

Panamá

January 20-27, 2024

My fascination with Panamá, primarily the canal there, began after reading David McCulloch's *Path Between the Seas* about the beginnings of the construction of the canal. So, Sue and I made plans with [Road Scholar](#) for a tour. We found that Panamá is a beautiful, vibrant, and diverse country. Its citizens are rich in many ways. Their culture is both ancient and modern with traditions that have survived despite centuries of colonialism and upheaval. We learned much about the history of the canal and how it changed human history but also how its inhabitants have evolved to enhance that history.

The following are some notes about each day's activities:

Saturday, January 20th

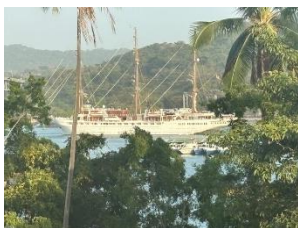
We began our [trip](#) by driving to Portland and the inauspicious Clarion Airport hotel. Our plan was to stay overnight in preparation for our flight to [Panamá City](#) tomorrow. We also planned to have dinner at Sur Lie in Portland.

Sunday, January 21st

After flying from Portland, then Newark, we arrived at Panamá City airport (PTY), where Nesto drove us to the Radisson hotel near the canal. Since it was so late, we were forced to rely on TGI Friday at the hotel for sustenance.

Monday, January 22nd

Today is my birthday and we began by walking to explore the nearby canal area. Our



hotel is near the entrance to the canal from the gulf. We watched some passing vessels as they entered and also began to discover that it was **HOT** and humid. However, we enjoyed seeing the activity along the entry to the canal and the distant skyline of [Panama](#)



[City](#). We walked past some remnants of local history, old barracks, a park, and some monuments to Korea (this was due to the 1962 [bilateral relationship](#) establishment. We continued walking toward the [Biomuseo](#), which unfortunately was closed. By this time, we had reached our ultimate destination for lunch, a little place called Pencas. After lunch, we were able to easily hail a taxi back to the hotel. We decided to take a dip in the hotel pool to refresh from the heat. Later that evening, we called for an Uber to take us to [Bucanero's](#). Thanks to Sue, I had a fabulous dinner of Lobster Thermidor.

Tuesday, January 23rd

Gabe (Gabriel Ortiz) and Luis (Abiel Luis) introduced themselves as our group leaders at the orientation meeting to begin our tour. Our first foray was by van into the old town (*Casco Viejo*). Our group visited the *Panamá Canal Museum* then walked through this seventeenth century city. The colorful buildings reflect the colonial influence of the Spanish, French, and Americans. My observation was that many of them evoked memories of New Orleans architecture. We visited the *Metropolitan Cathedral*, the *Municipal Palace*, Independence Square, Arco Chato, the *French Embassy* and *Plaza de Francia*. After lunch at Restaurante Casablanca, we took our van back to the hotel for another dip and, later, a fascinating Road Scholar presentation about the past, present, and future of the canal, given by Jaime Robleto, an “authority on all things regarding to the Panamá Canal”.



Wednesday, January 24th

Today we boarded a large bus for a trip across the *Bridge of the Americas* to our first stop at the *Chinese Memorial* on the Mirador de las



Americas. We explored and learned more about the role of Chinese immigrants in helping build Panamá's infrastructure. Next, we visited the *Panamá Canal Administration* building to learn yet more about the canal's



construction amid the “vibrant murals that illustrate different stages of the project”. A quick third-stop at *Madden Dam* and Lake

Alajuela on through *Soberanía National Park* toward *Gamboa*. Lunch stop was overlooking the *Chagres River* at *Don Caimán* in the *Gamboa Rainforest Reserve*. Back onto the bus, we traveled back south to the *Miraflores Locks* Visitor Center and made a slight detour over the *Puente Centenario* to see the *Culebra Cut*. When we arrived at the visitor's center, we were taken to view the locks in operation. Coincidentally, the passenger ship in the lock then was the *Zuiderdam*, the same ship on which we will be taking a cruise this summer. After viewing a short film at the IMAX theater, we boarded the bus and headed back to our hotel and had dinner at the nearby Canal House.



Thursday, January 25th

We left the hotel early (6:00 AM) on the bus for the ride to the [Pacific Queen](#), our home for the day as we transit the canal from the Miraflores Locks near Panamá City to the [Gatún Locks](#) near [Colón](#). We arrived at the marina on Flamenco Island, one of the islands that make up the [Causeway Islands](#), and set off after having breakfast on the boat. It was a beautiful morning as we sailed under the Bridge of the Americas toward the Miraflores Lock with the rising sun on our starboard side. As we approached the lock, we were behind the [Velos Aquarius](#), a large container ship. Both the ship and our seemingly tiny boat being guided by tug boats through the lock. As we slowly passed through



the locks, I was reminded of our sighting of the Zuiderdam. When we were here yesterday, we were standing on the opposite side of the lock watching as it passed through. We continued on through the Pedro Miguel Locks and the Culebra Cut, observing the



expanse of flora and fauna as we sailed toward the Atlantic. Soon we passed [Gamboa](#) and, shortly afterward, [Barro Colorado Island](#), a designated nature preserve that was formed when the Chagres River was dammed to form Gatún Lake. When we reached the Gatún Locks, we were forced to wait as the Velos Aquarius made its way to the lock. This time we were in front of the huge ship in the lock. Finally, we sailed under the [Puente Atlántico](#) and into Colón. We



docked at the marina and bade farewell to the Pacific Queen, then boarded the bus once more for the journey back to the [Gamboa Rainforest Resort](#). Rather than standing in the line waiting to check into the hotel, we shared a drink with our Road Scholar compatriots, Stephen and Elizabeth, at the [Monkey Bar](#), and had a pleasant chat before continuing to our room, followed by dinner at [El Corotú](#).



Friday, January 26th

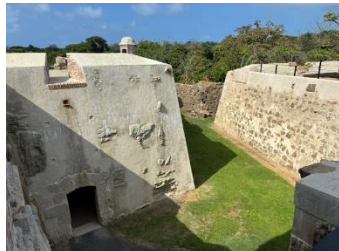
Today's adventure took us to the [Agua Clara Locks](#), part of the canal expansion project. We learned about the project as we explored the visitor's center and watched [Trancura](#), a huge container ship, as it



passed through the lock. [Fort San Lorenzo](#) would be our next stop, where we would be served lunch made by a local family. As we disembarked from the bus, we encountered a [Northern Tamandua](#) anteater on a tree near the parking lot. It was our first



encounter with a local land animal other than the ubiquitous cats that roamed freely around many of the towns we have visited. We also saw a [White-faced Capuchin](#) monkey above us in the trees while we enjoyed our lunch overlooking the Caribbean



Sea. After lunch, we explored the old fort before taking the bus ride back to Panamá City and the Crown Plaza hotel. Sue and I took a short walk around the vicinity after a drink at the bar with Stephen and Elizabeth. We

were able to help them find her misplaced luggage. We were treated to a farewell dinner from Road Scholar and our guides Luis and Gabe, whose knowledge of Panamá has been so exceptional and educational. Additionally, these guys were immensely friendly and helpful, making this a most enjoyable and memorable trip. After dinner, we were presented with a dance from a local group featuring colorful traditional clothing. They were accompanied by a small band playing instruments not often seen in the United States, although very traditional here, one of which was a small accordion. It was a joyous and rousing farewell.



Saturday, January 27th

We were able to have breakfast at the hotel and Sue acquired an Uber to PTY as we began our trip home. We arrived at the airport and made our way to check-in and security, with no serious problems. My carry-on bag was searched and the guard seemed concerned with my small trimming scissors, but I passed. Our tickets allowed us entry into the spacious Copa lounge where we waited for our flight to begin boarding. This story is long enough already, and since our flights went smoothly and we are happily back at home, I'll say adios.