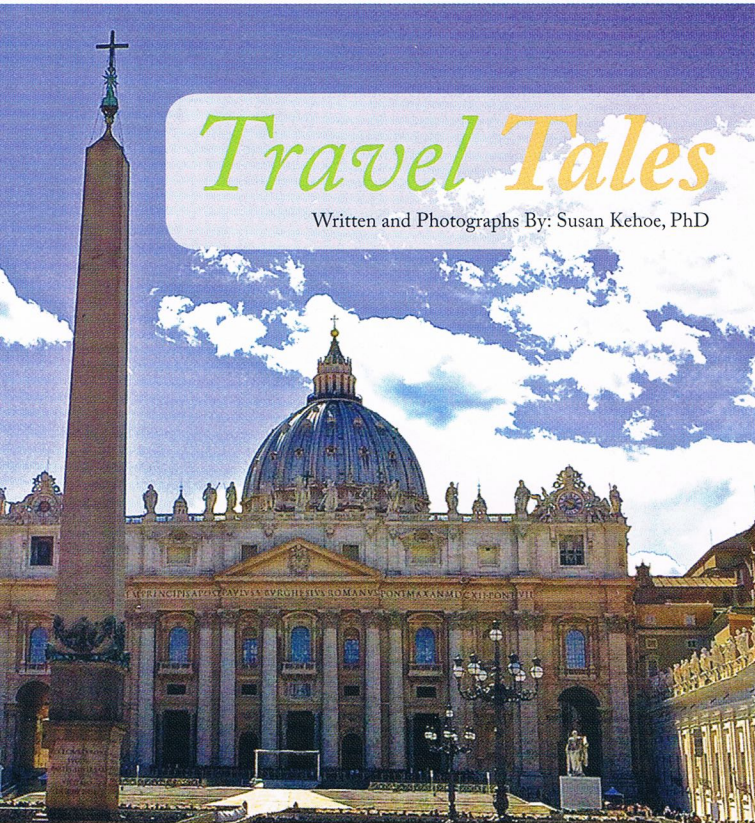
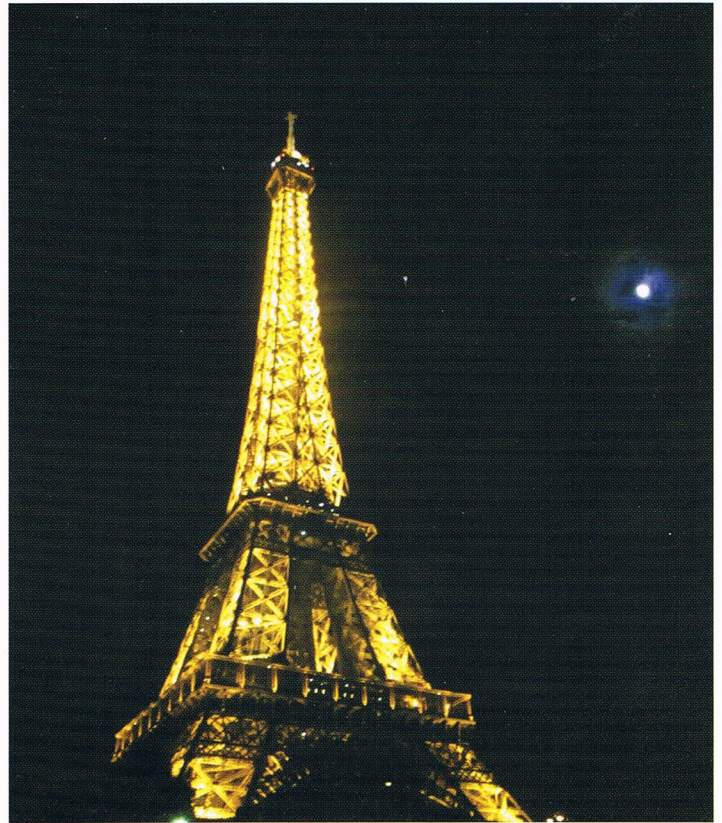


## Travel Tales

Written and Photographs By: Susan Kehoe, PhD



St. Peter's Square in Rome.



The Eiffel Tower seen from the Seine River in Paris.

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### Revisiting European Capitals

A few months ago a friend asked, "Where are you going on your next trip?" When I replied, "The old capitals of Europe – London, Paris, and Rome," I heard disappointment in the response: "Why are you going there? Haven't you see it all before?" It occurs to me that I am not a "been-there, seen-that" traveler. In the decades I've been traveling, I don't make a check in the box, consider it done and move on to the next popular venue. There are places that need to be explored and experienced over and over, from different vantage points in one's life. As often as I have visited these three cities, the stories are different each time. I will share just a few.

Our favorite story in London has to do with a chance dinner at a local 12-seat Italian Restaurant. Michael, my fiancé, made friends with the owner, Silva. He was a man of similar age and Italian descent, and soon they were doing shots of lemoncello together. Discussing our extended itinerary to Paris and Rome, Silva suddenly asked if we would be in Rome the following Wednesday. In fact, we were. Next he asked if we would like an audience with the Pope. An audience with the Pope?! Of course we would. But we couldn't decipher the connection between Pope Francis and this local restaurant in Kensington. When I related the story to my twenty-something tour guide that night, she patted me on the shoulder and replied with a bit of condescension, "Let me know how that works out for you."





Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace in London.



Winding staircase in the Vatican Museum in Rome.

We returned the next evening, both in search of good food (London has never been a culinary destination for us) and more information on how to meet the Pope. It seems Silva's wife, in Rome, could arranged such things. We were skeptical, Silva was sincere, and we pursued the possibility as if we were gamblers playing the lottery. Throughout our time in Paris we communicated in language-challenged phone calls and emails. But late Tuesday, a paper was clandestinely slipped under our hotel room door in Rome; it conveyed instructions for an audience the next day. This paper cleared us through the Swiss Guards, who sent us to another checkpoint, from which we were sent to wait outside of a "secret door." About then I began to wonder if we'd fallen into a Da Vinci Code-type Dan Brown novel when a diminutive nun appeared with the coveted orange tickets in hand. A "runner nun" guided us through a maze of twists and turns where one could easily expect to find skeletal remains in a corner. But this was real and there is a happy ending to the story. We were enthralled to see Pope Francis and receive his blessing (even though I had to make my Hermes neck scarf into a babushka.) With our journey completed, the only thing left was to send flowers to Silva and his wife in thanks —oh, and to email the tour guide back in Paris to "tell her how that worked out for us."

In Paris our tour itinerary included a destination that may have seemed clichéd to me at another time, but it was romantic and memorable this time; we enjoyed a sunset dinner on



Susan and Michael in front of the Inverted Triangle at the Louvre Museum in Paris, with the Apple store looming in the background.

the top floor of the Eiffel Tower. The restaurant was pleasantly smaller than anticipated and the convivial wait staff created an air of intimacy for our private affair. In this case, France is a culinary destination, such that the food, even at this well-visited tourist attraction, is *très magnifique*.

We had an unexpected shopping excursion at the Carrousel de Louvre. The Carrousel is an underground shopping collection containing about 35 stores, as well as a convenient entry into the Louvre Museum. At its center is the striking inverted pyramid that can function as a skylight for the 11,000-square foot area. Remarkably, we found the world's largest Apple store peeking out from behind the pyramid. Desperately in need of a charging cord for the converter, we were happy to come across it. When I handed my credit card to the clerk he instantly pulled up my name and asked in heavily accented English, "How do you like your new iMac, Susan?" Apparently my entire buying history with Apple is stuffed into the handheld devices of their workers all over the world. I am constantly mystified by Apple genius, especially since it's almost impossible to exchange a towel in a department store the day after purchase without a paper receipt.

The last story is about attending Mass at St. Peter's Basilica. While marveling at the majestic interior and debating the merits of climbing to the top of the famous dome, we discovered that a Mass would begin in a few minutes. By the time we found the location,

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(under the same dome we had pondered climbing) the pews were full and guards had installed barricades to prevent further participation. Sizing up the opportunity, I pushed to the front of the crowd and asked if I could attend the Mass. The guard considered me carefully and asked “How many?” I held up two fingers and gave him my best “pretend I’m your mother” look, and miraculously the sea parted! As we scurried in and found a spot, the Gregorian chant began to echo throughout the space, enhancing the hallowed atmosphere. Soon an entrance procession crossed the considerable distance from the sacristy to the altar. We watched as 64 cardinals, bishops, and priests processed in front of us in full regalia. The sea of red, though familiar with much smaller ceremonies, captivated Michael. Fresh from the Buckingham Palace ritual he leaned over to me and whispered, “That’s the Catholic Changing of the Guard.”

There are so many more stories ranging from the banal to the sublime. Revisiting these capitals reminds me of a Martin Buber quote, “All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.” So I encourage everyone to return to your favorite countries, search out the unexpected avenues, and view the experience from your present-day perspective. It is reaffirming to savor the same places from various points in your life.



Helical staircase curling down from the street level of the Louvre Museum in Paris.

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