Untold Italy Episode 349: Italy Protests Update - Navigating Demonstrations and Travel Tips for Visitors

Over the past few weeks, there have been protests across Italy and Europe, and I've had a few questions from listeners and clients wondering what the situation is. Let's check in with our team in Italy to see what's happening on the ground.

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:
Buongiorno, benvenuti, friends. 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 taking a look at the protests and demonstrations that have been happening in Italy and Europe, and whether they have the potential to disrupt your travel plans. Today, I have asked our Untold Italy team who live in Italy to give their thoughts on the situation and what that means for travelers. Because when we hear things on the news, it's easy to jump to conclusions about situations that likely need to be considered with a bit more nuance and context. Drama gets clicks and sells papers, unfortunately, so it is in their interest to focus on the less than savory aspects of the protests, which have been, for the most part, peaceful in Italy.

Katy Clarke:
We have had guests and clients in Florence and Rome during protest activity, and we thought it would be useful to report back on the reasons behind the protests, what that means for travellers, and what you can do to prepare yourself if you are in a city where there are protests. Of course, we are talking about Italy on this podcast. I cannot talk to the situation in France or other countries as we do not have that firsthand experience. If you are considering a trip that does involve France, I suggest tuning into Annie Sargent's wonderful podcast, Join Us in France, for the latest updates in that country. I will say that protest and strike activity is an important and regular part of the political discourse in most European countries, including Italy, and it is protected by law. So, by law, you are able to protest. And in Italy, there is usually some sort of industrial action every month, especially around transport, which we cover in much more detail on our website. I'll put a link to that article in the show notes for you.

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Katy Clarke:
So it is a common occurrence, especially in the major urban areas like Rome, Florence, Venice, Milan especially, Turin and Bologna. But I guess what is different this time is that there has been some violence that has been targeted at police officers. So let's have a look at what the law says. Under Article 17 of the Italian Constitution, citizens have the right to assemble peacefully and unarmed. You do not need a permit or prior authorization to gather. If the demonstration is held in a public place such as a street or piazza, the organizers must give at least three days advance notice to the local authorities, specifically the Questura, the police headquarters. Wearing of masks and carrying weapons is not allowed.

Katy Clarke:
So what we know is that genuine protesters follow these requirements, and therefore what we can say is that it's usually a handful of troublemakers on the ground that cause problems or commit violent acts. And that's always the way, isn't it? There's always. just a handful of people that spoil it for everyone. Let's hear from one of our tour hosts, Silvia, who lives in Sicily and has family in Bologna, sharing more on what the protests are about and whether travelers should be concerned.

Silvia Rignanese :
I'm Silvia. I'm leading the tours in Sicily, and it's a gradual beginning, meaning that we arrive at a certain point with the gasoline and diesel price very, very high. It was never that high. It's 2.30 Euros per liter. And this generated truck protests, especially in south of Italy 2 weeks ago. Well, but this is just the iceberg of many other protests that were going on among people. And this leaves the opportunity to all consequences of this protest, meaning that the truck drivers were striking, supermarkets were empty for a while, they were blocking the ports and the big area where the trucks are distributing things. And other people joined through the weeks, through the last 2 weeks, meaning that people that were protesting against the cost of living, the inflation, the fact that the salaries are not adequate to the cost of living, and to the fact that the extreme poverty in Italy is really rising.

Silvia Rignanese :
So the whole thing, as usual, involves also some people that are not there to protest or to get their rights, but to just create chaos or to destroy something. We were told that some teenagers in Milan, in Rome, and in Bologna destroyed shop windows or some trash areas or some cars. For me, I mean, it's obviously that this is not linked to the protests. These people were among the protesters, but it doesn't mean that the protest is a violent protest. And anyway, I would not worry about that because the protests happen in specific places for specific reasons in specific days. There are no more planned protests ahead. And the protest has no goal towards other people or towards tourists at all. The only goal is police for those who think that protesting is basically going against the police.

Silvia Rignanese :
And this has nothing to do with the protest. It's just a bunch of teenagers that are frustrated or violent. So I would not worry at all. They will never come towards you because you're

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clearly not a police officer. So I think this is a side effect of the protests in general. It shouldn't happen. I'm totally against any form of violence, but it happens. I don't think anybody should be concerned of our travelers because they will never be the goal of anything.

Katy Clarke:
Silvia brought up the great point that the tourism industry is to be protected at all costs in Italy. Where it makes up 10% of GDP and employs millions of people. So it's not in their interest to have protests and activity that's going to disrupt people from visiting Italy. Also, it's worth noting that most of the uncivil behavior is directed towards the police, not the general public or tourists. Moving on now to central Italy, where we are going to hear from Sarah, who manages the Untold Italy tour operations, is a tour host, and is also one of our trip planners. Sarah is based in the Umbria region, which is next to Tuscany, where she has lived for many years with her Italian husband, Salvatore, who is from the Campania region in southern Italy. Sarah was actually looking after some guests who were in Florence while the protests took place and has some interesting insights. Back in a flash, right after these messages.

Sarah Marano:
Ciao! I'm Sarah, and I have multiple roles at Untold Italy. My main role is managing all the logistics for the wonderful Untold Italy tours, but I'm also one of their trip consultants and one of their tour hosts. I live in Umbria. I've lived here for more than 20 years. We have an olive farm here, but we also have a chestnut farm in the south of Italy, so we spend a lot of time in both locations. As farmers, we've been following the protests with great interest here because the recent protests, peaceful protests - I hasten to add, in the main cities have all been about the farmers and truckers, lorry drivers, who have been very peacefully protesting about the rising fuel costs and how it's affecting all of our livelihoods. Unfortunately, there has been a bit of bad press in Milan, but the protests and the unrest that made the headlines has not actually been anything to do with what the protests were about and is not typical. And between Salvatore and I, we've been out and about quite a lot in Italy in the last month when the protests have been going on.

Sarah Marano:
Here in Umbria, we are completely untouched. We don't have major cities and we don't have a huge population. We're very sparsely populated. So Umbria is always very peaceful, very quiet, and we have just not been touched at all. So we are very happy to report that. But recently we have had a couple of tours in Tuscany, and they've started and ended in Florence, and I can safely say that we haven't been affected at all, despite the fact that protests have gone on in Florence during that time. It hasn't hindered anybody's experience. As I've said, these protests are peaceful marches, very well managed, and around all the main tourist sites, there's lots of security, so entrance into main sites and museums doesn't get affected.

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Sarah Marano:
We've had various reports from guests who have spent some time in the major cities recently, and all has gone according to plan. Salvatore has just spent last couple of weeks down in the south of Italy and has not seen a single protest or demonstration. And we have been surrounded by farmers down in the south. As Italians, we always get very upset when the press misrepresents what's really going on, on the ground and how one small incident can affect people's perceptions. Katy, you know, I'm a huge fan and ambassador of Umbria, so my advice always is to anybody coming to Italy - protests or not, come to Umbria. We're just very peaceful, quiet, and without the crowds. But seriously, people have been continuing to enjoy Italy in the last month or so without any problem at all.

Katy Clarke:
Sarah takes such good care of our guests. She also acts as the emergency contact for our private tour clients and has fielded a few concerned calls. But as you just heard, there was no disruption to travel plans and everyone had a lovely time exploring Florence. Now on to Northern Italy, where Henna is our team member based in the Liguria region. Henna has some practical tips if you arrive in a city where a protest is taking place and insights into what is happening on the ground.

Henna Garrison:
Hi, it's Henna. I am a tour host and trip consultant with Untold Italy, and I live up in Liguria. Recently, there have been protests around the country, and most of them are reflecting the high cost of living and the inadequate response, let's say, from salary to inflation. So the cost of everyday life is just getting more and more expensive, and what people are earning is not aligning with that increase. And it's been quite challenging. That, along with the rising gas prices, this has really impacted the agricultural sector and truck drivers as well. So these are challenging things for the whole country, but different regions have been reflecting these problems differently. And most of the protests have been peaceful and mostly just demonstrating outside of large public offices or in piazzas in the main cities, but also down south in the southern regions, Sicily, Sardinia, Puglia, there have been roadblocks or that sort of things on streets to protest the high cost of gas.

Henna Garrison:
And I would say, unfortunately, the things that get publicized most are the damage or the violence because that sells headlines. But in reality, things have been quite calm. I would say if you know you are traveling to an area and there are planned protests, I think it's best just to stay out of the big main areas. Sometimes hotels or your hosts can tell you what parts of the town might be targeted, but you can also just see if you're walking that there might be big masses of people, and it's always a good idea to maybe find an alternative route. But in general, it's important these things are being discussed and that especially the younger generation is getting out to explain their frustration with these issues and with what they see for the future. So. I would say happy travels in Italy, and like anywhere in the world, you keep your eyes and ears open and just inform yourself about what's going on where you travel.

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Katy Clarke:
Thanks to the wonderful Untold Italy team for sharing their thoughts. In summary, the protests in Italy are not the same as what has been happening in France, and the reasons for this civil unrest are mainly associated with the high and rising prices of fuel and other goods and services. The protests are concentrated in the major cities, especially in Milan, Rome, Florence, and Turin in the north. Now, we can't predict the future, of course, but as there is a general election happening in Italy next year and the cost of living issues will likely not be solved overnight, there could be more demonstrations. In that case, what should we as travelers do if we arrive in a city where there are demonstrations planned? The first thing I would do is stay in touch with Italian news rather than the big news outlets in English-speaking countries. So most of the major outlets in Italy can be translated, but I like independent online sources Il Post and The Local. We'll put a link to those in the show notes. You can also ask at your hotel or accommodation what the situation is, and also ask if there are any places that you should avoid, such as large piazzas where people gather to demonstrate.

Katy Clarke:
Thanks to Henna for this tip. In Rome, for example, this is Piazza del Popolo, which is near the Villa Borghese Gardens. If you do see a big crowd of people and they are making a lot of noise, they are probably best avoided, just as you would do at home. Please also resist the urge to take any photos and videos. I know it's tempting, but if there are people intent on causing problems, they are usually the kind of people that don't want others having evidence of their behavior. So keep the phone and the cameras away. But remember, Italy is a very safe country to travel in. Tourism is such an important industry to the country, and the main sites and tourist attractions will be protected by very smartly dressed Carabinieri.

Katy Clarke:
Lastly, if in doubt, grab yourself some delicious snacks from the local market or even the supermarket and stay inside and wait it out. They're my best tips. Of course, you could always avoid the big cities altogether and head out into Umbria and have a completely relaxing time in the countryside. What I really want to say is that we need to stay cautious and informed, but at this time I wouldn't change any plans if you were coming to Italy soon or in the coming months based on these incidents. I certainly won't be. And finally, at Untold Italy, we aim to keep you updated as much as possible here on the pod. And of course, if you are a client or tour guest, we are at your disposal for personalized support if you need it. To wrap up, we've mentioned a few websites and resources on this episode, so of course I've put them all on our website show notes as usual at untolditaly.com/349 for episode number 349.

Katy Clarke:
Thank you for joining us today on Untold Italy. I do 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 travellers just like you. That's all for today. Next week we will resume usual programming and head to beautiful Lecce in Puglia. But until then, it's ciao for now.

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