

Featured Contributor



Susan Lanier

By Maralyn D. Hill and Sherrie Wilkolaski

Susan Lanier-Graham is living the dream. She is an accomplished journalist with more than 25 years' experience that has been featured in hundreds of publications, has written over 70 non-fiction books, and done this all while enjoying a life filled with travel and adventure.

While her articles usually specialize in luxury travel, fine dining, homes, and luxury lifestyles, she realizes that wonders are everywhere. Sharing those wonders — whether they be around the world or across the street — is what she enjoys most. Susan has written more than 70 nonfiction reference books, computer and business books, training manuals, and hundreds of newspaper and

magazine articles. Her articles have appeared in such publications as AAA Highroads, AAA Home & Away, Uptown Magazine, View Highlife, So Scottsdale, Go Gilbert, Arizona Health & Living, Design & Architecture, Scottsdale Health, Western Horseman, Western Lifestyles Retailer, Cowboys & Indians, Rocky Mountain News, Persimmon Hill, Steamboat Magazine, Rosewood, Countryside, Frontier Magazine, Phoenix Home & Garden, Colorado Homes & Lifestyles, and more. Susan's work has also appeared online at Vacationist.com, Hotels.com, TravelandLeisure.com, Mapquest.com, Marriott.com, Sofitel.com, Fairmont.com, Examiner.com, Fox News Travel and AOL Travel online.

How did you discover your love for travel?

I have been traveling since I was a very little girl. I can remember being maybe five or six years old and tingling with excitement when my family would check into a hotel room. I'd run around, opening drawers and looking in closets. We traveled constantly and I definitely inherited my love of travel from my parents and grandparents. I recently discovered that in the early 1940's, my grandfather made a cross-country drive, which was unheard of at the time. My grandmother was always traveling somewhere and she never met a stranger. I do write a lot about food because I think food can help define the soul of a place. Sometimes you find out the most interesting things by sampling what the locals eat.

Which do you prefer, writing or photography?

I love both writing and photography. I started out writing and have been writing since I was a child. I loved "taking pictures" as a kid, but never thought about as a profession. Then, when I met my husband, he spent every spare minute taking photos (and every spare penny buying photography equipment). I fell in love with being able to express myself visually as well as through words. If I had to give up one or the other, it would be a hard choice.

What does the writing process entail for you?

I am a chronic researcher. In fact, I often spend more time researching than I should. I always research a location before I visit so I know some of what to expect. I take notes while I'm on a trip, along with a lot of photos, many of which are just for my own use. When I get home, I scan all the paper materials into Evernote and organize it. I usually wait a couple of weeks before writing, and then I open up Evernote with all the collateral materials, re-read my notes and start making lists of article ideas. After I have ideas, I create an outline, then I start writing. I try to keep in mind that I want my readers to feel as if they're experiencing what I write about.

When it's up to you to pick your travel destination, where do you like to go?

Besides visiting my four grandkids (my son is in the Army and currently stationed in Missouri), I spend a lot of time on the beach in Baja, Mexico where it's quiet but I can still find great food. My family owns a couple of places in Baja and I am happiest walking the beaches there. I also love to travel in Europe. Last year, I spent a week in a cottage in the English countryside that dated back a couple of centuries. I love living with the locals, going to the pubs and shopping in the markets. Of course, I also have to make a trip to Harrods on any visit to London. One of my favorite places to visit is the South of France. Not only is it beautiful, but there is amazing food, incredible wine and the best street markets in the world.

If you could be anyone else, who would it be?

Honestly, I love my life and can't imagine being anyone else. I have an incredible family, I

love the work I do and I'm fortunate to be able to see the world. Why would I change?

What motivates you to be a luxury journalist?

By covering the luxury world, I get to see some of the most amazing hotels in the world and eat foods that leave me saying "wow" quite often. The quiet elegance of a historic inn or the warm ambiance of a world-class restaurant where a chef performs magic are experiences that take life to an unforgettable place.

Tell us about one of your favorite experiences while traveling?

My first trip to the South of France was more than a decade ago. I was overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of Provence and the taste of the food. I was there with two other women and we were, quite literally, wined and dined. One day, after a morning sailing off the coast of Cannes and Antibes, we were led to a small restaurant on the beach at Cap d'Antibes for lunch. Pure white sand. Brilliant blue water shimmering in the sun. Bright yellow chairs and umbrellas. We sat back, sipping Champagne from flutes, watching yachts anchor off the coast as the staff brought us plate after plate of food. I popped a fresh slice of prosciutto-wrapped cantaloupe into my mouth as one of my companions commented that this was "one perfect day." I've often thought back to that lunch on the Mediterranean beach when my days are less spectacular and I remember how incredibly lucky I am.

What is your favorite dish?

I think the best single taste of food I've ever eaten was the handmade ricotta gnocchi made for me one evening by Executive Chef Eric Klein at Spago Las Vegas. They were the most amazing little pillows of flavor. Chef Klein created the most extraordinary meal for me that night and it is still the single best meal I've ever eaten. I also have to give kudos to Sam Fox of Fox Restaurant Concepts in the Phoenix area. This Tucson native now owns dozens of restaurants here in Arizona (as well as California, Texas, Virginia and others). He is not a chef, but he is a master at creating restaurant concepts that are both luxurious yet comfortable. His staff is always professional, the food is fresh and I'm never disappointed.

What do you do in your free time?

While it might seem strange for a travel writer, I actually spend a lot of my free time traveling. I love to explore the world, eat in out-of-the-way spots and explore various cultures. I also sneak away to see my grandkids whenever possible.

The business of luxury is always changing. How do you see luxury?

Luxury can mean different things to different people. It might be a glass of vintage wine sipped in the pleasure of your own home or a stay in a mountain-top chateau in France. A decade ago, luxury was about conspicuous consumption and things had to be big and over-the-top. Today, people want to know

about the history of a place, or where their food came from before landing on their plate. The experience matters more than how much they spend on a meal, wine or vacation. I think it's a trend that's here to stay and I love this need for a connection and a story.

If you were stranded on an island, name one person and three items you would bring. Why?

I would have to bring my husband, Bill. He's been by my side for 35 years and we love to travel together. I wouldn't want to be alone with anyone else, but could imagine being perfectly happy alone with him forever. I would want to have a photo of my family (my son, daughter-in-law and 4 grandkids in particular), a knife so I could prepare food and a hairbrush because a girl still has to look good even on a deserted island.

If we came to your hometown of Phoenix, what would you recommend we do to have the best experience?

I would encourage people to visit Phoenix in the winter or spring; summer isn't the best time unless you love heat. I find the desert magical. When people visit and take a chance to experience the colors and contrasts, they are usually surprised at the abundance here. Besides taking advantage of the outdoors (hiking, going for a bike ride, sitting outside at night looking at the stars), I would tell people to spend a day at the Joya Spa at Montelucia or Well and Being at Fairmont Scottsdale Princess. After a relaxing day at the spa, head to Posh in downtown Scottsdale for a dinner to remember. The chef will ask your favorite items and create a custom dinner just for you. Book a seat at the bar so you can watch the chefs in action. After dinner, you can head to Kazimierz Wine Bar for a drink. If you're in the area for a few days, take a drive to Sedona. Those red rocks are not only beautiful but magical. The perfect spot to stay is in a creekside luxury cottage at L'Auberge de Sedona.

What is on your "must have" list when you travel?

My iPad (I do all my reading on it), my iPhone, my camera (I'm the proud owner of a brand new Nikon D5300 that I adore) and a great pair of walking shoes. You can't enjoy traveling if your feet hurt.

What does Luxe Beat Magazine mean to you?

I love the concept of Luxe Beat Magazine and the design is clean and a little sexy. I'm proud to be a part of Luxe Beat because it's about the experiences of the writers who contribute. Each one seems to genuinely love telling stories and they seem to be great at making those connections that people appreciate today when they travel. I'm very excited about the future of the magazine.

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