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Panama's biggest tourist draw turns 100



By **Eric Vohr**, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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While Panama is emerging as a favored destination for vacationers looking for great beaches, tropical rain forest and rich biodiversity, its first claim to fame was the Panama Canal, which celebrates its 100th anniversary this summer.

At the center of this anniversary is a new expanded lock system that can accommodate some of the world's largest cargo ships. You might be thinking: a ship canal, new locks — I think I'd rather spend my vacation lying on a beach nursing a pina colada. But whether you're 70 or 7, watching a giant container ship squeeze through one of the locks with inches to spare is a thrill.

Leave it to the French to come up with the idea of cutting a waterway through a continent and joining two oceans. Unfortunately, the project, launched in 1881, came to an abrupt end only eight years later because of high costs and an unexpectedly high mortality rate during construction. The United States took over in 1904, and on Aug. 15, 1914, the Ancon became the first ship officially to sail the length of the Panama Canal.

Since then, close to a million ships have passed through the canal. The cruise ship Norwegian Pearl paid the highest toll, \$375,600 in 2010, and Richard Halliburton paid the lowest, 36 cents, when he swam its entire length in 1928. Probably the most impressive and tragic canal fact is that it cost around 30,000 lives to build it, mostly due to tropical diseases.

The best place to learn about the canal is the Miraflores Locks at the Pacific entrance near Panama City. The on-site museum is a great source of information on the canal's past, present and future. You can even stand on the bridge of a mock ship and watch a video that simulates a passage through the canal. When you're done, step outside on the observation deck and watch the show in real time as floating leviathans squeeze through massive locks so close you feel as if you could reach out and touch them.

The best place to tour newly expanded locks (to open in December) is at the Panama Canal Expansion Observation Center in Gatun on the Caribbean end of the canal. About a 90-minute drive from Panama City, visitors can enjoy views of the waterway from a platform 150 feet above. These new locks will increase the size of ships able to pass through the canal to 1,200 feet in length, 160.7 feet in width and 49.9 feet in water depth, which raises the cargo volume significantly from 5,000 to 13,000 containers.

Technically, due to the geography of Panama, the canal doesn't run east and west but actually north and south. It's also not one continuous canal, because much of the journey is on Lake Gatun and the Chagre River.

In fact, commerce across this isthmus once used both the Chagre and a trail that ran along the canal called the Camino de Cruces. Today the Camino de Cruces is part of an 11,342-acre national park, the entrance of which is only a short distance from the Miraflores Locks. This massive wilderness area is a wildlife-watchers' paradise featuring red-and-green macaws, birds of paradise, monkeys, armadillos and three-toed sloths.

Another great way to experience the canal is a boat tour/fishing trip on Lake Gatun and its hidden side arms covered in dense jungle vegetation. Not only can you catch a lot of delicious bass, but you also get to sail alongside large container ships as they navigate the lake.

Lake Gatun is an immense and beautiful wilderness area, and fish or no fish, the trip is worth it just to get a sense of the beauty and majesty of the lake and its islands (one of which was featured in a National Geographic documentary titled "The World's Last Great Places: Rain Forests").

Panama City is the best home base for any canal excursion. If you want to stay in the heart of downtown and like being pampered, consider the new Waldorf Astoria. The sushi bar, shaped like a ship, has one of the best sake selections in the region, and the hotel is walking distance from some of Panama City's best nightclubs and casinos.

If you're looking for a younger scene that's more hip and eclectic, the recently restored colonial barrio of Casco Viejo combines Old World charm with diverse restaurants, cafes, bars, nightclubs and boutique hotels.

Before dining in Casco, take a short taxi ride up nearby Cerro Ancon. This small hill not only provides fantastic views of Panama City and the Bridge of the Americas, but also is a favorite nesting spot for toucans; the trees are full of them.

Of course, these are just a few of Panama's wonders; the isthmus nation is rife with amazing coastline, deep jungles and a biodiversity that is mind-boggling.

With all this country has to offer, the canal anniversary is just another good reason to head down and

explore. Panama has polished its brass and put on a shine, and a lot of associated events and attractions are planned.

If you're lucky enough to be there Aug. 15, expect a big party. And if you've never partied in Panama, my advice is, hold on to your Panama hat.

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If you go

Getting there: The Panamanian carrier, Copa Airlines, operates nonstops between Chicago and Panama City. A nonstop flight takes about 5 1/2 hours. Rates run about \$560 and up for a nonstop round trip.

Lodging: For high end, the Waldorf Astoria (tinyurl.com/panamawaldorf) and Los Quatro Tulipanes (loscuatrotulipanes.com). Midrange, Casa Sucre (casasucreboutiquehotel.com). Economy, Luna's Castle (lunascastlehostel.com).

Dining: High, Manolo Caracol (manolocaracol.net) and

Ego and Narciso (facebook.com/EgoNarciso). Mid, Pony Rosso (diablorosso.com) and

La Forchetta (facebook.com/pages/La-Forchetta/172249816138281).

The canal: Canal info and activities (micanaldepanama.com/centennial), Camino del Cruces National Park (tinyurl.com/canalpark), Miraflores Visitors Center (tinyurl.com/mirafloresvisit), Expansion Observation Center (tinyurl.com/observecanal), Gatun Lake Tours (<http://www.gamboatours.com/gatun-lake-expedition>).

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