

Untold Italy Episode 330: A Perfect Day in Palermo - Sicily's vibrant capital

Palermo is one of those cities that people either love from the very first moment or they never quite get it. Silvia moved there from the north of Italy 13 years ago and has never looked back. Today she takes us through a day in the city that she calls home, and it looks nothing like the guidebook version.

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

Katy Clarke:

Ciao a tutti and benvenuti. Welcome to the Untold Italy Travel Podcast. I'm so glad that you are here. And as we all know, Italy is much more than a checklist of highlights and must-sees. And nowhere does that feel more true than in a city like Palermo, the capital of Sicily, where everything worth experiencing is something that you feel and it comes from the people. Today I have a guest on the show who has become a real favorite among our Untold Italy tour guests. Silvia was born in Modena in the north of Italy, which is famous for its balsamic vinegar, cars and Pavarotti. But she fell in love with a boy from Sicily and followed him south.

Katy Clarke:

And even though that relationship didn't last, her love for Palermo and Sicily absolutely did. Sylvia has been living in Sicily for 13 years now, and she knows the city the way locals know it. Not from a map, from the years of walking the same streets, having coffee with the same people, and watching the place change, change around her. Apart from being one of our incredible Untold Italy tours hosts, Sylvia leads local experiences in Palermo for people who want to see the city through a local's eyes. And she's also building something extraordinary out in the Sicilian countryside near Castelbuono. What I love about this conversation is that Sylvia does not just tell you where to go, she tells you why those places matter and what Palermo is really made of. It is a city of contradictions, she says, complicated and generous at the same time. Time.

Katy Clarke:

So let's dive in and hear all about it. Benvenuta. Sylvia, welcome onto the Untold Italy Podcast.

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Silvia Rignanese:
Ciao. Hello, Katy. Buongiorno.

Katy Clarke:
Buongiorno, Buongiorno. How is it there in beautiful Sicily this morning?

Silvia Rignanese:
Well, I'm in Palermo and today it's a beautiful sunny day of spring. I love those.

Katy Clarke:
Spring's really special in Sicily, isn't it? It's my favorite time.

Silvia Rignanese:
It is. It's the only time of the year when you can see flowers. In a few weeks will be all dry.

Katy Clarke:
Oh yeah. And it just looks stunning. If anyone's lucky enough to go in the middle of Sicily and see the hills and the mountains there, it just looks absolutely amazing.

Silvia Rignanese:
Yes, they're gorgeous.

Katy Clarke:
Oh, so good. I'm starting to get a bit chilly here, where I am in Melbourne. So a Sicilian spring and summer sounds really lovely right now.

Silvia Rignanese:
Yes, come.

Katy Clarke:
I wish I could. Now, you and I know each other quite well, but our listeners are new to your beautiful voice. Can you tell them a little bit about yourself, where you are from and how you came to be living in Sicily, because you are Italian, but you're not Sicilian.

Silvia Rignanese:
So I'm Silvia and actually I was born in north of Italy in a city called Modena, that it's pretty much known for balsamic vinegar, Pavarotti and cars. My father is from south of Italy, from Puglia, when my mother is Polish. And at a certain point in my life, I felt like the south was calling me. And many, many years ago, like 13 years ago, I met a boy from Sicily that stole my heart. And I moved to Sicily to see if this was working. It was not at the end, but I fell in love with beautiful Sicily. And since there. I'm living here, I felt at home immediately. And I'm really, really, really happy that in my life I found this big love for Sicily and for this beautiful island.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, so exciting. I mean, it's something about Sicily that gets really under your skin and it's... I feel like if you're a little bit adventurous and you like lots of culture and history, that it's the place. And especially Palermo, where you live, right?

Silvia Rignanese:

Yes. You know what? When I arrived, I was one of the first people from north of Italy moving to the south. It's really uncommon to do that. I don't know if you know that the two parts of Italy sometimes are a bit against each other. And well, everybody was surprised, like, what are you doing here? You know, the economy is different, the history is different. Linguistically, it's different. So traditionally, everybody moved from south to north. And then I thought, well, yes, it's unusual, but the weather is amazing, the food was all new for me and amazing.

Silvia Rignanese:

I'm nearby the sea, which I was living in the central part of Italy and it's very foggy and the climate is different and people are so much open. I don't know, I felt at home immediately when I arrived here, and everything was so different, but at the same time was the same country. So I felt like, wow, that's really exciting. And somehow I was remembering my roots a bit when I was traveling to south of Italy with my parents as a kid to Puglia. So it was really similar, the atmosphere. And I really loved it. Immediately I felt like, that's the place.

Katy Clarke:

And why did you settle in Palermo especially?

Silvia Rignanese:

Well, that's a good question. Because Palermo, it's a city full of contrast. When you visit Palermo, some people love it, some people hate it. Like from the first moment, I think I loved it from the first moment. I love the traffic, the chaos, the markets where everybody screams to sell their things. The fact that, really, people, after you meet somebody, like after five minutes, you're friends. So I like the city life, that it's sometimes very complicated. I will not lie.

Silvia Rignanese:

It's very, very different than north of Italy. Not very well organized, but at the same time very spontaneous. So I like the fact that you can walk around. It's a big city, it's 1 million people, but you can walk around the little neighborhoods and feel like in small little towns. And this doesn't happen in many cities, especially in north of Italy. I had the feeling that it was different. Like you could really know the guy at the bar or the guy at the supermarket. Everybody says hello to each other.

Silvia Rignanese:

So I felt like in a small town, but actually I'm in a big town and there are lots of opportunities and you can go to the theater, to the cinema, you can go to music concerts. So you have a bit of everything.

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Katy Clarke:

So exciting. And Sylvia, tell everyone what you do in Palermo, because you've got an interesting life.

Silvia Rignanese:

Yeah, well, right now it's been a while. I'm a trip leader for tours, so I love to bring people around to discover Sicily from an authentic point of view. And at the same time, two years ago, I bought a land one hour away from Palermo, in the little town of Castelbuono. I don't know if you ever heard that place, but it's an amazing little town in Sicily, on a beautiful spot on a hill, not far from the sea, not far from the mountains. And I bought land after a long research. And I'm right now building a tiny house for myself, hoping to open a little campsite, a little glamping with activities in the countryside, because I feel like there is a lot to discover in the countryside and not to focus only on cities. And soon I will move there. And I arrived to a stage of my life where I think, oh, well, city, it's fine. But also, you know, waking up looking at the beautiful mountains and trees, it's something I need to experience.

Silvia Rignanese:

And I want other people to experience too. So I will be very glad to host people in my future little place.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, so exciting. These cities are very exciting in Italy and so different. They're all very unique. I mean, you can't really get much different, I think, than Palermo and Modena.

Silvia Rignanese:

Yeah, right.

Katy Clarke:

That is a contrast, for sure. But this countryside is so, so beautiful. And the traditions of the countryside, I know you really love them, too. So I'm excited to see how that project comes.

Silvia Rignanese:

Yes. And I learned so much pruning trees, taking care of the land, discovered ancient seeds and ancient fruits. So it's really. There is a whole world that I didn't know. So I'm really happy to be part of it.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, exciting. Well, we are going to be focusing a little bit more on Palermo today, because I did ask you, if you were a tourist, how would you spend a day exploring the city? As you're a local, but as a tourist, so you sometimes when - and you know this because you're, when you're leading tour groups, people are going to the highlights and, and all of those, you know, places that are popular for a reason, but there's also places that they may miss that are really

special to you as a local. So I can't wait to hear what you've got in store. So let me know, how would you spend a day in Palermo?

Silvia Rignanese:

Absolutely. Well, first of all, when you asked me this, I was thinking about a specific day of the year that I would like spend with you. And I was thinking about the 21st of June, that is the summer solstice. And I live nearby the sea, near a gate of the city that is called Porta Felice. And that day of the year, the sun is exactly in the center of the gate. It was built like that. And that's amazing. That's a beautiful day of the year.

Silvia Rignanese:

And even though Sicilian people don't like to wake up very early on that day, I always try to wake up early, very early to see that happening. And it's really cool because that gate doesn't have an arch on the top. According to the legends, they say that it's because so the husbands that have been cheated on could pass by with their horns. Yeah, that's an incredible story. And I really like to start the day from there. We are nearby the sea there is the sun, early sun of the morning coming through, and people are starting to wake up. There are little cafeterias opening. There is one below my house that it's not really a special cafeteria, but it's special for me.

Silvia Rignanese:

It's very local, and it opens at 6 in the morning. And as every local, it's good to start the day with a morning coffee and a pastry, because it's also a pastry shop. Here we have a huge collection of pastries. It's amazing how much sugar we can eat in a day in Sicily.

Katy Clarke:

We had some photos come through from one of our tours, and I didn't know Sylvia was such a sweet tooth, but now I know.

Silvia Rignanese:

So that's another reason for living in Sicily. The desserts are amazing. Amazing. They're works of art, literally. So I would start today with that.

Katy Clarke:

Which one? Have you got a favorite?

Silvia Rignanese:

Well, I really enjoy pastries with pistachio. So we have like some sweet doughs filled with pistachio with sugar on the top. But another thing I really love for breakfast is the local breakfast. That might be gelato sometimes, or granita. Granita is a Sicilian local breakfast. So that's really something I really, really enjoy. Even though it sounds strange.

Katy Clarke:

Tell everyone what it is.

Silvia Rignanese:

Oh, granita. It's like slushed ice, but it's really creamy. It's more similar to a melted creamy gelato with different flavors. It doesn't contain milk, so it's a bit different than gelato. And it's really what you want on a hot summer day, you know, when it's very warm and you need something refreshing and energetic. And it comes with different flavor, fruits and nuts. But my favorite is pistachio. I'm a pistachio freak.

Katy Clarke:

Our whole family is pistachio freaks. So if I ever come to Italy, I always come home with jars and jars of pistachio paste. Always from Sicily. Always.

Silvia Rignanese:

Yes. And in Sicily, around our volcano, we have a unique type of pistachio that grows only here. So we are very proud of our pistachios.

Katy Clarke:

They're delicious. Yeah. Okay, back to Palermo. We've had our granita. Now, where are we going?

Silvia Rignanese:

I like to start to walk around the little streets of my neighborhood. The city center of Palermo divides in four parts. I'm in the lower part, nearby the sea, so I will start slowly to go higher. What I like about my neighborhood is that I know every little person working in different shops. So, for example, there is another little coffee place, and the guy is called Baldo. And I always pass by and say, hello to him. And I take another little coffee. He only sells coffee.

Silvia Rignanese:

So at the end of the day, he is covered by a pile of cups. And then I will start to enter some little streets. There is a street not far from my house called Paternostro, and it's full of handcrafters. And since some are my friends and in the morning they start, you know, slowly but slowly opening the little shops, I like to pass by and say hello to everybody. My favorite is a place called Edizioni Precarie, of a friend of mine. And she started a little business using the paper of the markets of Palermo, the food wrapping paper. And she does beautiful works of art or notebooks. And this paper, it's very precious because it's disappearing.

Silvia Rignanese:

And the markets, the open-air markets are disappearing. And nobody's wrapping food anymore in paper, you know, use plastic or other things. And she is really trying to save this paper to be forgotten. And every different food has a different wrapping paper. The meat has one, the fish has one. So she does this artistic notebooks with all the different papers. So this is a really a place that I really recommend. She's Carmela and she is a dear friend of mine.

Silvia Rignanese:

So I really recommend passing by and saying hello to her. And there I would move through other little street in Palermo. It's cool because as many other towns in Italy, you have a different street for different handcrafters. There is Via Calderai, for the people that build things that are used in the oven. There is the street where there are still some people building things in silver, silver crafts. There is a street where they sell coppola, the traditional hats, Via Garibaldi and so on. So it's nice to walk around that area.

Silvia Rignanese:

At the end of my walk, I like to end up with another coffee. Coffee is really a thing in Sicily. Really. When I arrived to Sicily, everybody was inviting me for a coffee, no? Like, let's have a coffee, let's have a coffee break, let's.... and I thought, oh my God, how many coffees I can have in a day, right? But apparently, you can have many. It's always a coffee break here. And I really love that about local culture.

Silvia Rignanese:

It's really chilled. Nobody really worries about tomorrow or about, you know, the things that you have to do later. It's like we live in the present and this is really, really important to me, especially in this type of world we're living in. So there is another coffee place that it's next to the main square of Palermo, that it's called Stagnitta. And actually, this is a traditional coffee place where you can see twice a week how they roast the coffee and then you can have it very fresh. So it's really a thing to see. And also it's an art place because there are a lot of pictures of a very important photographer for Sicily called Letizia Battaglia. She died few years ago and she was the ex-wife of the owner of the coffee place that it's the most famous in town.

Silvia Rignanese:

And her pictures are there to remember us about her. She was the first woman that in the 80s and in the 90s, she was taking the pictures of the people that got killed by mafia. So she was a reporter and a journalist. So she's really important for our city. It's a city full of contradictions, unfortunately, because of the past that we are literally rewriting in these years. Thanks also to a lot of tourists or people moving here. And these past memories are fading away, but still, of course, it's a very complicated city to live in from center point of view.

Katy Clarke:

I think it's good that you acknowledge that, actually, Sylvia, because I think a lot of people have this idea that that's the culture that still exists. But as you rightly say, there's big changes underway. And it's a big cultural shift too.

Silvia Rignanese:

Absolutely. We used to be a very poor part of Italy, so of course, poverty brings a lot of issues in. Unemployment. And the need to ask for favors, you know, to wrong people if you are in need. Thanks to a new wave of tourism and a new economy. And you know, we have a lot of

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agriculture here and organic food. This is giving a lot of jobs to people. So things are changing very, very fast. The transformation is very fast for good sides and also for bad sides, as in everything.

Silvia Rignanese:

But it's really becoming an international place. What was Sicily known for in the 80s? It's very different from now, so we are very happy for that. But we still remember that her pictures are very important for the city and she was super loved by everybody.

Katy Clarke:

I love that there's always art involved. You know, I feel like in Sicily there's always some connection between art and community and these changes that are happening. And also, as you say, the agriculture. So I really love that you mentioned this photographer because I think it's really symbolic of Sicily, actually.

Silvia Rignanese:

Absolutely. Absolutely. I always say to the people that travel with me, first of all, you have to imagine Sicily like north of Africa and not south of Europe, because then it's changed completely the perspective culturally, geographically, we really belong to north of Africa. And in fact, since 2015, Palermo itself in the Arab Norman UNESCO site. And we have a lot of buildings that are in this style. And also I like to say to the people that travel with me that sometimes I have the feeling I'm in 2026, but at the same time, in the 50s, contemporary in the same place. So you can still see somebody able to build a shoe from zero, but at the same time, you have Wi-Fi, and you can take pictures and post them on Instagram. So this is literally something that is lost in most of the places of other countries or of north of Italy.

Silvia Rignanese:

These things are disappearing faster in north of Italy because industrialization of other... globalization. Here it's still like a place that it's a bit not so open to new things, but at the same time very jealous about the tradition and to preserve what was there. Sicilian people like to say stick to the plan, because it was always working like that and that's always the best idea. And thanks to that, we could save a lot of our ancient grains, ancient grapes, ancient traditions. And that's really good. That's amazing.

Katy Clarke:

This is the Italy that's my favorite, where you have the tradition with a layer of innovation. I think that's where Italy does it the best, actually, in the world. So you can see it as in lots of different ways in different places. But yeah, what you've just described, I think that's a really great way to describe Sicily, actually. I love it.

Silvia Rignanese:

Well, it's time for another bit of desserts. Of course. I'm sure everybody who is talking about any city in Italy, they're always like into food, for sure. Well, next to the Stagnitta Torrefazione, so the coffee place, there is an amazing monastery called Santa Catarina that

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have a pastry shop where they were able to save the original recipes of the nuns. And they do the best cannolo in town and also the bigger one. So Canolo - it's a must. It's a fried roll of dough filled with ricotta cheese and sugar, beautifully decorated with candied fruit and pistachio.

Silvia Rignanese:

And when you enter this place, there is a courtyard with a lot of majolica (maiolica). Are the tiles traditional from south of Italy, beautifully decorated. And there you can enjoy a pastry and a beautiful cannolo, so that will be something very important for my morning.

Katy Clarke:

You can't go to Palermo without having a cannolo, I think.

Silvia Rignanese:

No, no, no, no, you can't. Right next to it there are the four corners. That is the main crossroad of the city center. All the streets of the town bring you to the four corners. It's exactly in the center. And the four corners, it's where there is always somebody playing music. So I really like sometimes to walk by there to see who is playing or performing. And sometimes there are opera singers, sometimes amazing people with a great talent.

Silvia Rignanese:

So, listening to some music, we can enter the neighborhood of Ballarò. Ballarò - it's a very multicultural neighborhood in Palermo. It's not really visited because it's known for its market, but taking some side road and trying to get a bit lost, I think it's a great idea. In Ballarò, you have the main open-air market. I don't know if you know, in Italy, the open-air markets are disappearing. So Ballarò and the open, open-air markets that we have are in danger of disappearing because people nowadays prefer to go with the cars to buy everything from a supermarket. But those are surviving for two reasons. Thanks to tourism that it's enjoying trying something traditional and our local street food.

Silvia Rignanese:

We are really proud to be the capital of street food in Europe. We have so many street foods. Arancine, Panelle, Sfincione, Frittola. So many things involving also weird parts of animals. Yeah, but also it's a very multicultural neighborhood. When in Palermo, you say, oh, this is like a Ballarò place. It means like a melting pot of cultures. So if you take side streets, you will see a lot of different cultures living together.

Silvia Rignanese:

And we introduce in our markets also food from other cultures. There are a lot of local associations, like a little restaurant called Moltivolti that is also a cultural space where you can taste dishes from all these parts of the world, where all these people come from. So I really spend a lot of time, I do a lot of volunteer in this neighborhood to support migrants and other people that are actually now living in Sicily and living in Balaro. So that's, I think, an exciting melting pot. Very representative of how Italy is becoming multicultural. We were

always emigrating and now it's a bit different, this situation. So we are changing a lot. And then I guess it's time for lunch after our walk through the streets.

Silvia Rignanese:

And I would like to share with you a little place. Well, apart from Moltivolti, that it's an option. It's a bit a cultural place. Not far from Moltivolti in Balaro, there is another place called Al Fresco. And I went there with my last tour. No, with some of our guests. And it's a place that some of the waiters are young, very young people that are actually in their way to get out of jail.

Silvia Rignanese:

So they are trying to change their life and find a job and learn some skills. And this little restaurant is really, really, really cool. There is a secret garden, so from the outside you cannot see what it's inside. It's a beautiful garden with oranges and lemons and flavors. And they cook some traditional dishes and you find any sort of person. And they're really, really enjoyable people. Very open, very funny. You can have a drink and something to eat.

Silvia Rignanese:

Some pasta and some pizza that they prepare. And the name of the project, it's a pun on the word al fresco. That means a fresh place, a chilled place. That is also how we say, you know, when you go al fresco, you go to jail.

Katy Clarke:

No, I do know that. It's. It's funny. I love it because in English, if someone says, oh, we're eating al fresco, that means that we're eating outside. Right?

Silvia Rignanese:

Yeah, Right. But 'al fresco' can mean also something different. I love their project, so I really support them. And it's really a cool place.

Katy Clarke:

What I was thinking, though, as well, like, when you're talking about multiculturalism in Palermo, it's always been a multicultural place, right? Because people have always been coming to and from Palermo. French, Arabic, Greeks, Romans. I think you can keep going for ages, can't you? Everyone's been there.

Silvia Rignanese:

Exactly. So Sicily - it's a huge island in the middle of the Mediterranean. And everybody wanted to come to Sicily because it was a strategic place. If you control Sicily, you control all the trades. Back when the world was about Mediterranean Sea, and literally everybody came here to the point that the Greeks were calling it the Great Greece. So even better than Greece. And then Romans, well, before that, Phoenicians, and then we have Byzantines and Arabs and Normans and Spaniards and French people. So we are like.

Silvia Rignanese:

All the other places in Italy are lasagna, but we are really multicultural lasagna. These people were talking different languages, completely different cultures, and everybody left something here. So we always been multicultural. In fact, I don't know if you know, Katy, that the symbol of Palermo, we call him the Genius of Palermo. It's a man. It's a king with his crown holding a snake, and he's breastfeeding a snake. And the meaning of that is that Palermo, it's somehow killing its own inhabitants. Because it was always a very difficult place to live in for historical reasons.

Silvia Rignanese:

But he is very welcoming with people from other cultures. So he is open to everybody, but somehow oppressing its own people. Historically, we were in troubles. We were in the middle of many wars, always. And people feel a lot, a strong sense of identity. But being a Sicilian, it's literally having a bit of Arabic blood, a bit of Norman blood, a little Spaniards blood. So a bit of everything. So that's really amazing.

Silvia Rignanese:

And we are still like that. I feel that the city is really open. It's. It's a port city, so it's really open to whoever wants to participate.

Katy Clarke:

I think it's really hilarious that this is just my crazy sense of humor. But I love the fact that there was a King Roger, Just Roger. Who could have thought of King Roger of Sicily. Like, it just doesn't sound right. No offense to any Rogers out there, but it just doesn't sound very Sicilian.

Silvia Rignanese:

Exactly. Yes, we have - everybody was passing by here and everybody left and took something. So that's very important for us.

Katy Clarke:

Yes. So where do we go after lunch? Because we need to passeggiata.

Silvia Rignanese:

Absolutely. Well, one of my favorite places to walk, maybe with a brioche with gelato in your hand, maybe, is the botanical garden. Botanical garden is not a place where usually people consider to go, but I think it's an amazing place. It's a botanical garden from the end of the 1700s, and it was a place where nobility was walking around, but also regular people. And it became pretty famous early in times because it's a tropical botanical garden. So it's literally one of the few places in Europe when you can grow some tropical species. We have a lot of plants and trees from Australia, for example. Our cities are covered in different types of ficus trees and different plants.

Silvia Rignanese:

That seems like they're not from here. In fact, they are not from here, but they grow wonderfully. So it's one of the few botanical gardens where you can admire really beautiful tropical speeches. So I really love walking around the botanical garden. It's not one of those super tidy, super perfectly arranged botanical gardens. It's a bit wild and it's a bit Sicilian style, so you can get lost. You know, not everything is really well explained, but I think it's fun about that place and what. It's interesting.

Silvia Rignanese:

And not far from the botanical garden, there is another place that I really love with. And it's called Spasimo. It's a church that was built in the 1500 and the roof was never finished. So it's a roofless church. And now we use it for concerts or events or dancing sessions. And it hosts one of the oldest jazz schools in Italy. So it's really beautiful. You go to that place, it's free access and you can hear the music of people rehearsing or some little concerts or events. So it's really a fun place.

Katy Clarke:

We'll return in a moment with the rest of the episode for on-the-go curated travel tips, restaurant recommendations and fun things to do in classic and hidden spots across Italy. Download the Untold Italy app link in the show notes.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, who knew? I love things like that. I think it. When you walk along and you stumble upon things like that, or even if you go there deliberately, like I think music makes any place more interesting. I like to try and always add a little bit of music experience into, as you know, the tours, but also just in. In travel in general, because you remember the tunes from your travels.

Silvia Rignanese:

That's true. Yeah. So that's the Spasimo church. For the afternoon. Another thing I would really recommend, and again, not many people know about it, is our puppet tradition. I don't know if you know that in Sicily we have a wonderful puppet tradition, that it's a bit strange because the traditional puppets are nice knights dressed like French medieval knights fighting against the Muslim army. So we are telling stories of medieval times, of very old stories, but somehow are representing the wish of the Sicilian people to always fight against their dominators. So it's not really a fight between the French people and the Muslims, but it's really about Sicilian people feeling to fight for the freedom from the others that were always conquering the island.

Silvia Rignanese:

And this was actually - it begun/was born during the period when we were under the French domination. So we were representing ourselves as French fighting against this other army. And there is every day a puppet show in town. In the past, there were many puppet theaters, and it was a soap opera in the past. In the 1800 was the soap opera of the working class, mainly a

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soap opera for men. There was an episode a day for all year round. So after hard work, people were going there and it was like watching a TV series on Netflix because every day there was an episode and there was a panel outside showing you what happened in the previous episode, so you could catch up if you missed one day. And it was for men because it was mainly about fighting and there were very bloody scenes.

Silvia Rignanese:

You know, people didn't have TV at that time, so it was really like they were really feeling it or throwing tomatoes if there was something they didn't like on the stage. And our puppet tradition is wonderful. They are dressed with these fine clothes and you know, all the metal details. And there are special effects like when they fight some puppet lose their heads or there is smoke coming out from a machine of smoke. So. And they still do it in the traditional way, in the old style way, without any technology. And the soundtrack is given with a cylinder mini pianino. It's a bit like a music box, but bigger.

Silvia Rignanese:

So there is always a guy turning around the wheel and this funny music is coming out. So there are two families. Well, there are more than two families, but there are two of the main families carrying on the tradition. They are the family Argento and the family Cuticchio. And they do shows in town almost every day. So that's really, really something I love to do. And everybody's always so amazed by that.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, that's so cool. Who's making up the stories? These. Someone in the family is making up the stories.

Silvia Rignanese:

Well, the story actually, the puppets are a UNESCO protected, not material heritage. Because the story is written nowhere. And also the knowledge of how to build a puppet is written nowhere. It's something that family, generation after generation, is going on. But the story was originally written in Chanson de Roland. So it's a medieval story that was written in a book, like 500 years before we started to represent them. We just picked that story from that book that it's super famous in Western Europe as a medieval story.

Silvia Rignanese:

And we started to represent it as a metaphor for our dreams of freedom. no? Sicily always wanted to be independent. Never actually really succeed in that. We never also really tried because we're kind of a very chilled culture. But that was really representing the dreams of people about dreaming.

Silvia Rignanese:

You know, a place that was not dominated by anybody. but representing also values. No, of what. What a knight should do protecting his own families on land. So it's really a story full.

And it's full of magic. Also, there are a lot of monsters of flying snakes, flying horses, wizards, witches. It's really, really - I'm really passionate about puppets.

Silvia Rignanese:

You can tell I love them. Then I was thinking it's time to do something more active and bike towards our local beach to see the sunset. Because it's almost sunset time. It's summertime, so the sunset, it's much later. And the city center, it's connected to a place called Mondello that is still inside Palermo, but it's like an area of the city that it's a bit outside the city center and it has a beautiful sandy beach. And it has a tiny little town that it still belongs to Palermo. And between that there is a huge urban park. And it's the biggest urban park in Italy.

Silvia Rignanese:

It's called La Favorita. And it's a wonderful place to bike. You can bike for kilometers and feeling like you are still inside the city, but you're like outside the city. And you can see along where you can go with the bike those channels that were built during the Arab and Norman times that were used to water the plants. We have a lot of orange and Mandarin and lemon trees that are still irrigated with this traditional channel system. Also, biking around this kind of woods, you will see appearing at a certain point, a Chinese building. It's a huge villa built in Chinese style. And this is really, really interesting because this was built at the end of the 1700s because the nobility and the king of that time had this taste for oriental things.

Silvia Rignanese:

No? So they love like Chinese pottery, Chinese fans or other things. And they. He wanted for himself and his family to build a summertime villa in Chinese style. So there you go, you are there with your bike and in Sicily pops out a Chinese historical villa, which is amazing. And then you will arrive at sunset time at the beautiful beach of Mondello. You see the sun's going down. The water, it's almost always emerald color. It's a very crowded place in summertime, though, because everybody goes there.

Silvia Rignanese:

You know, it's really, really hot in Sicily. We hit 45 degrees last summer, so it's really, really hot. And from there, from the beach, you can see a huge mountain that separates the city center of Palermo and Mondello Beach. And that's the mountain that we called Monte Pellegrino, the pilgrim mountain, where the grotto of our saint is there. We love saints. Every neighborhood has its own saint. The city of Palermo has Saint Rosalia. And she has an amazing history.

Silvia Rignanese:

She was a noble woman that didn't want to get into a combined marriage. And she decided to spend the the rest of rest of her life in a grotto on the top of that mountain, praying. Then she died. And 200 years later, she actually is responsible for a miracle because she's supposed to be the one that saved Palermo from black plague. And since then, it's more than 400 years that every 14th of July we bring her bones and her cart. So, we literally, every year we built a huge cart with her statue. Very artistic.

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Silvia Rignanese:

And we carry it around the town. And it's really an incredible day. Everybody's there looking at Saint Rosalia and there is a lot of music. So when you are in Mondello and you can see very well that mountain, it's really like, I think even if you're not religious, everybody loves Saint Rosalie and the grotto where she died. And it's really a place you can visit that. The Saint Rosalia Grotto. It's really, really an interesting place.

Silvia Rignanese:

A bit off the beaten paths.

Katy Clarke:

One thing, if you have never seen these processions in Sicily, which I was able to do in Messina actually, a few Easters ago, it's amazing because a whole community comes out to participate.

Silvia Rignanese:

Yes. And you need sometimes really hundreds of people to pull the card. If you look on YouTube on videos of Saint Rosalia or Saint Agatha in Catania, there are hundreds of people pulling such a heavy card. And everybody's so excited. And really, people really feel it. So it's a very important thing. And they love to see those and participate because you really feel the sense of community, that it's something that I don't find when I travel, I miss that sense of community.

Silvia Rignanese:

The fact that for one day of a few days a year, we all belong to that thing. Even if you're not a believer, but you belong to that thing that it's happening right now in front of you. And it was happening since 400 years. You know that every year this is happening. So that's amazing.

Katy Clarke:

I think it's especially - and I know you meet a lot of people from United States and Australia and all over the world, but we don't really know we have Christmas, but it's not the same. It's a little bit more family-oriented. It's not community-oriented. So I think that I really find it very special to see those celebrations in action. It's really quite incredible. And to know that it's possible, actually, that communities can really come together like that and celebrate. I love it.

Katy Clarke:

That's a great day. Have you got somewhere else to take us, Sylvia?

Silvia Rignanese:

Oh, yeah. Yes. It's time to end our day with a very nice dinner. There is a place that I really recommend and it's called Club Rosa Nero - Black and Pink Club. And it was the place where all the people that really care about football in Palermo, because black and pink are the

colors of our football team, were gathering in the past. And now it became like a restaurant. And you can feel like the tradition, traditional dishes for a few Euros with a very, very unique location with this football team. And after that, I really recommend to go around the city and look for music. We are a very musical city and we are very proud of our jazz tradition and jazz culture.

Silvia Rignanese:

So you can find some jazz clubs, you can find open squares where people play or also do concerts. Especially in summertime, we have a lot of music, music festivals. And every Thursday evening on the main square, Piazza Bellini, there is a very big group of people that do traditional dances open to everybody. You can just join the group and dance with them. And it's really, really wonderful in a summer evening to hear... they dance till very late at night to hear that music. And the day is fading away and you can hear the notes of our traditional music and everybody dancing together in groups, in circle, in couples. So that's something that I really recommend to find.

Katy Clarke:

Wow. What a way to finish up a day in Palermo. And everyone thought they just had to go to the cathedral. Yeah. I think you need to spend a long time to get to know a city like that. I think.

Silvia Rignanese:

Yes, there is a lot underground, A lot, a lot that doesn't come to your eyes in a short moment of time. Yes, absolutely.

Katy Clarke:

Well, Sylvia, thank you so much for taking us on a walk around Palermo. That's just wonderful. I just love talking about that. I would love to go walking around Palermo with you, but what if some other people would like to do that? How could they, how could they get in touch? Are they able to go on a little walk around Palermo with you?

Silvia Rignanese:

Absolutely. Well, I would love to bring everybody around Palermo to see the Palermo that, that I enjoy. So let's call it the alternative or secret Palermo. And you can reach me by email. I would be very glad to receive your emails.

Katy Clarke:

So we will put all Sylvia's details into the show notes. So if you want to get in touch with her, it's probably best by email. And we will share that with everyone, as we always do. So, Sylvia, Grazie Mille! And Palermo, what a fascinating city. And obviously, it's becoming a little bit more popular, maybe due to some White Lotus TV show or something like that. But, you know, I think it's got so many thousands of years of history waiting to be uncovered. So I really appreciate you sharing some of it with us today.

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Silvia Rignanese:

Thank you. Thank you very much. It was a pleasure.

Katy Clarke:

Ciao

Silvia Rignanese:

Ciao

Katy Clarke:

Wow, what a day in Palermo. Granita for breakfast, a cannolo from the nuns of Santa Catarina, a puppet theater with a 500-year-old story and traditional dancing in Piazza Bellini as the evening draws in, this is exactly what dreams are made of. Palermo is one of those cities that takes a little time to understand, and Sylvia summed that up perfectly. She says she sometimes feels like she is in 2026 and in the 1950s at the same time. And that to me is the Italy I love. The one where the old and the new are living right next door to each other.

Katy Clarke:

And that nobody finds that strange and, in fact, finds it quite exciting. If you want to experience Palermo the way Sylvia showed us today, I have some great news. Sylvia is one of our Untold Italy tour hosts, taking you on complete multi-day Sicilian and other adventures. And she brings exactly this kind of passion and local knowledge to every experience that she leads for us. You can also book in with her for a day experience in Palermo and tread the paths that we spoke about today. All the details are in the show notes at untolditaly.com/330 for episode number 330 and as always, if you found this episode useful, the best thing you can do is share it with someone who's planning a trip to Sicily or Italy. Word of mouth is genuinely how this show grows and I am so grateful for every one of you who passes it along. That's all for this week. Next time we're talking about traveling in Italy as a family with kids of all ages.

Katy Clarke:

But until then, it's ciao for now.