

THE PANAMA CANAL CONNECTION

We are on our ocean cruise, the “*Panama Canal Connection*,” so named as it runs from Los Angeles to Miami – and through the Panama Canal. Long on our “bucket list” we book on the Oceania line ship “*Insignia*” that would do a nine hour daylight transition through the canal. In actual fact, the *Insignia* was on a round the world trip (called at Napier, NZ in May) departed Miami last March and returns to Florida in July.

Having boarded the ship in Los Angeles, we set sail out of this massive port and head overnight down to San Diego in Southern California. We awake to find ourselves “berthed” at the cruise ship dock and not too distant from a large number of US Naval ships that also belong here.

There are all sorts of “day trips” for passengers to take at this port – as there are all along the way. Having previously seen the likes of the zoo and Sea World, we opt to walk around the city and do a little bit of shopping. As we depart San Diego harbour, we pass war ships and a very large naval airbase where I can see a couple of airfields, each with about three dozen helicopters parked on their tarmacs.

Helicopters and small naval craft move past us into port, presumably returning from practice exercises. It all seems very “military” but as well as that presence, two small rubber Coastguard boats cover each side of our ship until we get right out of the harbour. On the front of each boat is an armed “sailor” manning a rather large anti-aircraft gun mounted on a tri-pod. An American passenger remarked to me “how safe he felt” being escorted out of the harbour in this way. They were not thoughts that I necessarily shared!

A whole day at sea around now means that I am beginning to learn that I am not really on a ship (although it certainly moves on the sea) but rather a giant floating hotel and theme park! There are about five restaurants and I believe (though never investigated) a similar number of bars. It is difficult to conceive that there are ships several times larger than this one! We have a swimming pool (on deck 9) plus two spar pools, an exercise track (deck 10), a gymnasium further down the ship (somewhere) as well as a library, internet room, hospital, hairdresser and any number of other facilities.

The next port of call was Cabo San Lucas in Mexico. This seemed just a small port with only one wharf, no apparent industrial port activity and as we cannot dock we get to shore using the ship’s “tenders” (i.e. the lifeboats). The hillsides were dry, of red rock covered with apartments – said to be occupied by holidaying Americans. The attraction here is the golden sands that surround this rather beautiful bay. Once ashore we are exhorted to buy all sorts of Mexican stuff that we don’t need although I did pick up a leather drink bottle holder for my belt, designed for carrying a can of beer, but mine is for water.

We leave Cabo San Lucas escorted again by an orange Coastguard boat but this time the man on the front seems to just have an old .303 rifle mounted on a camera tripod! I think I feel safe - as we sail on to the next Mexican port of Huatulco. Again, this is a rather picturesque port which seems to support little more than cruise activity and holiday makers. It is hot and sunny and we are regaled to buy more stuff but at least there seems to be a real village and community around the rather long wharf.

We are now getting into the swing of things on board and slowly coming to grips with the handling of the meals. The temptation of “fill-up” at each meal time is hard to resist and the “Chef” is about seven foot tall (well in his hat) so I don’t like to upset him but not partaking fully of his preparations. All meals are included in our fare and drinks are free – except for the alcoholic ones! There are

special packages though, at like US\$30 or \$50 (top shelf) per day to drink anything you want! I decide to buy the odd glass of wine as I feel like it. This could cost \$12 – 15 (US) per drink – about the same as I paid for a bottle of gin at a drug store (read pharmacy) in LA before we left!

Generally we are sailing at night time to reach our destination sometime in the morning, depending on the distance we have had to cover to get there. We make our way to Puerto Quetzal in Guatemala. This is a real working port although you could be forgiven for thinking you had passed back in time when pulling alongside.

Local dancers and drummers in their national costumes greet us as we disembark and they are a real sight to see! We make our way into town past streets lined with trucks heading to the wharf to load or unload; hundreds of them. The main means of transport about the village though, seems to be bicycle taxis and we take one for a personal tour. This was a somewhat hair-raising experience!

Ports continue to come and go, Corinto in Nicaragua and then Puntarenas in Costa Rica, each with their own charm and culture. Shopping is pretty much done in US dollars which makes it a little easier to reconcile in one's mind. Another day at sea enables us to catch up on things and attend lectures on the Panama Canal, as well as photography and art classes.

We arrive at Panama Canal, right on time so as to take our place in the queue for a daytime transition. Bookings for this spot are made as far out as 12 months, and must be pre-paid a week before arriving! Cost depends on size but could be \$100,000 so it is a great money spinner. Over 1000 ships per month use it; it costs US\$600m annually to run but turns over \$2 billion!

We learn that constructing the canal was first begun in 1880 by the French (after they had done the Suez) but after 10 years and around 20,000 deaths, they gave up. Eventually the US weighed in, built it in 10 years, opening in 1914 and operating it until 1999 then it was returned to the country of Panama. Engineers call it one of the seven wonders of the modern world.

We work our way through, beginning with going into three locks to raise us to the level of the man-made inland lake that we sail across before coming down through three more locks to be at sea level to enter the Atlantic Ocean. Tugs assist position us and train engines on each side hook up ropes and pull us through. At 80kms and with rainforest on each side much of the way, it is an amazing experience.

Out of the canal we head to Cartagena in Colombia but we find the Atlantic Ocean is nowhere near as flat as the Pacific was and a number of people become ill, including some in our cabin! Meals are consumed sparingly and we were at port for some time before I ventured ashore (alone) hired a cab and took a one hour ride around the city. The cab driver was a retired police officer so we shared some memories and I shared some of my money with him! It is a great city, the old contained by a wall and the new by sky-scrapers.

On the sea again we head towards Key West but the weather is such that we cannot reach there in time and as well, a sick passenger has to be helicoptered off (at 9.30pm) to the nearest land, I think in Jamaica. So we miss the Key West excursion that we were looking forward to and as well, seeing the southern-most tip of the US.

We then spend three days at sea, heading to our final port of Miami, entertaining ourselves with lectures and classes, as well as attending some of the evening entertainment (which does not begin until 9.30pm!). This was very good with singers, a magician, bands and even an evening with "*The Platters*" a vocal group from the 1950 – 60s. (I think they are pretending though, because the original singers would now be well into their eighties!)

We make Miami, Customs and Boarder Control come on board, clear us for departure and we head down the gangway for another adventure – in a city we have never visited before.



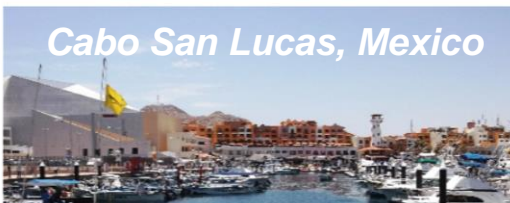
San Diego



Top Deck



Huatulco, Mexico



Cabo San Lucas, Mexico



Puerto Quetzal, Guatemala



Panama Canal



Corinto, Nicaragua



Cartagena, Walled City



Cartagena, Colombia