

Untold Italy Episode 321: Your Italy Travel Questions - Tuscany vs Umbria, Milestone Birthday Idea, Concerts and More

Every six weeks or so, I open up the pod to your questions and every single time, I am struck by how thoughtful they are. In this episode, I'm answering real, considered questions from people who are traveling to Italy soon. Some are seasoned travelers and others are first-timers to Italy. And they cover the top to the toe of the boot!

Ciao a tutti and benvenuti! Welcome back to the Untold Italy 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 back to the Untold Italy podcast, I am your host Katy Clarke. If you are new here, welcome - so glad you found us. Untold Italy exists for people who know that Italy is more than a checklist. The podcast is the heart of what we do - over 300 episodes, six years running - and we have expanded from there into a travel app, trip planning consultations, and small group hosted tours. Everything lives at untolditaly.com. We put a call out for questions recently and honestly, you delivered. We were absolutely overwhelmed with how many came in - and the quality of them. Choosing just six was very difficult. What I have tried to do is pick the ones that I think will be useful to the most people. Some are quite specific, but I also want to share the thinking behind the answers, which tends to apply far more broadly than the question itself.

Katy Clarke:

Today, we are covering six listener questions. Solo travel safety on Italian trains, choosing between Tuscany and Umbria, finding live music in Italy, celebrating a milestone birthday in Puglia, keeping children genuinely engaged, and what to do when you have just overhauled your whole itinerary and are wondering if you made the right call. These Q&A episodes are some of my favorites to make - because your questions remind me that the people in this community are not looking for a checklist. They are looking for their version of Italy. And those are two very different things.

Katy Clarke:

If you are in the thick of planning right now and want personalised help - not another Google search, not another forum thread - we do offer one-on-one trip planning consultations. You bring your ideas, your dates, your wishlist, and we help you build a trip that is genuinely

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yours. You can find all the details in the show notes, as well as a transcript and details discussed in this episode. Andiamo! Onto your questions.

Katy Clarke:

Our first question comes from Ruby, who is planning her first-ever solo trip to Italy. Three weeks, which is wonderful. Ruby, good for you. I love that you are doing this. Now, Ruby is traveling by train and, as a solo traveler, is understandably a little nervous about keeping her luggage safe. She's planning to bring a medium suitcase, a duffel bag and a small day bag, and she wants to know how to protect her belongings on the trains. Ruby, first of all, this is such a common concern and I'm really glad that you asked it because the answer will help a lot of people listening right now who are wondering the same thing. Here's the important thing I want to say before anything else. Italy is generally very safe for travelers. And you know, like most places, petty theft exists, as it does in every country, but it is far from a very scary experience, people sometimes have in their minds. So make sure you go with awareness, take your usual precautions and have a great time.

Katy Clarke:

Now onto your specific question. The single best thing you can do for your train travel in Italy is to limit yourself to two pieces of luggage. And I know three weeks feels like it needs three bags, but you can do it with two pieces, I reckon, and that'll be your suitcase and your day bag. And here's why that matters. In a practical sense. Italian trains, especially the ones doing the intercity routes, will require you to board up a couple of steps. And in this case, a platform is lower than the carriage, so you've got to go up a couple of steps to get on the train, down to get off. And so if you're managing multiple bags on your own, those steps can become a real challenge.

Katy Clarke:

This is a lovely thing about Italy. Someone will almost always help you. And Italians are very kind in those moments because they want to get on the train too. But you don't want to be dependent on that every single time you board. And that can be a little bit of an effort even with two bags. And I know this from experience because I am a serial purchaser in Italy, so I've managed to have to manage multiple bags. And I think if you can try, you really should try and only do it with two pieces. Now, the storage on the train does vary, so on the faster Trenitalia and Italo services, there's usually overhead storage and luggage racks at the end of the carriages.

Katy Clarke:

But if you're on a route that lots of travelers take, like Naples to Rome or Rome to Florence, those ground-level luggage racks fill up really quickly. And if you want - if you need the best access to those ground-level racks, and I don't know how tall you are, but I'm not very tall and apparently I'm shrinking. So if you want the best access, the good idea is to upgrade to a business class ticket as there are fewer people on the carriages, so it's usually only a few more euros to do this and it's very well worth it. On the slower regional trains, your bag is going to go wherever you can fit it, really, and you may need to be able to lift it as well. So,

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you know, think about that and pack accordingly. In terms of security. If you're worried about this, and I haven't had a problem in decades of travel and many, many trips on the trains, if you are feeling concerned, I recommend a bike lock with a code. So one that has a code that you put in and it's not a key, because you don't want to be fumbling for a key on a busy train.

Katy Clarke:

So what you would do is loop this bendy bike lock through the handle of your bag and around the rack or the luggage holding area or the seat frame in front of you. It's not Fort Knox, but it's enough of a deterrent that someone looking for an easy opportunity will move on. And, you know, most opportunistic theft happens when bags are completely unsecured and the owner is not paying attention. It's really easy to do when you're traveling, in fact, so a lock can change that calculation quickly and just deter people from even trying. The other thing I would note is to keep your day bag with you at all times on your lap or between your feet. And that's where your valuables would stay. Your passport, your cards and your phone and everything else can go into the suitcase. And if you've got one of those suitcases that's got a lock on it, I've got one of those.

Katy Clarke:

It's one of those TSA-friendly locks. I think that's the best thing, because it's locked, it's done, everything's away, and you've got everything else that you need with you at the time. So, Ruby, I did a full episode on staying safe in Italy, which is episode number 243. And we also did a deep dive on Italian train Travel in episode 264. So both are worth a listen before you go and we will link to them in the show notes. You're going to have a wonderful trip. Solo travel in Italy is one of life's great experiences and I hope it inspires you to take many more trips to Italy and just discover the whole peninsula on your own. It's fantastic.

Katy Clarke:

Our next question comes from Kim in San Francisco, who tells us she's also a supporter of our app, Grazie Mille Kim, that means a lot. Kim and her husband are planning a trip for September or October and are torn between Tuscany and Umbria, and she wants to know if they are significantly different and asks if I can paint a picture of the two regions. Kim, I love this question and yes, they are different and more different than most people expect. So let me try to paint that picture for you first. What they share. Both regions have that classic central Italian landscape that stops you in your tracks. The rolling hills, the vineyards, medieval hill towns perched on ridgelines, and that beautiful, typical central Italian look.

Katy Clarke:

If that's the Italy you're picturing, both will deliver it. They do feel the similar in that sense, because they're neighbors, after all. But you know, many of those similarities are largely visual. The experience on the ground is actually quite different. Tuscany has more geographical variety than people realize. And so, yes, we know they have those rolling hills, those famous hills in Chianti and the Val d' Orcia, and we know the area around Siena and San Gimignano, which are some of the famous towns there. But Tuscany also has a long coastline, mountains in the north and northeast and the wild, lesser-known Maremma in the south.

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Katy Clarke:

It's a bigger, more varied region than its postcard version suggests. Umbria is landlocked. It's got no coast. But what it does have is lakes. Lake Trasimeno is the most beautiful and it's well worth building time around. And it's got a... in this area, it's a quieter, more contained landscape. It's greener in places than Tuscany because it's known as like the food bowl of Italy. There's a lot of agriculture happening in Umbria.

Katy Clarke:

It is maybe less dramatic, some might say, but it has a peacefulness that Tuscany's most famous corners have largely lost due to tourism. And that brings me to the experience. Tuscany knows it is famous and the experience reflects that. The landscapes around Chianti, Siena, San Gimignano, Cortona and the Val d' Orcia are beautiful, but the prices are high and the experiences in many of these places are becoming more geared towards larger tour groups and, unfortunately, a more transactional experience in peak season. And September is probably the peak of seasons, the most visited spots can feel more like set pieces than living places. So just bear that in mind because you can choose a part of Tuscany that is really busy and it's famous, but there's also other quieter corners of Tuscany that are worth knowing about.

Katy Clarke:

So the area around Arezzo, the Garfagnana north of Lucca and north of Florence, the Maremma coast. These take more effort to visit, but they're really worth it. We actually spent an amazing week in the Garfagnana outside Lucca a while back and I really recommend that to anyone. It was such a wonderful holiday. We wandered the streets, we could walk for gelato. I think my kids had their first gelato there and got it all over their face, of course. And we went for drives in the mountains and it is a really beautiful area, so that's an option. Tuscany is a really, really big place, so choose your area and you can find a little quiet spot.

Katy Clarke:

If you want to go to the more famous places, just be aware that they are busy and you're going to pay for, I guess, the well-known nature of that area. Umbria is a different story altogether. And I've heard people describe it as what Tuscany was like 30 years ago. And that's not far off, even though I didn't go to Tuscany 30 years ago. But it is quieter, it's far fewer tourists and there's much less tourist infrastructure. So you're really taking part in life in Umbria. It's more relaxed. The towns like Spoleto, Gubbio, Orvieto, Todi are peaceful and beautiful and it feels more everyday Italian and less arranged for visitors.

Katy Clarke:

And so, because it's more local and you know, people are really happy to see you because they're not used to having so many visitors like they do have in Tuscany. It also offers better value for money. Assisi is Umbria's main tourist draw card, but it attracts largely pilgrims who are going to visit the cathedrals there and, you know, pay their respects to St. Francis, which gives it a very different atmosphere and it's a beautiful town and it's very moving, even if

you're not religious. And it's absolutely worth a visit, but. And that's probably the busiest place in Umbria, but apart from that Umbria is quiet, it's a little sleepy, it's got amazing restaurants, amazing wine. They're just not very well known.

Katy Clarke:

And so if you're open for a little bit of an adventure, I think it does offer so many different possibilities in Umbria. So one practical note that applies to both places is that you will need a car because while public transport connects the larger towns, it will not get you to those landscapes and villages, easily, that make either region worth going to. So my honest answer, Kim, if you want the experience that feels most like the Italy most people never find, you should start with Umbria. You can always add a few days in Tuscany, especially if you stay near Orvieto, which is right on the border there. And you can drive from Orvieto, you can drive into the Val d' Orcia and other areas in Tuscany that are quite famous. So what a fantastic question. Brava, Kim. I hope the answer helped you decide.

Katy Clarke:

Now, this next question made me smile. It comes from Ailsa in Raleigh, North Carolina, who has a wonderful tradition of taking her nieces and nephews on a graduation trip of their choice. She's hoping her niece will choose Italy next year and is already doing some research just in case. Ailsa, you know that you're my kind of person. I know Ailsa from being in our community for a very long time and she would love to arrange some kind of concert piano, preferably, and does not know where to start. Also, the good news is that Italy is full of incredible live music, if you know where to look. And the even better news is that some of the most extraordinary musical experiences in the world happen here in settings that you simply cannot find anywhere else and that are absolutely magical. So let me give you a few options depending on where you end up traveling.

Katy Clarke:

If you go anywhere near Verona, this is the one to do. It's the Arena di Verona is a Roman amphitheater that seats around 15,000 people. And every summer it hosts a full opera season. So you may have seen it in, I think it was a closing ceremony of the Winter Olympics. They had it at the Verona Arena. And I mean, this is a 2000-year-old structure and it's still working to this day. I find that absolutely incredible.

Katy Clarke:

And sitting under the stars in that 2000-year-old arena, watching a full-scale operatic performance is something that I have on my bucket list and I don't know, I don't really do bucket lists, so might be the only thing on there. Anyway, Liv and some other members of the Untold Italy team have done this and also my brother. And they say it is one of the experiences that stays with you for the rest of your life. The season typically runs from late June through to September, so you can check out the website for the program and make sure to book well in advance because it does sell out. If you go to Lucca in Tuscany, there's something that's far more intimate waiting for you. And also another thing that's maybe a little bit different to what you were thinking of, but I want to tell everyone about anyway.

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Katy Clarke:

Most evenings in Lucca they hold a one-hour performance of Puccini arias at one of the churches in the city. So Lucca was Puccini's birthplace and there's something very fitting about hearing his music here. It's not a grand production; it's chamber music in a candlelit church, very atmospheric, but that's really what makes it so lovely. And I've experienced this myself and it is so beautiful. And that day I did hit the jackpot because one of the sopranos sang *O mio Babbino Caro*, which is one of my favorite arias. And regular listeners may not be surprised to know that it's on the soundtrack to the movie *A Room With a View*, which I absolutely love.

Katy Clarke:

Lucca also hosts in summer some really big, big pop and rock concerts in their main piazza there. And they've got everyone from the Rolling Stones to, I don't want to say, Sabrina Carpenter, you know, people like that. So, you know, they have a lot of big acts performing in their piazza and again, that's a totally different vibe, but it's still a music concert and Italians love music and just it's a great thing to go see. Venice has the Vivaldi concerts, which are extremely popular and they're very well done. In 2026, one of the organizations is celebrating 30 years and have dedicated their entire concert season to Vivaldi performing the Four Seasons alongside Baroque soloist at the School of Grande di San Teodoro. And you can find all the information about that. We'll put that in the show notes. But you can also catch concerts at the Church of the Pieta, the very place where Vivaldi worked.

Katy Clarke:

So both are worth looking into and they run regularly throughout the year. So you can go from anything in Italy, from pop and rock to classical and everything in between. And Rome. And this is where I need to give you an important update for 2026. The famous open-air opera at the Baths of Caracalla, which has been running since 1937 and is extraordinary, has temporarily moved to the Circus Maximus this year to allow some restoration work to be carried out at the baths. And the summer program at the Circus Maximus runs from late June to the end of July. And the centerpiece of the 2026 season is a new production of Verdi's *Aida*, running across six nights in July. It's a very different setting from Caracalla, which is a bit more intimate.

Katy Clarke:

Obviously, the Circus Maximus was the former chariot race arena and it's huge, but it's also hardly a bad consolation. And open-air Rome is still beautiful and you'll be listening to an opera under a summer sky. So my tip for finding concerts more broadly, Ailsa, is search for the city your niece chooses plus 'Estate Musicale', which means musical summer. Or look at local tourism websites. Closer to the date, we will obviously be adding all of our favorite concerts locally across Italy into the Untold Italy app, which people can find also. So churches across Italy also hold concerts throughout the year. Many of them are free or very low-cost, and they are often not well-advertised online. I mean, it's hilarious how badly advertised they are, but asking at your hotel or accommodation is sometimes the only way to find them.

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Katy Clarke:

But we would do our very best to collate them. As I said in the app, we're also going to put all the links that we mentioned to some of these concerts in the show notes for this episode, so you have everything in one place. This next question comes from Janeen, who is planning a September trip with her husband and friends, and they are starting with five nights in Naples, then hiring a car for a week in Puglia. After that, Janeen and her husband are heading north. And on top of all that, she's in charge of organizing something special for a dear friend's 60th birthday during the Puglia and Naples leg. No pressure, Janeen. None whatsoever. So in the interest of time, I'll focus on the Southern Italian section.

Katy Clarke:

And let me take the Puglia-based question first, because it's one I get asked a lot, and the honest answer is that the right base depends entirely on what you want from the region. So if your group loves nature and wants to feel like you've found a corner of Italy that most people go straight past, then look at the Gargano Peninsula in the north of Puglia. It's got a beautiful national park, dramatic coastline, ancient forest, whitewashed fishing villages. It's really off the tourist trail and it's a place for slow exploration. You will need a car there, though. If you want to be central to the main sites like the Trulli of Alberobello, Locorotondo, Martina Franca and access to Monopoli and to Polignano on the coast, then it's a good idea to base yourself in the central valley, which is the Val d'Itria, and so you'll be well placed for day trips in every direction. And the landscape there is that quintessential Puglia, with all the Trulli houses. And once again, you do need a car.

Katy Clarke:

If beaches are the priority, then the area around Ostuni and Lecce in the south gives you access to some of the beautiful coastline, as well as those two lovely towns. And, you know, again, because it's a little bit out of the way from the main traffic into Bari, then you're getting maybe a little bit cooler, less visited version of the region. That brings me to the 60th birthday. And Janeen, I'm going to give you one idea, and it's my favorite because I did this for my birthday recently, and that's a private boat trip. So you can organize these all along the Puglia coast, from Vieste, on the Gargano from Monopoli to Polignano, Amare, and you'll spend a few hours on the water exploring sea caves and hidden coves, and you usually have some lunch, delicious snacks and wine on board, and you can stop and jump off for, you know, swims and stuff. And then sometimes they'll bring out a cheeky limoncello, which is always nice, and you can have a little bit... a drink of that, and they could probably organize a cake. So it doesn't need to be complicated to be memorable. And for a milestone birthday in that setting, it will be absolutely memorable.

Katy Clarke:

But I did have one more thought, as you're starting in Naples, and if the budget allows, you could also do a private boat trip on the Amalfi coast while you're there, because that is probably the ultimate Italian summer experience. And on that coastline, the water is absolutely breathtaking as the landscapes are so iconic. So it's worth considering that as a

way to mark the occasion before you even get to Puglia, where you can just relax and just soak it all up. This next question comes from Sara, who used the podcast to help plan an amazing trip for her mother's 70th birthday, which makes me very happy to hear. Well done, Sara. Now she's back with a new challenge. Sara and her husband are taking their three children, age 7, 9 and 11, on a Mediterranean cruise with several stops in Italy.

Katy Clarke:

And Sara wanted to know how to keep the children engaged with traditional sightseeing without either surrendering the trip entirely to them or losing them to boredom. Sarah, first I want to say that I love that you are not planning 100% to cater to children entirely. That is exactly the approach that we take with our kids. And it's been absolutely fantastic. Children, they love exploring and they'll rise to what you expect of them. And anyway, Italy has a way of enchanting even the most reluctant travelers. So here's the framework I would suggest you should break the day into sections. So maybe a morning of sightseeing, then lunch, then something a little bit loose in the afternoon, maybe a park, a wander and definitely a gelato.

Katy Clarke:

So if you try and fill every hour with monuments, it's probably going to be a bit much. And it is a bit much even for adults. So when it comes down to it, the pace of the day matters as much as what's in it. So have a bit of flexibility built in, a little bit of downtime and everything will go swimmingly. Speaking of gelato, this is your most reliable currency, which is another way of saying bribe. And in Italy, I've been known to deploy two a day when necessary. They aren't expensive. And who doesn't love an ice cream, especially kiddos.

Katy Clarke:

Now, the single best investment you can make for traveling with children in Italy, especially if you are visiting the major sites like Colosseum, Vatican, places like that. It's a guide who knows how to work with kids. Our friends at LivTours are absolutely brilliant at this. They have a dedicated range of family-focused tours, particularly in Rome, that are designed specifically to bring history to life for younger travelers and free up the parents to enjoy the experience for themselves. So they do storytelling, not lecturing, and they do age-appropriate activities like little spotto things where you have to spot got animals or things in the Colosseum and they make those places like the Colosseum and the Vatican interesting for children and will adapt tours based on their interests. So a good example of this is that my son happens to know a lot about the different types of gladiators and we did a really big deep dive into those when we were at the Colosseum with our Live Tours guide. I'm such a big fan of this company and we really partner with them often, so they've kindly offered a discount code for Untold Italy listeners and I'll put it in the show notes for this episode. LivTours also run a gelato-making experience in Florence, which would be a wonderful way to spend a couple of hours.

Katy Clarke:

Hands on. Delicious. And the children talk about it. For years, our kids were able to choose which flavors they got to make and they absolutely loved it. Who doesn't love just gelato? And

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I think they were allowed to eat as much as they wanted, so that was fun. We had a bit of a sugar rush after that. I mean, it is Italy and a lot of people travel to Italy for food, so food experiences even more broadly are worth building in. So, just finding a good pizzeria and watching how they make the pizza and how it goes into the wood-fired oven - children absolutely love that.

Katy Clarke:

The market, sitting in a piazza, watching Italian life go by. And it's all those unplanned moments that often end up being what they remember the most. Parks. Always a good idea. And I'll have to say Italy is not great with parks, but in Rome, Villa Borghese is your friend. It's just close to the Spanish Steps and it's a proper green space where children can run around. There's a decent playground and you can also hire bikes and have a breath of fresh air after a morning of sightseeing.

Katy Clarke:

One last thing we're saying, Sara. Italians adore children, all ages, all temperaments. Your children will be welcomed warmly in restaurants, fussed over in shops and generally treated as small VIPs. And that warmth is part of the experience and it tends to make children feel really good about the country they are in. So let Italy do some of that work for you.

Katy Clarke:

Our final question today comes from Teri, who's been planning her first-ever trip to Italy for nine months. She tells us it has been a dream of hers for 35 years. Oh, Teri, how wonderful for you. It's so great when these dreams come true. Anyway, in the last week, just weeks before her mid-June departure, she and her husband made a significant change. They switched from a driving trip to one based entirely around trains and local transportation. And she's looking for reassurance that she made the right call and some advice on how to make the most of her time in Florence and Rapallo on the Ligurian coast. Teri, let me start with a reassurance. You made a great decision. Driving in Italy is wonderful in the right context. Rural Puglia, Dolomites, Umbria's back roads.

Katy Clarke:

But in and around the major cities in summer, it can add some stress, parking headaches and a level of logistics that can work really against the relaxed experience places you're really hoping for. Trains in Italy are excellent. You'll travel between the places easily, and you're going to arrive in the middle of each city, and then you can have the freedom to look out the window a bit and enjoy the countryside going past. And that's actually not a compromise. That's actually the better choice for the trip that you have described. Okay, now, Florence in June. Here's my honest advice. Just try not to overschedule it.

Katy Clarke:

I know that feels counterintuitive after months and months of planning, but Florence is the most magical when you are wandering far more than following a packed itinerary. Yes, book the Uffizi and the Accademia in advance, which you really need to do in summer, but leave

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space between things. Sit in a piazza, get up early, walk across the Ponte Vecchio at different times, or in the morning, in the evening, and go shopping in Oltrarno for a special souvenir. One of my favorite things to do in Florence is to actually get out of the city a little bit and up into the hills. The perspective from above is absolutely beautiful. There's a little town called Fiesole, which is really lovely, and it's a small hilltop town just above Florence with beautiful views back over the city. And it's got a completely different, quieter atmosphere. It's an easy bus ride from the center, and it gives you that sense of stepping back and seeing Florence as a whole, which, after a day or two inside, is exactly what you need.

Katy Clarke:

Then you're on to Rapallo. Teri, I think you're going to love this. Rapallo sits on the Ligurian coast and it's the kind of place that feels properly lived in. It's not a resort town, it's a real town, but it's got a pretty seafont and good food and that particular Ligurian light on the water, which I absolutely love. I love Liguria. It even has a sandy beach, which is not something you find everywhere on that coastline. What makes Rapallo such a good base, however, is how well connected it is by train. So from there you can take the train along to Santa Margherita Ligure, and then a ferry across to Portofino, which is tiny and beautiful and worth a few hours living the lifestyle of the uber, uber rich and famous.

Katy Clarke:

This is billionaire territory there, actually. And from Santa Margherita, you can also get to San Fruttuoso by boat. And this is really lovely. It's actually a beautiful remote abbey that's sitting right on the water that you can only get to by boat or foot if you're feeling especially energetic from Rapallo. Also, the Cinque Terre is easily doable as a day trip from Rapallo by train. So. So while you're based in one place, living slowly and locally, you have all of that wonderful, beautiful Italian seaside magic right within your reach. You didn't plan the wrong trip, Teri. You planned a very, very good one. So enjoy every moment of it.

Katy Clarke:

That is all for today's Q&A and thank you so much to everyone who sent in a question. We were absolutely overwhelmed by the response and I loved reading every single one of them. If yours did not make it into today's episode, do not worry - we are planning to do another one of these in around 5 weeks and I hope to get to more of them then. Keep them coming to ciao@untolditaly.com.

A quick reminder that if you are deep in the planning process and want help that goes beyond a podcast episode, we are here. Our trip planning consultations are a great way to get personalised advice for your specific trip, the season you are traveling, and all those 'only in Italy' experiences you are dreaming of.

One small ask, if you have been enjoying the podcast, the best thing you can do to help us keep making it is to leave a review wherever you listen. It takes two minutes and it makes a real difference to how the show is found by travelers just like you. We appreciate every single one.

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Full show notes for today's episode, including all the links we mentioned - LivTours, the Verona Arena, the Puccini concerts in Lucca, the Vivaldi concerts in Venice and the Rome summer opera programme - are at untolditaly.com/321.
Buon viaggio and ciao for now.