

Untold Italy Episode 340: This Beautiful Country - Exploring Italy's Natural Beauty

Italy beckons us with history, food, art, and of course, its beautiful landscapes. And it is the landscapes of Italy that we turn to today. From the breathtaking coastlines, fiery volcanoes, beautiful lakes, and spectacular mountains, Italy really does have an unfair advantage when it comes to natural beauty. In this episode, I'm joined by author Ed Cutler to learn how Italy is the biodiversity powerhouse of Europe and why you should get out into nature to experience Italy at its finest.

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:

Welcome to the Untold Italy podcast, where we help travelers move beyond the checklist so they really feel part of Italy. This is the Untold Italy way. I'm your host, Katy Clarke, and on today's episode, we are getting a history and geography lesson about how Italy was formed over millions of years and why it is unique in Europe and around the world for its incredible diversity. I'm delighted to introduce you to the author of a new book about Italy's natural landscapes and how they shaped its civilization and culture. I'll ask Ed to introduce himself to you in his own words in a minute, but I'll preface that part of the conversation by saying that, like many of us, He fell in love with the country as a child or young adult, and his passion for Italy has grown much deeper over the years. Ed shares some of his favorite places, and yes, they are very 'Untold'. So listen on if you are inspired by nature and Italy, of course. Benvenuto, Ed.

Katy Clarke:

Welcome on to the Untold Italy podcast.

Ed Cutler:

It's great to be here. Thank you for having me.

Katy Clarke:

Oh, it's wonderful to have you here and to talk about your new book that's both in English and Italian. Amazing. And it's called This Beautiful Country. Ed, would you mind sharing with our listeners a little bit about yourself and what inspired you to write the book?

Ed Cutler:

Sure, sure. Well, I'm British. I grew up in England and studied in Scotland. All my life. I studied art history at university in Edinburgh, and I've had a sort of a love affair with Italy since quite young, since being brought to Venice when I was about 8, when my dad was on a conference there. I've been slightly kind of obsessed with Italy ever since. And I lived in Venice for a year after university and then went back to London. And then I met my wife there, who's Italian from Rome. And we moved to Rome in 2009 when she was pregnant with our first son, thinking that it would just be a good place to be.

Ed Cutler:

I was offered a job in a gallery in Rome and stuff, and then we ended up living in Milan for 4 years and then moved back to Rome. And then I bought my little farm where I am here in Maremma in southern Tuscany about 12 years ago. And I have worked in the art world, I have worked in green technologies, and I've been sort of moving towards more environmental work in recent years. And then the book came about; it was really a sort of a realization, an awakening, when during COVID we were here, all the family on the farm for those months of lockdown. And my son and I had this incredible moment. We were exploring the woods and walking everywhere. We were very lucky in lockdown. We were lucky to be here.

Ed Cutler:

And I appreciate that many people were less fortunate. But for us, it was amazing. And one day in early April, we were down by this little river, sort of seasonal river that runs the bottom of the valley that divides our farm from the village. And we were poking around in there and we never really found much down there in the past. But that day, my son spotted something in the water. It was like a kind of a dark shadow shape and it looked kind of reptilian. And we managed to get it into a glass jar and identified it as this Salamander. It's called the Spectacled Salamander, and it is a wonderful creature.

Ed Cutler:

It's completely endemic to Italy. It's found nowhere else. There's actually 2 versions of it, one in the north, one in the south, but only on the Apennine chain. And in those days of lockdown, we had so much time to sort of wander and read and go down rabbit holes. And that was the starting point. It was the fact that it was endemic that really caught my interest, that it was only found here in Italy. And that just started me on a process of finding out how many other creatures are endemic to Italy. And it was really shocking.

Ed Cutler:

It was just totally - you know, I felt like I knew the country, like so many of us feel that they know Italy from one way or another. But really, it suddenly felt like I actually didn't know anything about the country at all. And I didn't know, why are these species only found here? There was nearly 5,000 endemic faunal species in Italy. I mean, to put that into perspective, in Britain, we've only got - I think you can count them on one or two hands maximum, species that are genuinely endemic. So that started this period of research and writing. And yeah, we were originally going to turn it into a TV series. And so I was in development with a

production company in Bristol for a couple of years to create a a kind of a, you know, an Attenborough-style blue-chip, uh, nature doc. But the finances kind of dried up, and I'd done so much work, and I just thought, I've got to write a book now.

Ed Cutler:

So that's how it is. And that was - that was a couple of years ago, and now here we are.

Katy Clarke:

Well, maybe the book comes first. Beautiful. It's been absolutely beautifully designed, actually, that cover. I love how you've combined your, um, interests in art history and, and nature as well. It's really beautiful. Uh, so this little salamander- this has sparked a whole journey, and it's taken you all over Italy, hasn't it?

Ed Cutler:

Yeah, completely, completely. I mean, there are endemic creatures spread all throughout Italy. You'll find them from the Alps all the way down to Sicily. And actually, it's further south and on the islands that you get the really interesting, unique creatures. I'd like to add that it was an Australian paleontologist, quite a famous guy called Tim Flannery, who really got my interest - he built it up even further. He wrote a beautiful book some years ago called *Europe: The First 100 Million Years*, Tim Flannery, and he's quite well known, I think, in Australia. And he covers the salamander in his book, amongst many other species and stuff. So big shout out to him, and he's written me a really nice blurb on the book as well.

Ed Cutler:

But yeah, it was wonderful. It took me all to lots of places on the map that I hadn't yet filled in, Calabria being one of the most notable, I would say. I was quite well-traveled in Italy already, but I mean, this gave me an excuse to go to some really, really wild spots. And luckily, Italy still has these wilderness areas, these bits which humans have touched but I think what's just amazing is just the fact of having the highest levels of biodiversity in Europe, which Italy does. It contains a third of all the faunal species that exist in Europe, half of all the plant species. This has happened, I mean, it's still got all of that despite centuries, thousands of years of civilization, of clear-cutting the forests, of building roads everywhere and draining the swamps and everything that's happened. In spite of that, it's held on to this remarkable biodiversity, levels of biodiversity which in Britain we could only dream of home, which we're now working - having to work really, really hard to bring back, to actively, you know, bring back nature.

Ed Cutler:

Italy's still got it, and that's thanks to its topography, its landscape.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, I was going to ask why you think it is, because it has its fair share of industrialization, right? Like, it's one of the biggest industrial countries in the world. But I do feel like Italians have a very deep, innate connection to nature that I didn't really appreciate until I started

going there more regularly. And, you know, I have friends that were like, okay, well, let's go up in the mountain, let's go for a walk, let's, you know, get outside into nature. And it was then that I started to really appreciate - yes, they love that country and especially their local countryside.

Ed Cutler:
Definitely.

Katy Clarke:
And maybe it's because of that that they try to preserve it or they're a bit more, you know, aware of what the impact is of large-scale industrialisation.

Ed Cutler:
Yeah, I would agree with that. I think they do have a deep attachment to the land. It's changing, the demographics are changing, and 75% of the population now live in one of the major cities. So the rural areas are declining and emptying of people, but you don't have to go very far back in Italians' history when far more people were much more connected to the land, were working there, were farming. The industrialization of Italy happened fairly late and fairly rapidly. And because of the landscape itself, because of the topography of Italy, there's actually very few places where industrialization can happen, where heavy industry can happen, and where intensive agriculture can happen, for example. So, I mean, that's really just restricted to the Po Valley, of course, and bits of Puglia, and now along the coastal areas that have been drained, but there's not that much. It all gets concentrated into a few areas, I would say.

Katy Clarke:
Yeah, right. So it's really to do with the fact you've got that big mountain range going through the middle, right? So the Apennines that give you that biodiversity.

Ed Cutler:
Yeah.

Katy Clarke:
And most people never go there, right? And that's the crazy thing.

Ed Cutler:
It's such a shame, really, because there's so much. I mean, I know that for visitors coming from afar, from Australia or America, you know, you come to Italy, you obviously, you've got to see Rome, Florence, Venice, Naples. But I don't love mass tourism, I've got to admit. And I think a lot of places - and I've lived in Rome now for sort of 12 years off and on - and, you know, the center of Rome, it becomes quite difficult, becomes really quite choked. And I understand why the pressures - why people want to be there. But I would urge people to discover the interior. The entire Apennine chain is just filled with remarkable places and

towns and landscapes and villages, and you'll find a kind of hospitality. And the tourism needs to be spread out.

Ed Cutler:

At the moment, it's sort of heavily concentrated in a few areas, and people are suffering in those areas, let's say, from the pressures on infrastructure and stuff. And it would be so much better if we could somehow kind of spread the load a bit and get people to think, well, this time I want to go and see Mantua, Padua, I want to go and see Reggio, I want to go and see Gubbio, and all of these remarkable places that you can visit and have a different vision of Italy. And go to Abruzzo, go and see the bears and the wolves and the chamois. You can have one of the best nature holidays ever there.

Katy Clarke:

It's incredible. So, one of my favorite memories is from Tuscany when we took our kids, who were very small, and my husband and I went for a little walk after dinner and it was sunset. And then all these lights started appearing in the bushes. And I was like, oh, that's nice. They put fairy lights in. Then I realized that they were, you know, fireflies. You know, I'd never seen them before because we don't have them here in Australia. And I was like, wow.

Katy Clarke:

This is incredible, you know. It was such a show. I felt like they'd put it on just for me.

Ed Cutler:

They're amazing. I actually wrote an article. I've got a Substack, and I publish things there occasionally about species or landscapes. And I wrote a piece about the lucioles, because this year there was a particularly strong showing of them. I think it was after a wetter winter, they still had moisture down. I mean, the conditions were amazing. We had this light show for weeks. But yeah, you know, that's just sort of - it's one of those memories of youth that I got a lot of comments on the article writing about it, how people remembered them from their youth and they haven't seen them for years because they, you know, live in the city now.

Ed Cutler:

But yeah, exactly. If you're just stuck in those cities, you're not going to - you're going to miss those spectacular moments and seeing the stars, perhaps.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, 100%. Well, one place that shocked me actually was in the Dolomites because it's actually quite heavily built up there, like in terms of villages and things like that. So I was - Going, oh, we're going to be in the mountains, there's going to be all these stars. Because even here in Melbourne where I am, and I live right in the city, like, we've got this magical arrangement here with this, with the Southern Cross, because you can still see the stars even in the middle of the city.

Ed Cutler:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

Not like a massive, you know, like a Milky Way. But yeah, I'm always searching out places where I can go and see the stars. So where would you think the best place is? Obviously not the Dolomites. I was a little bit disappointed.

Ed Cutler:

Well, actually, it's quite interesting. I've been part of this sort of light pollution discussion for a while because it's one of the things that really annoys me. Italy actually suffers from some of the worst light pollution in the world per capita. It's on a sort of par with South Korea or something. So if you look at the night map of Italy, you'll see that the whole of the north of Italy is just lit up like it's a Christmas tree. And actually, there's very few really genuinely dark patches left. I'm pleased to say I live in one of them. The comune of Manciano nearby was declared the darkest sky in Italy a year or two ago.

Ed Cutler:

So we still can see them. And north of us, sort of between Grossetto and Siena, is one of the least populated parts of Italy and Europe, I think, and it's just forest. So there's less light pollution.

Ed Cutler:

The issue really is actually something - it's one of these modern problems which we could solve quite easily. We've got the technology to do it, you know, and especially Italy, which has got a very professional lighting industry, lighting design, and they're like world leaders in this. It wouldn't be hard. And we've even got regional laws saying about light pollution, that your lights, your streetlights, things have to be pointing down. We're about - we're in the middle of the Perseid meteor shower at the moment, and we're going to have an eclipse of the sun, I think, in a couple of days. So it's an amazing time to be watching the heavens if you can. But Italy does have a real lack of genuine dark sky. You know, I look at - the example is New Zealand.

Ed Cutler:

New Zealand's aiming to be an entirely dark sky nation, I believe. That's the objective. which is incredible. The International Dark Sky Association, I've been in touch with them. I know everyone there, but we would love to get a dark sky park initiated here if possible. But the - I mean, again, the places you've got to go are the least inhabited ones. So the interior, Abruzzo, Calabria, in the middle of Sardinia, it's amazing. And here in Maremma.

Ed Cutler:

So that's the place to see the stars.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, absolutely. And there was one part of your book, and you talk about this lake trout that's barely changed for millions of years, and that's in a really interesting part of Abruzzo too. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Ed Cutler:

There's a few examples of this. The one you're thinking of is the Posta Fibreno trout, which is actually - it's on the border of Lazio and Abruzzo in this little lake, and it's a salmonid. And there was a geological event 6 million years ago or so, the Messinian Salinity Crisis, when the entire Mediterranean dried up. Which is amazing. Gibraltar and Africa fused together. It created a barrier. All of the Atlantic waters stopped entering the Mediterranean. And over the course of half a million years or so, the Mediterranean dried up.

Ed Cutler:

So you had the rivers, the Rhône and everything pouring into the Mediterranean basin, huge waterfalls and stuff. Pretty amazing event. But this had a big impact on Italy's freshwater fish, it isolated a lot of the areas, and fish got stuck in one area and then never joined up again with, uh, to rivers and things. So that particular trout was - they did some tests on it, I think, in the '90s, and discovered that it was this part of this ancient lineage of salmonids that was just completely unique. And it's lucky it's in a very beautiful place. It's fed by sort of karst springs from the Apennines. Beautiful, crystal-clear, cold water all summer. It's probably a good place to be right now, actually.

Ed Cutler:

But there's lots of other examples of freshwater fish in Italy's rivers that have remained isolated for extended periods of time and evolved in their own way.

Katy Clarke:

So interesting. And in that area, I know you mentioned, I think it's the Tirino River, which is like the cleanest in Europe. Well, I was putting that on a little list of places that I wanted to go.

Ed Cutler:

Oh, the Tirino, you must go. I mean, it's magical. You can't quite believe what you're seeing, really. Just these sort of - these beautiful crystalline waters. I mean, it's all sort of blues and greens, and you can see right the way down to the bottom. I mean, it's remarkable. You can canoe down it. I did that with my kids some years ago.

Ed Cutler:

Yeah, it's just remarkable. Again, fed by these waters, these karst waters, these that travel underground for years and then emerge there. And it's a very short bit of river. Absolutely to do. If you combine that with the Rocca di Calascio, the beautiful castle at the top that was used in *The Name of the Rose*, and then there's a village called Sextantio, and this incredible

albergo diffuso. So, it's a remarkable area. Unfortunately, the story of the Tirino ends badly. And that's why I use it as this sort of contrast.

Ed Cutler:

Because at the end of the Tirino, then you had this notorious industrial site that in the early 20th century was being used to produce sort of arsenic and chemical weapons, mustard gas and stuff for use in the First World War.

Katy Clarke:

Oh.

Ed Cutler:

Yeah, it was called the Montedison plant. And unfortunately, yeah, the environmental controls and things were not really in place in the early days of heavy industry. And in the early 2000s, it was declared Europe's largest toxic illegal dumping ground. And so unfortunately, the waters of the Tirino end at this disaster, and where then the pollution goes on into the eternal Pescara River. So one of Europe's cleanest rivers. It is said to be the cleanest, least polluted river in Europe ends at one of Europe's worst. So, it's really sad, but this is a sort of story of Italy in many ways.

Katy Clarke:

So, everyone, Ed's book goes through a series of chapters, and it's really like the elements, the chapters of the elements. And so, I guess one of my favourite ones, because I do love a volcano, is around fire.

Ed Cutler:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

You know, it's never difficult to be impressed by the force of nature that is a volcano, but like in Italy, they do have this sense of what nature destroys, it also gives back. And so, can you talk a little bit about the volcanoes of Italy and why they're so important to the landscapes?

Ed Cutler:

I mean, they are crucial for understanding Italy because as a sort of a geological element, I mean, they have created so much of the landscape. And I would argue they gave the Romans, for example, everything they needed to build their civilisation. The building materials, literally the stone, their sources of drinking water, their hot springs. They fed their legends and their myths, and the fertility of the land, of course. I'll give a quick run-through of why there are volcanoes in Italy. The creation of the Apennines is a fairly young mountain chain. They sprung up around 30 million years ago, or started being pushed up when Corsica and Sardinia snapped off France and swung around into position and squashed up against the African plate, and then the Apennines were created. But they were pushed up on one side, and then on the Tyrrhenian side where I am, they stretched open.

Ed Cutler:

So that stretched the mantle, and that created the weak spots where lava was able to emerge and rise to the top. It was a process that started, let's say, about 10 million years ago, the first ones appeared. Earlier ones up here in the Tuscan archipelago, Capraia and others, I live behind, in the shadow of one called Monte Amiata. That's literally our big mountain around us. That fell silent about 600,000 years ago. Most of Italy's volcanoes were really active during the Ice Age in the last 2 million years or so. And so if you'd been able to visit this place during the Ice Age, it would've been, I guess, like Lord of the Rings kind of landscape. Fire and ice and kind of amazing.

Ed Cutler:

So this chain of volcanoes starting from where I am, going all the way down to Rome, down to Naples, and continuing all the way along, you have volcanoes all the way along there. And the ones around Rome, you had 3 to the north of it and one, the Colli Albani, just to the south of it, that just completely remodeled that entire landscape over a few million years. I would say here, I mean, obviously, Etna gets all the press because it's always active and there's lava flows, and it is amazing. And it really, in terms of - I had the pleasure of meeting and talking to some fantastic volcanologists during the writing of it. I really didn't have the knowledge, so I had to go and ask people. And yeah, Etna is the one that - I mean, they all just sort of cloud over and just - they get very kind of emotional talking about Etna in many ways because it is just a remarkable volcano by all standards. But I would argue that again, coming back to your question about places to visit in Italy, then the extinct ones are just as fascinating in my mind. Monte Amiata up here behind me is just amazing.

Ed Cutler:

The villages around it produces the best chestnuts in the world from the forest there. There's one called Roccamonfina, which I went to as research, which is between Rome and Naples. It was a huge volcano. I mean, it was massive, probably the largest of all of Italy's mainland volcanoes. And that fell silent, I think, about 100,000 years ago. I might sometimes get those dates wrong, but it's amazing. And then it preserves this incredible fossil site, which is unique, really. Most volcanoes destroy all evidence of past.

Ed Cutler:

But this one, this - it records these tracks made by ancient humans, 300,000-year-old footprints preserved in this lava rock. It's really startling. I didn't believe - I don't know why, I just didn't believe that it could be true. And I went there and saw it for myself, and it really is footprints, like boot prints in fresh snow. They were the oldest footprints in the world. Until some ones in South Africa were discovered a few years ago. But that's a great site. No one goes there.

Ed Cutler:

Tora e Picilli is the name of the village, and it's really worth a visit. It kind of makes the hairs stand up on the back of your neck. The volcano story is endless, really, for Italy. It's so

important for understanding the nature. I mean, and a bit further south of Roccamonfina, Monte Vulture is the other one I loved in Basilicata. Absolutely beautiful. The Lakes of Monticchio it preserves one of the rarest moths in the entire world there. And also one of the great wines of Italy comes from there.

Ed Cutler:

The Aglianico del Vulture is the Barolo of the south. It's just a fantastic, beautiful place to visit. And there's a natural history museum in this monastery on the side of the crater lakes that is astounding. It's really, really beautiful. So the volcanoes in so many ways are Italy's story, part of its modern story, the creation of Italy. Without them, we wouldn't have all of these incredible benefits that we still get today, the water, the fertility, the energy. And that's, of course, a portion of our energy comes from heat sources deep down close to - and where I am in this Tuscan magmatic province, we've got Larderello, which was the world's first geothermal power station.

Katy Clarke:

Very cool.

Ed Cutler:

Remained the only one for about 40 years. Yeah, it's very cool. So there's a book just about Italy's volcanoes, to be honest. I could have kept on writing about them and what they give us, but it is amazing. And Etna, yeah, go to Etna at least, and Stromboli, and Vulcano in the Aeolian Islands. They're amazing.

Katy Clarke:

They really are. And I think the really great thing about volcanoes is that, you know, as you mentioned, they've got the fertile land, they've made the land so fertile that whatever you grow there is going to be like extra delicious.

Ed Cutler:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

But some of the things - and I guess there's always a strong connection to food wherever you are in Italy, you can't get away from it in any way, shape, or form, which is fantastic. And I think that's why a lot of people like to go. But one of the things that I really love, and I'm a little bit obsessed with actually, is the bitter greens. Yeah, I just love that, and I'm always seeking them out. If they're on the menu, I'm having - I'll have 2. Give me the cicoria now. And is there something around those particular vegetables or - they're not vegetables really. They're officially weeds, aren't they?

Ed Cutler:

Well, yeah. I mean, I think that's really interesting. I think it's actually the flavor of amaro, of bitterness, which is a really interesting subject because apparently throughout the world,

bitterness has been bred out of vegetables, has been sort of taken off the menu in most cases. But Italy preserves that culture of bitterness on the palate. And it is something that you have to train your palate to like. It's not something that children love automatically. It comes with time. And actually, I think our brain is sort of wired to reject things that taste bitter because it sort of associates it with being poisonous.

Ed Cutler:

But in Italy, I think there's a combination. I think when times weren't as plentiful as today, and hunger and starvation did really sort of stalk the land for many, many years. People had to make use of everything that grew here. So really, if you go into our - even our olive grove in the spring, you know, when everything's shooting up, there are so many foods there which we just completely overlook. And I think that those flavors go back a long, long time. I think, you know, you can go back to the monasteries; I'm sure the Romans were foraging and eating most things. I'm sure they had a deep knowledge of them and thought some were better for you than others. I think it goes back - I think the culture of that business goes back a long way.

Ed Cutler:

And certainly, with the distillation of the amaro bitters, the things like Fernet-Branca and the whole galaxy of amaros, which I love, that goes back to the sort of time of the monasteries. That really goes back to the monks in wild mountainous places, distilling the mountain herbs and coming up with these liqueurs, which were obviously beneficial for their health and still are. I think it's a really interesting subject, that, and that food culture. And if you're - next time you're in Rome, the best restaurant in Rome, the only restaurant in Rome in my opinion, is called Piatto Romano. It's in Testaccio, the sort of southern bit of the city. And there you can have the most - I think the best food in Rome now. And they do the foraged herbs, the side dishes, the contorni. It will blow your mind.

Katy Clarke:

I'll see you there. I go there often. That's where I go for my cicoria.

Ed Cutler:

Oh, you know it! Grattaculi and things like that, which means arse scratchers. I think they're the flowers of something else, dandelions or something like that, but I love them. I'm trying to learn more about where I am. I've started eating and picking and foraging and doing little kind of veg salads and things with what I find here, but there's so much more. There's so much that we overlook, that we don't eat anymore, that would have fed and kept people alive for centuries, I think.

Katy Clarke:

I think it's - that's interesting as well when you think about the concept of cucina povera and you do have that cooking from a poor, you know, situation in life. They had to really go and grab everything. And so it forced people to be really inventive, I guess.

Ed Cutler:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

But they also have sweet things in the countryside in Italy. And I was so surprised to learn that figs are native to Italy because I, for some reason, I thought they were from, you know, Persia or, you know, the other side of the Mediterranean.

Ed Cutler:

There is some debate about that. I've got it on pretty good authority from someone I trust that we can be confident to call figs native. I mean, they are native to the Mediterranean. It is possible that they traveled with Phoenicians or other settlers or during Neolithic times, but there seems to be plenty of evidence that figs have been growing here wild for at least 10,000 years or more. So I think it's fair to call them native. They're native to the Mediterranean. They grow everywhere. I've got them now fruiting in my garden.

Ed Cutler:

Now's my moment of figs, and I just love them. I want to grow more of them. But yeah, they've been part of the foraged diet for a long time. And obviously by the time of the Romans, they'd taken on - even the Etruscans kind of held them up as a sort of symbolic of health and fertility and everything. So yeah, they've been part of the culture for thousands of years.

Katy Clarke:

Pomegranates, do they have the same connection, or is that something that's been - I'm asking because I do love a pomegranate.

Ed Cutler:

I love a pomegranate too. I have them and I love them. And, uh, we're usually eating them sort of late September. I think I need to be - I need to check this. I would say that's more North African. I would say it's Mediterranean, but I'm going to have to look, I'm going to have to look that up. I didn't even get to the pomegranates in the book.

Katy Clarke:

I just put you on the spot, but I just love them so much. Like anything with figs and a pomegranate, I'm happy.

Ed Cutler:

Me too. And almonds and pistachios and everything else like that that you get. I just love those combinations.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah. So good. So I'm wondering, um, Ed, you know, like most people are coming to Italy and they, they may not think to go and see some nature first. But if you could pick a few places

where people could go and really experience this side of Italy that will maybe inspire them to go and explore some more, where would you send them?

Ed Cutler:

Well, I think quite an easy first stop could be somewhere like Pescasseroli, which is only about an hour and a half from Rome, deep into Abruzzo. It's a lovely town. It's the sort of heart of the National Park of Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise. It's really well organized for excursions, for tours, for bear watching, for wolf watching, e-bike trips, everything like that. So it's a great - I mean, it's so easy to get to from Rome, and there you'll feel immediately in the sort of the heart of the Apennines, the heart of the sort of wild Italy. So that's a great place to go. I would also say that Calabria, I think, for me, is so wild and beautiful and rugged and amazing. And I think that where Basilicata meets Calabria, there, the Pollino National Park, which is Italy's largest national park, I was blown away by that landscape.

Ed Cutler:

I think that was... I'm dying to go back and explore it some more. There, you've got some of the Europe's oldest trees, the Bosnian pines, and a completely wild landscape, but also one where it hasn't been wrecked by pastoralism or anything like that. There's native cattle breeds there. You get patchworks of forest and open pasture, so you get life in total abundance. So Calabria, absolutely. And then I would also argue Sardinia, away from Cala di Volpe and all the kind of the smart bits where everyone goes on holiday and stuff. But actually, like, the wild west coast of Sardinia is really worth checking out. I found that beautiful.

Ed Cutler:

And the interior. If you're lucky enough to be able to sort of come maybe a bit out of season, maybe May or June, that's the sort of time to see those places. And Abruzzo, I would say. And the flowering, the wildflower meadows in the Maiella National Park in Abruzzo again. Those places I told you, the Tirreno is 100% worth seeing, worth checking out. Yeah, that's just to name a few. And then there's plenty of bits of the Alps. You've got the entirety of the Alps.

Ed Cutler:

And rather than the Dolomites, and that's again, that's suffering from overtourism, particularly in the summer, and the Cinque Terre in Liguria is completely out of control there. There's so many other bits along the Alpine chain where you could go. So Friuli in the Slovenian corner at the far eastern end of that is just so - the Carnic Alps, they're beautiful, much less frequented. Where I was just last week, the Biellese Alps, I loved it. There was no one there. And then of course the Maritime Alps near Cuneo. You've got - you're blessed with so many places you can go, but it is really worth having a bit of courage to say, nah, I'm not going to Venice this time. I'm going to go to Trieste.

Ed Cutler:

And then off into the borders with Slovenia, and there it's completely wild.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, that's a very beautiful area. I really love that too. And it is so great because you can see the whole way that the culture overlays with the nature. So, you're getting everything anyway. Everything's inspired by each other. And up in that area, like, I love going to those towns and everyone's got the winged lion of Venice. But you're still getting a little bit of Venice wherever you go.

Ed Cutler:

And even Sicily as well, you know, Sicily, if you can get it out of season and go to the Egadi Islands or somewhere like that, you know, Pantelleria I found was remarkable. I went there in the height of summer, but I'd love to return slightly out of season. Somewhere like that.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, absolutely. Now, if our listeners can take one thing from your book into their next Italian trip, what would you like them to do? What do you think they should do?

Ed Cutler:

So we've mentioned those places. I would say, yeah, Abruzzo. I would say you can still live with the seasons here, the seasonal rhythms. And so if you find yourself in Italy in the autumn, in October time, which I think is one of the best months, you know, to visit Rome, definitely October is the best month. But it is also the best time to come up here, to come up to Monte Amiata. And you've got the chestnut season. Or go to the Garfagnana Valley in Tuscany and see it in its autumnal splendor and have the best chestnuts in the world roasted for you there, rather than the cheap imports and the street vendors in Rome. Be bold, come in the winter if you like winter sports as well.

Ed Cutler:

But it's also like, for example, I lived in Venice for a year, And there was this brief moment between New Year and Carnevale, the first weeks of January, when suddenly there was no one in Venice. And you could walk out at night, and it was misty and foggy, and suddenly you had the city all to yourself. And so you get these moments when you can actually see Italy in its sort of true colors, and it's stripped of people and stuff. There are just moments in the year when you can really see the true beauty of Italy. I know it's hard to do. People have their holidays when they have their holidays. But, you know, these months of July and August, especially now in the heat wave that we're having, and it's really put so much stress on the landscape, on an already stressed landscape. So I would say be a bit more thoughtful about the timing of your trip to Italy because it is beautiful all of the year.

Ed Cutler:

So don't, don't just think you have to come here in the hottest months of the year.

Katy Clarke:

Yeah, 100%. I think spring's amazing too.

Ed Cutler:

Yeah.

Katy Clarke:

For some reason, the travel is really back-ended into the later months of the year, and in fact, I think September's now like absolute peak season. So yeah, I would really encourage people to have a look at, you know, spring - March, April. April in Sicily is insane, like it's one of the best times to visit.

Ed Cutler:

Agreed.

Katy Clarke:

Wildflowers, energy, so good. And all the festivals that are going on. Some of my favorite times actually have been in Sicily in spring.

Ed Cutler:

Yeah, I completely agree. I've been to Sicily at New Year. You know, I went skiing down Etna and then had vongole on the beach in Catania the same day. You know, you can do these sorts of things. So Sicily, I mean, people go over winter in Sicily, in Palermo. It's beautiful. You can swim there in December. So yeah, that's it really.

Ed Cutler:

Uh, Italy moves with the seasons completely, and summer now is survival mode really. It's just trying to get through it.

Katy Clarke:

So it's a bit sad, isn't it? What I feel like is that nature is so resilient, and I think, you know, that's what you've shown in your book. Like, you know, over many millions and hundreds of thousands of years, somehow the nature is going to survive. We might not, but the nature is going to keep going, so...

Ed Cutler:

Yeah, yeah. The planet will be okay. I think we're just another evolutionary sort of end of the road, I think. But yeah, you're right. There is some resilience built into the Italian landscape, and that is through variety. That is the variety of landscapes, the incredible topography, and that which has birthed all of the amazing foods that we eat, this agrobiodiversity, having these little niches where life can survive. And that's exactly what happened during the Ice Age, you know, over 2 million years while the rest of Europe froze over, much of the faunal life found refuge here in Italy and Spain and Croatia and elsewhere, in Greece. So yeah, I think there is resilience built in here.

Ed Cutler:

Nature will find a way to survive. Yeah, it'd be good if we started trying to help it a bit.

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Katy Clarke:

100% agree. Okay, now Ed, where can people find your book if they want to explore this a bit further? Because actually, I highly recommend it because it goes into a lot of detail. And it's not - I mean this in a very respectful way - it's very easy to read. It's not really an intellectual book, although it is very intellectual and very well researched. But I think it's very accessible for anyone if they, you know, want to find out more about the Italian landscapes and how they've really impacted the way Italy's developed over the years.

Ed Cutler:

Thank you. That was the intention. I wrote, you know, it's a natural history by an art historian and by someone who was learning it all anyway. So I've tried to do it, I've tried to keep that sense, and I didn't want to write a complicated geological explainer or anything. So thank you, that was the intention. It's available for pre-order right now. It's published in English on the 1st of September. It's available for pre-order now.

Ed Cutler:

The Italian edition, Mondadori Edition, is coming out on the 29th of September. They're still getting together the links and stuff for the pre-orders. I'm hoping that's going to be available quite soon. But yeah, you can order it on Amazon or wherever you buy your books.

Katy Clarke:

You mentioned you've got a Substack as well. Do you want to let everyone know where they can find you on there?

Ed Cutler:

Yes, I have a Substack called Endemic Notes and Edward Cutler. You should be able to find me on there. I have a website called edwardcutler.com. And it's got information about the book and my writings and everything there. I'm not very active on social media. I do have an Instagram, which I'd shut down for years, and now I've been urged to reopen it and start broadcasting stuff. But it's not a place I'm comfortable. But yeah, I am also on Instagram: @edwardjamescutler.

Ed Cutler:

And so yeah, you can find all my stuff. There will be an audiobook as well. as me reading the book, if you prefer. If you prefer that. And that's coming out, I think, on publication date as well, 1st of September.

Katy Clarke:

So exciting. I'm really excited for you. It's a really great book, and I hope that, um, people really, you know, get a lot out of it. And I also hope you somehow find a way to do that TV show too, because I think it'd be really great.

Ed Cutler:

Yeah, I mean, that would be - that would feel like completing it now, if, if that's possible. And I think Italy deserves a proper TV series or film that covers its wildlife and landscapes a bit better. So yeah, I hope people find a new side to Italy from that and another reason to love the place. And yeah, and I hope they enjoy the book.

Katy Clarke:

Well, I don't want to be too facetious, but I don't think we need another TV show of some guy driving around Italy tasting all the food because I think we can branch out from there.

Ed Cutler:

I agree. I agree. I think combine the food with nature or, and art and everything like that. You don't want to limit Italy's wonders to one thing or other. They're all connected.

Katy Clarke:

100%. Oh, grazie mille. Thank you so much for sharing your passion for Italy's natural wonders with our audience. And we're wishing you all the very best with the book. And yeah, I hope to see that TV series.

Ed Cutler:

Oh, thank you, Katy. That's really kind. And I'd love to get to Australia and come and do a book tour if possible. So, if any of your listeners have ways to help that happen, then get in touch.

Katy Clarke:

Will do. Thank you.

Ed Cutler:

Thanks.

Katy Clarke:

Wow. What a fantastic look at the Italy that many of us haven't explored yet. And of course, some of the classics like magnificent Mount Etna in Sicily. Thanks to Ed for opening my eyes to even more possibilities across the country. I'm especially interested in taking a swim in the Tirino River when it is clear and clean. What Ed didn't mention is that near the source of the river at Lake Capodacqua, there is a submerged village that was abandoned when the lake was repurposed for irrigation. He says it is one of the most amazing places he has ever dived in. I might just pull out my PADI diving license for that one.

Katy Clarke:

Ed shares many more beautiful and unique places in his book, *This Beautiful Country: How Italy's Nature Shaped Its Culture and Civilization*. It is available for pre-order and published in early September. We will put a link to the book and also Ed's website and fledgling Instagram

account onto our website show notes at untolditaly.com/340 for episode 340. You'll also find all the places that he mentioned today.

Katy Clarke:

Thank you. Grazie mille for joining us today on Untold Italy. I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did, it would be fantastic if you left a rating or review on your favorite podcast app. That helps us reach more Italy-loving travelers just like you. If you enjoyed this video and are watching on YouTube, make sure to subscribe so you don't miss an episode. We drop a new video each week. That's all for today. Next week I'm sharing some important tips for first-time visitors to Italy, but until then, it's ciao for now.