SPECIAL TRAVEL MOMENTS

As of now, I have been fortunate enough to have visited 107 foreign countries and all 50 U.S. states. The following are brief descriptions – in random order -- of some of my favorite travel experiences, selected from the years 1975-2017. Some of these trips were done with a tour group, or with my wife and daughter, or with friends, or on my own. I think that in a small way I at last understand the curiosity and passion that drove the great travelers such as Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, James Cook, Lewis & Clark, Lowell Thomas, Richard Halliburton, and others. Thus, I heartily encourage you to visit these wonders for yourself. Experience, learn, and be enlightened! The world awaits your exploration…

\*Fez, Morocco – We were warned to purchase mint leaves to stuff in our nostrils, to help offset the appalling stench of the open-air Tannery. We foolishly declined several offers, as we wandered the twisted streets and alleyways of 8th century Fez. Entering the leather dyers quarters on a searing hot August afternoon, we gagged and had to breathe through our mouths after pinching our noses shut with our fingers! Workers were scraping fresh animal skins smooth with metal tools, standing knee-high and barefoot in guts and offal. The skins were next placed in ancient stone vats of colored dye – mostly chocolate brown, deep red, creamy light green, and Tuareg blue. After soaking the skins for several hours, they were removed to hanging racks to dry in the sun. The leather was later skillfully shaped into belts, vests, purses, bags, and shoes, then made ready for sale.

\* Barrow, Alaska – I flew from Fairbanks north, stopping first at Prudhoe Bay where most of the oil pipeline workers on my flight deplaned. From the air, the pilot noted that the North Pole was on the far horizon amid the sea of ice and icebergs. Landing in Barrow in mid-summer, the temperatures were in the brisk 40s F., with a fresh wind off the Arctic Ocean. Barrow is the northernmost town in North America, and this was as warm as it got here. I was dressed in multiple layers of clothing, yet many native Eskimos were enjoying the balmy (for them) temperatures, and were simply wearing t-shirts! The ocean beach sands were black, and I saw whale bones on the shore, with floating icebergs in the distance. The day’s big newspaper story was how a teenage Inuit boy was killed by a polar bear while trying to defend his girlfriend from attack with only a large hunting knife. At the local supermarket, I was surprised at the astronomical prices for fresh fruits and vegetables (all had to be flown in from afar), and was amused with the presence of frozen TV dinners which the locals were happily purchasing.

\*St. Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, Egypt – Because of recent Islamic terrorist activity in the area, we were escorted inland by an armed military convoy with our guide from our Red Sea resort at Sharm el Sheik. The dark, rocky geography was stark, otherworldly, and utterly barren. The monastery lies near the center of the peninsula, and was built in the 6th century. Its library and icon collection are both the second oldest in the world, after the Vatican. We saw the descendent plant of the original Burning Bush mentioned in the Bible, and the looming mountain of Mt. Sinai – The Mount of Moses – where Moses received the revered tablets of the Ten Commandments. Pilgrims can still climb Mt. Sinai today, and stand in the footprints of Moses.

\* Galapagos Islands, Ecuador – About 600 miles west of the mainland of South America, these islands teem with unique bird, reptile, and marine life. Because much of the wildlife have no natural predators, the animals are fearless of humans. It was great to walk among assemblies of iguanas sunning themselves, behold up close groups of giant tortoises, and to snorkel in the island bays with huge sea turtles!

\* Varanasi, India – We saw sunrise on the Ganges River, sacred to the Hindus as a place of rebirth from the endless cycle of Maya (illusion). We saw chanting throngs of believers bathing in its murky, greyish waters, drinking it, and burning corpses along its banks, later dumping the ashes into its swirling currents. The smells and ghosts of antiquity are ever present here, as well as the sense of human time and eternity.

\*Irkutsk, Siberia, Russia – We saw the log mansions of the pre-Revolution mink, wolf, and sable fur barons. We also glimpsed the famed Trans-Siberian Express at the local train station, on its six-day run from Moscow to Vladivostok. Outside of town, we visited Lake Baikal, the world’s oldest and deepest fresh water lake. At a shoreline restaurant, we enjoyed dining on the delicious local omul fish. Lake Baikal freezes solid every bitter winter, and trucks can even drive across it until the spring thaw!

\* Samarkand, Uzbekistan – Legendary crossroads of the Old Silk Route linking Europe with China, this town has a few remnants of it glory days, such as the magnificent three-sided Registan Square, the impressive Tomb of Tamerlane the Great, and a fascinating historic cemetery filled with turquoise domes and intricate tilework on numerous ancient gravesites. At the old city market, we saw colorfully dressed women vendors with mounds of fresh and dried fruits and vegetables for sale, as well as sacks of spices and various kinds of nuts and sweets. Meanwhile, the local men looked lordly and exotic, with their full beards and turbans and fur vests over robes, and high leather boots, despite the 100 degree F. summer heat.

\* The Grand Canyon, Arizona – This site never fails to inspire awe and a sense of time measured in millions of years! Seeing it from either the South or North Rim is dramatic, but to get a different sense, try river rafting 16 miles on the Colorado, a mile down at the bottom of the Canyon. A five-day, professionally guided, small-group trip from Lee’s Ferry to the Glen Canyon Dam (near Las Vegas) is the way to go. All meals are included, and you camp each night under the stars on sand bar areas near the water. The Colorado River is icy cold (perfect to bath in on a roasting summer’s day) and is the color of chocolate milk, such is the huge amount of silt it carries. We saw ancient Native American petroglyphs, and swam in the clear blue pools beneath sparkling Havasupai Falls. The river passes through several hair-raising, extreme rapids, so you will get totally soaked and bucked on your big, floating, wild ‘bronco’ of a raft!

\* Tanzania, Africa – Seeing large herds of different animals up close roaming in the wild is one of the most unforgettable thrills of overseas travel. Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, Namibia, and Botswana are the prime game viewing destinations I have visited so far. I recall stepping out of our safari van near a hippo pool to have a quick bathroom ‘bush stop.’ I walked alone into the vegetation for about three minutes until I found a clearing to do nature’s call. As soon as I stopped, all of the monkeys and birds in my vicinity froze their movements and became absolutely silent, warily watching me as a potential enemy. A few yards before me was a large hippo carcass, picked clean to the bone, with the exception of a under flap of its thick, tough skin. I was no longer a modern man from the year 1991. My subconscious genetic memory instead propelled me back for a few seconds to my distant caveman ancestors, as I felt what it would be like to try and survive here 40,000 or more years ago! I was startled, quickly did my toilet business, and then rushed back to civilization and my wife.

\* Australia – We climbed Ayers Rock in the middle of the desolate, forbidding Outback, after touring Alice Springs. Although it was late December, the desert heat was brutal, given that seasons are reversed south of the equator and it was the start of Aussie summer. From the top of the Rock, in every direction, the red sands and dry, infertile red soil was dotted with green scrub plants and trees. Later, by way of contrast, we went scuba diving in the Pacific Ocean at the offshore Great Barrier Reef. Over 2000 miles long, the coral chain is the longest living entity in the world. As a certified diver, I went down for an hour to forty feet. The colors of the schools of tropical fish in the warm waters was amazing! I especially remember encountering a giant clam (about four feet across) with its mouth open, feeding. I gently touched its bottom ‘lip’ with my bare hand, and it slowly began to shut its two shell halves together in defense. The clam’s lip felt like thick, wet rubber.

\* Istanbul, Turkey – This is one of my favorite large cities, after London, Vienna, and Paris. At the crossroads between Europe and Asia, Istanbul remains exotic and mysterious for me, even after three visits. First named Byzantium, then Constantinople, this former capitol of the Ottoman Empire still has plenty of remnants of its former glory. Hagia Sophia (first a Christian church, then a mosque, now a museum), the Blue Mosque, the Suleiman the Magnificent Mosque, and the Topkapi Palace with its amazing Treasury are just a few of the sites to enjoy here.

\* Iceland – Like another world! Volcanos, geysers, waterfalls, boiling mud pools, colliding seismic earthquake plates. Pure air and water. Geothermal energy. Organic food. Small population, only 330k. A main Ring Road that circumnavigates the island country. 21 hours of daylight in summer, 21 hours of darkness in winter. Friendly, well-educated population.

\* Prague, Czech Republic – Largely untouched by World War Two, this large, impressive medieval gem has plenty to offer. In 1990, immediately after the collapse of Soviet Communism and its control of the ‘satellite states’ of Eastern Europe, we were in a restaurant having dinner. A local University math professor named George overheard our American voices, and invited us to stay at his nearby apartment (we had earlier planned on camping). He, his wife, and his daughter were leaving on vacation, so his place would be free, he explained. He took us up to his third-floor spacious apartment, showed us around, then gave us the key and left – totally trusting us three complete strangers! We were to place the key under the front door when we left Prague. Such hospitality left an indelible impression on us.

\* Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay – I flew here for the day from Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was a less than 25 minute flight on a small airplane. The compact city was beautiful and quaint, and its old town was like something out of a movie set from a century ago. So peaceful compared to the megalopolis of B.A., I simply wandered, free and anonymous in perfect sunny autumn weather. I saw a young grade school group of fifteen or so students let out at lunchtime. I was later told by my lunch waitress that the children would go home, eat, then put on their pajamas and sleep for two hours, then finally return to class for the rest of the afternoon!

\* Niagara Falls, New York and Canada – The first time you see this marvel, you realize why it is so famous! Since my first glimpse back in the 1970s, I have enjoyed larger and more spectacular waterfalls: Iguassu Falls in Brazil, Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe/Zambia, and Gullfoss in Iceland. But one’s first view of Niagara surely makes a lasting impression, especially if you do the “Maid of the Mist” boat ride up to the water’s edge and get totally soaked by its spray!

\* Zagreb, Croatia – What a pleasant surprise! Here you find a splendid, intact, classic European city that is still untouched by most American tourists -- Croatia being somewhat ‘off the beaten path’ (other than for the cruise ship port of Dubrovnik). Once a stop on the fabled Orient Express train back in the fading days of the Austria-Hungarian Empire, Zagreb was a delight for me to explore. Safe, healthy, with a solid tourist infrastructure and very nice people – all a big plus for the visitor.

\* London – “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life,” wrote the wise Samuel Johnson. It remains my favorite world city, even after five visits. Other than the dismal winters and frequent rain, I could easily live there. So much to see and do! Exciting and stimulating like nowhere else. Fabulous and free museums, especially the world's greatest -- The British Museum. Riding the superb Underground “Tube.” Theaters, shopping arcades, restaurants, pubs. Parks and gardens. Boat rides on the Thames. Castles and palaces in and around. The Royals and their pageantry. History oozing out of every nook and cranny! During my first visit in 1975, I remember wandering in a blissful daze, suddenly turning a corner, and seeing Big Ben for the first time, towering at the end of the street. Oh my God, there it is! I exclaimed aloud to myself. I was in London! I was in England! I was in Europe for the first time. I was just shy of turning 24 years old. I had fallen in love with international travel, and we have been happily intwined ever since…

\* Going to any Communist country has always been an eye-opener for me. A subtle touch of danger, and the sense of doing something which was at one time forbidden to Americans, is probably part of the allure. Going to the U.S.S.R. in 1984, I saw behind the façade of its claim to progress and witnessed instead its collapsing economy. Going to Cuba in 2015, I saw a land locked in the 1950s, its people struggling and yearning, cut off from the modern world. On my first visit to China in 1982, getting off the airplane was to enter another world of everyone dressed in either olive or blue military garb, staring at me as if I had arrived from another planet -- simply wanting to touch my arm or shyly shake my hand! And in Vietnam in 2012, being warmly greeted by a mostly young population without any animosity towards Americans, despite our 1963-1975 war against them. An added fascination in visiting some of these countries is seeing the embalmed corpses of their historic leaders on somber display in glass coffins: Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh.

\* The Vatican, Italy – The world’s largest church will overwhelm your visual senses! Beneath the central altar is a passageway leading to the underground crypts of the Popes. You can also climb an internal stairway to the inside top of the dome, as well as climb up for an outside view of the Tiber River and Rome from the roof of St. Peter’s. The church also houses my favorite sculpture, The Pieta by Michelangelo. The Vatican Museums display an overwhelming and impressive amount of religious art treasures from across the centuries too.

\*Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Germany – One of my favorite medieval walled cities, along with Mont Saint-Michel, France; Toledo, Spain; Tallinn, Estonia; and Carcassonne, France. Rothenburg was like going back in a time machine, with colorful, storybook-type buildings. (Also visit Fortress Louisbourg in Nova Scotia for another fascinating walled town.)

\*Mackinaw Island, Michigan – A fun place to wander or bicycle, accessible only by ferry. No cars allowed on the island! Major location where the movie “Somewhere in Time” was filmed, at and near The Grand Hotel, built in 1887.

\*Jerusalem and Bethlehem, Israel – The Holy Land has many of the Christian and Jewish traditional sites from the Bible. Highlights are the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Via Dolorosa, The Room of the Last Supper, the Tomb of King David, the Dome of the Rock, the Western Wall, and the Church of the Nativity. Israel is a ‘must visit’ for both the faithful and for those who treasure history and archeology.

\* Vienna, Austria – Capitol of the Austria-Hungarian Empire under the Hapsburg dynasty, this is a wonderful world city to explore. Loads of monuments and museums, harmonic architecture, trams that circuit The Ring. Coffee houses and rich pastries. Strauss waltzes. In the Treasury Room of the Hofburg Palace, you can see the Crown Jewels, as well as the spear that purportedly pierced Christ’s side at the Crucifixion. Outside the city are the relaxing Vienna Woods and the immense imperial Schonbrunn Palace.

\* Krakow, Poland – Former capitol of the country, located on the Vistula River, it is a charming city of castles and cathedrals, and the burial place of many Polish kings. Nearby are the grim remains of Auschwitz, the notorious Nazi concentration camp from World War Two. The shock of seeing the cremation ovens and the gas chambers where over one million innocent people were murdered will surely haunt you for the rest of your life.

\* Cape Town, South Africa – One of the most beautiful locations in the world for a city (along with Sydney, Australia; Hong Kong, PRC; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; San Francisco, California; and Vancouver, British Columbia), with unique plants and splendid weather. Make sure you take the aerial tram to the flat top of iconic Table Mountain for a spectacular vista! Visit Robben Island as well, to see where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned during the days of apartheid.

\* Santa Fe, New Mexico – Along with New Orleans, this is one of the most unique and distinctive cities in America. With a history going back to the 1500s, Santa Fe is a gem of adobe architecture and fabulous restaurants. Its 7200’ altitude location offers pure air and beautiful natural light for artists. The traditional churches, the Plaza, and the Palace of the Governors are especially recommended.

\* Quebec City, Canada – Perched high on a bluff overlooking the St. Lawrence River, this is a little slice of France relocated to North America. A very special place filled with charm and history. There are numerous old grey stone buildings and remnants of the fortification walls which you can walk. Stay across the river at Levis to save money on lodging, then take the inexpensive, regularly scheduled ferry to Old Quebec.

\*Camino de Santiago, Spain – I hiked about 200 miles of this classic medieval pilgrimage trail (aka The Way of St. James), from Astorga to Santiago de Compostella, with my two best friends, Joe Masonick and Rick McKay, in 2005. It was one of my favorite adventures of all time! We met people from all over the world participating in the same journey, some looking for spiritual insights, others looking for a purely physical challenge. I wrote a fictional story entitled “Death on the Camino,” which is included in the first volume of my collected short stories, self-published in 2016. Many of the details of the Camino experience are interwoven in the plot.

\* Saas Amagell, Switzerland – My Europa House college-aged tour group stayed here for a night during our eight-week trip across Europe in 1975. This was an utterly peaceful and remote tiny village at the end of a mountain valley. It was Shangri-La to me! Pure air, pure water, pure food, and gentle, friendly locals. Unforgettable…

\*Herat, Afghanistan – The first major city we hit after leaving Meshed, Iran with my 1977 Capricorn Tour group, this was an amazing place, like going back in time a thousand years. An ancient, enormous mud brick fort guarded the city from a high cliff. There were mosques with their tall minarets, and we encountered our first dignified Afghani people in their robes and turbans. This historic place was on the main route that Alexander the Great traveled when he marched to conquer all of Asia. Genghis Khan and Tamerlane also knew this city well, on their own separate attempts to rule the world.

\*Yangtze River Cruise, China – This was experienced in 1982, well before the modern, hydroelectric Three Gorges Dam was attempted and completed. Seeing the very old, traditional river towns and villages was truly a look back into China’s pre-Communist past.

\*Dawson City, Yukon, Canada – To finally arrive here via the Yukon River was the goal of thousands of eager miners from all over the world during the 1898 Gold Rush. Several of the original buildings remain, making this town a time capsule for the history devotee. Its remoteness is part of its allure. I have been there three times – alone, with friends, and with my wife and daughter. Read the Canadian book “Klondike” by Pierre Berton to get the full flavor of the area and the times. Also enjoy the legendary Yukon poetry of Robert Service. There is a hotel in Dawson City which offers the unusual experience of The ‘Sour Toe Cocktail,’ which is a drink you can try with a mummified human toe in it! Incredibly, over 100,000 people have paid the $5 fee to do this bizarre ritual, afterwards signing their name in an official register. Still available today, now on its tenth toe, this oddity began back in 1973.

\* Isfahan, Iran – A beautiful city of water channels, flowers, trees, fountains, turquoise-tiled mosques, poetry and parks, I was there in 1977. I recall an attractive, cultured, friendly, and well-educated population. One prominent feature in Isfahan is its old, central covered bazaar -- selling Persian miniature painted tiles and plates, beaten copper and silver metal-works, tunics, shoes, turbans, carpets, dried fruits and nuts, and assorted sweets. Isfahan is my favorite city in Iran! I hope to return one day, when the political/religious climate against the U.S. changes to something similar to the less turbulent times before the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

\* St. Petersburg and Moscow, Russia -- The former was still named Leningrad when my wife and I visited there in 1984. The Hermitage Museum was stupendous, being the former Winter Palace of the last Tsar, Nicholas II, as well as the site of the 1917 Revolution. So much art that much of it remains in storage and must be rotated! A boat ride on the Neva River, a visit to the Peter and Paul Fortress, and walking down the main thoroughfare of Nevsky Prospect are all highly recommended. While in Moscow, you can enter iconic St. Basil's Cathedral, wander enormous Red Square, explore the ornate 1893 Gum Department Store, and visit the golden-domed churches inside the Kremlin.

\* Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan -- The automobile magnate re-assembled famous historic buildings (including the entire working Menlo Park, New Jersey laboratory of his friend, the inventor Thomas Edison) into an ideal American village from a century ago. An amazing vision and accomplishment! Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, is an even finer restoration, highlighting our country at the time of the Revolutionary War.

\* The Hawaiian Islands -- My family and I walked across the black, hardened lava beds at Volcanoes National Park. Through fissures on the still warm ground beneath our shoes, we could see fresh, flowing orange magma! Later that night, from the safety of the balcony of our cruise ship, we witnessed rivers of molten lava poring over cliffs and into the ocean, steaming and hissing as it hit the water. On another day, our daughter got to swim with dolphins in a special pool area at a hotel, and we also explored underwater in an actual submarine in Maui off the port of Lahaina.

\* Srinagar, Kashmir -- In 1977, we stayed on houseboats floating in the middle of Lake Dal, with the Himalayan Mountains visible in the distance. The cool highlands were a welcome respite from the heat and humidity of subtropical India in July. The houseboats were luxurious and pleasantly smelled of carved sandalwood. Our three-night stay, with all meals and laundry and a private shakara (boat taxi) with oarsman, cost a mere $5 a day!

\* Peru -- Landing in Cuzco, the former capitol of the Incan Empire, literally took one's breath away, for it lies at just over 11,000' in elevation. Coca leaf tea was offered at the hotel to help relieve any lingering altitude sickness. I tried the national dish of Peru here, "cuy", which is roasted guinea pig! Later, I rode the early morning train in the chilly Andean air, past herds of llamas, paralleling the course of the Urubamba River until I arrived at the remote Incan mountain- top marvel of Machu Picchu.

\* The Smithsonian Museums in Washington, D.C. -- All offering free admission, my favorites are: the National Air & Space Museum (with the original Wright Brothers 1903 flyer, Charles Lindbergh's 1927 Spirit of St. Louis, the Apollo 11 moon capsule, and even a moon rock you can touch!); the National Museum of American History; the National Portrait Gallery; and the National Museum of Natural History. (Additionally, for fine museums when you visit New York City, don't miss the excellent Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the American Museum of Natural History.) While in our nation's capitol, I would also recommend a tour of the White House and an ascent up to the top of the Washington Monument. Finally, see where Abraham Lincoln met his tragic fate by going to view the President's fatal balcony box at Ford's Theatre.

\* The Canadian Rockies, Alberta and British Columbia, Canada -- This is one of those special places where one never tires of visiting! I have been there four times, and would happily return tomorrow and every year afterwards. The area includes: Banff, Lake Louise, Jasper National Park, the Icefields Parkway, and Waterton Lakes (which extends into Montana and Glacier National Park, my favorite U.S. park). Mountain trail hiking, horseback riding, sparkling rivers, waterfalls, deep forests, and glaciers. Stunning vistas. Solitude and quiet, when you need it. Wildlife in abundance. Baronial lodges offering fine dining including fresh elk and buffalo. Pure mountain air and clear, starry nights. Heavenly!

\* The Pyramids, Egypt -- Yes, in my humble opinion, these wonders top the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal, the Parthenon, the Colosseum, Stonehenge, and all other ancient structures built by man. They are so huge and so dramatic and so old -- going back 4,500 years! They are the only surviving Ancient Wonder of the World, of the original seven. There they sit, mute, having withstood virtually all of man's history. Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, and thousands of other famous figures across the many millennia have stood before these mysterious stone monuments in awe and contemplation. I climbed up to the now forbidden top of the Great Pyramid of Cheops in 1977, and entered its secret tomb chambers both then and again in 2016. During the eerie nightly Sound & Light performance on the Giza plateau, beside the three famous Pyramids and the mighty Sphinx itself, the narrator cryptically intones, "...Man fears Time, but Time fears the Pyramids..."

And so it does...Happy Travels!

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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