

“Be Careful What You Read”

by Jerry Gordon



I was looking through the sale books in an airport bookstore when a non-fiction by one of my favorite writers, David McCullough, caught my eye. In “The Path Between the Seas” written 30 years ago, McCullough tells the story of the Panama Canal from 1870 to 1914. I had always had an interest in the Canal but I have to admit I knew a lot less than I thought I knew. As it turned out I knew very little. He is a great story teller and the 600 pages passed quickly and fascinated me with the topic to the point that I wanted to see the canal for myself. But, I resigned myself to the

idea it would not happen since I am not a fan of cruises.

A few months later as I was reading International Travel News (ITN), I discovered a small ad for a company based in Charlotte, North Carolina called Costa Rica Tours, Ltd. They specialize in small group tours to both Costa Rica and Panama. I checked out their website (www.costaricatoursltd.com) and was quite impressed. I was delighted to see that their land tour to Panama included a full transit of the Panama Canal as a day trip which was one of my goals.

After much contemplation I called them, (704.541.8680), and was surprised when the company owner answered the phone. I asked my many questions and become more and more interested in her tour to Panama. After a few more phone conversations and comparing her small group tour to those offered by other companies, I made my decision to travel with Costa Rica Tours, Ltd. to Panama on their Canal Transit Tour from January 25 to 30, 2008.

One of the questions I had was if I could take the train from ocean to ocean which was not included in the original itinerary. Only recently has it been restored and put back in operation for both commuters and tourists. Its history also fascinated me – the train was built during the California Gold Rush of 1849 as an alternative to the dangerous crossing of our country because of Indian attacks. The owner arranged for an add-on tour the preceding day which eventually attracted eight of the fourteen passengers who had signed up for the whole excursion. When adding the costs for the pre-tour to the regular tour package, the seven-day experience cost \$1650 plus airfare.

The train departed at 7:15 AM for the 60-minute ride from Panama City on the Pacific side to Colon on the Atlantic/Caribbean side. The geography of Panama is most interesting because the Pacific Ocean is actually on the South and the Caribbean Sea is on the North. Thus, the Panama Canal runs for 50 miles generally north and south and the country of Panama generally runs east and west. Once on the Caribbean side our guide and driver met us at the train station and took us to Portobelo where we toured the former protected port located in a secluded bay about 20 miles from the end of the canal. Christopher Columbus first arrived there in 1503. During the 16th to 18th centuries gold and silver that came from Peru were transported from the Pacific to the Atlantic on a trail called, the Royal Path, to await ships to transport the precious cargo to Spain. Goods were stored in the Customs House. Several forts surrounded Portobelo to protect the port from pirates, including Henry Morgan. Also in Portobelo we visited the historic church where the famous Black Christ statue rests. After lunch at an interesting restaurant in Portobelo that specialized with local food choices, we returned to Panama City in a van.

Our group along with 200 other passengers transited the Panama Canal on the second day of our tour. We left at 7:30am from Panama City, went through the entire canal in 8 hours, and returned on a motor coach in 90 minutes. While on the boat, we watched and listened to a detailed description of the history, and what we were seeing. Being on a small boat one gains an awareness of the enormity of the locks which is lost to passengers on a cruise ship that entirely fills the lock chamber.

Having read McCullough's book was a wonderful asset in preparation for the tour. Although there was a lot in his volume that I had forgotten, learning more about the French involvement and their disastrous first attempt to build the canal was dramatic. Also, up until then I had not fully appreciated the tenacity of President Theodore Roosevelt. The trip was a terrific reinforcement for the information described in the book.

On the next day, we took a day land tour to El Valle de Anton, a town located in the crater of one of the world's largest extinct volcanoes. It is some 75 miles from Panama City and takes about two hours to get there. On the way we saw the beautiful scenic mountains of rural Panama. While in El Valle, we visited the Sunday market where we bought local crafts created by Ngobe Bugle (Guaymi) artisans and appliquéd textiles (molas) made by the Kuna artisans. We also visited El Nispero Botanical Gardens & Zoo where we saw unusual tropical flora and fauna. In addition we had a chance to walk in the surrounding rain forest. While in town we had lunch and then visited a museum and an art gallery.

The following day was our full-day Panama City tour. As we traveled from one section of the city to the other, we saw the many modern skyscrapers which surprised most of us. We also saw the 16th century ruins of the original city, now known as Panama La Vieja. Afterwards, we visited Colonial Panama (Casco Viejo) which was built after the destruction of Panama La Vieja. The original was destroyed either by fire or by pirates (both versions are told!). We walked the narrow streets studying the impressive restoration of the buildings. We also visited the former U.S. Canal Zone to see the Miraflores Locks and the informative Visitor Center.

On our last day we had a full-day excursion to an Embera Village which was like a scene from *National Geographic*. Situated on the banks of the Chagres River in the heart of a tropical rainforest, the village is reached only by sturdy canoes (with motors). We met the gentle Embera villagers, learned about their culture, and saw their ceremonial dances. Many of us purchased their woven baskets and carved tagua nut figurines made from the hard seed of the village palm trees. The village healer showed us his garden where he raises plants to prepare his natural medicines. In the evening, we had our farewell dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Panama City.

All the passengers on the tour were professionals, mostly teachers who shared with me a desire to learn as much about the area as we could. The age level ranged from the mid 50's to the early 70's. They were great to be with which made the experience even better.

Panama is a beautiful country. Although there is poverty, Panama has the highest median income of any country in Central America. Most of the automobiles are late models and in good condition. Panama has become the new "hot" destination both for tourists and relocating retirees from the United States. Between both groups, they keep the hotel occupancy rate at about 96%.

It is easy to travel in Panama. United States paper money is their currency. Since the electrical service is the same as ours, there is no need for a converter. The tap water is safe to drink. The food in Panama is good, plentiful, and inexpensive. Supermarkets are large and well stocked. Road side fruit and vegetable stands are very appealing selling fresh produce that tastes wonderful, especially the pineapple.

The name "Panama" comes from an Indian language and means a place of many fish. We frequently ate corvina, or Panamanian sea bass which was prepared in different and interesting ways each time. We also had delicious tilapia with plantain and fruit in the Embera Village.

Had I not found McCullough's book on sale, chances are I would not have made the trip, at least not at this time. Now that I am home I have decided to reread it. So be careful what you read. You might end up with an incurable urge to go to Panama.