

# Untold Italy Episode 318: Italy in Winter - Milan, the Olympics, and Getting Unstuck

You have done all the research. You have gone down a thousand Italy trip planning rabbit holes. You have even tried asking an AI to build you an itinerary or travel plan. And somehow, at the end of all of it, you are less sure of your trip than when you started. My guest today knows exactly why that happens. And she has been on both sides of it.

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 a tutti and benvenuti. Welcome to episode 318 of the Untold Italy podcast. I'm Katy, your host and before I kick off today's episode, I have a message for all of our listeners and followers.

Untold Italy is a podcast for travelers who love Italy and getting lost in the hidden corners of every region. It is a podcast for first time travelers to Italy who perhaps have dreamed about visiting Italy for the longest time. It is a podcast for every type of traveler. We do not judge here. Everyone has a different travel style and is at a different stage of their traveling journey and our goal is to help ALL types of travelers find their version of Italy. I also know some of you listening are no longer able to travel for a variety of reasons and use our episodes as virtual escape. I'm so glad we can bring Italy to you too.

Some episodes might appeal more to those who have been many times and others may be more interesting for those of you who go many times. We have over 300 episodes so there are infinite ways to get your Italy travel fix.

I'd like to say thank you for all of your ongoing support and kind messages over the years. Special thanks go out to the people who support our work by buying our app, writing reviews and sending lovely messages. Creating over 300 episodes is a huge task - mentally, time-wise and financially - and does not just involve sitting down for a chat every week, though that is my favorite part. We have a team of people working to produce the show - research, editing, working with speakers, creating epic podcast notes and even traveling to Italy - which is also the fun part. To those of you who outwardly show your appreciation, we could not be more grateful. Grazie mille.

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Now we've been recording this podcast since Covid days and unfortunately, the dark clouds that were gathering then seem to be hovering now. I have had to delay my planned trip to Italy in May because my flights to and from Australia were routed via the Middle East due to the ongoing war. It is possible, but very expensive, to reroute via Asia. A lot of people here in Australia are also in this situation and it's sad and frustrating. All I can say is, while I am also very disappointed to delay my trip, I'm remembering how lucky I am to not be wondering whether my home is going to exist tomorrow due to the actions of other human beings. To be clear, I am, and our team is, anti-war and anti-violence of any kind towards anyone, regardless of where they are from. If that's not your vibe, feel free to tune out. For the rest of us, we go back to Italy over the airwaves and it is great to have you here.

I recorded this episode with our partner Alex Tryon, who is a startup founder, a tech builder, and someone who genuinely understands how AI works from the inside out. She is also a mom of two young kids, a lover of Italy, and a traveler who recently took her family to the Milan Winter Olympics. Yes, the actual Olympics.

Now, here is what I love about Alex's story. She is someone who knows how to use agentic technology better than almost anyone. And she found herself stuck when it came to planning this trip using those tools. Hotels that did not exist. Ski resorts with made-up lesson ages. Itineraries that looked right on a page and made no sense on the ground.

The Italy you want is not found in endless Google searches or AI prompts. And this episode is a really honest conversation about why that is, and what to do about it instead.

We talk about Milan with kids, a little-known ski resort in the Aosta Valley called Pila, and why more information does not always mean better travel. Alex also explains the difference between the kind of AI that grabs from the whole internet and the kind that is actually grounded in expert knowledge.

It is a conversation that goes places I did not expect and I think you are going to love it.

Katy Clarke:

Benvenuta. Alex, welcome onto the Untold Italy podcast.

Alex Tyron:

Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, ciao. And hello to you, beaming into me from New York City, which is one of my favorite cities on earth, even if it's not in Italy. But let's face it, if there are cities around the world that hold a strong affinity with Italy, then New York is definitely one of them. Alex, tell me, what's your background and connection to Italy?

Alex Tyron:

That's a great question. So, you know, I visited Italy for the first time when I was 16 years old. It was one of the very first times I'd ever left the country. And it was a special trip with just myself and my dad. And it was a really transformative trip for me, I think. You know, I grew up in rural Texas, so in a radically different world than Italy. And he had planned this two week tour for us to visit Rome and Florence and Venice. And like every stop, I just felt like my, my mind was exploding.

Alex Tyron:

And for me in particular, the art, like it just hit this note that changed my life. I mean, I went on to major in art history in college, and I referenced that trip for years as this turning point where I realized that the world was a whole lot bigger and older than I ever thought it was from my very American perspective. And so it's been a place that I go back to whenever I can and most recently went this winter to go for the Winter Olympics. So it's near and dear to me.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, it's exciting. Oh, you can't wait to hear about the Olympics. I didn't know that you studied art history. That's amazing. Anyway, I know a little bit about you because we've been working together for a little while, but our audience hasn't. So would you mind letting our listeners know a little bit about you, what you do, and I guess a little bit about what we're going to talk about later, which is how to research trips to Italy. So just a bit of context for that.

Alex Tyron:

Yeah, sure. So I'm a technologist by trade. I build startups and currently running a company called Dewey Labs where we build AI-powered answer engines that are grounded in kind of real expertise that comes from humans that know a particular piece of information really well. Also, kind of nonprofits, publishers, all types of organizations. And so I'm living in this interesting place where I live as much of an analog world as I can sometimes, you know, just trying to be in places like Italy where you get to just enjoy the moment while also building with technology everyday.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, it's so much fun. And you're a mom and you've got all the things going on.

Alex Tyron:

All the things going on. I've got two little kids at home, full life here in Brooklyn, and the startup on the side. So, yeah, juggling all the things.

Katy Clarke:

And what was the reason that you wanted to go to the Olympics? What was the motivation behind that?

Alex Tyron:

Sometimes the universe just tells you when you need to take a break, which you really need as a founder, because there's never a good time to take a break. And in this case, my cousin is on the Canadian women's hockey team. She's an amazing tenured hockey player. This is actually her fourth Olympics and we knew it was most likely gonna be her last. And that, you know, these chances don't come around multiple times, so you don't kind of miss those swings. And her daughter is very similar in age to my kids and they're close. And so we knew we were just gonna have this moment to have this amazing family trip. And so it all started with kind of literally signing up for the lottery to go to the Olympics back in August of 2024.

Alex Tyron:

I mean, it was mind-boggling for me to plan something that far in advance, I mean, you know, one of my kids is only four years old, right? So like, we were planning this in a very different world and basically telling ourselves if we could get tickets to the gold medal game to watch women's hockey, then we were going to plan the rest of the trip. And then, you know, fast forward to like February, I think 2025, when the lotteries dropped and we were like, okay, I guess we're going. You know, I think I bought tickets at 2 o'clock in the morning. You had to like log in as soon as the drop opened, like logged in, bought them, went back to bed and was like, I'll deal with the consequences of that tomorrow. And then I think once we realized that we had this incredible anchor reason to go, like, okay, well, I'm flying four people across the ocean. We should make this a real, meaningful memory trip. And it should be more than one hockey game. What else are we going to do while we're in Italy?

Katy Clarke:

Oh, that's so exciting. And what else did you want them to do? What were the ideas that you had?

Alex Tyron:

You know, I think we started very focused on the Olympics. I mean, it seemed like that was going to be the anchor. And so we investigated going to other parts of the Olympics because it was so distributed this year and the hockey events were going to be in Milan, and pretty quickly got some good advice that maybe that wasn't the most practical thing to do, to try to travel to Cortina or places with the young kids in particular. And so we kind of asked ourselves the same question, though. Like, we love winter sports. What if instead of going to watch the skiing, we went skiing ourselves and took our kids to the Alps, which felt like a whole different kind of once-in-a-lifetime memory. And so that ended up being kind of the bookends of the trip. Watching hockey in Milan and then heading north to go skiing.

Alex Tyron:

And that was kind of the core of the trip.

Katy Clarke:

And how long did you plan to be away?

Alex Tyron:

We ended up making the trip be about 10 days. So we overlapped the kind of midwinter break for our kids at school. And then, you know, just wanted to be practical. So you add on a couple of days to make the trip both long enough and make the flights manageable.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. Right. Okay. So did you get any other Olympics tickets? Because I've - having been to an Olympics myself here in Australia, the Sydney Olympics, it is a lot of read, right?

Alex Tyron:

Yeah. You know, the tricky thing about this Olympics is there really just was very little going on in Milan. So it was kind of only the ice events, but even then, not all the ice events, like curling wasn't there. It was down in Cortina. And so we saw four hockey games. We saw a lot of hockey, both women's and men's hockey. And then we saw some speed skating, which was fun just to see something totally different. But the only other thing that was happening in Milan was figure skating, which I would have loved to go.

Alex Tyron:

But I decided that I was going to have to trade one of my children for tickets. It was just insanity to try to get figure skating tickets. And it just wasn't quite important enough to us. We decided we could have a whole other vacation instead of see figure skating.

Katy Clarke:

It would have been amazing to see some of that. I think that was some of the highlights for me, just watching some of those young women in particular, what they were achieving. And there's a camaraderie that was going on in that environment. I was just shocked. I'm not shocked. I was just. It was just lovely to see, actually.

Alex Tyron:

I went to the Olympics in 1996 when I was a kid, and it was a really transformative experience to see, for me at the time, women's sports, I mean, women's sports kind of weren't mainstream at all. Like I said, I grew up in rural Texas, was not the women's sports capital of the world. And I walked away just being like, I'll go see any Olympics, any sport, any team. And that was the experience that we had in Milan as well. I know nothing about speed skating. I still pretty much know nothing about speed skating, but I was screaming my heart out with the people seated around us. And you just feel for the incredible talent of these athletes.

Alex Tyron:

Even if you don't really understand how they do what they do or even why they're doing what they're doing, there's just this incredible bond that happens. And you're making friends with your neighbors, and they're teaching you the little bit they know, and you're trading pins with them, and next thing you know, you're all getting a hot dog together. I mean, it's just like this huge, incredible community being formed. And so I'm now officially an Olympic fan girl. This

will not be our last. I can already feel it. But, you know, and I think I would root for truly, any team in any sport would strongly recommend it to anybody kind of planning a trip.

Katy Clarke:

Absolutely. Yeah. I felt that way for the Sydney Olympics, too. That was in 2000, and I still remember that. I think we watched beach volleyball that time. One of the events that we watched, but. Yeah, exactly.

Katy Clarke:

It didn't matter who was playing. Everyone was right into it. It didn't matter which country they were from, because they're all amazing athletes, and they, you know, work so hard to be there. And I think it's a testament to their dedication and, you know, four years of training, basically, to get to that point that you can only respect that, I think.

Alex Tyron:

Yeah, absolutely. That's very much how I felt.

Katy Clarke:

All right, so now I heard about this trip a little while ago, and I was thinking, this is going to be interesting. How did you first start planning this trip?

Alex Tyron:

So, like I said, it really. It started with the tickets. You know, the Olympic tickets needed to be the route because we knew that that was going to be the hardest element to move. And I think the tricky part is that process was so overwhelming that we got those set, and then I froze. I was kind of like, okay, this is too far in advance. I don't know how to plan a trip this far in advance. I don't really know what else we should be doing. And eventually kind of backed into a calendar, so I knew when we should be flying in and out.

Alex Tyron:

But again, that was kind of it, and that's kind of where I got stuck, frankly. We had this idea of going skiing. We were open to trying to go to other cities. And I just didn't. I didn't know how to figure out where to stay and should I be in a hotel or an Airbnb. And honestly, I feel like I'm really good at this. I feel like I'm good at planning trips and figuring things out for myself. But the Olympics were making everything kind of extra complicated.

Alex Tyron:

Inventory for hotels. I mean, I was going to use some points. No way. Literally nothing available in Marriott anywhere in the vicinity of Milan. All of these things that were kind of my normal plays. And that's when I had my moment where I was like, oh, I'm ignoring this amazing resource. I should reach out to the Untold Italy team and ask for help. Which I frankly had never done before for a trip and didn't really know what to expect.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, it's super interesting and we hearing this all the time is the people that they say to us, I know how to plan a trip, but I'm stuck for some reason. And we'll do that. And I've actually got to say Milan will do that because there's so many events that are happening in Milan all the time. It's one of the world's big event capitals. So there's Fashion Week, there's a lot of trade shows that go on there. Just coming up is Salone Mobile, which is the big design fair. And one of my friends who's an interior designer is taking a group over there and she's the same. I couldn't find any accommodation and that it happens a lot and it's very pricey, it can be really, really expensive.

Katy Clarke:

We'll get into how you ended up planning your trip, but first, I wanted to understand, like Milan. I know you wanted to go for the Olympics, but did you have any other ideas about Milan? Because it's an interesting city, that it's a bit polarizing. I think some people love it, I love it. And some people find it. Yeah, they're like me. Yeah, it's not for me.

Alex Tyron:

It's a great question. I had actually really misremembered Milan. I realized when I got back there. So, you know, I don't think I would have put it on my list if the Olympics weren't there. Because all of my really positive childhood memories were much more of Florence and Rome, but those are also cities I've been back to as an adult. I had not been back to Milan. And so all I remembered was that there was great shops, shopping and fashion. So clearly, 15/16-year-old me, that's kind of all I remembered.

Alex Tyron:

And so I think I was expecting a very... a more modern urban center that just didn't feel like the kind of texture of Italy. And I was so pleasantly surprised. Just the incredible architecture that I think I just completely overlooked as a teen or frankly because of the other places we visited. I think, you know, if you're on the same trip, you go to Florence and Venice, maybe Milan doesn't stick out, but when you go see it by itself, you're like, this place is gorgeous and ancient and interesting everywhere we turn. And the walkability, I think that was something that was really surprising to me and hard for me to relate to on a map. You know, we were a little obsessed with where we were going to be staying and what trains it was close to and how that was going to impact our travel for the events that were happening kind of outside the city. And I lost track of the fact that, you know, the core kind of downtown area is really quite condensed and really walkable and very accessible with kids, you know, with green space kind of scattered through and little courtyard areas where we could just grab an ice cream or gelato and sit.

Alex Tyron:

And so, yeah, I think it wouldn't have been in my, like, top three or four of cities I'd been to in Italy to come back to. But now I'm very much like, oh, we could come back here in a heartbeat. It would be easy with the kids. Like, it felt very comfortable. I mean, I was a New

Yorker. You know, it's hard to find a city too big when you're coming from New York. But it didn't feel overwhelming at all.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. And where did you end up staying? Which area?

Alex Tyron:

We ended up staying just a few minutes, kind of outside the Duomo area. So, in a little bit more residential area just to the south. You know, we were a 10-minute walk to the Duomo and I felt like we were in a neighborhood. Like, it felt like we were tucked entirely into a residential area. But we were, you know, a couple of minutes in a different direction to one of the main train lines that could get us everywhere. And so it was like a really beautiful intersection.

Katy Clarke:

It's one of those things that people, you know, logistically can't picture things so easily when there's all these ancient buildings, things to get around. And using your feet is usually the best answer, I think. To get around.

Alex Tyron:

Yeah, absolutely. So, such a great way to orient yourself. I'm also just really grateful that we ended up not staying in a hotel. Now that I have a better sense of where those are. You got so much more texture of Italy because of where we stayed, you know, because we were, you know, down the street from neighborhood spots and not in a business district. And I think it would have felt like a very different trip. And maybe that's what I remember, you know, maybe that's exactly why I remember it differently, but because of where we were, you know, we met our neighbors that were locals in the building and they thought it was cool that we were there and taught us how to use the elevator. And, you know, it just became part of the trip.

Katy Clarke:

So nice. I love that, especially with kids. I think you need that sort of. Yeah. A neighborhood vibe. And in Italy, how did you find the people with the children?

Alex Tyron:

Oh, how do we find people with children? You just walk towards trees and grass and you'll find all the other kids. I mean, I think that's what we did. Like, every time the kids needed a break, we just literally headed for, like, anything vaguely like a green space, and you would just run into other people with kids running around, whether there was a playground there or not. You know, I didn't find Milan very playground-dense at all. It was hard to find a playground, but it didn't really matter because there was enough space. There were enough runaround spaces where there were no cars and where there were. I'm forgetting the full name of it, but there's a kind of a castle that's pretty central to the city, that's right on the edge of the park, and it's free just to walk through. And the courtyard is just like.

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Alex Tyron:

There's kids just riding around the courtyard. And it's tourist kids, it's locals kids. And, you know, next thing you know, they're chasing pigeons and everybody's just off to the races. And. Yeah, so I think it didn't feel hard. And then the Leonardo da Vinci Museum, which is for kids partially and very much also for adults, was also a great place. We spent an entire rainy afternoon. Afternoon there.

Alex Tyron:

Every single person, my cousins, went with us as well. We all just loved it. We all learned something. And we learned things about da Vinci, but also just about science more broadly. And that was just a really incredible experience.

Katy Clarke:

Also, I would have to say those museums there, people always rush to the Uffizi and all of the very popular museums, but you're going to these places in Milan and there's very few people. There are people there, but it's not crowded like you would have in Venice or Rome or Florence. It's really nice. And they're so well curated, I think, just wonderful for kids to engage with the art and the science. And you don't even, like you said, even if you're running around the Castello with chasing pigeons, the international language of chasing pigeons. I think it's such a really nice way to engage with the culture and Italians love kids. So it's really easy, I think, to travel.

Alex Tyron:

Yes, I totally agree. I'll say on the. My fun hack. Maybe we were not... we did not have our act together well enough to get tickets to see the Last Supper. That was probably, you know, things that were going to be hard to do during the Olympics. Everybody had that idea and I didn't realize it, but if you, when you go to the Da Vinci Museum, there is a full-size replica on one of the walls that is just incredibly detailed and you can walk right up to it. There's no crowds and it's not the same. You know, I've seen the original when I was there as a teenager.

Alex Tyron:

It doesn't have the kind of environment, but especially for the kids, you know, and for the attention spans that we had available, it was the perfect last summer viewing. If it's maybe number five on your list and you don't want to build your trip around it, go see the version at the Da Vinci Museum and all of the context. I learned more than I think I learned seeing the real one, if that makes sense. Because there was more like educational content about kind of why things were done the way they were done and how they were done instead of just standing in line, shuffling past it and being rushed away.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, it's an interesting experience, that one. Yes. And if you are going to Milan, you must book well in advance for The Last Supper. Unfortunately, it's highly limited and it's highly

coveted and people often miss out. I know. You know, a lot of friends of mine have said, I wish I'd listened to you, Katy, when you said book the tickets in advance. You told me that, too.

Alex Tyron:

And I said okay, and then got distracted. But we did listen on the other one, which was there was a recommended tour to go up the Duomo and to go up the elevator to be able to do the roof tour. And I walked right past hundreds of people in line who had not taken that option. And it was a very small difference in cost to have pre-booked this trip to go straight up the elevator to the roof, which was absolutely the only way to do it and especially to do it with the kids. And it's still a ton of stairs and a ton of walking, even at that level, but such an incredible way to see the city. And I'm really grateful it's the thing that we booked on our first full day there, because I feel like you were saying before about like, orient yourself with your feet. Like your feet and your eyes, right?

Alex Tyron:

So, like we walked to the Duomo, we went up, we looked around, we understood everything about how the city was laid out by the time we got to lunch that day. And then the rest of the trip we could just look back and that could be our reference point. Like, oh, we know where we are because there's the Duomo. And it really anchored us, I think.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. Now you were working with Tyla on our team and Tyla's got a very big passion for skiing, so it was a really great fit. And she'd also lived in Milan, so she's probably the perfect consultant for you, actually. And what did you talk to Tyla about when you were deciding about what ski resorts you wanted to visit?

Alex Tyron:

Tyla was like working with magic. What we talked about was that we had two kids. Our kids are seven and four and they're true beginners. The four-year-old had never been on skis the seven-year-old had, but it had been two years. But my husband is a pretty advanced skier and I'm kind of comfortable anywhere on the mountain. And so we needed something that was going to work across a pretty wide range. But we really wanted the trip to be a success for the kids and, you know, we knew what our trade-offs were, you know, in terms of like high-end resort versus just like great kid-friendly skiing. I had tried my hardest to plan this part of the trip.

Alex Tyron:

And you know, I was saying I feel like I'm usually pretty good at this. I had done a ton of web research. At one point, I had even had an AI agent go out and build me a spreadsheet of mountains and ski resorts and ones that had different lessons available based on kids' age cutoffs and it was just slop. Half the places didn't exist. They made up ages about what age kids could take lessons. Like, it was just totally useless. And we were just heading.

Alex Tyron:

We were like, all right, we're going to go to the Matterhorn because we've heard of it before. Like, I don't even know what else to do. I don't know how we're going to get there. Should we rent a car? And then Tyla stepped in and had such clear, like, here are three choices, here's why you would pick between them. And this is the right one for you, if you just want to know what I think you should do. And it was exactly what I needed. And it was, you know, this, like, firm but gentle hand, if that makes sense of, like, there's good reasons for all of these. But you've told me what you want, and it's this.

Alex Tyron:

You've never heard of it. It's this little mountain called Pila, and you're gonna love it.

Katy Clarke:

I love that. And she did that to us as well, and we went to a totally different resort because my kids are a little bit older, and it was like, literally, on the other side of the Dolomites mountains. But she listened very carefully to what we needed, you know, and I think it's invaluable. And as a travel business owner, I now always get local help if I don't have it on my team for Italy. We're going to Japan later this year. I'm getting help for Japan because I don't know. And like you said, when you're searching online and you're doing these AI, I mean, you know how to make AI work better than anyone.

Katy Clarke:

Like, that's listening here. I guarantee it. But it can only get what it can get, can it?

Alex Tyron:

Right. I think that's exactly what we hit was, you know, I would try to go fact-check. And I was like, oh, well, you're pulling from a website that has no. Basically no content on it. So, like, of course you're making up what age ski lessons are available for because they're not published anywhere, you know, and so, like, you just needed much less anything that would give you, like, thoughtful commentary on what the experience might be, you know, And I think beyond that, there was just the layers of understanding, the complexity. So, like, I had a vision for how the trip was going to play out in terms of kind of order and when we should go where. And Tyla just tweaked it in so many little ways. Like, I had never thought, like, okay, we should actually leave Milan and go back to the airport to rent a car.

Alex Tyron:

I don't know why it seems so obvious now, but because we picked the car up at the airport and then planned the trip so that we could leave the mountain and drive straight back to the airport. It was a little bit more expensive. It was also the only sane thing to do with two kids that needed car seats that we were also going to rent at the airport. It totally changed the stress level of the ski portion of the trip. And that was, like, the design of somebody who's physically done this drive before and knew, like, yes, it looks long, but it's actually reliable and it's an expressway and you're going to be able to do it. And here's how much time to give yourself. And by the way, don't forget to get your international driving permit, which we

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would have totally forgotten had it not been on a really explicit checklist that we were being handed. And so it would have been a very short-lived attempt at picking up a car.

Katy Clarke:

That's no joke, actually, because I have a friend here in Australia and her family's Italian and she goes to Italy every two years and they had planned this trip right up in that area and they forgot their international driver's permits and they were not allowed to rent the car. And so their trip turned into something very different than what they originally planned, which was, you know, like, it ended up being fine. But I mean, if you've only got a short amount of time, like 10 days, and that's your dream trip, could be a little bit of a challenge or it could get very expensive, so...

Alex Tyron:

Oh, yeah.

Katy Clarke:

Anyone listening, please? And I, I literally have friends argue with me that they don't need the international driver's permit. Hello, Rachel. My friend Rachel, she's like, I've never needed it. Why do I need it?

Katy Clarke:

I'm like, please, just, you know, I don't want to "I told you so later". So...

Alex Tyron:

No, no, you don't. It's not worth it. This is like not one of those that's worth rolling the dice on. Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, well. And tell us a little bit about the ski resort because I think when people have in their mind about a ski resort, well, depending on how much skiing you've done. And we - my husband's done quite a bit, but I'm. I don't like cold, so it's not been my preference. So when we went up, I had no idea really what to expect. And so I think it's really worth painting a picture of what you found when you got to Pila.

Alex Tyron:

Yeah. So my experience is almost entirely skiing in the mountains in Colorado. So I have a very kind of specific idea of what skiing looks like. So we were going up to the Aosta Valley, which is a region that I conceptually knew existed on a map but had never really thought about. For one thing was just a really beautiful, very easy drive from Milan. I mean, you changed environment so rapidly. I think by the time we were less than an hour out of the city, we were just staring at mountains and then another hour and you're really in them. You're fully kind of immersed in them.

Alex Tyron:

And there's this really stunning town that I wish we'd had more time to spend in called Aosta, that's at - kind of the base of the valley that I now understand is like an ancient, ancient Roman village that, you know, we stopped for supplies. This was another one of those, like trust someone who's on the ground. I would have never thought to go stock up on all the groceries we needed while we were still not kind of on the mountain. Turns out that was a critical move. So we stocked up on all of our groceries and then drove up what was darn close to a one-lane switchback road up this tiny, tiny road into the mountains to just emerge into what was truly a tiny ski village. I mean, I wonder if the year-round population in Pila is more than 100, 200. I mean, it is very much on the top of a mountain. Most people who go up there come up a gondola, down from the valley and you actually ride the gondola up daily.

Alex Tyron:

So I think most of the staff and most of the skiers are coming up the gondola. But Tyla had found us this incredible little condo. The condo itself is like kind of a fun story because this mountain, and I can't remember exactly when this was built, but it has very kind of Swiss engineering feel to it, where you drive into a tunnel and it is just concrete. Like you're in this concrete tunnel and you have no idea what's going on. And there's just doors occasionally throughout the halls and you don't really know until you've actually parked your car also in the tunnel in a garage and emerged into the building, that the way they've built this is so all of these condos are built into the mountain so that everybody has a view straight out into the mountain. And all of the kind of interiors are hidden in this concrete tunnel. So when you're outside, you see no roads.

Alex Tyron:

Like you have no sense of the cars even existing. You're just walking out of the door right next to your condo, straight onto the snow, in our case, actually straight onto a snow-covered playground that our kids' brains exploded with joy. And we spent so much time in ski boots just on swings and a zip line in between ski lessons, which was great. And so yeah, you're emerging into this magical place. But then it turns out there's a lot of mountain there. I would guess there were at least 40 runs. I mean, there was a meaningful number of gondolas and chairlifts that you could get up. And a lot of complexity.

Alex Tyron:

I mean, more difficulty than I really felt like skiing, but also plenty of kind of beginner runs for the kids, and then just restaurants scattered across this valley and across this mountain. And I think one of my favorite just, I'm not in Colorado anymore moments, one is on the gondola. I heard no English. I mean, we were not in crowds of American tourists at all, which I thought with the Olympics in town, we were going to be, like, not the only ones with this idea. And we were going to be in tourist crowds. All locals or other Europeans, but pretty much locals, you know, and that was exactly what we wanted. You know, we wanted to go and just have an immersive experience that was more about the mountain than it was about kind of being a tourist. And then we get to the top of the mountain, and there's a lunch spot

with proper silverware, a good cappuccino, table service, waiters, but everybody's in their ski boots.

Alex Tyron:

And it was so different than being in Colorado, where you're, like, served a \$15 tiny cup of chilli that you kind of have to slurp down because it's the only food. I mean, we were having a gourmet meal with this stunning view of the Alps while still all cuddled up in our ski gear and thinking, I could get used to this. This could be what skiing feels like. I could have a proper cappuccino served to me between runs and then a really great glass of wine later, like, we could do this. This feels different.

Katy Clarke:

Very civilized. They really know how to do things, don't they? But you really do need to find those places, because I think if you're in Cortina or something like that. We went through Cortina last year, and that's the kind of the most popular or the best well known Italian ski resort. But it's, you know, it's very typical and it's very, you know, it's like that luxury kind of thing. And I didn't feel the soul of it, basically.

Alex Tyron:

This mountain felt like all soul. I mean, it was very family-friendly. I mean, even the way it was just set up, I think it was kids under 12 ski free if they're with an adult who's bought a pass, which, again, compared to Colorado, like, my brain's exploding, you know? And then we put them in ski school, where they were immediately grouped into, like, great groups. The instructors spoke English, even if not the other kids did. And they were just off to the races. And then, you know, it's Italy, so there's a slice of pizza waiting at the end pretty much everywhere, so you don't have to worry about feeding them. And I can have whatever I want.

Alex Tyron:

And it was a very special place to be able to go. And I think, again, like, having that planning assist, you know, I would have looked for a hotel. I would have looked for, kind of, more that generic luxury experience, because that's what I've experienced. But instead, we had a condo with a kitchen. And the advice to pick up food on the way up so we could make family breakfast in the morning, which, you know, with the rush of getting out onto the mountain, like, that was so much nicer than needing to, like, bundle everybody into a restaurant and try to rush and still make it in time for ski school on time. It was exactly the pace that we needed.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. I think it's a different type of luxury, isn't it? Like, if you have the luxury to do things at your own pace, I think. Think we can talk about defining luxury forever. I mean, I could anyway, but. But I think it's a different way to look at things, that if you really get the experience you want and it's something that's special to you, then that, to me, is the ultimate luxury.

Alex Tyron:

Yeah, absolutely. I think I didn't feel like I was put on somebody else's rails at all. And that meant that we could catch our breath a little bit, which was really nice.

Katy Clarke:

Oh. And do you think you'll go back to Italy anytime soon?

Alex Tyron:

Ooh. I mean, I'll take any excuse that I can take to go back to Italy. You know, there's so many regions that I haven't seen, even just actually now that I have seen. But now, having spent a tiny bit of time in the Dolomites, I want to go back in the summer. Like, I can already - you know, it's easy to squint at what I saw and picture what it would be like in the summer. I will say one of my big dreams right now is to figure out how to do a month, you know, like the month of July, in some place like Italy, with our kids in the near future, where we can really let them be immersed in a local camp and a different pace of life. And I could work remote, so that's high on the to-do list.

Katy Clarke:

Oh. I actually have a friend whose kids are at a school here in Australia who they go to a bilingual school, Italian and English, and they have done some immersive things like that. So I'll let you know about that later. But yeah, there's so many options. It's exciting. So Alex, let's just circle back about researching your trips because I think people have this idea that when they go online, that everything that you want is online. And maybe that's true here in Australia or in the US. Although we could talk about that as well. But in Italy things are a little bit different, aren't they?

Alex Tyron:

Yes, very different. I mean, I was kind of joking before about the information not being there on the websites, but that wasn't a one-off experience. That was like an over and over again experience. And even when we were on the ground and we were trying to figure things out, I mean, there was one point where we were even in Pila, in the mountain, and I was trying to figure out where to go to dinner because we'd been, you know, recommended to always have reservations because it's such a small mountain, there's not a lot of seats. But the websites just didn't have hours. And some places were open for dinner and some of them only did, you know, lunch and apres ski. And so we finally just, just we've had to go walk. We had to go walk the town and literally look in the windows and get the hours and knock on the windows and ask if we could make a reservation for later.

Alex Tyron:

And because I was just so dependent on the way I always do things, I was going to go straight to Google Maps and Google Maps was going to solve the problem for me, but it was not going to solve the problem in the mountains of Pila, like at all. And you know, Milan was better because some of the attractions are more documented. You know, the big museums and things are going to be there. But some of the best gelato I've ever had in my life was on the end of

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our block. And I don't even think the location was listed. Like it just didn't even exist. And yet we knew about it because there were crowds down the block waiting to get it every night when we walked by. So it's not like it had just appeared.

Alex Tyron:

You know, this was a known place. So yes, it's not a, you know, a very online place.

Katy Clarke:

No and Italians, they don't put this stuff online. They, I think Italians love a bit of a scroll on Instagram or things like that. But they're not these people that go and leave reviews. So it's super interesting if you look at restaurant reviews as well, for things on TripAdvisor, they just - they don't do it. So you're not getting the local perspective a lot of the time. And it's usually someone from outside that's given that perspective. And one thing that is, you know, really clear is, like, as, you know, our technology capabilities advance.

Katy Clarke:

If it's not online, it can't be anywhere else.

Alex Tyron:

No, Right. There's such an expectation that, you know, it can be found, and if it exists, it will be found and surfaced to you. But that was very much not true. And, you know, it's a little bit of a relief once you adjust to it, because you realize that maybe you could just be, you know, maybe you could just take a walk and decide where to get your coffee based on what looks good instead of having the perfect plan. But, you know, especially as somebody who likes to plan things and has small children, that's not how I'm programmed these days. But some of our better experiences were very much just kind of following our instincts and our noses. And I think for me, that came back to, like, once I started to think about planning these trips and I realized I needed to let go of that perfect plan because that was just going to be an overstructured, stressful experience. Instead, it was like, what are the really big rocks? Like, what actually does need to be planned? You know, the Duomo tickets.

Alex Tyron:

I'm not going to get them unless I book them. That one's important. But we can eat anywhere we want in Milan. We don't need a special reservation. Let's just not worry about that. You know, let's make space for serendipity there. And kind of balancing that back out felt really good.

Katy Clarke:

Italy has this amazing way of doing that, because as, like I said, we've had this gentleman that we used to have a Facebook group where people would give recommendations, and his shop kept getting recommended. And he reached out to me and he said, can you please make these people stop? I have enough business. I don't want any more. Like, it was so such a different mindset, I think. And I just love that, because when you go to Italy, you are not

under that, like, constant: Efficiency. Do things faster. Do things better. No, they just, you know, it's.

Katy Clarke:

It's what will be, will be. And they've been doing that for a very long time, and it's worked out, you know, okay for them, really.

Alex Tyron:

It's the mental adjustment that I was making for myself, you know, as the trip was planned. And then once you're on the ground, and you're reminded kind of, you know, we got to our first Airbnb in Milan and we had instructions of getting a key out of a lockbox and we had the lockbox open and there's no key there. And I've got, you know, jet-lagged kids and suitcases and we're standing on the curb and you know, you just have to take a deep breath and go, okay, well, where can I find some food? Where can I find a park? And then you've realized that people are still people and people will help you. And so instead we knocked on the door and somebody let us in and we went upstairs and they were finishing cleaning it and the cleaners just had the key. Like it just wasn't a big deal. But in the moment, you're like, 'this wasn't the plan'. You know, we were supposed to be able to check in at 3, it is now 4. There's no reasonable reason that the key isn't there.

Alex Tyron:

Obviously, this is going to be a disaster. And then you've just got to breathe and like let it go for a second and adjust to the fact that like 4 o'clock is a lot like 3 o'clock in Italy and you know, they're just running a little bit behind and everybody's going to be okay.

Katy Clarke:

It's, it is one of those things. Everyone's in the heat of the moment and travel can be very, very stressful, that you do have those kind of panic moments. But I think in Italy especially, they're very friendly. They just want to help you and it'll work out. I think that's true everywhere, actually.

Alex Tyron:

I think there's a depth to humanity that we can all kind of forget that other people see themselves. And I remember this a lot when I'm traveling with kids who may or may not be having their best moment and having a fit in a restaurant, that very rarely do you see somebody scowling at you if you're actually paying attention. Mostly, what you see is empathy or people making silly faces at my little guy because they realize that they can get him to laugh better than I can. There's just a lot of, a lot of people that are trying to help, not trying to judge.

Katy Clarke:

Exactly. Why is it that strangers can make your kids laugh better than you can?

Alex Tyron:

I don't know. But infinitely grateful for them. And you know, now that my daughter's a little bit older, my 7-year-old loves babies and all she wants to do in a restaurant is go greet the babies at other tables. And I have to turn off my inner American that's like, 'no, don't bother them. They don't want to be bothered'. Because every time I say yes and she goes and greets some baby, we end up having a conversation with the family. They end up telling us that it was like one of the nicest parts of their meal because they just got to sip their wine in peace because she doesn't want to talk to them. She literally wants to talk to their baby and hand them pieces of food off their plate for 20 minutes.

Alex Tyron:

It turns out that people like having interactions with other people when we're all on the same page and we're not bothering anybody. We're actually just living in community and it's a really nice feeling.

Katy Clarke:

And I just love this juxtaposition of technology and just humanity as well. And for those of you who don't know, we've got this really great tool on our website and on our app specifically, which is built by Alex's team, that helps you get really great information about Italy that's built on the Untold Italy information. So Alex, you want to tell us a little bit about how your view on expert knowledge is compared with the great wide unwashed of the Internet?

Alex Tyron:

Yes, I mean, I think this is, it's great to understand AI when you're thinking about how you're going to use online tools for travel planning. And so I think the first thing to understand is just a little bit of 101, if you'll entertain me - on kind of how the general models work. So they're trained on trillions of words that came from the entire Internet and books. And that means things that are up to date and things that are out of print. And it means super accurate websites and all of Reddit. Right? It's all in there. And that forms kind of the base model and what we call parametric knowledge.

Alex Tyron:

It is like the brain of the AI. And so most of the time when you're interacting with a ChatGPT or a Claude or Google, these days, what you're getting is parametric knowledge. And so it is kind of like reaching into a grab bag. It is sometimes great and sometimes you just get the bad apple and you don't really get to decide. Increasingly, models are shifting to do more web search. So they are trying to find accurate and high-quality sources, but that's just kind of like a filter on a grab bag. Because again, we're talking about web search of the Internet and the Internet is full of a little bit of everything. And it certainly isn't curated to your tastes and preferences or accurate necessarily, especially in a space like travel, where things can be really, really rapidly changing.

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Alex Tyron:

We tried to plan a trip last year using heavy use of AI tools and the number of things that it was recommending that just didn't exist because they were from six months ago. It wasn't a huge miss, but the world had changed. And so what we have been building and what we built with Untold Italy is what's called a rag system, which basically means a system searching on a closed loop amount of data. So in this case, it is all of the knowledge that Untold Italy has created about Italy, including, you know, articles and blog posts and guides and podcasts. And so that knowledge is constrained to something that's been human-verified as being high quality and being up to date. And that way, it means it doesn't know everything. You might be like, what's the rate to, you know, to stay in this hotel next week? And it's going to say, I don't know. Here's our favorite resource, you know, to book hotels that'll give you the best rate because it's actually been created by humans, but it will tell you in accurate detail exactly why you do need that international driver's license and all sorts of other kinds of little tips that might not come up somewhere else.

Alex Tyron:

And I think it's been really fun for us to kind of feel that contrast, you know, between general web and what recommendations might come up and somebody who's been there and who actually has a strong opinion about this.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, because it doesn't give you an opinion, does it? Any of these tools - they're giving you what's out there. They're just giving you raw data, basically.

Alex Tyron:

They're giving you raw data. And I think the thing that's complicated about it is they might give it to you as a strong opinion. I mean, when we were trying to book this trip, you know, where should we go skiing? You could ask across three windows the exact same question and get the absolute right answer is this. And it'd be a totally different answer based on totally different data that it got on that particular roll of the dice. And so you don't know how much it doesn't know if that makes sense. It doesn't say, hey, I don't actually have a comprehensive spreadsheet of all of the mountains that are available and which ones might be best for kids. It doesn't ever tell you that. It just says, you should go skiing here.

Alex Tyron:

And you hope that that's based on something useful. And maybe there's a citation, and maybe you go through and you click it and it turns out there's nothing on that site about skiing. And you think, huh, that's odd. Why did it pull this citation? But it can't tell you.

Katy Clarke:

I can't tell you how many people come to us with itineraries that they've built on AI tools and they're really frustrated. And it's because, like, just circling back, the data's not there to begin with. So if it's not there, you can't do anything with it. And then it will make things up.

Alex Tyron:

Right. Or it just. It makes guesses, you know, and one of the things that people forget is, you know, AI today does not have a very accurate kind of world model, which basically, what that means is, like, it doesn't have a sense of kind of how things fit together in the physical world in a way that you might expect it to. And so something that I've seen it really struggle with is, like, what would be the best way to organize a trip between these four cities with minimal transitions between trains? Unless it has an article written that really talks about that, it's just going to kind of get, I guess, based on a rough understanding of geography, it is no real understanding of how the train lines work and which ones are operated by who and how frequently they run, and which ones have overnight trains. Like, it's just going to get messy fast. And I bet you see that in some of the itineraries people show up with, where it just. It assumes that things are possible that aren't possible.

Katy Clarke:

Yes. And the other really sad thing is, you know, my background's from travel blogging, and people don't travel blog and write these articles anymore because there's no incentive for them to do it. So what that means is that those articles, if they're out there, they're not going to be fresh, they're not going to be updated, because there's no financial incentive for anyone to do it. You just. It takes a lot of effort to keep all this information up to date, and it's basically just being stolen and scraped by the general tools. And for me, when we create information, I want it to be useful, but there also needs to be some sort of return because it's a lot of effort to find out all of this stuff and keep it together. It's not something that just happens overnight. Like, you have to really invest time in terms of actually going to do the thing and then write about it and then promote it.

Katy Clarke:

Like it's a lot of work.

Alex Tyron:

Yeah, absolutely. I think it's, you know, it's a big part of why we decided to build the company that we built was, you know, my experience. I sometimes joke that I'm kind of a reluctant evangelist for AI because I kind of wish we could put the genie back in the bottle, you know, but since we can't, we have to figure out what to do with it. And one of the things that I'm really aware of is we have to create incentives and ways to encourage expert knowledge to continue to be created. Because, like you just said, I mean, the travel blogs are drying up. And you know, that makes me so sad, the number of incredible trips and ideas that I got kind of earlier in my life because I stumbled across somebody who I could relate to and I followed their advice and I could just almost just cargo copy paste their trip and be like, great. You and I seem to think enough alike. I will do exactly what you did and I will have a great incentive.

Alex Tyron:

And yes, I might use your affiliate link and everybody will be happy about it because that works for both of us. And now either you're not going to find it or you're going to find just

mass numbers of AI-slop-ridden versions. I mean, reviews are becoming useless so quickly. Reviews for everything. I mean, almost all the sites are just overrun by AI reviews. And so one of the reasons we wanted to create this was - we need to give these tools to the experts themselves so that they can surface their expertise in a way that makes it easier for people to access it so that they're not needing to go to the big models. They know that they can go straight to their experts, but still have that high-quality AI experience because, yeah, we need human curation. We desperately need human curation.

Alex Tyron:

You know, AI is really good at a lot of things, but taste is not one of them yet.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. And to that point, like if everything's compounding on itself, so if more of these generic itineraries and things are built, then it's gonna think it's more popular. Right. And so then everyone's going to be going to the same places and everyone's going to be doing the same trip, which creates more crowds. And it's sort of, to me, it's creating in travel a sort of a dichotomy. It's the people that want that fast and furious kind of travel experience. And then there's like the people that kind of realize, oh, hang on a minute there's something you know, maybe that's not really what I want, and I want a different kind of experience. It's all about the feeling that I want to get when I travel, rather than what someone else's plan is.

Alex Tyron:

Yeah, absolutely. I think there's an interesting kind of - I don't know if it's the light side or the dark side, maybe it's both, you know. You know, AI is changing the world in a lot of ways. And when you get all of this slop out there that floods the Internet and it breaks the tools that we've all been relying on with bad reviews, it does change, I think, how people need to interact with information. And I think in a way, maybe we had lost track of the value of the individual curators and the travel bloggers. But it's not lost on me that the travel industry market is just exploding right now.

Alex Tyron:

I mean, the number of people I know who have worked with a travel agent in the last 12 to 18 months is exponentially higher than it was a few years ago. I think that has a lot to do with this kind of information moment that we're in, because, you know, I'm planning a 40th birthday trip with a bunch of girlfriends. That was the easiest thing in the world to find a travel blog for in the past because everybody's written about that when they did that big trip - all slop now, you know, and I feel like I can't trust any of it. And so you're going to plan this big trip. I'm going to reach out to somebody who has an incentive to give me a really great recommendation because their business is built on me referring them more business after I have a great trip. And so whether they refer me to a place where they have some type of referral relationship or not, I don't care. I care that they referred me to something that they love enough to put their name behind, because their business is going to grow because I tell people about my experience. And that is an incentive that AI just doesn't have at all.

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Alex Tyron:

It might have the referral link, but it does not have the loop. It does not care whether or not you come back to it and tell it you had a good experience. It does not care whether or not you give it a positive review. It doesn't care whether or not you tell it that you had a horrible experience. It doesn't update that for the next person. And that's just such a different experience than when you work with a human, and that human's going to ask you and you know, Tyla is going to take my feedback and that's going to change maybe what she recommends for the next family, because now we learned a little bit about how there's two ski schools and there's slightly different accessibility. And, you know, she doesn't know that because she doesn't have a four-year-old, but I can give her new information that will change her experience, and I'm incentivized to do that and she's incentivized to learn. That's a beautiful thing that's lost, I think, in the simplicity of the AI tools.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, 100%. Alex, such a great conversation. I'm so thrilled that you had a really fun time with your family in Italy. I had done a similar trip without the Olympics, unfortunately, the year before. And we just had such a brilliant time. And I keep getting asked when we're going back to do that same trip again, and hopefully it's imminent. But I do hope you get back to Italy soon. And thank you so much for sharing all your insights on travel in Italy in the winter and also the ways that we can use these tools more efficiently.

Katy Clarke:

And everyone, if you want to try out Zia, which is our online tool, then we'll drop a link to that in the show notes. Alex, thank you so much for joining us. Really appreciate it.

Alex Tyron:

Thank you for having me. This was a lot of fun.

Katy Clarke:

Ciao, ciao.

Katy Clarke:

Grazie mille to Alex for being generous with her time and so honest about the whole experience. The Winter Olympics and the Pila story alone was worth it. A gondola ride up a mountain, table service in ski boots, a cappuccino with a view of the Alps. What an adventure.

If you want to try out Zia, our AI travel tool built on actual Untold Italy knowledge, you will find the link in the show notes. It is a very different experience from a general web search and is worth exploring if you are in the thick of planning your next trip. You will also find it waiting for you on the Untold Italy app.

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As always, all the places and ideas from today's show are waiting for you on the show notes at [untolditaly.com/318](https://untolditaly.com/318).

Next week, I'm answering some more listener questions and there are some great ones. Especially about booking restaurants. Looking forward to that one. Have a peaceful Easter and until next time, it's "Ciao for now".