

06 - Italy's Most Exquisite Experiences

Narrator 00:02

From Curtco Media. Coming up on the show...

Maria Shollenbarger 00:07

A fisherman rocks up in his little gozzo and hands over the mussels or hands over the moeche, which are those seasonal softshell crabs, they cook them up for you and you eat them right there on the boat. And the whole time you're being taught about the seasonality of Venetian cuisine and how reliant it is on the health of the lagoon, and you're out in the wilderness that you wouldn't have imagined existed if you spent your whole time in the city and that it's very easy to never know exists.

Bruce Wallin 00:32

That's travel journalist Maria Shollenbarger. I'm Bruce Wallin, and this is Travel That Matters. Hello, everybody, and welcome to Travel That Matters. This is the podcast where we explore the world's most exceptional and meaningful travel experiences. And we meet some of the fascinating people who make them possible. Now, over the past couple years, we've all gained even more of an appreciation for travel. And we've realized how much of a privilege it actually is. I think we've also developed an even greater appreciation for the places we love to travel to. And if there's any place on Earth that's universally loved it is Italy. I've traveled all over the place and people ask me regularly what my favorite country is. And it is really, really hard not to say Italy. It's got everything, the history, the food, the beaches, the mountains, the vineyards. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. But my point is, now that we've had a forced break from Italy, is it time to reconsider our relationship with everybody's favorite country? Are we going to just head straight back to St. Mark's Square or the the Trevi Fountain? Or are we going to do things a little bit differently? Here to offer up her insights on that very subject is someone who's not just one of the world's top travel writers, but a person who currently resides in Italy, speaks fluent Italian, and is absolutely passionate about experiencing all corners of the country at its very best. Her name is Maria Shollenbarger. And whether you recognize that name or not, I can pretty much guarantee you're familiar with her work. Maria has written for pretty much every top travel publication. She was the Editor-at-Large for Conde Nast Traveler, Senior Editor at Travel + Leisure, and she's currently the travel editor and Editor-at-Large for the Financial Times' wonderful weekend supplement, How to Spend It. Maria and I have actually led somewhat parallel lives over the years we grew up in the same era in suburban LA and we had a number of mutual friends. But unlike me, who pretty much stayed in LA, Maria went off and became a true citizen of the world. She's lived in Vermont, New York, Holland, Singapore, Bangkok, the UK. And now she divides her time between London and Rome. We're going to talk to Maria about that. About her international lifestyle, her international work. But most of all, we're gonna pick her brain on Italy and get her selections on the best insider destinations and experiences the country has to offer. But we also want to hear from you. What your favorite places are in Italy and throughout Europe. So stick around after my chat with Maria so we can connect and share some of our personal picks and secret spots. But for now, let's get started with

Maria Shollenbarger. Maria so great to have you on Travel That Matters today. Thank you so much for joining us.

Maria Shollenbarger 03:35

Thank you for having me. It's good to talk to you again after such a long time.

Bruce Wallin 03:39

It has been a long time. We've all been separated and I think to that point we've all had a place that we are dreaming to go and I think for a lot of us that place was Italy. But you, you've been stuck in it this whole time or or you know until very recently where...so where were you dreaming of going?

Maria Shollenbarger 03:57

It was kind of manifold I mean I had a lot of dreams happening because it was as you said a pretty intense I missed the first lockdown in Italy is I think you know Bruce I went back to California actually to be with my family. And then I got back in June of last year and was pretty much there. But I spent a lot of time thinking about Australia. I spent a lot of time there when I lived in Singapore a few years ago. It's also so different to Italy you know Italy is softer light and older places and old stones and Australia is just red Earth and hard light and so I think of it as an elemental nature place. So that was, I thought about it a lot, I in that kind of dream way. I missed certainly the heat but also just those landscapes and those horizons and the nature mostly. And then beyond that, I thought a lot about the places that are kind of conceptually as far away also from Italy. I had just previous to going to California I had just spent three and a half weeks in India with Sujana Luxury, which is the amazing leopard camp Jawai in Pali and they have beautiful camp called Sher Bagh in Ranthambore Park, which was just pinnacle of exoticism in a really old school way for me that idea of First of all, you know, however many acres it is 4000 square kilometers of nature reserve to have that much land with no people in it in India is just beyond imagining. You know, if you've spent time in India you realize it and sort of these falling down temples and habitat, space, wildlife, these signal broad identifying features of travel that are what brought you and I into it as a career, our kind of, those trips are sort of the apotheosis of those things. They're the distillation of them, you know.

Bruce Wallin 05:36

The experiences you've had, I'm sure there's so many, there's no way to kind of narrow them down. But tell me about a couple of the experiences, a few experiences, that just really stand out as shaping who you are and impacting you as a writer.

Maria Shollenbarger 05:50

Definitely Raja Ampat in eastern Indonesia, which I think is a bit more traveled than it was when I was there. I think I was there eight years ago. But this group of islands in far far eastern Indonesia, that includes bits of West Papua, and I was there on a boat, a pinisi boat, which is one of those traditional Bugis pirate tribe boats that's built on the island of Sulawesi, it's a sailing boat. And that was, that was incredibly special, because it was almost this sense of like slipping through a wrench in the space time continuum and kind of riding outside of time because you wake up in the morning, particularly, you know, they'd sail overnight or motor overnight if there was no wind. And we'd drop anchor, and you'd wake up in these lands these just kind of these Jurassic landscapes, you know of Hilux coming out of

the sea and covered in green and nobody around utter stillness. And you had this sense that it could be five years ago it could be 500 years ago it could be 1000 years ago and truly very very little had changed and colors like you could barely believe existed above and below the water because Raja Ampat I think still one of the world's kind of most sought after diving locations. Scuba divers go there.

Bruce Wallin 07:02

Are you a diver?

Maria Shollenbarger 07:03

I was certified in Raja Ampat on that trip. I was fortunate enough to have that which is literally like entering the film Finding Nemo for your PADI certification. It's just unbelievably beautiful.

Bruce Wallin 07:16

It's like learning how to play golf at the you know, Augusta or something like that.

Maria Shollenbarger 07:19

At the Royal and Ancient Yeah. Basically, I was that lucky.

Bruce Wallin 07:23

Okay, another place. Another one that you felt particularly lucky to experience.

Maria Shollenbarger 07:28

I've been to Mozambique twice and both times really found it kind of perspective enlarging and kind of life changing because it the first time I went I mean, Mozambique is a very, very complicated African story. You know, it's, it's incredibly poor. It's incredibly beautiful. It was under Omani sultans in the medieval times, and then the Portuguese came and Vasco da Gama landed on the isle de Mozambique in 1507. And the church there, I think, is the oldest church in the southern hemisphere. But then just it's Africa. It's extraordinary. And in some places you go and you see these sort of lost remnants of who was there before, kind of eaten up by landscape. And then the people, Mozambicans living very, very contemporary lives there. And, you know, there's some really interesting initiatives that were happening on the ground in terms of conservation and philanthropy. But it's also a real crucible, because there's tons of inward investment, particularly from China. It's just a really amazing place because there's ancient ancient ancient culture and kind of timeless wilderness. And then this very contemporary story, this tension that you see playing out almost anywhere you go,

Bruce Wallin 08:35

The timeless wilderness and Africa has me thinking about another extremely otherworldly place or you know, otherness that differentness, what we're talking about is Namibia. Ah, you know, I don't know if you even know this, but that's another story of our parallel lives.

Maria Shollenbarger 08:52

Were we, were we there at the same time, and I didn't know it?

Bruce Wallin 08:55

I think I was at the same place as you but like the day you were arriving, I was leaving. It was Hoanib Skeleton Coast camp, the wilderness, the Wilderness Safaris camp on the Skeleton Coast. I think I was the very first guest there or something. It was, it was brand brand new and that was such an amazing place. It's such a different location I've been on I've been on safari a number of times, but the safari there was just surreal. Like you said, it was just like, it blew your mind. Because it was so different. You felt like you're in the desert somewhere which you which we obviously were, but then there's giraffes and lions and hyenas and everything, and then this fog lined coast with giant elephant seal. It was incredible.

Maria Shollenbarger 09:34

It's just bonkers, isn't it? I mean, there's so many things. I mean, it's weird to start with Namibia. It's kind of it's Mars. First of all, there are moments where you're driving across it and you think, this is just another planet. It's you know, in that way, it's like the salt pans in the in the Kalahari, the Mojave salt pans. There's just there is something planetary if that's lunar Namibia's Martian. And the fact that you see these animals already there, kind of, what are these animals doing here? Like this is so weird. I don't expect them in this landscape which doesn't suggest conventional Africa to me. But then the animals themselves look a bit different because their desert adapted, you know the elephants are taller and skinnier. And I don't know if you felt this at all, but you perceive already when you experience something like the Serengeti or the Okavango Delta, you understand like, wow, nature, you know, the Darwinism of it. But there it seems more pronounced, just like such a hardscrabble life for people for animals because the landscape is so inhospitable.

Bruce Wallin 10:29

Not only has Maria traveled all over the planet, she's also lived for extended periods of time in cities throughout Asia, Europe and the US. Even for a travel writer and editor, she's lived a very international life. I asked Maria, how her itinerant lifestyle came about, and what she loves, and doesn't love about living all over the world.

Maria Shollenbarger 10:51

What I love is again, just being different places, that experience. A few times I was brought, it was circumstances in my life that took me to places as opposed to just my own agency saying, I'm going to up sticks and go live in wherever Rotterdam. You know, I didn't choose Rotterdam, I would, for instance, I lived almost five years in Singapore, it's not a place I would ever have just gone and lived on my own. I pursued a relationship there, I ended up loving being there because it was, first of all it was five degrees above the equator, so it was a totally different just I loved walking out into kind of wet hot air and the sound of insects and being in Southeast Asia as a quick flight from so many places that had a very satisfying degree of like that back of beyondness. And then you get back to Singapore, and it's just tidy and works. And everybody's really civically minded and sort of, there's so much attention to the I mean, they literally have ministries dedicated to the idea of, you know, being nice to your neighbor. I'm being slightly glib, but that is kind of the overall vibe of the city. And conversely, we left Singapore and I lived briefly in Bangkok, before I came back up to Europe, and I thought I was going to love living in Bangkok because Asian city, writ large, so cool. So just, you know, just I always loved spending time in Bangkok, in transit or visiting friends. And living there was setting up a house there kind of sorting my life out there whilst also trying to work and be on the road half the time was a real challenge. And it was

a surprise moment for me because I found I didn't enjoy living there as much as I thought I would, I would have much rather just gone through once a month and really been able to absorb it. Because when you're on your way to try to find fresh basil in a giant city to make pesto or pine nuts, and you have to visit sort of seven different supermarkets. You're not really looking up and going wow, I'm in Bangkok and this is fun. You know?

Bruce 12:38

That's why you moved to Rome. It's the basil and the pine nuts.

Maria Shollenbarger 12:43

It's the god damn basil, totally. No, no, no, but it's, there is something and I wrote a story last year for How to Spend It kind of about what it had been like to go home to California unexpectedly during lockdown and which became sort of a wider meditation on this idea of having lived lots of places and there's a line from it that a friend lovely Rebecca Meisner, who is a traveler with me and she loved it. She wrote it back to me because she said it resonated it transpires there's an occupational hazard of itinerant life. One I wish I could have warned my 20 year old self about, a kind of free floating homesickness. It's the privilege of a lifetime to immerse in parts of the world far away from the one I was born in. But to live in many Elsewheres is to feel slightly displaced everywhere, even the place that's putatively home. So living lots of places, traveling lots of places, is all the benefits, all the things we love about it. And the reasons we do it, it's very present making, it's very mind expanding, it feels wonderful to connect with people who couldn't be more different from you culturally, or don't speak your language. But that that idea of that, but then you also eventually kind of, for me, it's slightly hard to know where home is. I find

Bruce Wallin 13:49

I find that fascinating, but you have many, many, many homes and now home is Rome, Italy. One of my favorite places. It's one of those things I've talked about this before where, you know, part of me wants to go with the whole pandemic, it just made me want to go to all these new destinations, go off the beaten path, so on and so forth. But then another part of me wants to go back to Italy, because I love it and I miss it. And I think there are a lot of people who feel that way right now. You have been there. I want to hear a little bit about what that was like being there during the pandemic. But then I want to get into your thoughts on Italian travel, how we're going to do it differently, you know, what are some of the experiences that we should be seeking out so we'll get to that but tell me tell me first a little bit about what was it like being there during everything.

Maria Shollenbarger 14:31

As people who work in travel and probably a lot of the world knows last summer between pandemic lockdown one and pandemic lockdown two was kind of a beautiful reprieve because things did open back up around mid July and people were able to travel and most importantly, Italians were able to move freely after what was probably a really terrifying time for them for all of us when we didn't really know what COVID was all about. And I arrived back right about this time last year and Italy felt incredible. I have to say it was very, very moving to see Italians out and about and then because I think you do kind of if you spent a lot of time there, and you spend time in a city like Rome or Florence, sections of which entire historic center sections of which have been really given over to tourism and

unfortunately, to a bit of mass tourism. And then of course Venice is the apotheosis of that, where it's even worse. To see these places kind of handed back to the Italians and to see Venetians sitting at Cafe Quadri in the Piazza San Marco with maybe 25 people in a square that has 2000 people ranging across it, and you know, on at 4pm or 5pm on a Friday evening is the last place any self respecting Venetian would have wanted to be, then all of them kind of gathering out in those spaces and reclaiming a bit that was really beautiful. I suppose more obviously, to not have to queue for the Vatican to not have to queue to get into the Galleria Borges a like that was also very amazing. And to be able to walk around Positano, to spend, I did something I haven't done in more than a decade, which was spend three nights on Capri, and walk through the Piazzatta and go hiking up to Tiberius Villa and just having the space to do that and having the reduced tourism. It's that conflict. It was obviously very difficult for people in the industry, but it was also incredibly pleasurable in a way.

Bruce Wallin 16:21

We're gonna take a quick break and we will be right back to hear Maria Shollenbarger's insider tips on Venice, Umbria, Sicily and more.

16:36

[Ad Break]

Bruce Wallin 17:27

Welcome back to my chat with travel editor and Italy expert Maria Shollenbarger. I took a trip to Venice right after the floods a couple years ago. And pretty much everybody else had canceled their trips. And it was incredible to be there when there weren't people, you know, other 1000s of other Americans there. And I just that experience of being there, like you were, and being one of the few Americans that that were there just is kind of the dream of the way we would all love to experience Italy. But we all know that's not going to last right? I mean, and you know, to your point for the better, it's not going to last because the the industry there needs to earn U.S. dollars, they need people to come back and we all want to come back. And people should be able to enjoy the country that way they want to enjoy the country. But I want to know from you as someone who has, you've you've studied in Italy, you live in Italy, you speak Italian, you have traveled and written many, many stories, including a cover story for Travel + Leisure, very recently about about Italy as a destination. Let's talk a little bit about where you think people can get kind of those, those insider experiences that experiences like you were just talking about. But even when all the tourists come back.

Maria Shollenbarger 18:35

Yes, you know, and probably a lot of people who are listening to this conversation know, there are ways to experience even the most ostensive saturated destination, whether that's Venice or Florence or Capri, the right way working with the right people going at the right time of year or even the right time of day and just having access. And that's why I started to make this plug. But I'm a huge believer in working with a very good travel designer or a very good travel operator, because they are the people with the keys to the kingdom and they read you they listen to you and how you want to have your experience and then and then they really work to craft something for you. So I know we've got some specialists in the U.S. I've worked years and years with Emily Fitzroy of Bellini Travel. These are these are people who will find you the versions of the Italy that you want to experience, even though it will

obviously bounce back. And I think it, as you said, it's a destination half the planet dreams of getting back to. That said, to me, it's incumbent on us as travelers to do due diligence and be responsible and apply to a degree even in a place like Italy that's meant to be all romance and gelato and spritzes and wearing fabulous bikinis and bathing suits, you still have to deploy a degree of the responsibility of the attention to ideas about regeneration, about sustainability, to travel in that country that you would in a place like Argentina or Africa because it matters you know, these are landscapes that matter. There are cultures that matter and not everything is UNESCO protected. So it's important to know where your dollar is going. There are these amazing guys in Venice who have this boat called Edipo Re, which means Oedipus the King. And it's this really, really beautiful boat that was sort of mid 20th century fishing boat that was owned at one point by Pier Paolo Pasolini, the film director, who kind of upcycled it and added cabins and made it kind of a chic sailing boat. And it was acquired by the father of one of the women in this couple who own it now. And they had a really, really brilliant idea to, they built a really beautiful open galley kitchen, on the deck, and they're very dialed in to the food scene in Venice. And they care a great deal about the health of Venice and about the health of the lagoon, you will probably as a participant in and a follower of our industry, you will have seen that there is a lot of attention around the Venetian Lagoon right now and its health. And it's a real forcing ground for mass tourism, mostly in the form of cruise ships, right. So this is literally the end, there is no more antithetical proposition to a cruise ship than Edipo Re. Because it can hold a maximum of about 12 people. What they do is they plot these lagoon cruises where they take you way, way out into the far islands or way, way down along the coast of Palestrina. And they bring chefs from the top restaurants in Venice, they bring people from Ali Pistare, or from Al Covo, or from Antiche Carampane, you know, sous chefs or executive chefs who shop locally, who stop up, you know, a fisherman rocks up and his little gozzo so and hands over the mussels or hands over the moeche, which are those seasonal softshell crabs, you they cook them up for you and you eat them right there on the boat. And the whole time you're being taught about the seasonality of Venetian cuisine and how reliant it is on the health of the lagoon, and you're out in the wilderness that you wouldn't have imagined existed if you spent your whole time in the city and that it's very easy to never know exists if you don't do the research and hear about things like this.

[Bruce Wallin 22:04](#)

Maria's experience on the Venice Lagoon brings up one of the great things about her. She knows the right people, the people who can make these magical experiences come to life. Now, one of her best connections is in a place where connections mean everything. And that's the Italian island of Sicily.

[Maria Shollenbarger 22:25](#)

The Tasca d'Almerita family in Sicily, you know, Alberto Tasca, they I mean, they're a big wine making family and Alberto took it over from his father. He's just been instrumental in putting, I mean, not just Sicilian wines, but Sicily as a place as a culture, back on the map with a whole new generation of people. They have an estate in the middle of the island called Regaleali, which is traditionally where they've produced their kind of multi-award winning wines. But they also have vineyards on the slopes of Mount Etna. They have vineyards on a beautiful island called Salina, which is one of the Aeolian Islands at an estate called Capofaro. And they grow vines on the other end of Sicily, on the far western most point of Sicily, there's a tiny island called Matsuya, which was a Phoenician stronghold, however, many 1000s of years ago, and they grow vines there and make wine there. And they've developed a

whole series of really, really small scale, intimate educational tourism experiences that you can have there, visitor experiences, I mean, you can stay at Regaleai which is absolutely beautiful. And they'll put you on the back of a horse or on a mountain bike or in the back of a Land Cruiser. And you drive you know, it's kind of 1000 hectares or something and they don't just have vines, they've got animals that they raise sustainably, they grow wheat, they grow kind of micro local grains and wheat that were brought over 1000 years ago from North Africa, they're some of the only people who still cultivate this. They will teach you all sorts of things about sustainable agriculture as it's been practiced there since time out of mind and then of course you go back to their beautiful castle it's kind of a fortified palace Regaleali and you eat exquisite food and you can spend the evening talking to them about what they do.

Bruce Wallin 24:07

So first of all, let me just say with all the all these names you're throwing out for the listeners, we will put all this in the show notes you don't have to try to figure out how to spell all these Italian names. What is it, like how many people are we talking about with your you're staying with them and interacting with them on this vineyard? How many guests at a time?

Maria Shollenbarger 24:24

Well Regaleali, you can take it over. I mean you or you can just stay there's there's several guests rooms but no these are they have a hotel actually a very beautiful resort on Salina the Aeolian Island at Capofaro. It's called Capofaro. I think there's 22 rooms, something like this.

Bruce Wallin 24:41

I've seen photos of that place and it's stunning. The photos are striking.

Maria Shollenbarger 24:45

It's very special. They have absolutely beautiful kitchen gardens that are 100% organic. They're very forward thinking and I should also mention, Alberto Tasca developed sustainable horizontal protocols for wine production. For tending vineyards, wine production, I mean all the way across from like which architects you hire to build your winery to who sources the glass and cork for your bottles. And it's been adopted by about I think 35 very, very important wineries up and down the Italian peninsula. So that that ethos kind of informs everything they do. They don't want you to just come and sit by the pool. They want you to come and explore Salina and they'll send somebody out with you to help you do that. They want to teach you about capers, which grow on the island and you can literally, the chef will get really, really excited about parsing capers and all the different things you can do with them and their cultural meaning and just they've thought very carefully about how to deepen the experience in every facet of it.

Bruce Wallin 25:43

Okay, so you've taken us on a wonderful wine journey in Sicily, a place I have not been and that's I all my Italian friends tell me I have to go to Sicily, which is high on my list, a wine journey in Sicily, a beautiful cruise in Venice. We've got a good good itinerary going so far. Where else do you take us?

Maria Shollenbarger 26:00

I would say if you want to get a taste of a very different countryside experience in central Italy, Tucsia is a very, Tucsia, you would say, is which is the North Western bit of sort of the Northern Northwestern bit of Lazio, which is the region that Rome is in the capital of and it borders Umbria and it borders Tuscany, but it's not really like either. I mean it's a bit like the Australia California thing. You'll see shades of Umbria or Tuscany in certain parts of Tucsia, but it's kind of shaggier, its wilder, it was a massive, a Etruscan stronghold, kind of home of the Etruscans. And also then 1500, 2000 years later of the Farnese a family, which is full of princes and Pope's, and sort of had primacy over that whole central section of Italy. And so there's incredible fortresses, incredible palaces and castles, and most importantly, world famous gardens at some of these castles and palaces and villas. It's a very different take on that Italian countryside experience. It's both way more low fidelity, and way more sophisticated.

Bruce Wallin 27:06

Now, is this near Abruzzo, that that kind of region there. It sounds very similar to me in that kind of unexpected Italy.

Maria Shollenbarger 27:14

I've not been to Abruzzo I'm slightly embarrassed to say, but I cannot wait to get there. And I know that, that is a very, very kind of austere landscape up there very unexpected for Italy as far as what we, you know, our received Italian tropes are looks very no cypress trees, no pretty villas or hill towns, its mountains and kind of almost Alpine or high plains.

Bruce Wallin 27:35

Wolves and bears there. I mean, again, the unexpected. You don't think about wolves when you think about Italy? Oh, I guess you do if you live in Rome, but not living actual, not actual living wolves. And in these mountains, there are large wolf populations, bears. That combination again, is just unmatched.

Maria Shollenbarger 27:54

Yep.

Bruce Wallin 27:55

Are there are there any other kind of regions, experiences, that you think are, you know, overlooked by most Americans and deserve our attention?

Maria Shollenbarger 28:03

I would say that is starting to get quite a bit of play in the press and on social media, because in large part of I mean, a lot of people knew about it before but because in large part of a very lovely hotel that has been acquired by Marie-Louise Scio who has the Pellicano in Tuscany, and that's Ischia, and the hotel is the Mezzatorre, which she took over two years ago, right before COVID. Unfortunately for her, had one season, but then it has it reopened last summer, and it's just opened again about a month ago. And it's a very, very beautiful property on set on its own kind of private promontory on the island of Ischia, which is in the gulf of Naples only a couple of miles from Capri. It's much larger than Capri, it's got five discreet comune, they're called towns, little regions on it, very beautiful beaches. It has a beautiful mountainous interior with lots of really, really nice hikes actually, which is something different for that region. And its own kind of lovely cuisine, which is not fancy but which is fresh out of the sea

and delicious. If I were coming to Italy, I would consider trying Ischia over one of the other islands, actually.

Bruce Wallin 29:13

Another island I have to add to my list here. Ischia, Sicily. Okay, where are we going next? Are we, are there any other hotels that you're particularly excited about right now in Italy, new or otherwise?

Maria Shollenbarger 29:24

I don't think we can have this conversation without talking about Reschio, which is the very, very beautiful estate in the center of Umbria owned by Benedikt Bolza and Nencia Corsini. And they he they they've taken it over from Benedikt's father, Antonio Bolza, who acquired a house in this very, very quite wild, central area of Umbria that's very woodsy, and kind of hilly, bordering on mountainous north of Perugia. And over the years, he sort of accreted bits of this estate, whose centerpiece is this very beautiful castle whose foundations date back sort of 1100 years called castelo di Reschio. And about three years ago, they realized that they needed to expand the experience of rescue so other people could enjoy it. And they decided to turn the castle into a hotel. And they spent three years really carefully renovating it. Benedikt is an architect of very talented architect and also designs furniture and works in interiors. And it opened in May, I was lucky enough to be invited for a special preview last autumn. And a small group of us went up and met some friends in Florence and spent a long weekend there. And it is very, very spectacularly beautiful, I have to say, I mean, it's hugely luxurious without being even slightly vulgar. It's extremely tasteful. As a matter of fact, the rooms are huge. The design is impeccable, the food was really really exquisite. They have quite a bit of bore and roe deer on the estate, which are sustainably hunted. Because the populations need to be taken care of. And the chef does extraordinary things. They have massive, massive organic gardens that Nencia takes care of Benedikt has worked very hard to reintroduce some of the indigenous vegetation and to sort of landscape in a very, very responsible way. I mean, if you want to go and just stay in the most gorgeous room you can imagine and lie by the very, very beautiful elliptical infinity pool with to die for views and just eat really gorgeous food, you can do that. But if you're even remotely curious about what it's like to run an estate sustainably in the year 2021, they are right there to put you in the Landcruiser with the dogs and take you out and talk you through it.

Bruce Wallin 31:40

and go find a bore that they will do amazing things with. So Italians really know how to do wonderful things with bore, that's for sure.

Maria Shollenbarger 31:48

With apologies to the vegans who might be listening.

Bruce Wallin 31:51

but that is something I'd like to eat. What else, what do you got for us?

Maria Shollenbarger 31:56

I mean, these are sort of up and coming things. There's a lot of activity and Puglia. My understanding is Four Seasons is opening up in Puglia. A lot of people are going down, I would say the thing I'm most

excited about actually just personally when I'm able to get on a British Airways flight and get back down there at some point in my I hope imminent future. Rocco Forte, who I really rate in general for making very, very sleek, comfortable well run hotels anywhere in the world he does them. I really think he does a good job. He was brave enough to take over a hotel in Palermo, which is Sicily's capital I think you probably know called the Villa Igiea, which has a really long history of belonged to the Floreo family. It was built by the man who is probably still considered Sicily's preeminent architect. He was late 19th, early 20th century, but he has yet to be bested. It's a massive, beautiful kind of Neo Gothic pink folly at the edge of the seashell of Palermo's Bay, and it's very, very special. And it was a place that was incredibly atmospheric and evocative, but had kind of been let down a little bit, you know, by the whoever was managing it before it just it wasn't particularly elegant, the grounds were beautiful, the building was beautiful, but the rooms were a bit meh, and he's put a massive investment into it. And it is I saw it when it was coming together in May wasn't quite finished, but it's I think it's gonna blow a lot of things, frankly, in Italy away when it's done when it switches right about now, actually, I think it's open.

Bruce Wallin 33:25

I've heard great things about Rocco Forte's new hotel in Rome. Or the one I believe it up and right before everything happened, I'm sure you've you've seen that, but they do they they have some very special properties in Italy.

Maria Shollenbarger 33:37

They do.

Bruce Wallin 33:38

Well, however we go back to Italy, I personally can't wait. And I truly hope that you are there when I when I do come back. So I hope to see you there next time we see each other for now. Thank you so much for joining us on Travel That Matters.

Maria Shollenbarger 33:52

Thank you, Bruce, it was lovely talking to you.

Narrator: 33:57

And now for the Wallin wrap up.

Bruce Wallin 33:59

If you've listened this far into the program, my guess is that you immediately want to start Googling all these incredible destinations and experiences that Maria brought up. So I'm going to keep this wrap up brief. Now, Maria is a true expert on Italy. But we want to hear from you. As I was talking to her about all these places and experiences, it made me want more, more ideas traveling through Europe in the post-pandemic era, how to do it in a way that's more meaningful and fulfilling. And I know that the listeners of this show are experts as well. So we want you to share that expertise with us. What are your favorite destinations or secret spots in Italy and beyond Spain, Austria, Romania, wherever it is that you found that special place or experience that's, you know, maybe not so well known or even undiscovered? You can send me an email or even an audio file to Bruce@curtco.com. That's

Bruce@curtco.com. Or hit us up on Twitter, @TravelwithBruce. However you do it, we would love to hear your thoughts on the absolute best of Europe. We'd like to thank Maria Shollenbarger for joining us today on Travel That Matters, check out our show notes or visit Curtco.com for more information and links on all the places we discussed today. This show was produced for Curtco Media by AJ Moseley and Darra Stone. Music by Joey Salvia. I'm Bruce Wallin and we'll see down the road.

Narrator 35:36

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