

# CRUISING THE

**A** cruise through the Panama Canal immerses you in a stunning contrast of the man-made and the natural: Hydrotechnology on a vast scale is surrounded by unspoiled, dense jungle. The canal unites the world's two largest oceans, the Atlantic and the Pacific, via the Isthmus of Panama. Cruise ship passengers can experience the wonder of the canal, view exotic flora and fauna and learn about some of the cultures of Central America.

The waterway has facilitated more than 922,000 oceangoing transits since opening in 1914, allowing ships to avoid sailing several thousand extra miles around the tip of South America. The canal uses three sets of locks — compartments with entry and exit gates — which serve as lifts to manipulate vessels as large as 90,000 tons.

An average of 55 million gallons of water is fed by gravity into the locks, which raise ships above sea level from the Atlantic or Pacific oceans into Gatun Lake. From there, they are lowered back down to sea level into the opposite ocean. The locks are named after the town sites where they were built: Gatun, Pedro Miguel and Miraflores.

"Many people go for the full-fledged experience of entering the locks and being dropped down, taking a whole day to go through the canal," says Cheryl Cunningham, manager at Vacations To Go, a Houston-based travel agency and leading discounter of cruises. A full transit of the canal, traversing the 50-mile waterway through all three sets of locks, takes an average of eight to 10 hours. Full-transit cruises typically last at least 14 days, though limited numbers of itineraries may be available for as few as nine or 10 days from cruise lines such as Princess, Cruise West and Crystal.

Another option is a partial transit of

the canal, in which the ship enters through one set of locks into Gatun Lake, the largest man-made lake in the world. It then turns around, exiting as it came in and frequently disembarking at the same port where the cruise began. This option enables travelers to save money on airfare, as they can purchase round-trip tickets rather than the two one-way tickets required for a full-transit cruise. Partial-transit cruises typically last at least 10 days.

## *Transit the Panama Canal amid lush jungles, exotic wildlife and vibrant towns*

*By Michelle White*

There are several options for sailing the canal, which is one of the most popular cruise destinations in the world. Ocean liners rated from three and a half to six stars visit the canal, and cruises embark from many domestic ports — commonly in South Florida and Southern California — as well as international ports such as Vancouver, British Columbia, and San Jose, Costa Rica. The dry season from December through April is the best time for a Panama Canal cruise.

Panama is a country of virgin rainforests, colonial Spanish forts, beautiful beaches and historic towns. Some cruises sail to the San Blas Archipelago, inhabited by the self-governing, indigenous Kuna people. The Kuna preserve traditional ways of life, living in thatched huts and selling handicrafts, and the women dress in intricately embroidered mola blouses. Many cruises also visit neighboring Costa Rica, where you can zip through the lush forest canopy on an aerial

tram tour; spot turtles, toucans, scarlet macaws and howler monkeys on a guided hike; and see Poas Volcano, where an emerald lake sits within a massive crater.

"Panama Canal cruises are excellent for those who like active adventure," says Cunningham. Many cruises today focus in depth on the environment and visit biological stations and wildlife refuges. "You're seeing miles of rain forests and exotic birds and butterflies," she says. "The show is all outdoors."

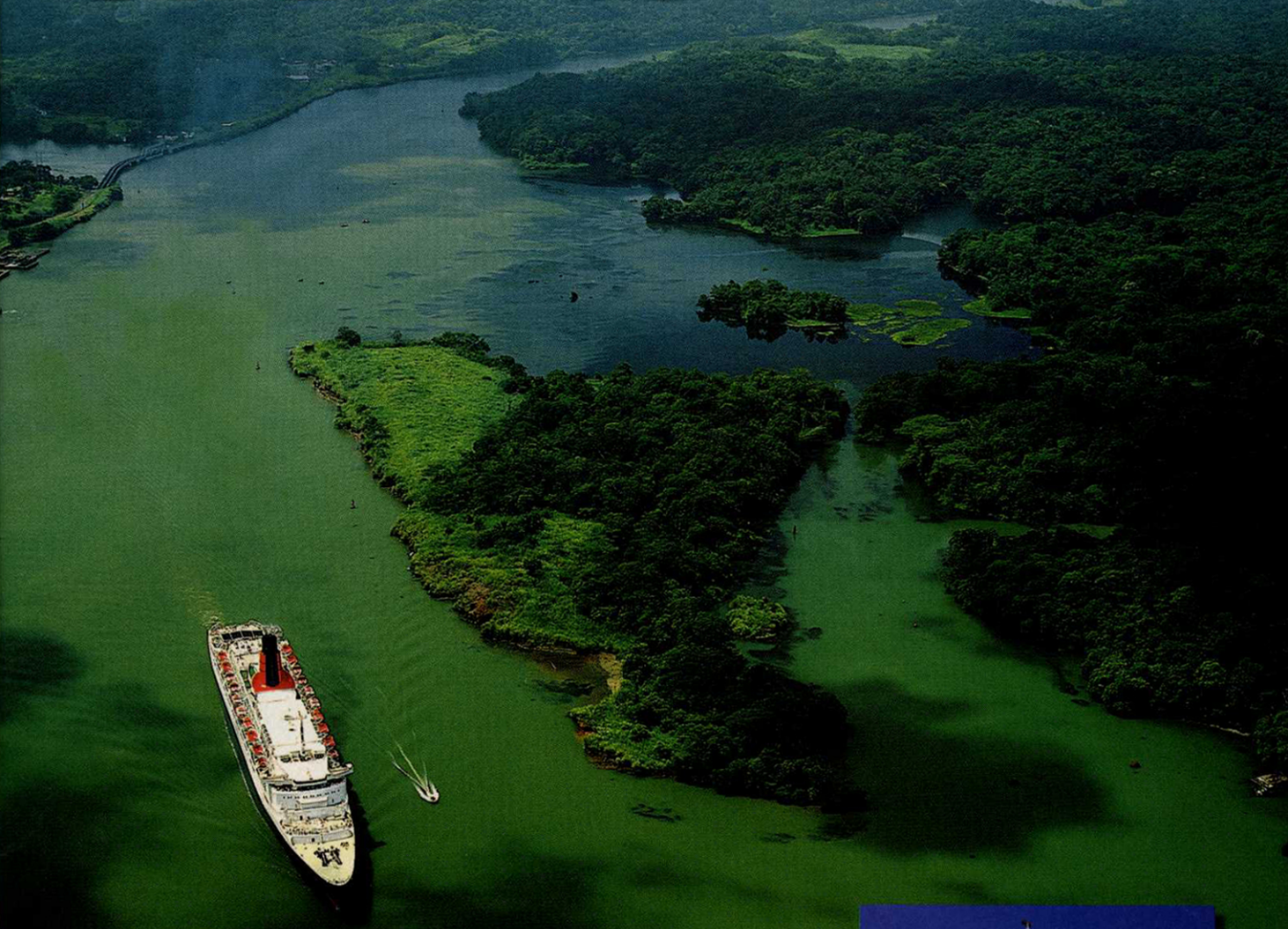
For a more intimate exploration of the region, consider a small-ship cruise. Cruise West offers itineraries that call at ports in Panama and Costa Rica on the 100-passenger Pacific Explorer. On some itineraries, passengers explore the canal via a local excursion boat. Zodiac landing craft allow you to get even more up close and personal with peaceful islets, mangroves, throngs of seabirds and rivers lined with lush vegetation.

On Cruise West itineraries, you can visit Costa Rica's Orchid House, Manuel Antonio National Park and Corcovado National Park; snorkel with manta rays and puffer fish at Isla de Coiba, Panama's largest island; encounter a remote Embera village nestled in the Darien Jungle; and see vine-draped trees hosting hundreds of bird species, three-toed sloths and monkeys.

The French first attempted to build a canal in 1881. They encountered engineering failures and significant cost overruns, but perhaps the greatest threat to the project were tropical diseases that took the lives of some 22,000 men, including many project leaders, within seven years. The French company went bankrupt and abandoned the task, and the United States took over in 1904. The Americans achieved greater success, eradicating yellow fever and greatly reducing the risk of malaria in the area. The



# CANAL



Above: Dense jungle lines the Panama Canal, which has facilitated more than 922,000 transits since opening in 1914. Below, from left: The San Blas Archipelago is home to the indigenous Kuna people. Panama's cuisine incorporates influences from native Indians, Europeans and Latin America. A handful of Panama Canal itineraries with Cruise West, a small-ship line, call at Panama City, where visitors can view the Metropolitan Cathedral.







PANAMANIAN INSTITUTE OF TOURISM

Passenger and commercial vessels move through the canal via a series of locks.

is planning to build a new, third lane along the canal in the largest project since the original construction. This expansion will double the canal's capacity and reuse water to preserve freshwater resources along the canal. The project is estimated to cost \$5.25 billion. According to the Panama Canal Authority, current operations should not be interrupted, and construction is estimated for completion in 2014.

View cruise itineraries in the Panama Canal at [www.VacationsToGo.com/panama](http://www.VacationsToGo.com/panama).

canal was completed at a cost of \$375 million to the United States. In 1914, the SS Ancon was the first ship to officially transit the waterway, beginning a new era in world commerce.

When the Panama Canal was built, it accommodated the largest vessels afloat. Today, many cargo ships are

built precisely to the maximum dimensions that will allow passage through the canal; these are called Panamax ships. "Post-Panamax" ships are too large to transit the canal; at press time, this included 21 cruise ships. To accommodate ever-increasing traffic demands, the Panama Canal Authority

A Panama Canal cruise offers an unforgettable experience, juxtaposing man's engineering vision with nature's resources. Much has remained unchanged around the canal in the near century since its opening, but future expansion plans make this a unique time to experience the canal and its tropical environment in a pristine state.

**Information:** To learn more about cruising the Panama Canal, call Vacations To Go at (800) 338-4962, or visit [www.VacationsToGo.com/panama](http://www.VacationsToGo.com/panama). **V**



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