

Untold Italy Episode 328: Walking the Way of St Francis - Central Italy's Inspiring Pilgrimage Trail

Eight hundred years ago, a man walked out of Assisi with nothing. With no money or plan, and nowhere to stay. St Francis changed the course of the history of the catholic church and that of the Italian city-states. The roads he walked across central Italy are still there. And today, our guest, an archaeologist and hiking guide, is going to tell you exactly how to walk them.

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 and welcome to the Untold Italy podcast. I am your host Katy Clarke, and today we are heading out of the city and into the hills of central Italy to walk in the footsteps of Italy's patron saint - St Francis. Pilgrimage walks like the Camino de Santiago in Spain are becoming increasingly popular, but many people don't know that Italy has some wonderful walks like this of its own.

One of the things I love most about this show is the people it has introduced me to. Over the years, we have built up this network of extraordinary locals right across the country, and Sara Zanni is one of them. She is an archaeologist based in Bologna, a guidebook author, and a hiking guide who has spent her career walking and documenting the ancient routes of Italy and Europe. And as we will hear, in 2006 she walked the Camino de Santiago for the first time, eventually completing a 2,400-kilometre journey from her birthplace in Milan all the way to the Atlantic coast. That took her one hundred days.

Today, Sara is here to talk about the Via di Francesco, the Way of St. Francis. It is a network of 13 trails through central Italy that all converge on Assisi. This year marks 800 years since the death of St. Francis, patron saint of Italy, and it is a significant moment to walk in his footsteps.

You do not need to be religious to do this. Or be particularly young or fit either, as Sara will explain. What you do need is a desire for a different kind of Italy. The one that is not in the brochure. The one our locals know.

So andiamo, let's get started.

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Katy Clarke:

Benvenuta Sara, welcome onto the Untold Italy podcast.

Sara Zanni:

Thank you, Katy. Thank you. I'm glad to be here with you.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, I know you're in Bologna and that's one of my favorite cities, actually. How are things there at the moment?

Sara Zanni:

Oh, very nice. It's warm and sunny. I also managed to have lunch on the terrace yesterday, so it's perfect.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, it's coming into proper spring now. That's so good. Today though, we're going to be heading not on the balcony, but we're getting heading out of the city and into the countryside to explore one of Italy's many pilgrimage routes with you. And I'm so excited about that. But before we begin, Sara, can you please introduce yourself to our listeners and tell them a little bit about yourself and the work that you've been done and what you're passionate about.

Sara Zanni:

I am mostly passionate about history and archaeology. So I am an archaeologist. I've completed my PhD several years ago, like 12 years ago. And I've been keen on finding more about going deeper into the story of roads and of ancient roots all across Europe. So I've been walking the Camino de Santiago the first time in 2006, and then I walked it again and again multiple times until I finally walked it from my birthplace, which is Milan in Italy. So I walked across northern Italy, France, and then also the whole Spain, Northern Spain, it's something like 2,400 km to go to the ocean shore. And so from that moment on, I started working as an archaeologist on ancient routes. And then I actually became a hiking guide.

Sara Zanni:

So now my main occupation is working on cultural and walking trails, long-distance trails, as a technical expert. But I'm also, for quite an important part of my time, I'm a hiking guide and a tour leader for international companies and I work a lot with foreign people.

Katy Clarke:

So amazing. And you also work with the Italian Tourist Board too, don't you, with helping them with the routes and making sure that they're, you know, suitable for people that want to come and walk them? I guess.

Sara Zanni:

Yeah, that's what I do. And also, I publish books. So I write books. Mostly guidebooks, but also atlases and travel books. Unfortunately, only in Italian for now. I've written something in

French because I've been living in France for a few years. I mix quite many things during my time, but I have quite a lot of fun.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, it sounds like it. Now tell me, how long did it take to do that walk from Milan to Santiago de Compostela?

Sara Zanni:

100 days. And actually, I wrote my first book about that journey and it's the title in Italian phrases, 100 days on the way.

Katy Clarke:

Wow. So roughly 20 kilometers a day.

Sara Zanni:

Roughly, yes, for a few days, in the beginning, I used to walk shorter legs each day because I wanted to preserve my body, you know, to train my body. Because I walked the trail when I finished my PhD, which is quite traumatic experience for everyone. So I needed to recover, but I was not fit at all at the time because, you know, I had spent so much time in the libraries and writing and doing research and so on. And so I need time to help my body fit in, in the walk. So the first days were shorter, was lighter, and then gradually I started to build up the distance. So in the last few days of the walk, it was always above 35 km per day, which is quite a good distance.

Katy Clarke:

Wow. And so, Sara, I hope you know you and our listeners don't mind, but the history nerd in me really wants to know what was involved in your PhD, because I know it was in digital archaeology.

Sara Zanni:

It was something completely different from walking. It was about a Roman villa which is located north of Rome on the Via Salaria. I don't know if you probably have seen the directions, because when you drive southward from Milan towards Rome on the A1, the main highway of Italy, the motorway you see in north Roma Nord, and under the direction Roma Nord, there is the picture of a Roman villa of some beautiful mosaics. And actually, they found the Roman villa of the Volusii family, where they wanted to build the highway towards Rome and also an autogrill, so a service station. So now if you stop in Roma Nord at the service station, you can ask for the keys of the archaeological site and you can visit what remains of the Roman villa. My PhD was about reconstructing, trying to reconstruct how the Roman villa should have looked like before we destroyed half of it to build the highway.

Katy Clarke:

I bet it was a bit confronting then. It was probably a very beautiful thing. And now it's just a truck highway.

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Sara Zanni:

Half of it is still there, but, you know, they found it out in 1951, 1952. So it was a time when we didn't really feel like preservation of the cultural heritage was something relevant for the Italian economy. We were in the boom, you know, after the war, we got some funding from the US, especially, and we needed to rebuild the country because it had been destroyed during World War II. So we really needed to push on the construction of new infrastructures. We didn't have any that was the first highway, the first motorway we built in Italy, so it was very important.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, yeah. And so we are talking about roads today. So there is a nice segue there, huh? So, today's road that we're talking about is. It's a very special one because this year is the 800th anniversary of St. Francis death. And St. Francis, obviously, is the patron saint of Italy. And there's a very special walk that you know about that I'm hoping that you can share with our listeners.

Katy Clarke:

And so tell me a little bit about the walk and where it starts and ends and the history of it.

Sara Zanni:

Well, actually, the way of St. Francis is not just one way, but it's a network of routes. It's made of 13 different trails, so everyone can pick the one they like. But they're working very hard to make it a whole network, like the network of the Caminos de Santiago in Spain, so that on every trail you can find more or less the same standard of directions, information, cultural, author, and so on. This year it's very special because 800 years from the death of St. Francis needs to be celebrated, because St. Francis is one of the most famous, I'd like to say, saints of the whole medieval times. He was a global saint because after his death, the friars spread all around the world, all around the globe, and they brought his message of poverty, simplicity, and of closeness to the poor.

Sara Zanni:

So basically, he was a missionary before the missions were invented. But he was a very peaceful person. And he also created a strong message about environmental protection, the respect towards animals, towards other species of living beings. So he was quite a person. He was really a character. And everyone had the perception that he was going to be a saint as soon as he died. He was also the first living person carrying the marks of the crucifixion in their flesh. I know it's not something that, I don't know, Protestants can feel like very interesting, maybe a bit creepy, but it was significant.

Sara Zanni:

It was important for him and also for the normal people around him, because he had tried for his whole life to leave the gospel message in its simplicity as it was, without any kind of interpretation and of mediation. So it was something very hard to do in the medieval time

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because during his life, there were also many heretical movements that had been condemned by the church, exactly for doing the same thing. But he was not condemned because he managed to stay within the Church, the Catholic Church, to ask the Pope protection. And also his body started to bear to show that Jesus Christ was recognizing his effort and his braveness, we can say.

Katy Clarke:

Wow, I think there's this interesting story, and I like I guess what I'm thinking about is parallels, like, everyone's always reinterpreting the Bible and there's different ways to do that. I don't have a particular religion, but I do find this endlessly fascinating. And obviously, the values... I really share the values of St. Francis and I, you know, even though he lived 800 years ago, I feel like, you know, we can still hold on to some of those values today. So how does the Way - what does the Way represent these places that he actually walked and he went to? Is that what they are?

Sara Zanni:

Yes, actually, we've got 13 different trails, because St. Francis, during his own life, he wanted to preach the gospel, so he wanted to meet as many people as he could. So what he did was keep walking around. So he was poor. He had left all his goods for the poor, and so he didn't have anything apart from his clothes. And he kept walking around, especially central Italy. So most of the trails stretch across central Italy, and everywhere he stopped, he did some preaching. So he was telling the stories from the gospel and telling the people that they needed to be good and to see each other as brothers and sisters.

Sara Zanni:

So to be close, to stick together, to like each other, because we are all human beings. We are all brothers and sisters, and we need to build peace. So it was something very strong. So now we've got 13 trails and different starting points, which can be a bit confusing. But actually, we've got just one destination, one main destination, that is Assisi. Assisi is a small - well, not really small today, but it used to be quite a small and wealthy city in Umbria. Umbria is the smallest, one of the smallest regions of Italy.

Sara Zanni:

But it's interesting that today is a sort of walking capital of the country. So all the routes converge to Assisi. We've got one starting from Florence, one starting from Rome, one starting from Rimini, which is on the Adriatic coast on the eastern coast of Italy in Emilia Romagna. The roads from Rimini and Florence converge. They meet in La Verna, which is the place where actually St. Francis received the crucifixion marks and then they go together, the pilgrims coming from Florence and Rimini, they go together towards Assisi.

Sara Zanni:

You can also start from Rome, and if you have started from Florence from the north or from Rimini, you can decide when you reach Assisi to keep going also to Rome. You have a lot of freedom, because St. Francis was a free thinker. And there is also very good, I'd say, one of

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the best English-written guidebooks published by Cicerone Press and from my friend, by my friend Sandy Brown, who is an excellent guidebook writer. He's an excellent author and he's very knowledgeable about St. Francis and all the places. So if you want, if any one of our listeners are willing to walk this trail, it's a very well-maintained and marked trail, so it's easy to follow. And you also have a good English guidebook, which is not something to underestimate.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, amazing. And Sara's also provided us with a map, which I love, a map and there's not enough maps in the world, I think, but it really clearly shows where all these trails converge around and start in Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna and then they go through, down into Lazio and Rome, through Umbria. And there's so many different stops along the way. Have you done much of this walk yourself?

Sara Zanni:

I've done some chunks of it. So not all the network, but I, I also usually lead groups, especially on the southern trail. So, from Spoleto to Assisi is one of my favorite sections of the trail. But also the one starting from La Verna and going to Assisi is amazingly beautiful. Also, it's special. All the network is quite special because you have an opportunity to actually meet many people who are strongly committed to the preservation of these trails. So there are associations of normal people who take care of the route, of the way marking. And also they have opened hostels for pilgrims.

Sara Zanni:

And you can also have the opportunity sometimes to sleep in the convents or in the monasteries, if you want to. And it's something special because actually in Umbria you can actually taste a little bit more of the medieval spirituality that still lives in these places. And we have many places where we know that St. Francis has been. So these trails actually connect places that still have the testimony of his life.

Katy Clarke:

So interesting. Our listeners are very - well, if they, if they've been listening for a while, they'll know how much we love Umbria because it's a very, like you said, it's a, it's a very spiritual place. And it does have. I don't like really like the word authentic, but I think it's got these very traditional sense of, you know, maybe what Italy used to be like, you know, a bit longer ago than maybe such a place like Bologna. But I'm really curious now, what's the topography like when you're walking from Spoleto through to Assisi.

Sara Zanni:

It's very hilly. You know, central Italy is not flat. And when you walk across Italy, you discover that actually most of the country is mountains or hills. So from Spoleto to Assisi, and also mostly on most of the trails heading towards Assisi, we walked across a hilly countryside, and especially the Spoleto to Assisi section is covered by olive groves mostly, so that we walk in the lower part of the hills. So usually we don't walk across the ridges, but we stay in the

lower part of the hills and it's - they're covered by olive groves. Actually, there is a project that is the Way of the Fascia Olivata.

Sara Zanni:

Fascia Olivata means the boundary, let's say a band covered by olive groves, because they've got many varieties of olive trees and they've been making oil since the Roman times. So it's been one of the deepest traditions of central Italy.

Katy Clarke:

And how long would that section take, the one from Spoleto to Assisi?

Sara Zanni:

We walk it in five days. It's good that part of Umbria is very comfortable because you have many railway stations. So even if you are coming as an independent walker, so usually I lead a group, so we provide transfers and so on. But if you are coming as an independent walker, it's easy to do that because you've got a railway station in every main city. So in Spoleto, in Spello, also in the lower city of Trevi. So you can, you know, find options and transfers. Also, if you are in trouble - it's very easy to reach the beginning of the walk and also to go wherever you want to go when you reach Assisi. Yeah. Okay.

Katy Clarke:

And so, how many kilometers would you be walking each day then?

Sara Zanni:

It's about 100 kilometers. Then it's up to you because you know, you can. There are walkers who enjoy just spending time walking, so they don't really know what to do with their time when they finish walking at 2 pm, so they just keep going until 5 pm, but there are so many things to see, so many places to visit. All the cities that you and the small villages where you will stop. All across the network of the St. Francis Ways, they have beautiful pieces of art, galleries, museums, castles, churches - churches with amazing paintings that are just free to visit. So it's beautiful to take your time and just, okay, walk a bit, enjoy the countryside and then go deeper into the history of art and the beautiful places that you're walking past.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, amazing. And I think, well, I know from my experience that when I go with someone that has the knowledge of the area and knows what to look for, it's a different experience. Some people don't agree, but I, for me, the more you learn about what's happening around you, I think is just so fascinating. What are some of the things that you really like to point out along the way on the St. Francis way?

Sara Zanni:

Well, I love the city, the city center of Trevi, which is a nested city. So it lays on the slopes of a hill, and in this time of the year, it's surrounded by fields of poppies, which are bright red, and the flower that we are very attached to, and that's on the section from Spoleto to Assisi.

But there are also some beautiful places, like the Abbey of Farfa, north of Rome. So also on the southern section of the trail. The Abbey of Farfa used to be one of the most powerful in the Middle Ages. And it's still an amazing place. But you can also see the Monteluco, for example, on the top of Spoleto. So across Spoleto, next to Spoleto, there is a beautiful river and you can walk on an aqueduct, on a medieval aqueduct that has now been restored and reopened.

Sara Zanni:

So it's a very high bridge, let's say, from where you have a special view of the valley. And then you can climb on the top of the Monteluco, where there is another of the St. Francis monasteries. And the mountain is covered by a sacred forest that we know was already sacred in the Roman times. So it was forbidden to cut the woods. And that's an amazing place because you can really feel like the age of the wood. And this is something that happens also in another part of the trail, which is the woods of La Verna.

Sara Zanni:

La Verna and also Camaldoli Hermitage, which are not far from each other. And they are built in the middle of the Foreste Casentinesi, the forests of the Casentino. They are one of the most beautiful and eldest forests of Italy, especially in central Italy. And when you walk there, the silence is something very different and something really deep. And you can also almost feel the history growing through the trees. So it's something special. But there are also other places. For example, in Monterchi you can find the Madonna del Parto by Piero della Francesca.

Sara Zanni:

So you can find some beautiful art pieces that are just spread in the countryside and protected in ancient churches. Or if you're interested in normal people life, you can visit the museum of the personal journal, the Museo del Diario, which is a hidden gem in Pieve Santo Stefano. And they preserve the diaries, the personal journals of many, many people across the history of Italy. Also, if you are writing a personal journal and if you want to leave it as a donation to the museum, when you're not going to be with us anymore, you can do that. And they're going to keep it and to pick up nice stories from your life and it's going to be recorded somewhere.

Katy Clarke:

I love that especially because now everything, you know, who knows what's going to happen to the computers. They're just going to, I don't know, everyone's life memories are just going to evaporate somehow. Even like with our voice recordings, nothing's kind of permanent in that sense anymore. I love that idea of preserving people's stories. So nice. And I really want to go check out those woods, like 2000-year-old trees. That's crazy. Like I can imagine it is really moving actually, because sometimes we just don't even stop to think about that or how long these things have been there.

Katy Clarke:

When we are just sort of passing through, destroying things in our path. You have to really respect the fact that those woods have lasted that long.

Sara Zanni:

Yeah. So you can... walking across these woods, you will also notice that every wood is different from one another. So the elevation changes and also the kind of trees how the lower part of the, of the woods, the vegetation, you know, everything changes in relation to the bigger trees that are growing there. So we've got younger ones and elder ones and everyone is different. So it's very beautiful to spend your time there also because when you walk this kind of trails, you are not under pressure, so you can spend your time during the day, basically as you like. So if you're loving the place, you can stop there and spend, I don't know, two hours just listening to the birds chirping. If you want to just walk, you keep walking and you go and then have a nice meal at the next trattoria in the next city. So everyone can enjoy their time.

Katy Clarke:

This is what I love about this type of walking because it's not a competitive sport and of course, it's Italy. So you will have a delicious meal and you will have a very convivial atmosphere. No doubt there's some, like, I'm sure there's some great restaurants along the way that you can help point out or that's in the guidebook that you mentioned by Sandy.

Sara Zanni:

There are many. Yes, there are many in the guidebooks. Also there is, there are some Excellent wines, of course, in the, well, Emilia, Romagna and Tuscany sections. But also in Umbria, we've got the Montefalco Rosso di Montefalco, but also the Sagrantino wine. You can choose, if you like, a lighter one or a stronger one. So we've got all the shades of taste that you would like.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, it's the best. That's why Italy is the best. Like, I love the fact that it's more of a... it's an overall experience. It's not just like. It's not just hiking, it's a cultural experience, it's a gastronomic experience, plus wine. It's the whole package, which is always what we love about Italy, because you do get that whole package everywhere you go.

Sara Zanni:

Yes. When we talk about, you know, religious trails like the Camino de Santiago or St Francis Way, sometimes people start thinking, no, I'm not into religion. I don't care about doing these sorts of things. But actually, walking for long distances is something that is inside us as human beings. We wouldn't be human beings if we were not walking. So when you do long walks, you become the master of your time again. And that's something very deep inside each one of us. So it's not really about religion.

Sara Zanni:

It's mostly about culture and also about really living the time of your life, which is not like going to the disco, but it's really feeling the time inside you and choosing at every step what you want to do.

Katy Clarke:

Yes. I think this is something that somehow we may have lost sight of and why I really love coming to Italy, because that's something I think that hasn't left yet, and hopefully it doesn't. I always say, you know, when I get there, like, things don't work the way that they do here, but there's something frustrating about that. But there's something really freeing about that, too, because you don't have to be on your phone. You don't have to rush everywhere. Piano, piano. Take it slowly and enjoy.

Katy Clarke:

And I think when I get worried about the state of the world and I think of, well, maybe I'll just go to Umbria, I'll go to Italy, and, you know, you'll see that people are not rushing so much and they are enjoying that. Taking that next step one by one.

Sara Zanni:

Yeah, well, we do our best. It's not like everyone of us always make it to live - avoid rushing. I must confess that I have a bit of a pain avoiding rushing. My life is full of notifications, emails, and so on, like, everyone's today, but just going out of the door and finding a hill and a nice path, and it's beautiful and it's, you know, it's something that we should try to do every day. It would be the best way of keeping also the stress level down, you know, because we are here just for one game. I usually say that we got one game - we should better play it following our rules, not someone else's.

Katy Clarke:

That's right. That's why I say one precious life to experience. So how many people would walk along these trails? Is it very popular?

Sara Zanni:

It is quite popular, and it's also quite popular among foreign people. So we've got many Italians walking it. But the St. Francis trails are one of the trails where we can meet more international workers together with the Via Francigena, that probably you've heard about, and maybe there will be a chance to talk about it in the future, maybe. So that one goes to Rome. It's the road to Rome, one of the roads to Rome, because we've got several. But going to Assisi, you can find more than 50,000 people every year, which is quite a lot.

Sara Zanni:

Of course, we don't make the numbers of the Camino de Santiago, but I think it's okay. I mean, we don't really want to spoil our countryside. We've got the places where you're going to stay are very small. They don't have the capacity to welcome hundreds of people every day. So you will have a very personal and, you know, slow experience where you can actually

meet other people living there, living in the area, and welcoming hikers from all over the world in a very, very, you know, warm and I'd say traditional, but it's not traditional... it's just... friendly manner.

Katy Clarke:

Sounds lovely. So when you're walking along, it's not like a squash out of a path and you're not seeing hundreds of people. It's sort of like you'll be walking along and then you'll see, you know, some people.

Sara Zanni:

Well, mostly you can choose on the St. Francis trails, you can mostly choose. If you want to be alone, you will probably have a chance to do so. So it's very easy when you walk. You just let the other people start earlier or you start earlier than them, and then you walk ahead. But if you want to be in company, it's very probable that you will meet someone else walking the same trail you're going to walk, and then you can walk with them or just being inside, you know, and be in contact. It's normal. We call it the Camino family, the walking family, you know, which are not normal families or traditional families, but it's just that you become easily friends when you walk the same trail and you have living the same experiences, you share the same ground with people from very different life experiences.

Sara Zanni:

And it comes naturally because you're, you're sharing the same effort, you're going towards the same destination. So it's normal. We say that you're never alone when you walk, but in this case, it's easy that you really are never alone because you can choose to be in company.

Katy Clarke:

That's lovely. So, do you have any practical advice for anyone thinking about doing this walk? How would they approach it? What would be the best way to start?

Sara Zanni:

Well, if you come from other countries, just be sure to check, to really check the weather before you buy all your stuff. Because one of the most common issues that I see on the trails in Italy is that people come here and they don't expect it to be so warm or so cold in the spring and in autumn. Because it's weather - climate is changing, apparently. And also today, well, yesterday my car was marking 31 Celsius degrees because it was in the sun and 31 Celsius degrees at the end of April it's hot. Yeah. But for example, last year in July it was cooler, so we had a very hot May and June, but then July and August was cooler, it was raining a bit. So, actually make a proper backpack with the technical stuff. But I know that Australians and Americans and the people from other countries are very keen on technical stuff.

Sara Zanni:

Carry good shoes, not forcibly boots, rigid boots, but protective shoes like trail running shoes with a good sole and a good gripping sole. They are necessary. If you feel comfortable with

them. You can also carry walking sticks, which are very helpful because I mentioned - the elevation is very regular, so the walking sticks can actually help you. Both appeals and especially downhills, because not like you keep going up for the whole day, but you have many ups and down during the day, so it's important to have something with you to help. But of course you're going to walk in the woods, so if you need to pick up a stick, you can do that.

Katy Clarke:

I love that.

Sara Zanni:

Nature provides.

Katy Clarke:

Of course, it always does. And what level of fitness would you suggest that people would have, like you mentioned earlier, that you had to build up to your big walk.

Sara Zanni:

You can schedule your walks with the distances that you like, that you feel comfortable with. So you can choose to make short legs or longer legs. If you like it, you don't need to be young and fit. Okay. But even if you are over 50, it's fine. It's full of over 50 years old walkers and most of them, they are strong walkers. So don't feel, don't feel ashamed of coming. The thing is that it's best if you test your gear before leaving, before coming here.

Sara Zanni:

So don't leave with brand new shoes that you've never worn and you don't know if they're going to kill your feet. Test them before leaving. And so while you test them, you're going to start getting into the fitness, you know. So it's better if you have some comfort with walking long distances during the days, so you can take it easy during the first days and then when you're feeling stronger, you can make longer distances. Pace yourself.

Katy Clarke:

And so be quite flexible along the route. Like, I mean, so I'm just envisaging, if I had planned it out, I've got like five days to walk and I have planned out a small route. Like you need to look at the distances between each of the towns and then maybe book some accommodation along.

Sara Zanni:

Yes, it's better that you book accommodations, but you can also cancel them. So it's a very good policy if you are in trouble or if you decided that you want to do a longer distance, that you just call them, call the places when you booked your accommodation and you tell them, look, I'm sorry, I'm not coming today. Just because the people who will host you, they actually take care of the trails. If you don't show up, they will start thinking that you are in trouble somewhere in the woods. So they will probably start looking for you. It's going to be okay if you just call them and say, look, I've got a problem and I'm not coming. It's going to be okay.

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Don't be ashamed again, just let them know so that they can chill and they can, you know, set dinner and have their dinner and be fine and don't worry about your surviving skills.

Sara Zanni:

And that's one thing. You can find useful information about the accommodations both on the guidebook by Sandy Brown, but also on the official Facebook groups of the St. Francis Way. There is an Italian group where you can find many resources and attachments and you can ask questions both in Italian and in English. The administrations will reply, also in English, it's not a problem. And there is also an English-speaking Facebook group, also administrated by Sandy, where you can find more information. If you write to the, if you ask information to the Facebook Italian group, they also have a list of the accommodations so you can ask them for advice.

Katy Clarke:

But there's no easy website to go online and book. That's what I'm hearing.

Sara Zanni:

They're building one collective St. Francis Way's website for the 800 years. So it's going to be online soon enough, but they are still working on it. For the present moment. There is an official website of the Via di Francesco and I will send you the link, of course.

Katy Clarke:

Brilliant. We'll have all of that up on our show notes for everyone. I think it's really important to note that something like this is so special. And I always say that in Italy if you have to work a little bit harder than you normally would to get something organized, it's really worth it because you really are going out into the countryside and you're going to meet the people and you're going to have, you know, of like a rich experience getting to people that, you know, they literally don't go online a lot of the time. So you do need to pick up the phone and try your best to say Salve. Yeah. And use your Google Translate so you can communicate a bit.

Katy Clarke:

But I think it sounds like a very special thing to do, especially this year, because it is the 800th anniversary of St. Francis' death. I just have one last question for you, Sara. Like, you're just about to head off on a big - leading a tour group that's going across the Camino de Santiago. What is different about that walk to some of the walks in Italy?

Sara Zanni:

Well, the Camino de Santiago is a special place, especially to me. You know, the Camino de Santiago is a pilgrimage route leading to the tomb of St. James, who was one of the apostles of Jesus. They discovered it in the Middle Ages in 813 A.D. more or less. And soon after the discovery of the tomb, the St. James Trail was established. So pilgrims started arriving from all over Europe, walking across to Spain.

Sara Zanni:

And at that time, Spain was not like we know it today, but it was half occupied by the Muslims. So until 1492, it was partially occupied by the Muslims. It means more than 600 years since the discovery of the tombs. The Camino de Santiago was encouraged and pushed not only by the Church, but also by the Catholic kingdoms of Spain that wanted help from eastern countries, European countries, so especially from the Franks of Charlemagne and all his successors, in order to push away the Muslims. So what happened was that northern Spain, was especially where now there is The Camino Francaise, was mostly deprived of inhabitants because it was a dangerous area. It was because of the Camino de Santiago that many people went to live there and established and founded new cities that were tax-free because the royals wanted people to go and live there. Basically, the history of all that area was built on the top of the Camino de Santiago. The difference with Italy is that we've got a long and continuous settlement history.

Sara Zanni:

So all the trails I've mentioned that we've got many routes going to Rome. Because we've got some coming from the Western Alps, some others coming from the Eastern Alps, someone crossing Italy, from Rome to Loreto, from Loreto to Rome, some going down towards the ports, the harbors for the Holy Land. So we've got many different routes and many different destinations because we didn't have one main Santiago de Compostela. What is special about St. Francis Way is that Assisi looks a little bit/feels a little bit more like Santiago de Compostela because it's a small city and mostly all the people going to Assisi, also normal tourists go there because of St. Francis. So when you get there, you feel like you're welcome because the city welcomes pilgrims going to visit St. Francis.

Sara Zanni:

So this is quite a strong connection. I'd say that spiritually, Assisi is our Compostela because it's used to welcome pilgrims. And St. Francis was a walking saint. He was not a pope, he was not a special person, a rich person. He was a normal walker. So he was a little bit like Santiago - St. James, who walked across Spain and failed converting anyone.

Sara Zanni:

So he managed to convert only seven people during his mission in Spain. So we've got some parallels. But you see, the feeling is more or less the same. Well, when you get to Rome, when you arrive in Rome walking, you are lost in one of the biggest and ancient cities of the world. So it was a 1 million people city also in the first century AD.

Katy Clarke:

It's amazing, isn't it? Gives me the shivers. That's so good. Oh, Sara, this has been so fascinating and I just thank you so much for sharing that with us. And I'd love you to come back and share some of the other routes that we know about. There's so many of them. But before we head off, can you let everyone know how they can get in touch with you and maybe they want to join you on a tour or you have a look at your website and you've got some social media too?

Sara Zanni:

Of course. You can find me on www.sarazanni.com, which is very easy. It's my name and family name.com and you can find also an English version of the website where I put the next appointments and tours that I'm going to lead for international guests.

Katy Clarke:

Well, once I've sorted out my children and got them through school, that's what I think that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to come and do a long walk with you in one of those ancient woods. It sounds amazing. So, Sara, thank you so much and have a great time on the walk. It must be, you know - quite emotional to restep those steps every time you go back because you know that was a huge undertaking that you did.

Sara Zanni:

Yes. It's going to be like going back home. So I'm very glad to do that.

Katy Clarke:

Amazing. Grazie Mille, Sara, thank you so much for joining us on Untold Italy. Grazie te Katy.

Sara Zanni:

Thanks to everyone. Have a nice day. See you soon.

Katy Clarke:

A big grazie mille to Sara. That was such a rich conversation and I think she has just opened up a part of Italy and a way to experience it that a lot of our listeners did not know was waiting for them.

This is exactly why I do what I do. The Italy you want is not found on the same itinerary everyone is copying. It is in the olive groves between Spoleto and Assisi, in the ancient forests of La Verna, where the trees have been standing since Roman times, and in that small museum in Pieve Santo Stefano, where people donate their personal diaries so their stories are not forgotten. You cannot find that with a Google search. You find it through people who know it.

Sara is one of those people. She leads small group tours along many hiking routes in Europe and in the show notes, you will find a link to her website, along with the Sandy Brown guidebook from Cicerone Press, the best English language guide to the route, plus the official Via di Francesco Facebook groups, where you can ask questions and get accommodation advice.

And if this episode has you thinking about Umbria, or anywhere in Italy, that is exactly what we are here for. We have a team of local specialists based right across the country, people with this kind of deep, on-the-ground knowledge, and you can work with them one-on-one to build a trip that is genuinely yours. Or if you would rather hand it all over and just show up, we love taking our small group tours to Umbria and other lesser-known regions of Italy. All the links are waiting for you at untolditaly.com/328.

On next week's episode, we are working on some Italian language skills, which would likely come in handy if you are walking the trails of st francis, but until then, it's ciao for now.