared and stuff like that. And, uh, it was really great, um, just to see that and be as close as we were to that whole procession.

BJ Witkus:

We were right there.

Chris Witkus:

Yeah, we were right there, basically. We could have reached out and probably touched some of the cows before they even started on the parade route.

Chris Witkus:

It was great. That was a great memory.

BJ Witkus:

And the view down there, too, because it was down behind the little town, went down, and then there was just the mountain views behind them. And there's the cows with their dresses and the people in their attire and the kids.

BJ Witkus:

So it was just - it was picturesque.

Chris Witkus:

Yeah, you got to imagine, we were back there, there was maybe, you know, a dozen, 12 people that close. And then the rest were working to get things going. And then you go to the parade and you got 10 deep trying to get close to the parade. And you were sort of out of touch at that point. So for us to get that close to that and really be, you know, in the middle of it was really kind of neat.

Katy Clarke:

I love that the children and even the teenagers are involved.

BJ Witkus:

Yeah. It's not - you don't see pouty kids sitting off in the corner like, uh, what are we doing? Like, they were all like - seemed to be so thrilled and proud to do it.

Chris Witkus:

They were very into it.

BJ Witkus:

That's what I'm saying. Like, yeah. And very into it instead of just like, oh, why are we doing this? Yeah.

Chris Witkus:

And not, and not from a touristy way. Right. You could tell it was a family tradition. It was something that the community did and it was part of their life and they weren't doing it to get tips or to impress tourists. They were doing it because it was family tradition.

Katy Clarke:

And that's in this day and age, it's quite rare, you know, to see that in action. And I mean, it makes me kind of sad for, you know, my life here in, you know, in a very English-speaking country where my children would, you know, I mean, they like seeing that, but I don't know that they would actively participate in something like that.

BJ Witkus:

Right, right. So willingly and joyfully.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, yeah. And I don't know if you notice, like, just everything there is very thoughtful, like the interiors of all the places that we stay. And, uh, even when you go up into the, you know, the little huts on the planted. Like, you're sort of thinking, is this going to be super rustic? But it's actually not, is it?

BJ Witkus:

So charming. When we went to that hut in Seisleralm - and I know you've heard many - I know many from the group have said that was a big highlight - but to go there with, what was his

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name, Franz, I believe it was. And, uh, like I said, when we were cooking the dumplings, his herbs and flowers, edible flowers, was all from his - like, he grew it. That was all his own. And even though I said about the snow in Sacheta, which to me was all like, oh, I really wanted the greenery, the most magical was when we were in the middle of that. You felt like you were in a movie. You look out, it starts snowing while we're there. It's like, where are we? Like, this is a Hallmark movie.

BJ Witkus:

My husband went out and got like a slow motion video and put it to Christmas music. Like, it was just so picturesque. He was so awesome. We ended up seeing him on Stanley Tucci and Giada as well. It's so cool. You're like, we were there. We were there. We saw him.

BJ Witkus:

We cooked with him. Like, that was just so awesome. Awesome when you see places you've been and or had an experience. Like, we know him, you know.

Katy Clarke:

I know, I saw him. I saw the Stanley Tucci episode just recently and I went, wait, what? I didn't even know that he'd been on it.

BJ Witkus:

Oh really?

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. So I don't know if Stanley's stalking the Untold Italy podcast.

Chris Witkus:

Yeah, that wouldn't be a bad thing, right?

Katy Clarke:

Come on, Stanley. Maybe I should get him on.

BJ Witkus:

That was awesome. But I mean, there are so many awesome - talking about even Ortisei, you always hear the Christmas songs roasting chestnut by a fire. Never in my life, even though I sing that song every year, or, you know, hear that song, they were literally doing that the one night we were there outside roasting chestnuts on this fire. And I was like, are you kidding me? This is real? Like, and we literally got to try that and do that. I was like, oh my gosh, like, that was just so cool.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, I can understand why you want to go back to Waterside because it's in such a great position there, isn't it? So you can go up to the Seiser Alm, which, for everyone that doesn't

know is the Alpine Meadow. You can take the cable car up to another part of that place that you haven't - probably haven't been yet. So you've got lots to explore when you go back.

Chris Witkus:

Exactly. That's part of the reason we're going back there, because we know it's very connected via the cable cars to get us going on our hiking and stuff. And the familiarity of the area kind of helps as well. And plus, we want to visit her favorite bartender at the hotel there, who sort of got us hooked on Negronis.

BJ Witkus:

Nicola, is that his name? At the hotel where we stayed, he was like our Negroni guy.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, I love a Negroni too. And I can see you've got your bar in the back there. Have you learned to make it yourself?

Chris Witkus:

Negronis in Pennsylvania will never taste as good as Negronis in Italy.

BJ Witkus:

So yes, he can make them, but he can't do that little fancy touch that Nicola does.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, you have to try another one that I like. It's called the Negroni Sbagliato.

BJ Witkus:

That's actually my favorite. So that's what I asked for there. And he does the Negroni, but I like that one better. You're right.

Katy Clarke:

And the best thing, everyone, about a Negroni is that it's a digestive, so it gets your - it gets your body and your digestive system ready for the meal ahead, which in the Dolomites is really different, isn't it?

BJ Witkus:

But I mean, what is it about Italian food? I swear, anytime we go, "I'm going to come back 10, 20 pounds heavier". And come back though, I don't know if it's because of all the walking or just the healthiness of the food, but we come back like, oh my gosh, we really didn't gain what, what I thought with all the pastas and stuff that we ate, you know.

Katy Clarke:

But I think they do a very well-balanced, you know, diet. Maybe like up there it can be a bit more heavier on the meat and things like that.

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Chris Witkus:

Yeah, the regional cuisine, I think, up in that area naturally is different - you talk about the different regions in Italy, and each region has their own, I guess, staples with food. Up north there was, like I said, I mentioned about the German influence and more of the gamey stuff, the venison and the wild boar and the rabbit and stuff like that. Seems like it's very much up there. And it's very refreshing. It was great to try that different variety of food and how it was prepared. And yes, it was a little bit heavier than we're used to with some of the pastas, but it was delicious nonetheless. I mean, it was wonderful.

Chris Witkus:

I loved it.

Katy Clarke:

I like those little dumplings that they have, the canederlii, I think they call it.

BJ Witkus:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

I mean, but that's full of vegetables as well. And when you're up at that altitude, I think your body is working really hard, even just to go on a little walk if you're not used to that, if you're used to being down at sea level, because you're up, I think Seceda is like 2,000 meters above sea level. So yeah, it's pretty high up, you know, and I think your body's working pretty hard up there. So more strudel, more dumplings, and more Negronis. Sounds great to me.

Chris Witkus:

It's inspired me as a sort of a hobbyist, cooking and stuff. It's one of the things we like to do in our downtime is cook a little bit. And I've made a few northern Italian meals. I made some dumplings the other week and, uh, rabbit stew. And just because I'm like, you know what, we had some stuff there that's very similar to this. So we look up some recipes online and - but we've actually made those dumplings and it takes us back a little bit.

BJ Witkus:

Still not the same.

Chris Witkus:

Not quite the same, but it gives us inspiration.

BJ Witkus:

Something you have to learn is that we did a hike in, um, Laguna, a tight - the Tyrol area. But anyway, I think the name of the restaurant I did write down was Untervegir. We had been on that promenade walk and came to this restaurant from - oh my goodness, they did this - I got a pumpkin ravioli that I would love for you to learn how to make because that was so good and it was so seasonal for that time of year. But that was - oh my goodness, that whole walk

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was cool because they had those little markets where they had the cider, but nobody was there. They weren't manned, the little markets, these little stands. And you just - oh, okay, you're gonna buy this honey or this or that, you know, and cider - just leave the money and go on the way. And then at the end, we came to this restaurant. You guys came up with some really good experiences and different things that we might not have found or done on our own, which was really cool.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, that's our obsession, actually. We're trying to give you something that's special. And it's - for me and for Olivia and the team, we try and give you like a varied experience when you're on tour. And what it sounds like to me, I'm absolutely thrilled about this, is I'm not sure why you first decided to come on a tour, but like it looks like it's given you the confidence to go back and do things on your own. And I just, I think that's fantastic.

Chris Witkus:

Absolutely. Yeah, it's an inspiration because I think you touched on originally, it's like you get sort of immersed a little bit. You could spend a little bit of time at a lot of locations, or you could spend a lot of time at a few locations. And that's what we found that we'd like more so nowadays. Like, we like to get on a trip, whether it's by ourselves or with a group, and maybe stay in 1 or 2 locations or 3 locations over the course of, you know, 7 to 10 days. And you're really kind of immersed in that community and the activities, people in those communities. And that's what we liked about your trip. You know, I think we only stayed at 2 locations or 3 locations, but it was, it was perfect because we had enough time to walk the towns.

Chris Witkus:

And, you know, like I said, get familiar with the people at the hotels or the facilities there. And we mentioned the bartender, uh, we had more than one night with him and stuff. So it was - it's great. And that, that kind of slow-ish travel, it really suits where we're at in life, and, uh, it gives us inspiration to go back and to sort of travel that way again.

BJ Witkus:

Don't get me wrong, I might wish I'd have rebooked the Dolomite with you as opposed to Summer with him. He's more - he's active.

BJ Witkus:

So this one, we're gonna - even though we'll be more central and stay there the whole time, he's gonna have me hiking a lot and doing a lot more activity for sure.

Katy Clarke:

My parents came with us, and they're in there at the time, they're in their mid-70s when we went up to that particular area. And what I love about it is there's different levels. I mean, if you want to be going and doing those hikes with the carabiners and - that's not my jam.

BJ Witkus:

He did want to do that. I can't. I was like, not with me. I can't do it.

Katy Clarke:

But you know, I'm very bad with heights as well. But I think you can definitely like have a mixture of that and you could maybe just sit at the, um, refugio with your Negroni, BJ, and he can go off and do it like.

Chris Witkus:

Yeah, that's how I think it's going to work out. She'll be at the spa. I'll be out walking myself.

BJ Witkus:

So no, he did come down. He originally wanted to do one of those which look awesome, the hike to huts You know, but I was like, I cannot go that amount of time and just have everything on me that I need.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah.

BJ Witkus:

So I think we're going to do one night at a hut just so he gets that experience, but we'll have a still place that all my stuff can be and just hike back. So that will be cool. But yeah, those huts are just unlike anything else up there. The food and the views, like, that's fabulous.

Katy Clarke:

One thing I was trying with the tour, we were trying to time it for these particular events, but a lot of the times you don't find out about these events until the very last minute. Like, you know, we're trying to plan things and we're waiting for them to announce. But one thing that I found when I went there independently, and you should look out for it as well, is that they have - and I think it's on the main tourist board website - is they'll post local events. And I found one that was one of the refugios, which is a mountain hut. And you just took the cable car up, because there's hundreds of cable cars as well, which can be quite confusing. And then you get to like this hut, and then they had the Alpine horn blowers. There was 6 of them, or 5 or 6 in a row, and they had like these really long - what do they call, like the shaft of the, um, the horn. They're probably taller than me.

Katy Clarke:

I'm not very tall, but like, and then a big, you know, like ball at the end of the horn.

BJ Witkus:

Yeah, yeah.

Katy Clarke:

Everyone was just sitting there with their glass of wine, with their tagliere, their plate of meat and cheese. Some people have been for a hike, and the mountains in the background, and we're I was just like, what is this? This is fantastic.

BJ Witkus:

How awesome. That would be so cool if we could come across that. That would be neat.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, well, I mean, like, definitely keep an eye out for it and ask. I mean, I think that, you know, the hotels there are fantastic and they'll let you know if there's anything like that happening. And it's really worthwhile trying to time your visits like that. I mean, you're in the right spot there because there's so many different cable cars that you can take that you've got lots of different options. Will you be driving, Chris, this time?

Chris Witkus:

Yeah, we're gonna - we will end up flying into Milan and we're renting a vehicle, so we'll be driving up to that area. And then I think the hope is to do the cable cars for most of our traversing, but we want the car just in case we want to go somewhere further and sort of minimize our downtime, whether it be waiting for a bus or whatever it might be. But originally I was going to go up there with my kids and we were going to rough it a little more, but the more we start thinking about it, having a car is probably the most efficient way. That way, because when we get over there, we try to maximize our time. And the best way of doing that is having a car to drive. So it eliminates the downtime, like I said, waiting for buses or trains and stuff like that. Yeah, the car, I think, is what we're going to do.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, I think it's good. I mean, like up there, it's quite easy to drive. You just need to, when you're up there, just check in because up on the mountain especially, there's rules. Which, you know, like Katy, supposed Italy travel expert, I'm just going to admit that I did find out the hard way that unless you're staying up on like, um, Seiser Alm or the Alpe d' Suisi, you can't drive up there.

Chris Witkus:

So interesting.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, yeah, check in with a hotel, they'll tell you straight up. And, uh, yeah, it's quite interesting up there because they have a lot of different rules that they are implementing, and it's - a lot of it is for environmental reasons. So I'm not sure on your trip whether you managed to get to the Val di Funes, which is the next one over the Santa Cristina.

BJ Witkus:

Yeah, I don't think we're going over that way. Yeah, Dolomites are like those two separate - I think we're going to be more on the other side - staying in that area.

Chris Witkus:

Yeah, yeah, we have 5 or 6 nights, I believe, booked in the area. But, you know, we're doing a lot of the, um, I guess the main hikes and the walks and stuff like that. Uh, naturally, we're gonna play it by ear in regards to weather, and that's what we kind of like about it. We're gonna play - stay one night at a refugio. But everything else, we're just going to sort of watch the weather. And if it's a nice, bright, sunny day, we're going to try to hit the mountains. Or if it's a rainy day, maybe we'll stay closer to town or something like that. So it gives us the flexibility to change if need be.

BJ Witkus:

I want to do the e-bikes once in the Alpe di Suisi too. I hope we get a good day to do that.

Katy Clarke:

And you mentioned the spa, and this is one thing that I think is amazing about this area as well, is you do get those wonderful spa activities up there. Did you go to the one in Merano?

BJ Witkus:

The thermal baths? Yeah, I think all of us but the one couple walked down. The rest of us all, I think, went and did those.

Chris Witkus:

That was quite interesting. I've never done anything quite like that before, just with the difference in temperatures between the one being outside and the air temperature being, you know, Fahrenheit-wise was probably in the 40s or 30s, just about freezing.

BJ Witkus:

You and Tyla went in the coldest one, right? Like that super, super whatever the coldest one was. The rest of us didn't.

Chris Witkus:

And then inside it was nice and warm. So it's - it was very interesting. And actually, it was very invigorating. I was kind of recovering from a shoulder injury during that trip and being kind of stiff and sore a little bit. It actually helped me a little bit. I remember talking to BJ about it. I'm like, that's the best I felt being in those pools and being able to move my shoulder, whether it was the contrasting temperatures back and forth or whatever. It's like, wow, this actually is, believe it or not, working a little bit here.

Chris Witkus:

Uh, but yeah, that was again another one of those experiences that we never got to take part in, maybe never ever will again. Who knows? It was so unique. It was so very unique.

Katy Clarke:

My family says, can we go back to Merano? They love it because swimming in and out of the building, um, and with the mountains in the background. But we went in winter last time, so about a year ago, and that's amazing because you go out and it's all steamy

BJ Witkus:

Yeah. I couldn't believe they went in that real cold one, but

Chris Witkus:

Yeah. It was very cold.

Chris Witkus:

I can't remember the exact temperature, but, you know, in the area it was snowing, so that's the air temperature in the region was kind of cold already. Um, and we were outside and the one was - it had to be air temperature, it had to be, you know, like I said, Fahrenheit-wise, probably 40 degrees, I'm guessing, in that area, which is quite chilly.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, yeah. And it's changeable there as well. Yeah, we were there, I think, the year before you were, and it was really quite warm.

BJ Witkus:

But I thought that's cool about what you guys plan too. As I said all of us did the thermal baths, but the one couple went into town. You have things planned, but yet if it's something somebody doesn't really want to do, there's usually like an alternative or an option. Or I know in the one area, walking, a lot of people went to town. You and I did like that one trail and walked along and then met back up. Like, so it is nice that you plan things, take the pressure off of us to all the great places to stay, the places to eat, but yet you do still have some time on your own. Like in Lago de Braies, everybody did more of that walk, which we do walk a lot, but one of my dreams was to get out there on that boat. Chris and I, I think we're the only ones in our group to go out there, but we literally rode out and did that and got those pictures. You felt again you were in like a book because there was the snow - from the snow, the mountains were all snow-covered.

BJ Witkus:

Ah, and the watercolor was just gorgeous, just like what you see on Instagram, and we were there. That's not a filter. That is what that looks like. That was just really, really cool. That sticks with me. I really love that. I almost don't even want to go back there because that was perfect.

Katy Clarke:

I'll give you another one that you maybe can go to when you drive up from Milan is Lago di Carezza, and it's just before Bolzano, so you probably have to pass it on the way, but it is another really gorgeous lake.

BJ Witkus:

I think I have that on my list to check that out. That would be good

Katy Clarke:

Were there any other special places or meals or experiences that you particularly liked?

BJ Witkus:

Absolutely. That, um, we went to, um, Hocheppan Castle. It was our very last meal. So to go up there, you're up at the top and just all of a sudden - that was a gorgeous weather, weather-wise, that area. So many good pictures, photo ops, um, and the views. And the meal was so good, but it was like these ruins.

Chris Witkus:

It was a beautiful autumn day. It was sunny out. We were sitting amidst the vines in, like she mentioned, like the ruins of a castle almost. Outside, a beautiful day, and we're all at a sort of a rustic picnic table, um, enjoying our lunch after hiking around the place. And like you said, that was probably the last meal.

BJ Witkus:

That was our last meal of that trip.

Chris Witkus:

But that was very memorable just from that respect. It was just everything was perfect, that the sun, the weather, you're up on the hill looking out forever. I mean, you could see forever from being up there in a castle the mountains and stuff in the distance. And it was really a great way to end that trip with your team there. And it was just a beautiful dinner.

BJ Witkus:

The pumpkin ravioli I said as we walk was good at Franz, but every place you guys picked for dinner was wonderful and fancy, nice, like the group. But one that also stood out was we did that beer and pizza. I think that was after the hot thermal baths. And it was just - you felt like you were a local going to the local pizza joint. And it was - everything else has been a lot of wine, and that one night was just beer and pizza. So it was just, it was like a contrast thing, but it was cool because it was like, oh, I feel like almost like we're locals here and we're just hanging at the local pizza place. So even though that wasn't like a fancy meal, it was awesome because it was just a local pizza and beer. And so many good meals though.

BJ Witkus:

What are some of the others that you had?

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Chris Witkus:

For, for me, it's when my kids ask me about what was your favorite meal, That's really hard to pinpoint sometimes because you can get a really good plate of pasta or a nice steak or whatever. For me, it's the experience. It really is. I mean, it's - you could have the best plate of food, but, you know, the facility is terrible or whatever it is. So it, like she mentioned, it's just the experience of eating up at the castle or wine tasting before we ate. They took us down and did a wine tasting, and then we had dinner after that. To me, it's the whole sort of experience. Even at the hotel, uh, in Ortisei, we walked through town.

Chris Witkus:

And that one I remember because that was some of the best lamb chops I think I've had. And it was, it was a dark evening, so we walked through town. It was a little wet, but it was a sort of a romantic walk there with a big group of us. And they put us in a little table there, and I remember those lamb chops, Katy, they were delicious.

BJ Witkus:

Another one that stands out to me, and I know it wasn't with your group, but I still give you credit because we learned about Ariana from you. We were at an olive oil place, but they made dinner for us in their home. We were in their kitchen, we were in their home, and they cooked for us. Then we must have been there long enough, the grandma brought the kids back. They'd taken the kids out while we were there, but the kids come in and saying good night, and that just stands out. It was nothing fancy. I mean, the food was a lot and delicious, but it was just their home. Like, and that just one stands out, like, just so hospitable.

Chris Witkus:

It speaks to the nature of the people of the region being just friendly and accommodating and, you know, wanting to always put their best foot forward, it seems, uh, from our experiences anyways, um, inviting you into their house or sharing their local cuisine and how they cook things. And, you know, it's just, this is very warm and welcoming.

BJ Witkus:

And I don't remember who it was, I think it was the one wine guy The one he looked like my grandpa. I forget which place it was, but one of the wine places that you guys had us go to. They were just so happy producing what they produced because he said he had a very good work-home and life balance. Yes, he could grow and get bigger, and with all his stuff, we're like, he could be a multimillionaire based on what he had going on there. And he - I think it was him, but if not, it was somebody over there, one of them. But their thing was like, no, why would we want to do this is what everybody wants, is this nice balance. I can live - I'm making enough to live, I enjoy what I do, but I also have my family. And it's like, wow, that's so - that's just awesome.

BJ Witkus:

Because he had a really nice balance where he could literally be probably a multimillionaire.

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Katy Clarke:

Yeah, that outlook on life, I think, is one of the main reasons I keep going back to Italy, because we live in a culture that's very geared towards growth and more. And it's easy to sometimes lose touch with, you know, that balance. And for me, going back to Italy really cements that in my mind, because for our listeners, before we jumped on, we were talking about some of the challenges about living in Italy. And, you know, things don't work as efficiently as they do in the States or in Australia, here where I am. And it's very charming to me. I don't know if I could live there because I think it would drive me crazy, but it's a very good centering and grounding element to every time I go there. I just like, wow, you know, these people are living very happy, fulfilled lives, but they don't have these endless pursuit of growth. And, uh, it's a really important part of the travel that I do in Italy.

BJ Witkus:

You do come back feeling refreshed and grounded, and that's why we just want to keep going back.

Katy Clarke:

And I want to get to so many other areas So you're up to the Dolomites in a few months again. What are they - anywhere else you're planning?

BJ Witkus:

We are doing - we're booked for Puglia for you guys the next year in spring. That was one of the first trips I ever wanted to do with you once you started up your - and learning about your tours. But then you guys started Dolomites last year. That was, um, that was the first one. And as soon as I saw that, I was like, oh, forget Puglia, we're doing this. But Puglia is still on our list, so we hope to do that next year.

Chris Witkus:

Yeah, and our, our daughter ended up getting married this summer, so we had to postpone it. So it's her fault we won't see you guys. We'll blame her.

BJ Witkus:

So that's why, that's why

Chris Witkus:

We'll blame her. We'll blame her.

BJ Witkus:

I'm sure that was amazing as well, but I want to get down south and down that area. I'm dying to see Puglia and Matera and that area.

Katy Clarke:

It's such a contrast. Sometimes I think, well, how can you explain Italy to people, the diversity of it? And there's - that is probably the best diversity is Puglia and the mountains because it's completely different. Different food, different culture, different landscapes. I think you're gonna love it. And then I'm gonna suggest Sicily because that's another mind-blowing experience.

BJ Witkus:

But some places are very intimidating to me with not knowing the language, even though I tried to learn a little bit. But that's what I love also, that mix we try to do. Even when we did the Dolomites with you guys, we did a week like I don't have to plan anything, do anything, but then we added on a little bit, went up - we tried the train system and I was nervous about that, and that ended up being great. Went up to Innsbruck and ended in Germany before we came home. But that's given us some confidence. So it's like, okay, and I don't know anything about the South. Let's do that with a group, kind of learn a little bit, see what we want to go back and visit. Okay, we've been there, saw that, move on.

BJ Witkus:

Because it can be a little intimidating.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, I can. And that's what I love, is that everyone can travel differently and have their own experience, and whatever works for one person might not work for other people. But I just love that you've really embraced it and you've gone, right, I've got this, I know how to do it, and I'm going back and we're gonna go and explore a bit deeper. I love it, it's so great. Thank you so much, both of you. It's just... I love hearing about everyone's travels and how they look at things. I've traveled in a different way, you travel different. And we had Carol on, um, last year - you've met her and she's such an amazing person.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, her husband doesn't like to travel, so she's off having adventures of our own. That's what makes the world go round. Everyone is having adventures, talking about them, and falling in love with Italy.

BJ Witkus:

And that's inspiring she does it, because I would - I think definitely on my own if he didn't do it, but I'd have to go with a group then, or like you guys for the company, because I don't think I'd be brave enough. Or when it's us, I'm like, okay, he's good at like the whole train system stuff like that. And it really wasn't that bad. I was much more nervous about, but that ended up being really great and beautiful. I thought, oh, I'll sleep on the train, and then it was like the whole view up to Interlaken. I was like, oh, I can't sleep, look at this, look at that.

Katy Clarke:

It was gorgeous. Oh, I hope you've got many, many, many more adventures in your future and that you can take the girls with you at one time. And, um, maybe, you know, who knows what's in the future. But thank you so much, I really appreciate you sharing all your experiences, and I know our listeners are going to enjoy it as well. And I can't wait to hear what you think about Puglia.

BJ Witkus:

I can't wait to go. Thank you so much.

Katy Clarke:

Thank you. Have a great time in the Dolomites.

Katy Clarke:

What I love about conversations like this one is that it captures something I genuinely believe - that Italy is not just a destination you visit. It is a place that gets under your skin, and once it does, you keep finding your way back. Italy is more than a checklist. And BJ and Chris are living proof of that.

I love how they have built the confidence to explore on their own and am proud that we have played a small part in that. I cannot wait to hear about their future adventures, wherever they take them in Italy.

If you have been dreaming about the Dolomites, or wondering whether that jagged mountain skyline really looks as good in real life as it does on Instagram - it does. I promise you that. And if you want to learn more about the Untold Italy Dolomites tour or our Puglia experience, head over to untolditalytours.com and take a look at what we have coming up.

Show notes for today's episode, including everything we mentioned, are over at untolditaly.com/316. And if you have a question about Italy, you would love me to answer on the podcast, send it through to ciao@untolditaly.com - I read every single one.

Next week we are headed to one of Italy's classic destinations that we haven't visited for quite a while on the podcast, but until then, it's ciao for now.