

# Untold Italy Episode 327: Your Italy Travel Questions - Choosing a base in Tuscany and for the Cinque Terre, hailing taxis and more

Italy throws a thousand questions at you before you even pack a bag. Plugs, taxis, three-course meals, whether Florence or Siena is the smartest base and how to get around the northern lakes. Today I'm answering questions that came straight from our app user community. They are all useful insights, whether you are a first-time or frequent visitor to Italy.

Ciao a tutti and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, the travel podcast, where you go to the towns and villages, mountains and lakes, hills and coastlines of Bella Italia. Each week, your host Katy Clarke takes you on a journey in search of magical landscapes of history, culture, wine, gelato, and, of course, a whole lot of pasta. If you're dreaming of Italy and planning future adventures there, you've come to the right place.

Katy Clarke:

Ciao a tutti e benvenuti. Welcome to episode 327 of the Untold Italy Travel Podcast. I'm Katy, the founder of Untold Italy and today is a Q and A episode. These questions came in from our Untold Italy app community, which I love because the app brings together exactly the kind of traveler who is planning something real and special. Not browsing, but actually planning a trip to Italy. That they really invested in. Italy is more than a checklist and the questions you sent in prove that, because not one of them is how do I get to the Colosseum? These are real questions that sit in the back of your mind when you are knee deep into the research. They're the ones that feel almost too practical to ask, but then they're also ones that actually matter when you're standing on a street in Florence with a flat phone and no idea how to hail a taxi.

Katy Clarke:

If you are not yet on the Untold Italy app, the episode show notes have all the details. Our app is a travel companion. It's not just a podcast player. It's got destination guides, restaurant recommendations, transport, strike alerts and every episode ad free. We'll share more at the end of this episode, but for now, let's get into it. Our first question comes from Peter and it's a great one. Peter writes, hi, I'm confused about the electric sockets in Italy. Some say type L a three-prong plug is needed, some say no - the usual two-prong European plugs are fine.

Katy Clarke:

Peter, it's no wonder you are confused. The information you get and get online is contradictory because both answers are technically correct and nobody really explains why. So let me try to sort this out properly. Italy actually has three plug types in circulation, so you have the type C with two round pins, which is the standard European plug that works across

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most of the continent. There is also Type F, which has two round pins as well, but with small earth clips on the sides. And this is sometimes known as the Schuko plug, and it's common in Germany and much of northern Europe. And then there is Type L, which is uniquely Italian.

Katy Clarke:

It has three round pins arranged in a straight line and it's on the official standard list. Now this is where it gets really interesting and where the conflicting advice come from. Older Italian buildings and some older hotels, apartments and guest houses have the pure Type L, which is the three-prong sockets. And a standard type C2 pin plug will not fit in that Type L socket, so you will need another adapter for that. So most hotels I have stayed in have one available. But if you are staying in Airbnbs or apartments, it might be worth bringing one along. Many modern Italian buildings and hotels from the past few decades have what is called a Bipasso socket. PBipasso means twin gauge outlet, and it's designed to accept both Type C and Type L plugs in the same socket phase.

Katy Clarke:

But the practical answer for you, Peter, is this. Bring a Type C adapter, maybe a couple, the one with two round pins for your phone charger, your laptop, your camera, and that will cover the majority of situations in a modern hotel or apartment. But it's also a good idea to pack a Type L adapter as a backup, because if you end up somewhere older with pure, three-pin sockets, the Type C will not fit. A universal adapter that covers both types is the simplest solution, and they are widely available online. It's not really worth scrimping on the quality of those either. The Italian sockets sit slightly deeper than other European ones, and a cheap adapter sometimes just doesn't fit properly and can just flop out. It's happened to me. It's annoying.

Katy Clarke:

So one more thing on the voltage, because this matters. Italy runs on 230 volts at 50 hertz and the US and Canada run on 120 volts. If you're coming from North America, check on the small print on every device before you plug it in. So your phone charger, your laptop and your camera chargers, they're almost certainly dual voltage, meaning they will handle 100 to 240v and they only need an adapter. But... and this is important... for those of you that bring a hairdryer, and if you've got hair like mine, you will definitely need to bring a hair dryer or a straightener if you bought it in the US, they're often single voltage, and that means they're designed for 120 volts only. So if you plug that into an Italian socket, you'll either blow a fuse or ruin the device. So the fix is to buy a voltage converter, or better still, leave the single-voltage appliances at home and use a travel version. Most hotels that are three stars and above do provide a hair dryer in the room.

Katy Clarke:

But I'm going to be honest with you here, they were the ones that sort of like someone blowing air and they're fairly useless if you've got hair that needs a little bit of attacking to make it presentable. So, Peter, type C for everything modern and type L as a backup for the older buildings. And check your voltage before you plug anything in with a motor or heating

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element into the wall. Our next question comes from Catherine and she's got questions about ordering or hailing Italian taxis. How can we get a fair fare? This is a great question to ask Catherine, and the honest answer is that the Italian taxi system is not designed to rip you off, but there are some quirks that you need to be aware of and knowing how everything works is a smart move- before you go, the first thing to understand is that you cannot hail a taxi on the street in Italy the way that you would in, say, London or New York or here in Australia. So taxis in Italy, they work from designated taxi ranks and they're called Stazione dei Taxi, or you book one through a phone call or an.

Katy Clarke:

The taxi ranks are usually near the main railway station, major piazzas and at the airport. And if you walk out of the station in any Italian city, there will be a rank nearby and a line to go with it. Official taxis in Italy are white. They have a taxi sign on the roof and a taxi meter that runs inside. If the car is not white and doesn't have a meter and someone is approach approaching you offering a ride that is not a licensed taxi. I mean, this scam is, I think it's in every city in the world. But yeah, I think we just need to be aware, especially when we've come from a long journey, is that it's easy to be taken advantage of. So make sure you pick up a taxi from the taxi rank.

Katy Clarke:

Now, the meter is where some people get caught out and this is the usual trick that taxi drivers, the world over, use and that is not turning on the meter. So Italian taxi meters are regulated by the municipalities, so the rates are set by law, not by the driver. So you just need to make sure that the meter is on, there is a flagpole charge and the moment the meter starts it's roughly three to six euros. And it depends on the city and can be higher at night or on Sundays and public holidays. And then there's a per-kilometre charge after that. So, as with most taxis around the world, the rates are posted on a sticker inside the cab and it's usually near the window. And it's really worth taking a quick look to check whether the meter is on before you pull away. Please do that.

Katy Clarke:

From the major airports, there's fixed fares into the city centre and the driver is legally required to offer them. So Rome Airport to central Rome is one of the most well-known examples and a fixed fare is around €55 for up to four people. So you need to ask what the fixed fare is to wherever you're going before you get in, not after. The single best thing you can do to protect against overcharging is to use an app, one of the taxi apps. And of course, this is Italy, so there's a different one for each city. Of course there are different apps. itTaxi is one of the most widely used ones in Italy.

Katy Clarke:

It functions like an Italian Uber and it connects to licensed taxis and shows you the fare before you confirm. FreeNow operates in Rome, Milan and several other cities. And both apps give the price upfront, removing all, you know, ambiguity from your transaction. In the Untold Italy app, we give the most popular taxi app for the major cities in each region, so you don't

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have to scramble through Google trying to find it when you're there or what actually happened to me and one of my friends is we somehow ended up at the wrong station in Florence. That's a whole other story. And we were not where we thought we were and we do need to get it cab and we did not have the taxi app and we were standing there trying to download that app because the rank was empty and we were very tired and we needed to get to our hotel. So it's worth getting those apps sorted out before you go.

Katy Clarke:

A word on Uber. So standard Uber as most of us know it from home doesn't operate in Italy. So there is Uber Black, which is a premium service using licensed drivers with high-end vehicles. It is significantly more expensive than a regular metered taxi and is not worth it in most cases. Actually, we did a day trip to Naples from Rome last time I was in Italy and got back on a Saturday afternoon at about 4 or 5 pm and stood in that taxi rank for about an hour before I had had enough and I decided to call the Uber Black. And let me tell you, it was a little bit crazy. Cost €80 to get to our hotel in Trastevere. But you know what, I was desperate by that stage. I was very tired and very jet-lagged.

Katy Clarke:

So, just to be aware that Uber Black is possible, but it's very expensive now, practically speaking, hotels and restaurants will call a taxi for you. This is completely normal in Italy. So if you're not comfortable using apps, just ask at the desk. They'll call a specific company that they know and the car arrives with the meter at zero and you're protected from the start. I will say another taxi issue that I've had, the main one I've had is in Naples and it's getting from the train station to the ferry port, which isn't a very long drive. And I think the taxi drivers don't like doing it very much. But when you've got luggage and you've got kids with you, like, you really do need that taxi service. And unfortunately, we have, even though my husband speaks Neapolitan, we have had a few issues there.

Katy Clarke:

So just to be aware of that and ask up front. But sometimes it's a taxi and unfortunately, I think it's a worldwide phenomenon that taxis can be a little bit dodgy sometimes. I don't want to speak badly of all taxi drivers because there are some excellent ones out there. Moving on to our next question, Virginia actually sent in two questions and they're both about finding the right base, which is actually one of my favourite things to think through. So Virginia's first question was, is Florence the best base for visiting Pisa, Lucca, Barga, Anghiari, Siena, Arezzo, Cortona, and then Perugia and Assisi in Umbria? Or is Siena a better base? Virginia, let me try to answer this as best I can, but the thing is here we don't have a critical piece of information, which is how did you plan to get around? Because that would really define the answers. Regardless, it probably makes sense to do at least two bases in Tuscany, as it is a very big region. Pisa and Lucca are easily reached by train and could be treated as one leg of the trip. The only challenge that you would have is reaching the lovely town of Barga, because that is well off the main transportation routes and you'd need to get there by local bus.

Katy Clarke:

So staying overnight in Lucca is advised, which... no bad thing, because Lucca is really, really lovely and it's one of my favourite cities in Italy. So I would say do two to three nights in this area of Tuscany. You could then take the train to Arezzo and pick up a car there, or pick up a car in Florence to explore the region around Arezzo, Cortona and Anghiari, which is a wonderful medieval town just outside of Arezzo. Public transport is possible, but it's limited if you want to travel to the villages. And renting a car is really the practical answer unless you have plenty of time on your hands, Virginia. Now it's only an hour by train to Perugia from Arezzo, but if you had your heart set on Assisi, then it's almost two hours. So Perugia is a day trip from Arezzo, but if you wanted to combine it with Assisi, I would recommend staying in Umbria for a few nights too. Again, this is not such a bad thing.

Katy Clarke:

It's very beautiful, very lovely, and you will never regret it. Florence is probably the best base for Siena, but there really is so much to see and do in that area, plus in the nearby Val d' Orcia, that I suggest keeping a base there too. And the thing we need to remember about Tuscany is that it's a very large region with limited fast transport options. We all love Tuscany for those winding roads and hilltops covered in vines, but they are going to slow you down, which is not such a bad thing. So, for Tuscany, a car is worthwhile because you can cover a lot more ground faster than if you are traveling solely by public transportation. Virginia's second question was what is the best base in Liguria for Cinque Terre, Genoa or somewhere else? So, Virginia, I think Genoa is not the best answer here. It often comes up as an option and it is definitely worth a visit. So it's got some great food, underrated architecture.

Katy Clarke:

It is one of the most atmospheric old ports in Italy. And you know what? They're doing some really cool community-led events lately, including big street parties featuring local dishes and they've even had like this very famous DJ doing some techno. I'm not really into techno, but I couldn't believe how that crowd was jumping in the main piazza there. So it looked amazing. If you want to, you can Google that or look it up on Instagram. It's really very cool. But Genoa as a base for the Cinque Terre is a bit too far north and the journey to the villages is about 90 minutes each way. You'd end up spending most of the day on the train and miss out on when this area is truly wonderful.

Katy Clarke:

And that's after the day trippers have left. So the practical bases are the villages themselves or La Spezia or Levanto. La Spezia is a real Italian city, not really a tourist town, although it is the major port where cruise ships come in to visit the Cinque Terre. It has direct train connections to all five villages of the Cinque Terre, as well as Pisa, which makes it very attractive for getting in and out from there to Tuscany. It does have better value hotels than the villages themselves and a wider range of restaurants. So many people find it convenient and a really good budget-friendly option.

Katy Clarke:

Levanto sits just north of the Cinque Terre on the same train line and it's only four minutes to Monterosso by train. It's quieter than La Spezia, it has its own beach and it works well if you want a bit more of a seaside feel to your base. We stayed in Levanto a few years ago and we just loved the European atmosphere, great restaurants and easy access to the Cinque Terre without feeling like we were in the real thick of it during the day. So what we did was we went in really early in the morning and we explored the villages and then as soon as it started to get busy, we decamped off to Levanto and spent the day on the beach and then headed back when the sun was setting. It was really lovely.

Katy Clarke:

I love that idea. So staying in the villages themselves is also possible if you book well in advance and accept that's going to cost you a little bit more. And then during the day you are in the thick of the crowds from the moment that you step outside. So it's just worth thinking about different options because it is absolutely gorgeous to wake up in those towns and see the views of the sea and just the cliff top towns, they look like they're tumbling into the sea and they're colourful and it's just lovely. But you need to accept that there's going to be crowds during the middle of the day. So if you are okay with that and you have a good plan, then that's fine. But otherwise, you might like to think of some of the other towns along the coast that I have mentioned.

Katy Clarke:

So a useful thing to know - the Cinque Terre card covers train travel between the villages Levanto and La Spezia. So that's worth looking at if you're planning to travel around a bit Virginia. And it's because it does include those two extra towns at either end of the train line. That's what makes them really worthwhile also. Onto our next question and several of you asked about rental cars, specifically where to pick up, where to drop off and whether one way rentals are possible. So let me cover all of this on where to pick up - airport locations have the longest opening hours, the widest range of vehicles, and they're open on weekends and public holidays. 9 times out of 10 the airport concessions are the most practical places to collect your car rental. In Italy, city centre rental offices are often cheaper, but city offices close earlier.

Katy Clarke:

They don't often operate on weekends or public holidays. And so if your arrival day falls on a Saturday or Sunday or public holiday and you are planning to pick up from a city office, check the opening hours before you finalise the booking. Also, consider it is a bit of a nightmare driving and parking in cities. I put this into the avoid at all costs territory. So we rarely rent our car from central city locations. In fact, I can't remember the last time that we did. One more thought on timing. If you're starting your trip in Rome or Florence or any of the cities, you don't need a car there.

Katy Clarke:

The city means that the car is a liability, not an asset. You're dealing with historic ZTL zones, restricted zones, no parking, lots of traffic. So consider picking the car up on the day that you leave the city rather than on arrival and enjoy the freedom of driving in the countryside. Onto one-way rentals. Yes, they are possible and they often make a lot of sense. So fly into Milan, drive through the lakes and down through Tuscany and then fly home from Rome. So you can pick up your car in Milan and drop off in Rome and you would save the cost and time of a train back north and you can follow the route as it naturally unfolds. But good to know is that almost every one-way rental comes with a drop-off fee. The industry term is sometimes a domestic drop-off charge or a one-way surcharge.

Katy Clarke:

It can be modest or it can be significant and it really depends on the company and the route. And the key is to check at the time of booking it should be itemised before you confirm and comparing it against the cost of a return train is a sensible way of looking at things. Often the fee is the cheaper option. So we find Auto Europe has the best value one-way fees and I've put a link to them in the show notes. Driving in Italy is a great way to get off the beaten path, but it's not for everyone. If you are considering driving, make sure to do your research properly as there are very strong requirements, quirks and rules you need to be aware of. I actually thought I had a whole podcast on driving, but unbelievably, I haven't, so I'll get that fixed up straight away. In the meantime, you can check out our article about driving in Italy, which we will also put into the episode show notes.

Katy Clarke:

Our next question comes from multiple people, actually, and it's interesting that everyone asks the same question at once and I think people do get a little bit nervous about this because nobody really wants to be a rude tourist who doesn't quite understand the culture and we don't want to be rude to our hosts at the restaurants. So let's clear it up once and for all. And no, you don't need to order three courses at lunch and dinner. Not even Italians order three courses every time they sit down at a restaurant. Just to recap, because we have talked about this a few times, the structure of an Italian menu goes a little bit like this. You have antipasti, which is your appetizers, your primo, secondo, contorni and dolce. So it's a progression and you can dip into whatever way suits you. It's not a contract, there's no rules here, so you can order whatever you want in whatever combination that you like.

Katy Clarke:

Although I have to say, if you ordered your dolce first, you might get a few strange looks. That said, it helps to understand how the structure works so that you know how you're choosing. So I'll go into this in a little bit more detail. Antipasti are snacks or appetizers. And I love ordering these as it's where the local and seasonal ingredients really come to the fore. So think of carciofi or artichokes or polpette, which are meatballs, or crostini, which are little toasts with toppings on. They're absolutely delicious. Then the primo is a pasta, risotto or soup and that's the first course, the secondo is the second course and it's the main protein, meat or fish.

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Katy Clarke:

And they are separate courses and they arrive separately, and if you order both, they come one after the other, and your server will usually ask. So sometimes you know someone's particularly hungry and wants both and someone doesn't, so they'll ask you how you want it brought out. Now, the secondo doesn't automatically come with anything alongside it, and typically, no sides that are served directly with that dish. So if you want vegetables or salad, you will order those from the contorni section, which is a separate list. Dolce is a sweet course, and if you get through all of that in one sitting, I would say it's a very proper Italian dinner. So how does it look like in practical terms? I like to order an antipasti and primo, which is like a really satisfying lunch. And then maybe for dinner I'll have a secondo and contorni. Plus if there's something tempting, I will go for a dolce.

Katy Clarke:

So two antipasto and like an antipasto and a primo is absolutely fine. There's no enforcer order, and no one's going to look at you sideways for not ordering a secondo. There is one nuance worth mentioning, and it's not necessarily an Italian rule, but it's a courtesy thing that we should all really think about. If it's a busy restaurant and there are only two of you and you each order only one small dish to share between you, you are occupying a table for an extended time on a very little spend. The restaurant, they won't say anything, but they have lost the opportunity to get the full value from the table and in peak hours, that can really make a big difference. So use your judgment based on where you're eating and how busy it is. Our last question today comes from Dan, who writes, "we are going this Fall to the northern lakes. We plan to see the gardens and villas on several of the lakes, and we're trying to figure out the logistics to get to each lake.

Katy Clarke:

Should we drive a rental, hire a car, local train? Is there a central location to base at and do day trips to each lake?" So, Dan, I love this trip. I love the gardens, I love the lakes. And when you're going, autumn or fall is an excellent timing for the lakes. There's fewer crowds than summer because a lot of crowds in summer are coming from Europe and they have all got back to work and are busily getting on with their lives in September. So it's a great time to visit. There's golden light and the gardens are open. So let me break down some of the logistics for you, because it might not be as simple as it looks on a map. The three main lakes, Como, Maggiore and Garda, are spread across a wide stretch of northern Italy, and Lake Garda alone is around 50 kilometres long.

Katy Clarke:

There is no single town that puts you within easy reach of all three on a day trip basis. So I think if you were to hear otherwise, it would be quite optimistic. But that being said, you can absolutely visit all three. It just requires some honest planning and maybe a couple of bases. So the key insight is that Como and Maggiore are grouped together in the northwest and Garda sits further east, closer to Verona than to Milan. So the lakes fall naturally into two clusters rather than one. My recommendation, Dan, is to plan two or even three bases rather

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than one. A few nights on Como or Maggiore for the western lakes, then move to Garda separately.

Katy Clarke:

If you do all three of them from one fixed point, you're going to spend your days traveling than rather than being at the lake. But if you absolutely do want one hub, Milan is probably the best place. It has good train connections to Como in around 40 minutes, to Stresa on Lake Maggiore in about an hour, and to Desenzano or Pescheria on southern Garda in just over an hour. But if the point is to experience the lakes, then, yeah, you probably don't really want to stay in Milan. On the lakes - all three lakes have excellent public ferry services that are run by Navigazione Laghi. They cover the whole lakes, but the lakes are quite large, so you need to understand that it's going to take a good amount of time, depending on what style of ferry you get to get from one end to the other. Lake Garda is very, very big, and a trip on the ferry can take two or three hours, I think, to get from one end to the other. But for visiting villas and gardens around the shoreline, the boat is often the most practical option as well as the most enjoyable one.

Katy Clarke:

So Villa Carlotta and Villa del Barbianello on Lake Como are both best reached from the water. The Borromean Islands on Lake Maggiore, Isola Bella and Isola Madre are only accessible by boat. And there's also the Gardone Riviera on Lake Garda, which is easily accessed by ferry. So you can plan your garden days around the ferry timetable and you have a very good time. But if you have a car, it can actually be very useful, especially on Lake Garda, where it's a very large lake. And if you want to see more than one corner of it, I really recommend grabbing a car and enjoying driving around the lake roads are beautiful and they give you access to places that the ferries don't stop at.

Katy Clarke:

And you can definitely see more of the lake if you have a car. What you could do is start at Lake Garda and drive around and then drive over to Lake Como and maybe pick a town in the central lake, like Varenna, where you can get ferries from and still have the car. You need to check carefully that the hotel has car parking spaces. There are other spots on the lake which might be good too, like Managgio, even Bellagio. But yeah, again, just check that they can have a car. And from Bellagio, actually, we're probably the best spot to reach Lake Maggiore. I really love Lake Maggiore because if you wanted to spend some time there, not only do you have the gardens there, but you're also in easy access to Lago di Orta, which is my favorite lake in Italy.

Katy Clarke:

But if you wanted to focus on the garden specifically, here's where I would concentrate - on Lake Maggiore, the Borromean Islands are the highlight. Isola Bella has one of the most extraordinary Baroque gardens in the country. It's really terraced, it's theatrical, it's like nothing else in Italy. Isola Madre is larger and has a more horticultural feel. It's full of exotic

plants and white peacocks. And both are only accessible by ferry from Stresa. Lake Como has many, many, many villas.

Katy Clarke:

And you could really build a whole week or two around visiting villas on Lake Como. And the most popular ones are Villa Carlotta near Tremezzo, which is really famous for its beautiful villa, as well as camellias, azaleas, rhododendrons, and it's a really seriously botanic collection. Villa del Barbianello at Lenno is. It's absolutely stunning, actually. And I love it when the wisteria is out there. And they have been made famous by several films, one of the Star wars films as well. And it's one of the most beautiful terrace garden settings on Lake Como. They're both accessible by ferry.

Katy Clarke:

If you can, though, you can get a private boat there and you do feel rather glamorous when you're rocking up there. And as I mentioned, on Lake Garda, there is the Vittoriale degli Italiani at Gardone Riviera. It's the most visited and it's the extraordinary estate of the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, who collected everything and threw nothing away. And it's worth noting also that Sigurtà Garden park near the southern end of the lake is one of the finest landscape gardens in Italy, and a car would help for both of those. One final note for you Dan, on timing - most villa gardens are open through October, but some reduce their hours or close from late October onwards. The ferry service also starts winding down to a reduced schedule, so it's worth checking the specific opening dates and booking ahead where possible.

Katy Clarke:

Isola Bella in particular, and Villa Barbianello gets busy even in autumn, and advance tickets save waiting time at the ferry landing. Have a wonderful trip, Dan. Enjoy every moment of it. I'm very jealous. I love that trip. That's all the questions we have for today. Grazie mille to Peter, Catherine, Virginia, Dan and everyone who sent questions in via the app. Keep them coming. It's exactly what the community is for.

Katy Clarke:

The Untold Italy app is where the questions I answered in this episode came from. And it's where a lot of the answers live too. We have destination guides, restaurant recommendations, transport, strike alerts, and every episode of this podcast ad-free to upgrade to the premium app experience. It's a one-off purchase fee of US dollars \$29.99 or the equivalent in your local currency. There is no subscription. All the details are in the show notes at [untolditaly.com/327](https://untolditaly.com/327) or you can search Untold Italy on the Apple App Store or Google Play Store. And if you're at the point where you would love someone else to do the planning for you, that is what we are here for, too.

Katy Clarke:

We have local contacts and experts across Italy who open doors that most travellers never find. All the details are in the show notes at [untolditaly.com](https://untolditaly.com) Next week, we're taking a walk along one of Italy's most cherished pilgrim trails, but until then, it's ciao for now.

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