



Panama: “The Isthmus That Changed The World”

By Don Mankin

How could a small country, only about 30 miles wide at its narrowest point, offer such a variety of experiences and activities: a large, cosmopolitan city: kayaking and snorkeling among tropical islands in two oceans, walking in the jungle to visit indigenous people and one of the most spectacular engineering achievements in the world?

It is this intersection of natural history and man-made wonders that makes Panama so special. Over three million years ago, the Isthmus of Panama emerged from the sea, separating the Atlantic from the Pacific Oceans and eventually serving as a land bridge between North and South America.

Animals on both continents migrated across this land bridge and made Panama one of the most biologically-diverse countries in the world.

In more recent times, human, political and economic history has played out in attempts to cross the isthmus and open up trade between Asia and Europe. The construction of the Canal was only the latest development in the evolving role of Panama, in the words of NASA, as “the isthmus that changed the world.”

Activities

My wife and I recently had the opportunity to experience this diversity first hand on the Pure Panama: Cultures, Coasts & Canal adventure cruise run by UnCruise Expeditions, our hosts for this seven

day trip (uncruise.com). In those seven days we:

- Kayaked among tropical islands and along a bay fringed by jungle and thick dark stands of mangroves
- Motored down a jungle river in traditional canoes, then hiked a short distance to visit the Embera, an indigenous people with the warmest, friendliest, most charismatic children I have ever encountered
- Visited the town of Portobela, the site of a 16th Century colonial fortress and a unique culture with deep African roots
- Bird-watched in a skiff cruising down the historic Chagras River, where we spotted howler monkeys and whales and over 30 different species of birds including herons,





woodpeckers, egrets, and one named after me—the Manakin

- Snorkeled in two oceans, the Caribbean and Pacific
- Traversed the Panama Canal, described by an exhibit in the Biomuseo, the excellent Museum of Biological Diversity in Panama City, as “one of the largest alterations of the natural world ever undertaken by humans”
- Celebrated the end of the trip in a spontaneous beach party with everyone cooling off in the gentle waves, clutching flotation noodles to keep our heads and drinks above water

The Ship

The UnCruise ship, the Safari Voyager, was the perfect vehicle for this active adventure. With a capacity of only 62 passengers, the ship was able to get to places that bigger ships can not without sacrificing comfort or luxury. The meals were excellent, the bar was open (including premium spirits and local craft beer), and each passenger received a free 30 minute massage from one of the two staff masseuses on the ship.

A feature that I especially appreciated, given my continuing recuperation from my knee replacement surgery several months ago, was the launching platform at the rear of the ship that lowered and raised to make it easy getting in and out of the skiffs and kayaks.

Panama City

Our trip didn't end with the cruise. Before we headed home, we spent two sweaty days in Panama City. In some respects Panama City feels very familiar—skyscrapers and traffic like Manhattan (but no pastrami); skyscrapers and humidity like Miami (again, no pastrami).

Panama City is built up with lots of very tall, very narrow, architecturally dramatic skyscrapers (many of them empty) densely packing the central city.



The highlights of our two days in the city included the Fish Market where we ate excellent, inexpensive ceviche surrounded by a colorful and funky (but loud) scene; the Biomuseo (The Museum of Biodiversity, designed by Frank Gehry); the Casco Viejo, the old city, an UNESCO World Heritage Site, which is currently being fixed up in anticipation of the visit by the Pope in 2019; and the Canal Museum in a beautifully restored colonial mansion in the heart of the old city.

Our visit to the old city ended at the roof top bar at the Tantaló Hotel, with great views of the downtown and several of the best mojitos I have ever had. I felt very fortunate that

the much younger and better-looking crowd allowed a grizzled geezer and his beautiful but significantly older wife into their magical world for a couple of hours.

On our way to the airport, we stopped for a short visit to the ruins of the original city. Panama Viejo, another World Heritage Site, was founded by the Spanish in 1519 and was the first European Settlement on the Pacific Ocean. The ruins themselves are spooky and evocative; the history—described in dramatic

detail in the museum on the grounds, and involving indigenous people, Spanish conquistadors, and the British pirate Henry Morgan—is worthy of a summer blockbuster Hollywood movie.

Panama was a huge surprise to me. I figured that the Canal would be pretty cool but I didn't expect to enjoy the trip as much as I did. I recommend Panama as a must see destination and not just for the Canal. Just make sure to bring lots of lightweight underwear and shirts.

For more information on the Adventure Geezer, visit his website and blog at adventuretransformations.com.