

My Travel Journal

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Sunday December 16, 2018

Hello RomeHello

The light from my plane window is blinding. If I open the shade a bit and squint I can see fluffy white clouds and a baby blue sky.

It has always been on my bucket list to get on a plane, have a meal on the plane, and then arrive in a different country. Today I am 2 meals in on a flight to Rome, Italy and awaiting landing. The meals themselves, cheesy pasta, veggies, and fruit and then a mini roasted veggie sandwich with fruit, were served in little cardboard boxes 35,000 feet in the air. In the distance, mountain peaks break through the clouds to wave a welcome.

The mission of this journey is to follow the footsteps of my great grandmother, Sybil, who traveled to Rome in 1972 for her second marriage. By the time of her second marriage, Sybil's children were adults. Instead, I travel years earlier at the young age of 21. I try to picture what Sybil's life was like at 21, in 1942. She had recently given birth and worked as a teacher for the duration of the war. If Sybil had traveled to Rome in 1942, the landscape would have appeared tremendously different as Italy was in war. She would have to wait thirty years before Rome was ready for her.

I took a cab from the Fiumicino Airport, just as my great grandmother did, to my hostel. The cab driver spoke very little English. When he asked me where I was from I told him Tennessee, to which he replied, “Ah! Jack Daniels!”

The drive itself was beautiful. Mixtures of different centuries coexisting in one city are a marvel to witness. Echoes of the Thirty Glorious Years, funky buildings and a large Fiat statue are coated with dust, lying next to aqueducts built eras ago. Churches mingle around with shops and restaurants; many covered in graffiti that is art itself. Rome is covered in history. In the same spot where Roman giants set their stage, also are the same spots as fascism, Nazi occupation, and then the Glorious Years to continue Italy's place on the world stage. Today Italians mingle around as they have been for centuries: older women in large coats and modest heels, their heads covered in a beautiful scarf while they shuffle across the street, the middle-aged man out on the corner smoking a cigarette, a beer belly covered by a black turtle neck, the busy waiter running back and forth, having no time to listen to my broken Italian. Rome is intimidating but by far worth it so far.

A few things I first noticed: as an American in our current political climate, the sight of assault rifles can be troubling. In Rome, camouflage wearing guards hugging large assault rifles to their chests are not as uncommon as one may think. Every major bank, embassy, and major tourist attraction are never missing a heavily armed guard. At first this caught me on edge. I tried to smile to one of the guards who just frowned back

with a serious glare. From then on I ignored them, passing by with my eyes on the ground in front of me or on the beautiful architecture of Roman buildings.

My last name, Giordano, was noticed at once for being an Italian name everywhere it was checked. My lack of the Italian language marked me a tourist. However, wandering the streets of Rome only allows for face value to be judged by strangers. I personally inherited my mother and grandfather's Italian complexion of tan skin and black hair. Although living in Ohio has made me a tad paler, I still passed unnoticed as a tourist to some. People in the streets who make a living flagging down tourists to sell things avoided me for the most part, save for major tourist areas, in which almost everyone is stopped.

The easiest way to let someone know you speak English is to start your conversation with "hello" or "hi" instead of "ciao". If that person knows English they quickly switch to accommodate the situation. Those who do not speak English stare wildly and try to endure a confusing match of broken communication.

The biggest challenge for me traveling to a different country is that I travel alone. Even Sybil, who flew alone, met family here in Rome. Instead, the steps I take are completely solo, and I can't help but think of the many women who were not able to accomplish even this much due to restrictions of the time. As a young, female traveler I am an anomaly. More so, my actions mark the changing of times. The evolution of gender equality has paved the way for me to be here today, making my own history by walking alone.

I received a free drink for staying at the Rome Hello hostel, which is beautiful and in a great location. After redeeming my drink I ordered my first meal in the hostel bar. At

first the waiter misheard me and brought me a bacon cheeseburger. As a pescatarian, (a vegetarian that eats fish only) I looked in horror at the pile of meat on my plate and frantically flagged down the waiter again, pointing to what I thought I had ordered originally, a veggie burger. I think the waiter asked if I wanted to take the other burger with me but not understanding him I just replied, “I can’t”. I’m now thinking ordering food will be my hardest task here. Although it was nothing close to a real Italian dish, a veggie burger with roasted squash and zucchini and Brie cheese was dangerously delicious.

My hostel is beautiful. Gorgeous local artist designed murals that almost look like graffiti adorn every wall on the ground floor. They are beautiful and youthful. I share a room with 3 others, however I have not yet met them. Happy to say I got the bottom bunk! I’m going to turn in early tonight due to a cloud of jet lag pulling me towards my new bed for the next 4 days. Goodnight.

Monday December 17, 2018

Stranger in a Strange Land

Breakfast at the hostel costs seven Euros and is worth every cent. Eggs, cheeses, meats, pastries, cakes, and more are set out every morning for diners to enjoy. I really could not ask for a better place to stay.

I started my day early, walking towards Via Sistina. As she put it herself, “we walked all over Rome, Via Sistina, Frattina, Condotti, Gregoriana, Corso, Margutta,

Tritone...” Starting on Via Sistina I made my way to the Spanish Steps. The steps themselves were for the most part deserted. Starting your journey early has its advantages. Thanks jet lag.

Next I walked down Via Gregoriana. Most shops were just starting to open. Buying souvenirs proves to be easy, as most souvenir shops are used to tourists. Buying food in a restaurant still stands as the hardest thing for me to do.

I made my way to possibly Rome’s most iconic tourist destination, the Trevi Fountain. Although it was still pretty early in the day, the Trevi Fountain is littered with tourists. I noticed that no one was tossing coins into the pool of water so I did not get the chance. Also, workers were busy cleaning and assisting to the fountain so getting to the fountain edge was not possible. I still took a picture from the same angle as my great grandmother did in 1972, after getting married in the Vatican. I bought some gifts for my family in a shop near the fountain and slipped into the church nearby the fountain. The church is called Santi Vincenzo e Anastasio a Trevi and it is a baroque church covered in beautiful but aged religious artwork. The church was a perfect place to stop for a break. Angelic songs sung by choirs played over a speaker as tourists wandered to a fro. I even spotted a nun behind the alter, busy ironing white fabric. It was then that I realized I knew more about the customs of the church than I did Italy. Due to my Catholic upbringing I operated through the church like a true pro, genuflecting, kneeling, even giving an offering and lighting a candle. I even noticed which tourists did not know church customs, as they kept hats on, spoke loudly, and lit candles freely. It was an odd feeling but I’m very thankful for the church as it offered me the break I needed.

Next stop gelato. My first taste of Italian gelato was the tourist friendly gelato shop across the street from both the church and the Trevi Fountain. The gelato shop workers were very helpful. As most tourists in this area were Asian, the workers waved and said “Ni Hao!”. I snuck in behind a large group, paid, and picked up a single cup of tiramisu flavored gelato. I ate my gelato while gazing out on the Trevi Fountain. The attraction was soon flooded with people, all happily taking pictures and enjoying their day. It was beautiful but my feet were starting to hurt so I said goodbye to the Fountain and left.

While wandering back to my hostel, I randomly found a small museum. I popped in to find it was a printmaking museum. As my grandmother apprenticed as a printmaker and my current roommate at school actively studies printmaking, I thought it was a happy coincidence. I snapped a couple pics to share with them both.

While making my way back, I stopped into a small market. I highly recommend any traveller stop in one of these markets as they are easy to navigate and paying is as easy as checking the cash register amount display. If there isn't one, cashiers are quick to either hand you the receipt or hold up with fingers the amount.

I was happy to find an abundance of salmon in these markets. Smoked salmon, or the kind you often find on bagels, are everywhere and I love it! Salmon has always been one of my favorite foods, especially raw or smoked. I bought a salmon and cream cheese sandwich, a large bottle of water, and made my way back to the hostel. Walking the streets of Rome, my mind wanders to my great grandmother. She loved Rome. She traveled here several times and spent many hours on these same streets. My great grandmother was a kind and loving person who appreciated everyone she met. I can

imagine her walking down these same streets now, greeting every local with her best Italian, fitting in perfectly into the Roman landscape.

After a much needed nap I decided to take the subway to the Colosseum. I was very nervous about using the subway as we do not have one in Nashville or in Wooster. Although I have ridden the subway in New York a handful of times, the concept is relatively unfamiliar. Travelers take note: the subway system is simple. Being the nervous person I am, I worried greatly and researched the dos and don'ts of the subway system in Rome. I even stopped by the front desk of my hostel for tips. What I found was an easy to understand machine that dispenses tickets and a simple gate which sucks in and spits out your ticket. There are only three tracks in the Rome subway system and getting from one side of the track to the other is as simple as following signs that lead underneath. The first subway I took was nice and clean and I even spotted a violinist playing a Christmas tune.

The Colosseum is two stops away from the Terminal and as soon as I stepped outside the metro building I was greeted with the famous Colosseum. This large structure was built around 70-80 CE and featured animal and gladiator fights as entertainment. How happy I am that this tradition only lasted a few centuries. I did not go inside the Colosseum as I did not have a ticket and did not want to wait in the line but I did walk around the complete exterior. Luckily there are informational signs littered around the structure to provide a quick history.

Standing outside the Colosseum I want to shut my eyes and imagine the roaring of animals, the shouts from crowds, and maybe even the clash of metal on metal. It's surreal, standing in front of a structure with such a rich history.

As I made my walk around the Colosseum, I noticed a group of people followed by many cameras. The group in question were a few older Asian women, an older man, and a few young adults. They casually joked and posed for pictures like any other tourist, except for the whopping nine cameras that followed their every movement. Soon a crowd of tourists surrounded the cameramen to watch the group. I will have to find out later who they were.

With a back as bad as mine, it was only a matter of time walking on cobblestone became a problem. After my Colosseum walk I returned to the subway and made my way back to my hostel, picking up presents for friends and family on the way back.

For dinner I walked down the street and found a decent restaurant. I had read before how restaurants with doormen are typically not the best, however, the doorman spoke English so that was enough to get me in the door. The doorman was so nice he offered me a free glass of champagne! What a way to start a dinner! I ordered gnocci with mussels and left in satisfied stupor. On my way back to my hostel I stopped by a bakery and picked up a few small pastries. With a full first day of Rome under my belt, I fell asleep happily.

Tuesday December 18, 2018

“If you’re going to be a Catholic, be a good Catholic” –Sybil Morris

My body is finally adapting to the time difference. I slept in to a normal time and enjoyed breakfast once again at my hostel. As soon as I finished I hopped on the subway and arrived in the Vatican. I bought a ticket in advance to skip the line but had some trouble finding the meeting spot. One great thing to note about the Vatican is that there are people on every corner around the Vatican walls that will either sell you a ticket or offer free directions. I asked maybe five different people how to get to a specific location and not one tried to sell me anything. The last woman I asked confused my meeting point with a different location and I ended up late, however I was only one of two groups to sign up for the 11am tour so everything was fine. The other group, a Mexican couple, were there to celebrate their honeymoon! I told them congratulations and we parted inside the museum.

I opted to forgo the escalator and take the Guggenhiem-esque trail to the main entrance hall. I highly recommend the audio tour for the Vatican Museum because it is only 8 Euros and includes a comprehensive guide of all the main pieces of artwork including artist, collection, where the piece was found, what the piece means, what period of time the piece comes from, and interesting facts one would miss from just reading the title card.

Room after room, I made my way through this vast and beautiful museum. Pristine Greek and Roman statues make up a gorgeous portion of the museum. The audio guide told me that the Vatican and many of its popes were big fans of art of any kind because “art in any form is a gift from god”. Some people must have thought differently

as the Fig Leaf Campaign removed or covered the most human parts of some sculptures. Still every statue is a sight to behold, the collection as a whole one of the most magnificent in the world.

Moving on to what I think was an underrated gallery, the Galleria delle Carte Geografiche, or Gallery of Maps is a long hallway. In truth, one can see the end of the gallery from the start, however the length equals that of a professional soccer field, 120 meters. The walls are covered in antique maps showing different regions of Italy. Wikipedia will tell you they are 80% correct. Personally, I think maps are very interesting pieces of art themselves and I enjoy looking at them, but the real highlight to this gallery, as well as several other galleries, is it's ceiling. Spanning the length of the whole gallery, again 120 meters, this ceiling mixes nature with the Christian faith in maybe hundreds of small frescos and beautiful gold plaster work. The Gallery of Maps was completed in a total of only 4 years! Accepted responses to seeing this ceiling include standing still and looking up with your mouth wide open.

After several more remarkable rooms with breathtaking paintings and frescos and I found myself out of place in the Vatican's newest gallery, the Collezione Arte Religiosa Contemporanea, or the Vatican's collection of contemporary art. I was surprised to find paintings from famed artists such as Van Gogh, Matisse, Chagall, Otto, Rivera, and my favorite, Dali. All works of art in this gallery are in some way related to the Christian faith. This gallery was not installed at the time of my great grandmother's visit.

The next location on the Vatican Museum tour is the main feature itself, the Sistine Chapel. Every inch of this chapel is covered in breathtaking depictions of Jesus, Noah, Moses, different saints, the creation of man, and other holy figures. The infamous

creation of man fresco in the center of the ceiling may surprise you in size. Although it is the most famous of the art in the Sistine Chapel, it is not the first thing the eye finds. Instead, visitors should expect a sensory overload of color and symbolism. The piece behind the altar may be the biggest and brightest blues attract your gaze instantly. The scene depicted is the Last Judgement.

One can spend hours in the Sistine Chapel interpreting every fresco and admiring the mastery of Michelangelo. I myself spent at least 30 minutes in the Chapel, taking in as much as possible and listening through the nine different audio options on the audio tour, each one giving different information. Be aware. Photography in the Sistine Chapel is prohibited and you will be called out if you try. If you forget, don't worry, guards yell "no pictures" about every 3 minutes or every time they see someone attempting to take a picture.

The next few rooms are dedicated to minor paper artifacts and a plethora of pricey gift shops. Before continuing to St. Peter's, I stopped to enjoy a slice of pizza in the cafeteria.

St. Peter's square looks big in movies but to really experience its size and splendor one must visit in person. After marveling in the square's magnificence, I first located the exact spot in which my great grandmother took their wedding pictures. In front of the right fountain, looking at the basilica, is where my great grandmother took a celebratory picture with her newlywed husband. I took a few pictures with my camera and then a lower quality one on my phone. With a great free app called PicMix I was able to stitch the two photos together to visualize the 40 year difference in the location. Seeing this picture, I almost became emotional. In a way, this picture represents my senior

Independent Study in its entirety. This is what I have been working for, what I saved up money for and what I have been dreaming about. To finally accomplish a goal such as this had me near tears while I waited in the long line to enter the basilica.

St. Peter's Basilica is not only the largest church in the world but the most grand and exquisite display of Christianity on earth. Larger than life statues adorn the walls and decorate tombs of past popes. On the right, the Pieta, created by Michelangelo in his early twenties is separated by glass and surrounded with eager tourists. More on the Pieta later.

The tomb of St. John Paul II was recently moved to the main floor due to popular demand to pray in front of it. Several pews sit in front of the tomb and I took the time to kneel and pray for all the babies recently born or that will be born soon (my godfather, my best friend from high school, and my cousin are all either expecting or just recently had a child). I also took this time kneeling to say a few words to several people specifically. I said a word first to my grandmother, Theodora, for whom I get my middle name. She passed away in 2007 after a long fight with ALS. She set the standard in my father's family for love and kindness, something I consider an important lesson from both sides of my family. Second I wanted to acknowledge my great aunt, Ellen, who passed away last April and was a gifted and smart woman, loved by all. The youngest of Sybil's children, she retired early to dedicate herself to the care of my great grandmother. Lastly, I would be amiss if I did not thank the woman who gave me a reason to come here in the first place. Sybil, or Cita as we called her, my great grandmother who inspired this project and this trip. Her journals continue to enlighten me every day and my life is forever changed for the better because of her. Kneeling there, I thanked her for all her work and her insight on the world, so full of love and kindness that it continues to inspire

not only me but everyone she knew. Sybil once wrote that she traveled for the specific reason of celebrating every culture she could. Despite financial, political, and religious differences, she continued to celebrate different cultures in the spirit of love and kindness. In places where others found darkness, she found bright, shining lights. Finally, I added that I hope she was proud of my efforts and I that I am trying to give her work and message the spotlight it deserves. It's all thanks to her.

A happy coincidence in the Vatican! As it turns out, a distant cousin of mine is currently studying in Rome to be a priest. He was in the area and we were able to meet up in the basilica! Unfortunately he had a soccer accident and had to use crutches to get around. Although injured, he took me around to the highlights on the church and added facts which I would not have known otherwise.

The first fact is the purple stone at the front of the basilica. Mined from a single spot in Egypt, this stone used to be reserved solely for the emperor of Rome to use due to its rarity and purple color (the color purple was the emperor's color). On that very stone emperors were crowned. Anyone other than the emperor to touch the stone would be punishable by death. When the basilica was renovated in the 1500s, the pope at the time decided that stone be placed at the center of the church so that everyone would step on it coming through the front doors of the basilica. Amazingly, there is no sign or plaque that tells visitors about this stone.

Next I revisited the Pieta, this time with Br. Joseph and he pointed out that Mary does not directly touch her son's skin. Her left hand is slightly raised and her right holds a cloth between her hand and his skin. Also, the way Jesus' body is laying, it would

naturally fall out of Mary's lap and onto the alter below the artwork. This would make sense as, in the Catholic church, Jesus falls onto the alter in the form of communion.

The most prominent piece of of the basilica is the alter. A bronze canopy covers the alter, topped with holy figures. Joseph explains that there is symbology of a wedding in this alter because Jesus is the bridegroom and we are all the bride. On the back wall is the only stained glass art in the whole of the basilica, depicting the holy spirit.

We exited the basilica around closing time and the cold air quickly brought me back to reality. I left in a stupor of gold, frescos, and marble for a packed subway and a delicious meal of pasta with a pesto sauce, shrimp, and tomatoes. For dessert I had tiramisu.

Wednesday December 19, 2018

Let them Eat Cake...and Pasta, and Gelato, and Paninis!

I started my day the same, with my 7 Euro buffet breakfast. This time I had toast with creamy cheese topped with eggs, mini crossants, tomatos, and yogurt. Weird but delicious. Beacause my next objective was a restaurant, I spent some time relaxing. My hostel has a courtyard with games and scheduled events every day. In the lounge area there is a fully functional kitchen, a fooseball table, and a TV that is always on a music or movie station.

Around noon I took a cab to the Pantheon. My cab driver took back roads that hardly looked like roads at all. His relaxed demeanor and no clear gps in sight told me he knew what he was doing but still, at several points we drove down streets flooded with

tourists, waiting for them to move out the way at times. Finally we arrived at the Pantheon and I stopped to marvel at the unique architecture.

About two or so blocks from the Pantheon is a French restaurant called L'Eau Vive run by nuns of the Missionary Workers of the Immaculate. In 1972, when my great grandmother remarried, she came here to celebrate her rehearsal dinner. My great grandmother absolutely loved this restaurant and talked about it often. She continued to visit the restaurant with every visit to Rome.

At first I almost missed the entrance, thinking instead it was a window. A friendly older woman opened the door and welcomed me in. L'Eau Vive may look dated to some, however I found it very similar to a church, with arched ceilings and a cozy but large nativity scene. Wood planks covered in stars lined the wall. I asked the woman if she spoke English and she said no, Italian? I responded asking Español?...No, French? The woman gave up and brought me to another woman. I noticed all the nuns had just finished eating lunch together at the same table. Some were getting up and cleaning up and some were finishing their food. After some confusion of me trying to tell another woman the story of my great grandmother and why I was there and she not understanding me, she asked if I was there to eat and I said I was. She sat me down and another sister came to take my order. The menu was completely in Italian except for the first page which read, "TOURIST MENU". The tourist menu was in English.

I ordered the fried fish filet with rice off the tourist menu. Weirdly, the first thing the sisters brought out was a dish of Chex Mix. Next they brought out a basket of bread and breadsticks. Finally they brought out my dish, a golden piece of fish with a dome of rice topped with a carrot shaped like a crown. I left my plate empty and my stomach full.

Lastly, the nuns brought out a dish of what looked like green oranges. They were almost minty and almost fruity and had the texture of an orange. As I finished the sweet older lady from before came over to ask how my meal was. I translated in my phone that I was here because my great grandmother came here and she smiled and said Oh! I then showed her my pictures and she said something kind in either Italian or French (I think most of the nuns spoke French). It was a sweet moment. The sisters of the Missionary Workers of the Immaculate are all kind and happy. They are all of different backgrounds, dressed in long colorful dresses, some with African designs, some with Asian designs, and some just a plain single color. I can imagine my great grandmother visiting this restaurant for the first time, falling in love with the nuns and their dedication to Christ and service. The nuns remind me of my great grandmother and I understand why she would choose this place for her rehearsal dinner.

Next of course was to look inside the Pantheon. It was a beautiful structure and I stopped to appreciate Raphael's tomb. Then a hike to the metro station and a visit to the Piazza del Popolo. This large piazza is filled with tourists, souvenir sellers, artists, and performers. It is an ideal spot to grab some gelato and people watch.

My next objective was to get to the Casina Valadier. The Casina Valadier sits atop a hill by the Piazza Bucarest. After some photos for comparisons to those from 1972, I walked to the overlook behind the restaurant. There you can find one of the most superb views in all of Rome. The area was mostly empty and a food cart stood alone. I grabbed a tomato and mozzarella sandwich and a drink and sat down to eat while gazing out at the Rome sunset.

On the walk back to the subway I wandered into the Leonardo da Vinci Museum right inside the Piazza del Popolo. There you can find a collection of recreations of da Vinci's designs and sketches. Interactive machines mixed with copies of his most famous artwork fill this underground museum.

At the end of my last full day in Rome, I am exhausted but fulfilled...and filled.

Thursday December 20, 2018

Goodbyes are Always Bittersweet

My trip to Rome began a few days ago but has been a lifetime in the making. I remember as a little girl, wandering through my great grandmother's house in Baton Rouge, admiring a full wall shelf of journals, scrapbooks, and picture books in her bedroom. Her house itself was littered with souvenirs from her travels but the shelf in her bedroom full of the recordings of her travels always stood out as a mystery. Today the contents of that mystery are in my possession. Through her travels, I have been able to look at historic events through a new eye, learned information one would only receive through experience, and come to know my great grandmother better even a decade after her passing. Tracing her footsteps in Rome confirms she lived her life through faith, kindness, and love. She was a pure soul who lived her life to the fullest and celebrated every moment.

In the spirit of my great grandmother, I trekked Rome alone, conquering the streets and exploring her museums. On my last day, despite having to leave, I felt nothing but

happiness. I was in Rome, making memories to last a lifetime and it was all thanks to my great grandmother.

I spent my last morning in Rome wandering the streets, catching a last meal, and admiring everything Rome has to offer. The day I needed a cab to the airport, the cab drivers were on strike, causing me to take the Leonardo Expressway to the airport instead. It was however faster and cheaper. Passing by Rome once more by train, the ancient culture mixed with the late 20th century economic boom and everything in between reveals itself.

When my great grandmother visited Rome for her wedding, Italy was experiencing economic growth. Buildings were being built and business was greatly improving since their involvement in the war three decades earlier. Today the edges of Rome are peeling at the corners, multitudes of vegetation out of control and graffiti lined abandon structures decorate the outskirts of the city, reminding me of the rise and fall of man throughout history, something Rome has seen itself several times. As Italy's economy evened out, the surplus of a postwar boom is left to collect dust while the city center continues to shine brightly with remnants of the ancient past. As time passes we choose to remember what we consider to be important and let the rest fall between the cracks. Every year, millions of tourists flood to Rome and the Vatican to visit echoes of our own past. Museums full of priceless artifacts and locations that are forever memorialized teach us who we once were and we leave with a sense of surreal enlightenment, whether from faith or knowledge.

History books remember Rome as a monumental city which saw the highlight of a past civilization as well as the home of the heart of the Catholic church. I will remember

Rome not only for those reasons, but for the personal history it has brought me, the history most will not see. The spirit of my great grandmother lives on through every step I take, teaching me about the world but reminding me about the power of love and kindness.