

October 15, 2003

We spent a very busy 11 days at the Balboa Yacht Club acquiring provisions and supplies, socializing, and getting ready for our transit of the Panama Canal. Phil’s brother, John, and his son Brad flew in the night of September 12 to transit the canal with us on Sunday, September 14. On the 13th we took them to the Panama Canal Museum where it was fascinating to look at the early motion pictures made during the building of the canal, especially as we had all read the book, The Path Between the Seas, by David McCullough covering the creation of the Panama Canal.

Our transit through the Panama Canal was a day we will always remember. John and Brad spent Saturday night onboard as we were told that morning by the Panama Canal Authority (PCA) that our canal advisor would be arriving on Sunday at 6:30 a.m. To be ready to transit on time, we awoke at 4:30 a.m. To transit the canal, one is required to have a helmsman and 4 line handlers. Ray and Eileen, cruisers off another sailboat, came along as our additional line handlers. Upon calling the PCA Flamenco Signal at 6:15 a.m., we were told that our advisor would be arriving at 7:30 a.m. At 7:30 a.m. we were told that our advisor would actually be boarding at 8:20 a.m. as we were now scheduled to go into the Miraflores Locks at 9:20 a.m. Well, so much for schedules!

At 8:20 a.m. we undid our line to the mooring ball at the Balboa Yacht Club and waved goodbye to the other cruising boats there. We were the first of the cruising boats presently at the Balboa Yacht Club to transit. As we maintained a minimum boat speed, the PCA launch came alongside, our advisor jumped aboard, and off we started on our transit of the Panama Canal. Prior to our transit, we had studied and read all that had been written concerning the transit of the Panama Canal by a small vessel and the potential problems and accidents that have occurred to small boats while in the locks. Pat, our Canal advisor, was a young tugboat captain for the Panama Canal and very knowledgeable in all aspects of the Canal operation. We felt very lucky to have him as our advisor. Pat definitely made us all feel relaxed. He told us that we had been given our first transit choice which was to go alongside a PCA tug.

*Bridge of the Americas  
Entrance to Canal*



*Balboa Yacht Club Anchorage*



*Pilot Boat With Advisor On Board*

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It took us about one hour to motor to the Miraflores Locks from the Balboa Yacht Club. The Miraflores Locks were the first set of chamber locks that we were to go through as our boat was lifted up from the Pacific to the Continental Divide. We were to share the lock with the ship Wani Falcon, a dry-bulk carrier. Upon arriving at the locks, we waited almost another ½ hour before finally entering the first chamber. As we were “uplocking”, the ship went first into the chamber guided by the tug. Once the tug was tied to the side wall of the lock, we went alongside and tied to the tug. Ray was in charge of throwing and retrieving the two bow lines, Mary was in charge of throwing and retrieving the stern line, and Phil was the helmsman. Once our two bow lines and stern line were secured, we passed and secured two spring lines to the tug. There was much horizontal water turbulence as the locks quickly filled, taking about 12 minutes to fill the entire chamber. Once filled, a bell signal rang. The ship started its prop and moved slowly forward into the next chamber guided by locomotives. When given the signal from our advisor we detached from the tug, moved away so that the tug could proceed first into the next chamber, and then attached Kuhela once again to the tug after it was secured to the wall in the second chamber. In the two chambers of the Miraflores Locks, we were elevated a total of 54 feet. After completing those two chambers, it was amazing to look back at the Pacific at a much lower level.



We proceeded slowly behind the tug and Wani Falcon the mile across Miraflores Lake to the Pedro Miguel Locks. Here, the same identical procedure was used as before. We rose 31 more feet in the single chamber of the Pedro Miguel Locks, making the total elevated height 85 feet. We now had arrived at the Gaillard or Culebra Cut, the narrowest stretch in the Panama Canal covering 8 miles and crossing the Continental Divide. The carving through the rock and shale in this stretch was the most formidable obstacle that had to be overcome during the construction of the Panama Canal. Even now there are landslides in the area.

After passing through the Gaillard Cut, we traveled across the main shipping channel in Gatun Lake until we arrived at the entrance to the Banana Cut Channel. With the approval of our advisor, we turned right and took this shorter and more picturesque route to the Gatun Locks. While traveling along the Banana Cut we were treated to a couple of Howler monkeys swinging among the branches in the nearby trees, and it almost looked as if they were waving us on in our journey. The main shipping channel from the San Pedro Miguel Locks to the Gatun Locks was 29 miles, and the Banana Cut saved us about 3 miles.



*Pedro Migule Locks*



*Advisor and Crew  
Along Side Tug*

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Because the Gaillard Cut is still too narrow in places for two big ships to pass each other, only “uplocking” takes place during the morning hours at all the locks. Each lock is 1000 feet long and 110 feet wide. The schedule is coordinated so that those with the largest beams pass each other in Gatun Lake and not in the Cut. Small vessels, like our sailboat, are only allowed by the PCA to transit during the daylight hours. The day we transited, one of the first big ships during daylight hours that didn’t fill the entire lock was the Wani Falcon, the ship we shared the lock with when uplocking. It was also the last big ship of the morning traffic to transit the canal.



*Passing Ships  
Gaillard Cut*

During the day our advisor had been required to call PCA Traffic Control and mention our progress at specific channel markers. When he called in around 4 p. m., he was told that the Wani Falcon had already arrived at the Gatun Locks and was scheduled to go into the locks at 4:45 p.m. Because it was the last big ship that day to be “downlocking” during daylight hours, we either had to make it to the Gatun Locks by that time or else spend the night on Gatun Lake and exit the next afternoon. We had been maintaining a boat speed of 5.5 knots throughout the entire transit. At this time we increased our boat speed to 6.2 knots. As we came out of the Banana Cut Channel, we could see the Wani Falcon and the tug off in the distance and to the side of the Gatun Locks. We ended up making the locks just in time and entered the chamber immediately.



*Kuhela Through The Banna Cut*



*Down Locking Gatun Locks*

As we were now “downlocking”, we entered ahead of the ship. Since the tug was not going to accompany the ship into the locks, we had to transit center chamber, our second transit choice. Ray and John handled the two bow lines; Eileen and Mary handled the two stern lines. There were 4 PCA line handlers along the walls of the chamber assigned to our boat. Each threw a heaving line with a monkey fist weight attached across the boom of our sailboat. We then attached the loop at the end of our transit lines to their heaving lines and they pulled in our lines fitting our end loops over the bollards. Afterwards, we took in the slack until Kuhela was centered in the chamber. Once the ship had entered and the water in the chamber began to drain, the four of us let out our lines slowly. When finally the “bathtub was drained” and the water was equalized with that in the following chamber, the PCA line handlers (now high up on the chamber wall) undid our transit lines from the bollards. We then pulled in quickly our lines with their heaving lines still attached, and as Kuhela moved slowly forward to the next chamber the PCA line handlers walked forward alongside our boat holding their heaving lines as we held their other end attached to our transit lines. In all, there were three chambers in the Gatun Locks, and we went down a total of 85 feet before reaching sea level.

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During our entire transit from the Pacific to the Atlantic, we used about 52 million gallons of fresh water from Gatun Lake. As the entire lock system was gravity fed by water from Gatun Lake, created by damming the Chagres River, and all was from rainwater, we felt quite lucky to have not had any rain during the entire day. When the third and last chamber was finally drained, and the final lock doors slowly opened and we looked out for the first time at the Caribbean, it was like a picture out of a storybook.

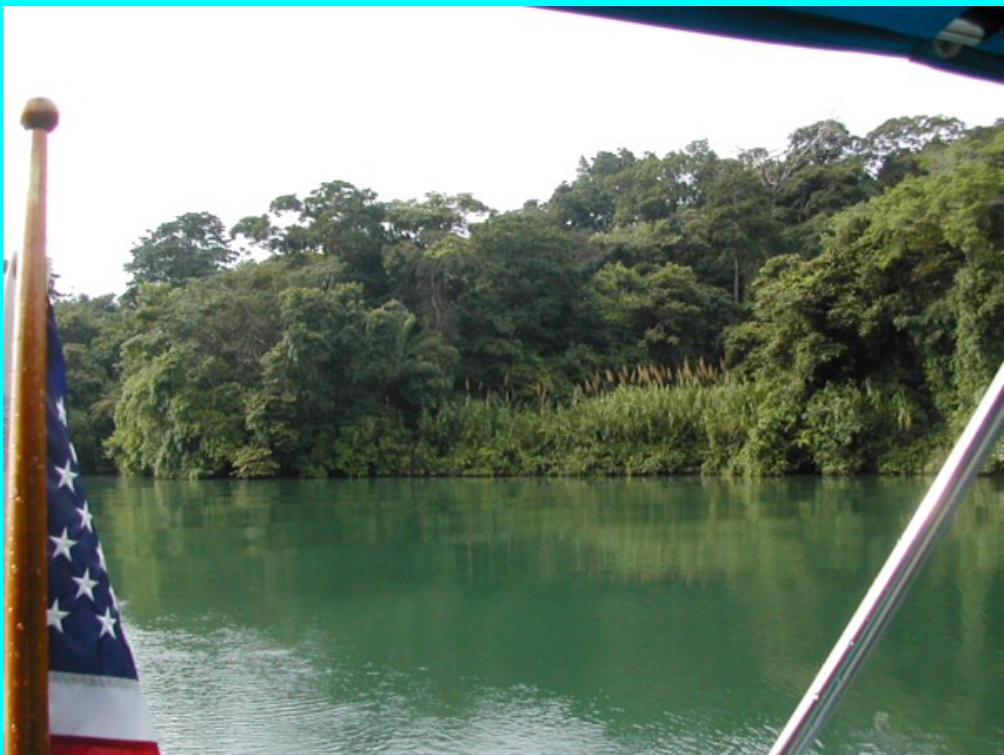
*Welcome to the Caibbean*



Dusk had arrived as we left the Gatun Locks and headed toward Cristobal. It took us one hour to make the trip. Before turning into the old French Canal where the Panama Canal Yacht Club was located, the PCA launch came alongside to pick up our advisor. If there was any scary part in our entire day, it was each time the PCA launch came alongside. As the sides of the launch came to the top of our stanchions, it was very difficult to fend off and in the process one of our stanchions was slightly bent. We arrived at the Panama Canal Yacht Club around 7 p.m. Ray and Eileen headed immediately back to the Balboa Yacht Club. John and Brad left Monday morning. We spent three days at the Panama Canal Yacht Club. While at the club, we made a quick taxi trip into Colon to replenish supplies. Colon was still a ghetto, not changed much from the Colon during the Canal construction days.

Thursday we departed for the Chagres River, 10 miles southeast of Colon and in the opposite direction from the San Blas Islands. On the promontory overlooking the entrance to the river, parts of Fort San Lorenzo dating from the 1600’s could still be seen. Once pass the narrow entrance, we traveled 5 miles up the river before anchoring. We spent 2 peaceful days anchored in the river observing and listening to the monkeys and birds in the surrounding forest and enjoying, for a change, the smell of fresh river water. On Friday we tried out our new outboard motor traveling by dinghy first up one of the small tributaries and then afterwards heading up the Chagres River toward Gatun Dam. We hiked along the old railroad ties used to transport supplies during the building of the dam. While on the hike we observed colonies of leaf-cutting ants and were entertained by all the little leaves “marching” toward their respective holes.

*Anchored in the Chagres River*



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*Leaf Ants on the March*



Saturday morning, September 20, we departed the Chagres River and headed for the San Blas Islands, passing once again Cristobal and the many-anchored ships waiting to transit the Canal. As there was little to no wind, we either motored or motorsailed. It took us 2 days to get to the San Blas Islands. We traveled 35 miles the first day, anchoring Saturday night in Isla Linton just as a rain shower hit. Now that we were anchoring in the Caribbean, a tide variance of only 2 feet had to be taken into account. On Sunday we traveled 50 miles to the Chichime Cays, our first anchorage in the San Blas. Again, the rain showers hit just as we were entering the reef pass into the Chichime Cays and didn't cease until anchored. So much for timing!



The San Blas Islands where the Chichime Cays are located are the home of the Kunas, one of the indigenous groups of Latin America. Their land encompasses 365 islands and also the mainland mountainous coastal strip that runs the length of the archipelago. Most live either in communities on 48 of the offshore islands or in 9 settlements along the coastal fringe. Since 1938 the Kunas have had almost autonomous rule of their province, Kuna Yala, with only minimal interference from the Panama government. This has enabled them to keep their culture and language intact. The dugout canoe is still the main form of transportation, and the Kunas continue to live in traditional huts, the sides being made from reeds or cane and the thatch roof from palm fronds. The hammock, used as both a chair and a bed, is the main item in most huts. While Kuna men dress western, most Kuna women still wear their traditional dress.

Our first anchorage in the Chichime Cays was idyllic. We anchored in crystal clear water surrounded by two sand cays, each no larger than about the size of a football field, and one very small cay with just a few palm trees. A protective reef mostly encircled these cays, and the sound of the surf against the outer reef could be heard off in the distance. No sooner had we anchored than we were approached by Kuna women paddling out in two dugout canoes wishing to sell their "molas", the traditional Kuna handicraft. We ended up purchasing a few molas during our stay in Chichime. Also at this anchorage, we were befriended by Eulogio, a Kuna who had gone to college in Walla Walla, Washington. He showed us around and introduced us to some of the Kuna culture and words. He and the other few families at these cays were from the Carti Islands and were staying there to protect and harvest the coconuts. This responsibility was rotated among all the families in the Carti group, with each rotation lasting about 3 months. Once harvested, the coconuts were sold to Colombia.

***Kuna Woman with Mola***



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Wednesday morning, September 24, we departed the Chichime Cays and headed to the Carti Islands, about 12 miles away. Eulogio came along as he had invited us to visit his island, Carti Sugtupu. Upon approaching these islands careful navigation was needed as there were quite a few reefs to dodge. All four small islands in this group were so densely populated; each island was totally covered in huts. As the Kuna society was matrilineal, puberty rites for girls were big celebrations. Eulogio had originally invited us to one of these celebrations. Unfortunately, as he was out in Chichime and not in the village, he ended up being told the wrong day. We still had a most delightful afternoon. He showed us around the entire island village. We went inside the large meeting (congreso) hut and the chicha hut where the celebrations took place. The alcoholic drink chicha used in the celebrations was made in the chicha hut from fermented sugar cane juice. We also visited the small Kuna museum and walked by the medical clinic and school. While touring the island, we were especially impressed with its cleanliness. To keep disease down, even an artificial "chicken" island had been created off the islands just for housing the chickens. The Carti islanders through their tribal leaders had voted to purchase a generator with village revenue, and so at 6 p.m. the generator came on, and for six hours the four islands had electricity and the noise from televisions could be heard.



*Kuna Man Husking Rice*



**Kuna Village**

Early Thursday morning while still anchored off of Carti Sugtupu, we watched the men from the islands leave in their canoes, some fishing and others heading to the mainland (about a mile away) to obtain water, gather wood, or farm. Living on the islands and going to the mainland during the day as needed was a way for the Kunas to keep insects and disease at a minimum. After saying goodbye to Eulogio, we departed for the Eastern Holandes Cays, about 20 miles away, once more maneuvering through the reefs. As we had purchased a "Kuna Yala" flag while in Carti Sugtupu, we now flew it alongside the Panama flag.

We spent 8 enjoyable days in the Eastern Holandes Cays at an anchorage known as "the swimming pool" because of its clear water and sandy bottom. Unlike the Chichime Cays, these cays were much larger and more numerous. Some were uninhabited; the rest had just a few families living on them. Because of this, only a few dugout canoes came by during our stay trying to sell molas. As mangroves existed on some of the larger cays, "no-see-ums" were a problem when there wasn't any wind, which was the case on a few days. During our travels along the Pacific side of Panama, not many cruising boats had been moving about at this time of year. Once through the canal the increase in the cruising boats was quite noticeable, especially from the eastern United States and Europe. As this anchorage was quite popular, there were already ten other boats anchored when we arrived Thursday afternoon.

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Unlike the remote Pacific side of Panama where it had been difficult to acquire supplies, some Kunas made it a business to provide food supplies to the cruising boats at these outer anchorages. Every few days they would come by selling food items and taking orders. While in this anchorage we did much socializing. Saturday evening a couple invited us to dinner onboard their boat. The day before we had been given a fish by the same two. Monday night we attended the official "social" gathering of the week on the beach to burn trash and visit while sharing appetizers. Tuesday we drift-dinghy snorkeled with two other boats. Wednesday night everyone gathered again on the beach as someone had caught a big fish and wished to share it.



Friday, October 3, we departed the Eastern Holandes Cays for Green Island, 8 miles away. We spent 3 days anchored inside the reef of this uninhabited island enjoying its solitude. Unlike the many boats anchored in the Eastern Holandes, we were the lone boat at this anchorage. Only sounds from Kunas coming from the village of Nargana, 4 miles away, to fish off the reef of Green Island could be heard. Unlike the many dugout canoes at Carti propelled mostly by paddle or sail, many of the Kuna men coming to fish from Nargana had outboard motors on their dugouts. Looking out at the landscape from this anchorage, the many cays in the San Blas all seemed like a bunch of little "flat tops" sticking out from the sea as only the coconut palms could be seen.



Monday we pulled up our anchor at Green Island and headed to the Coco Banderо Cays, 3 miles away. Of all our anchorages in the San Blas, this one was our favorite and definitely the most beautiful. The cays surrounding this anchorage were uninhabited, all less than a football field in length, with only palm trees, beautiful white sand, and no mangroves. Since there were no mangroves, we didn't have the problem with "no-see-ums" like in the Holandes. The snorkeling at the Holandes and Green Island had been great, but the snorkeling at Coco Banderо was the best. We snorkeled every day along the many reef walls enjoying the large variety of beautifully colored fish and coral. Each time we snorkeled, we saw something new. Because all the cays were so close, it was fun to kayak to each of "our" small islands and then, once beaching the kayak, walk the perimeter of each cay. When we arrived at Coco Banderо, there were six boats anchored. Two days later, four boats departed. We enjoyed many hours socializing with these two remaining boats during the remainder of our stay.

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*Kuna Sailing Canoe*

After 6 wonderful days in the Coco Banderо Cays, we pulled up the anchor at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, October 12, and headed toward Cartagena, Colombia, about 200 miles away. Our stay in the San Blas had been very enjoyable with many pleasant anchorages and surprisingly good weather for this time of year, having had only brief afternoon showers on most days. It would have been quite easy to linger longer in the San Blas, but this was the perfect time to head to Cartagena before the trade winds started to set in again in November. During our two-night passage to Cartagena we had lots of squalls and sloppy seas the first half and clear skies and calm seas the second half. As there was generally little wind, we sailed only 4 hours with the remainder of the time motoring or motorsailing depending upon the conditions.

We arrived at the sea buoy off the Boca Chica entrance to Cartagena Bay at 6 a. m., Tuesday, October 14, just behind a cruise ship entering the bay. The Colombian harbor patrol boat came out to meet us and to check us in with Port Control. Two hours later we anchored off Club Nautico, two miles from the center of town. We'll be in Cartagena for a month before pushing off for Florida around November 15.



*My Island*

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