

PANAMA CANAL 2010

This trip started out as many of ours do, with something I got in the mail. It was a bonanza! I got mailings from Princess, Viking, Regent, and one other cruise line in one day's mail!

We had been discussing what we wanted to do in the coming winter, and Princess offered a 10 day cruise with a partial transit of the Panama Canal.

Kathy had always wanted to see it, and this would be a perfect opportunity. The ship leaves from Fort Lauderdale, and my mother lives about a half hour north of there. We plan to stop by after our cruise on the way to the airport and spend some time with her, as we booked a late afternoon flight.

It should be a very relaxing cruise with 3 sea days, and one of the ports was Limon in Costa Rica.

I found I had a handful of Costa Rican coins, but when I checked out the exchange rate, they came to less than a dollar.

Because we lived on the West Coast, it is difficult to get flights that arrive in time for our cruise. Kathy said she did not mind a red-eye, so I went on line and found an Air Tran flight from LAX to Fort Lauderdale via Atlanta. It left at 11 PM, and we should be able to get some sleep. Since the 2 days after departure are sea days, we can sleep late to catch up.

The problem with making air arrangements early is that they are always subject to change. Our departure from LAX has changed twice, and our flight from West Palm has been moved from 7 PM to 4:30 PM.

In speaking to an Air Tran agent, we were told that when we go to print out our boarding passes 24 hours before our flight, we can fly Business Class for \$129 extra! Well, in coach it would cost \$60 for our 2 bags, and in Business Class they are free. Therefore, it really only costs \$69 extra to fly Business Class.

I got on line at one 23 hour and 59 minutes before our flight, and nailed 2 seats! While I was at it, I also got Business Class for the Atlanta-Fort Lauderdale leg.



FORT LAUDERDALE

We arrived about noon, and I waited for our luggage. After some time, 3 of our 4 bags arrived, but the 4th was nowhere to be seen! That bag had my suit and blazer in it, so I was quite anxious. I went to the baggage office, and there sitting outside the office was my bag! Air Tran had an earlier flight from Atlanta, and for some reason they put it on that one. The man in the office said he had paged me, but I am sure he paged me after the 10 AM flight while we were still in the air!

Well all's well that ends well, and we were taken to the ship by a circuitous route. That was to avoid the backup of cars and vans taking other passengers to the ships. There were at least 5 ships docked, so the congestion was enormous.

AT SEA

The first two days of the cruise were seas days, so we were able to catch up on lost sleep. The first thing we did when we got on board was to call and make arrangements for the Chef's Table. This is a unique dining experience combining a visit to the galley with a private dinner for only 10 people.

We met the Maitre D' outside the dining room, and were fitted with white coats to enter the galley.



We were then escorted to the galley where we met one of the head chefs and were handed a glass of champagne. We were then served a series of hors d'oeuvres that were spectacular!



After that, we were taken to a special table in the dining room. The main course was spectacular! It was medallions of beef, veal, and venison skewered on hanging spiked clubs and flambéed.



The dessert was also spectacular, consisting of a spun sugar hollow tetrahedron with a sugar zigzag spike on top.



All in all, it was a fantastic experience, and well worth it.

ARUBA

We just had to walk across the dock from where our shop was docked to board a sleek sailing catamaran. We boarded our catamaran and enjoyed a tropical fruit punch during our scenic Cruise. They told us the rum punch was for after we were through snorkeling. We were taken on a snorkeling expedition to one of Aruba's famed coral gardens. At the reef site, we snorkeled and explored a shallow coral garden featuring star, brain, and willowy sea rod corals. Parrotfish, blue tangs, and schools of chromis were swimming past us.



Then we sailed to the "Antilla", which was a German freighter scuttled by the captain to prevent it falling into Dutch hands at the beginning of WW2. This 440-foot-long shipwreck attracted schools of fish to its coral and sponge-encrusted decks. Unfortunately, it was too deep to get any decent pictures with my underwater camera. After our snorkel the sails were hoisted for a relaxing coastal cruise that included the rum punch we were promised.

CARTAGENA

Our guide escorted us to a photo stop at San Felipe Fortress. The peddlers were swarming around us like flies, and we had to shoo them off. We then headed to Las Bovedas (The Dungeons) which had been converted to artisans' shops.



Outside the walled city we boarded the horse carriage for a ride lasting approximately one hour. We enjoyed traveling along the narrow streets of the old city, passing churches and squares, and seeing the Spanish colonial architecture for which the city is known.



After the ride, there was free time to shop before rejoining the guide and returning to the ship. We stopped by an emerald museum, and I had already made up my mind that Kathy would not leave without an emerald. Well, there was a beautiful diamond shaped pendant with a central emerald and small emeralds in each of the four corners that “spoke” to her. Of course, I said she had to have the matching earrings! While we were at it, I found a beautiful gold charm of an Inca figure with an emerald in its center. The only problem was we had to call my credit card company and speak to three different people to get the sale authorized. After getting back on the bus, I apologized profusely to the other people for the delay.



PANAMA CANAL

We were supposed to travel the hemisphere's first transcontinental railroad, built in 1855, and see the Panama Canal in style in a deluxe railway car. However, due to extremely heavy rains, there was flooding and landslides along the route, so the tour was cancelled.

The flooding of Gatun Lake was so bad they opened all the spillways on the Gatun Dam, and also opened all the locks on the Canal. The flow was so great, that the canal was closed for the first time since 1921. What we had was a missed tour, but there were cruise ships that were doing the complete passage to the Pacific Ocean that were delayed two days.

What that meant was that the ships would have to miss a couple of their Pacific ports to arrive on time for passengers to make their airline connections. This is similar to what happened to us on a Danube River cruise when we were stuck for 2 days. We also had to bypass 2 ports to get to our final destination on time.





We transited the locks and sailed into Gatun Lake. In the distance we could see the mist and spray from the water going over the spillways of Gatun Dam. We cruised the lake for a few hours, and then transited the locks out to the Caribbean. We were supposed to dock at the port of Colon, but the wind and weather prevented us from docking. Frankly, other than the Duty Free store, there was nothing to see there anyway.

PUERTO LIMON

We enjoyed a scenic section of the mighty Reventazon River as we assisted the guide paddling through the Class II whitewater. We first boarded our air-conditioned bus for the approximately 90-minute drive to the rafting facility and our put-in point. There, our guide provided basic instruction and paddling technique as well as a safety briefing. We then set out on our approximately 90-minute rafting trip. Designed for the entire family, our trip featured wide-open stretches of water punctuated by small Class II rapids.



Neither Kathy nor I had done it before, and it was an absolute hoot! Later Kathy asked if there were places in California to do white water rafting, and I know there are some on the American River in Central California.

Our take-out point was near a streamside banana plantation, but it rained recently, and we had to slog through some mud to get to the road. We then returned to the rafting center for lunch before we returned to the ship.

OCHO RIOS

River tubing was the coolest way to see Jamaica's tropical countryside - and it is a great family outing. In fact, it is one of Jamaica's best-kept secrets. Kathy had done some tubing in Yosemite many years ago, but nothing like this

After a 40-minute transfer to Spanish Bridge, a landmark from the 17th century, we received our specially designed inner tube and a brief orientation. We then embarked on our two- to three-mile float down the White River past old plantations and small, quaint riverside houses.





This excursion was really a lot of fun. Our guides were singing calypso songs as we went down the river, and were kidding with us all the way. After our approximately one-hour float trip there was time to relax and enjoy the tropical splendor and explore the gift shop or bar prior to our return to the ship. We made arrangements with our driver to drop us off at a shopping center and pick us up later. We bought 3 pounds of the famous Jamaica Blue coffee. The beans sell in Jamaica for about 1/3 the going price in the States. Kathy also bought some rum cakes as gifts for some friends of hers. (and 2 for us). We stopped for lunch and I tasted Jamaican jerk chicken for the first time and loved it. The chef also stopped by and gave us a bottle of his secret jerk sauce to take home.

AT SEA

The final day of our cruise was a sea day, so we packed very leisurely and ate dinner at the buffet. I also had the pictures of tubing printed in case the CD we bought got trashed somehow.

FT. LAUDERDALE

We had a funny thing happen the morning of debarking. I normally put my glasses on the bedside table at night, but for some reason I left them in the bathroom. Kathy usually leaves hers in the bathroom. When I went into the bathroom to get my glasses, they were gone, but Kathy's were there. It does not take rocket science to figure out that in her sleepiness, she put mine on. I went out to our balcony, where she was sitting, and told her what had happened. She was still half asleep, but thanked me as she was going to complain to the eye doctor about the glasses they sold her!

We got off the ship, and picked up our rental car. We could have taken the Interstate to Boynton Beach to see my 97 year old mother, but decided to take the scenic route along the Atlantic Coast. It would have been too slow to go all the way on the coastal road, so we got off the Interstate just below Boca Raton and drove to the coastal road. We stopped a couple of times to look at the beaches and the ocean, and finally arrived at my mother's place.

We had a delightful visit with her, and headed to the West Palm Beach airport. When we got there, we were informed that there was freezing rain in Atlanta, and our flight would be delayed until 8 PM, instead of taking off at 5 PM. About 5:45, we decided to grab something to eat, and as we finished, I told Kathy I was going to check on our flight. When I got to the gate, I saw they were boarding the aircraft! It was a good thing we stayed close while we ate! We boarded the flight, and the trip was uneventful, but we were glad we had upgraded to Business Class.

Our flight from Atlanta was delayed, slightly, and we did not get to LAX until about 12:45 AM! There was a very long wait for our luggage, and we finally got home at 3AM and collapsed into bed.

All in all, it was a great trip, although we were a little disappointed in missing the railroad tour in Panama. The Chef's Table dinner and the Sabatini dinner on board were fantastic, the ship was comfortable, and the other tours were great. One thing we did learn was that 30 years ago it was OK for us to do the red-eye flights, but now they have just taken too much out of us.

Our next trip will be to see Yellowstone National Park in January, and we are looking forward to it.

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