

Saturday 13 January

At Sea; 13.5 knots, course 148 degrees.

Lat/Long: 13° 30.6'N 077° 58.0'W

Weather: 28.5°C

Our biggest and continuing problem is that there have been a lot of outbreaks of Norovirus (formerly called Norwalk virus) in the US and UK this winter, and the cruise ship industry has not been immune. We are on high alert due to several cases being found onboard. There have been several increasingly strict announcements and written warnings placed in the cabins. You cannot get on the ship without washing on the gangway. There are alcohol-based hand sanitizer stations at every grill, restaurant, bar and lounge entryway. Maitre 'd's are ensuring that all people sanitize before entering their dining rooms. There are now crew members who seemed permanently assigned to sanitation duty, and are seen constantly spraying Vitox and other sorts of liquids on all exposed surfaces. Rooms are being stripped and cleaned. It may be possible to break the cycle, but each time we load new people we run the risk of allowing on a new Norovirus. The risk is so high that the captain's cocktail party two night ago was cancelled for health reasons.

We are almost wallowing in the water. Our average speed is so low. It seems that we are doing little more than a third of the full speed. Since we had an extra day of sailing time, with the visit to Grand Cayman cancelled, we have to keep the speed low to arrive on time in Columbia. Of course for the cruise line this is a golden time. Sea days are revenue days, and the bars and shops and spas make extra money.

Tonight was the first full formal night, and I wore my standard tuxedo while Pam wore her slinky black dress with the black stones stitched on to the shoulders. Dinner was of course superb. There are three grill restaurants for the three levels of first class (439 seats total), then the Caronia (554 seats) as a sort of upper middle class, then the Mauretania Restaurant with two seatings of 530 for all standard cabins. Our restaurant, Britannia Grill, has a single seating for 108 people, and is situated in the forward starboard area of the Upper Deck.



QE2 in Cartagena harbour

Sunday, 14 January

Cartegena, Columbia 7:00am 7:00pm

Docked at the container port

Lat/Long: 10° 24.3' W 075° 31.9' N

Weather: 31°C

The original schedule called for us to moor at Puerto Moin, Limon, Republic of Costa Rica. However, the Costa Rican authorities have failed to dredge the harbour. So instead we are off to visit Cartagena, Columbia. We are the sole passenger ship in port as Columbian tourism has been hard hit by US warnings to cruise ship lines.

The pilot came aboard at exactly 06:00 and we began the long run into the channel. By 07:00 we had entered the beginning of Cartagena harbour as we passed several ancient Spanish forts built to protect their colonial port from the English. By 08:00 we were alongside the pier and nearly ready to run ashore. Crew was already pouring off the ship as they had sometimes less than two hours leave.

We shared a taxi to the old walled city with Drew and Florence, and each paid \$4. On the way back to the ship it was \$3 for the entire car.

Arriving early has its benefits. We were largely alone in the historic centre of colonial Cartagena, and took the opportunity to shot lots of photos of the beautiful streets lined with balconies and flowers and cathedrals. It is Sunday so most things were closed and most people still asleep or at home. The centre of the walled city is very beautiful and well kept. Much money has been spent, and the area is full of tourist police and national police and the army. There is very little crime, at least in this part of Columbia.

Now Pam did see a woman snorting cocaine in the front seat of a taxi, but that was the only criminal act we witnessed.

We then walked out of the walled city through the central park where Pam spotted several very large iguanas, and demanded that I take several increasingly close photographs of these lizards. From here it was across the short causeway and up the hill to the very immense fortress overlooking the city and the harbour. This was a very well preserved fortress, but lacked signage and context, so very little was learned. Now back again to the walled city which had filled with tourists and locals, and finally a taxi ride back to the ship.

Cartagena was a beautiful port, and Pam was even given some uncut non-gem quality emerald bits as a gift. These are cute and make a nice souvenir.

We slipped at about 17:15 and slowly turned about and headed out of the harbour, making it to the last light as darkness fell.

Pam's notes:

Iguanas live in the central park. I was surprised to see them. We saw three of them and they were all quite large. John got pictures. Iguanas like to posture when you get near them, so the smallest one, which we saw first got bigger when John got close to it. Since he was almost a metre long, we didn't get close to the biggest one. The large iguana was almost two metres long and he lived near the food stands.

I also got to see someone snort cocaine. I thought this girl was leaning into the taxi to talk to her boyfriend, but then I saw her take a small bottle and dip what looked like a popsicle stick in and snort a white powder off of it. I guess drugs are prevalent in Colombia.

I went into an emerald store since so many hawkers were trying to get us in and this guy had given me a card for a free emerald. We saw many emeralds in jewellery and small tacky statuettes of miners. I was given three emeralds to take home for free. They are not gem quality so they just give them away to tourists like me. I appreciate them and I can make something with them or not as I please when I get back to Ottawa.



Cartegena's old cathedral and the fortress guarding the old Spanish colony



Monday, 15 January

Transiting the Panama Canal

Lat/Long: 09° 9.0'N 079° 48.7'W at 11:00

Weather: hot, mist, humid, fog,

This is the first time Pamela and I have sailed through the entire Panama Canal. In 2004 we were here on QM2, but it is too big for the canal, so we took a taxi from the port to the first locks on the Caribbean (north) side.

Work on this engineering wonder began under French direction in 1880, but was passed to the United States which completed the work in 1913. By then, perhaps as many as 27 000 workers, mostly blacks brought in during the earlier French period, had died during construction. The eighty kilometre canal cost approximately US\$375 million, and since opening on the eve of World War One, has seen more than 922 000 ships make the eight-to-ten hour transit.

The canal is a short cut across the Americas. On this segment of the voyage we sail from New York to San Francisco through the canal for a total of only 8472 kilometres, excluding port visits. Transiting around Cape Horn in South America to get to the same place would add another 12,500 kilometres to a journey.

QE2 first transited the canal in 1975. It is a snug fit for the QE2. Each lock is only 304.8 metres long by 33.5 metres wide. This ship is 293.5 metres long and 32.07 metres across. We are called a Panamax ship, as we are the maximum dimension allowed into the locks. On her first world cruise, the QM2 will have to sail around Cape Horn, as she is post-Panamax.

The ship is sold out for this segment of the world cruise. Canal passage is almost always sold out on world cruises as it is the most popular and accessible for U.S. citizens.

As noon approaches we are in Lake Gatun and making 11 knots, heading 168 degrees. We passed through the breakwater on the Colon side (Atlantic) around 06:00. Our ship is designated South 12 Zulu; meaning we are travelling south to the Pacific, are ship number 12, and are classified as zulu meaning higher priority transit.

At 07:45 we entered the lowest of the Gatun locks, and at 08:20 entered the second. The gates of the second were closed by 08:29. We began to leave the third and last lock at 09:03 and were out by 09:12, but remained attached to the multiple mules until 09:22 when we slipped and began moving on our own into Lake Gatun for the start of the transit across the narrowest part of the Americas.

It takes about eight minutes to fill a lock with the 101,000 cubic metres of water. The water comes from Gatun Lake, and flows by gravity rather than being pumped into the one hundred openings in the lock floor. This will eventually raise us 26 metres above sea level to Gatun Lake and across the continental divide.

People began taking up positions at the railings and especially on the bridge viewing deck well before sunrise. And many of them are exceptionally militant and rude. They claim the railing space as though they own it, and will actually push people away who are trying to see or take photos. Being nearly 2 metres tall gives me the advantage of seeing over most people, but I still have to put up with the being rude to other passengers.

The bulk of the day was spent in transit of Gatun Lake and the Cut to the Pacific Ocean.

During the day Pam spotted two crocodiles sunning on the banks, and one was captured in a rather acceptable photograph. It was clear and sunny and hot, and many people got sunburned from staying out too long.

We entered the PedroMiguel lock at 13:30 and the lock was closed at 13:55. The lock was re-opened at the southern end at 14:12.

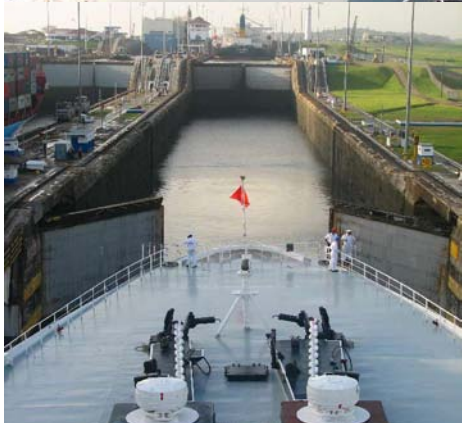
We arrived at the first Miraflores lock at 15:05, and the middle gates were opened at 15:19. During this time we were passing the Miraflores visitors centre where hundreds of people were gathered to watch our transit to the Pacific. There was lots of cheering and waving and in reply the QE2 blew the horn several times. We moved into the last lock at 15:29, and it was opened to the ocean at 15:42 and we moved a minute later.

This is not a free service. The company charges according to size and weight and type of vessel. Back in 1984 the QE2 paid US\$90,000 for transit. The lowest toll ever paid was 36 cents by a swimmer in 1928, and the highest was US\$249,165.00 for the Maersk Dellys container ship in 2006.

Pam's notes:

Today I spotted two crocodiles from the ship. (see below) They were both sleeping of course and they didn't look very vicious but they were big. They would need to be big for me to spot them from seven stories high and at least one ship width from the shore. I have bad pictures of both of them. John didn't even believe that I had spotted the first one until he photographed it and enlarged the picture. The canal is surrounded by jungle and there is a lot of construction going on.





Tuesday, 16 January

Fuerte Amador, (Ciudad de Panama), Panama 7:00am 6:00pm

Tendering

Lat/Long: 08° 57'N 79° 32'W

Weather: sunny, hot, slightly humid.

The new cruise terminal for Panama City is the abandoned US military site down the three kilometre causeway.

Today we took our first free excursion courtesy of the travel agent. Called the Panama Gold & Colonial History tour, we expected lots of colonial history. What we got was very little actual Panama City history, and instead spent two-thirds of the time in a factory and back at the Miraflores locks.

We started by driving past the ruins of the original city of Panama, without stopping to see this treasure, to an industrial park to see a factory where workers make copies of pre-Columbian gold and silver pieces, and of natural objects such as flowers and shells. Getting to see the entire process up close was very interesting. The company, Reprosa, uses the lost wax process for copies of the treasures. At the end we were all given a gift bag of hot sauce, coffee, liquor and pork rinds.

Now it was already lunch time and we drove back across town to the Miraflores locks visitors centre where a room had been set aside for our lunch and local entertainment. Several young girls danced for us. So did young boys, but I think it is bad form to look at any of them. The strangest part was that no ships were transiting the canal the entire time we were present. No ships at all, in either direction, for an hour! How bizarre.

Finally we were off to visit Panama Casca Vieja. The old city is amazing, but to get to it, and to the area of the presidential palace, anyone must transit through a slum. The narrow streets wind back and forth between tall decrepit buildings housing the poor of Panama City. This was the area in which the CIA employee Manuel Noriega had the headquarters of his military dictatorship until the US government decided he was a liability and deposed him in a destructive and deadly invasion.

Casca Vieja is now undergoing extensive restoration and renovation, as old historic buildings are being bought up, cleared of tenants, and turned into condos and expensive apartments and clubs and restaurants. It has become the trendy part of town. Yet it retains the charm of a place not yet yuppified. There are many beautiful colonial structures, and the streets are still filled with brightly clothed residents instead of tourists. The narrow streets with the colourful overhanging balconies are superb subjects for photography, as are the children and street vendors.

Pam's notes:

We went on an excursion to a jewellery factory where they make reproductions of pre-Columbian items. They have permission to use the actual artifacts for the original

moulds. They use lost wax casting to make the figures. They also gold plate some silver items and we saw the whole process while we were there. I bought two hematite necklaces from a street vendor for 5 dollars. I am very pleased with my purchase since I found out later that the duty free shop was charging 6 dollars for one.

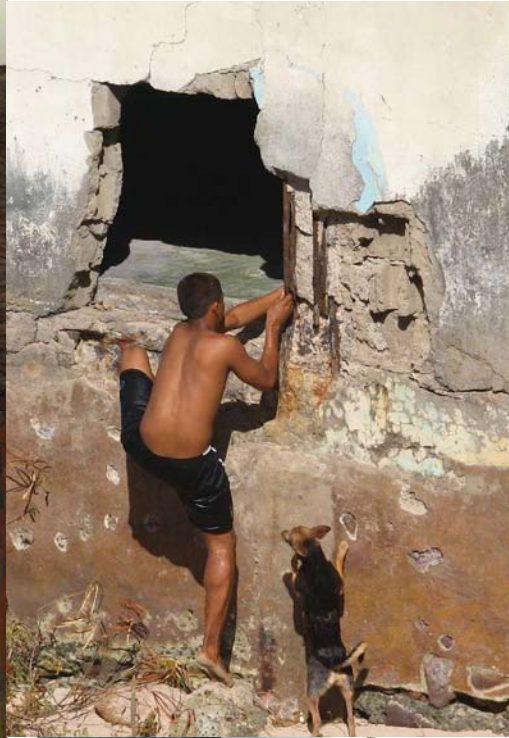


*In the streets of
Old Panama City*





*Pam dancing at the Miraflores Lock visitor's centre;
Boy & dog climbing a wall;
Ceiling art;
Boys on a bicycle.*



Wednesday, 17 January

At Sea from Panama City to Acapulco, making 25.4 knots

Lat/Long: 07° 46.0' N 085° 08.4' W

Weather: Hot sunny 30°c

This was another beautiful sea day. In the morning I went to hear and Q&A session with Terry Waite and a former US ambassador and arms control negotiator. In the afternoon we went to a movie so dull and convoluted that we left the theatre with an hour remaining. It was a formal night, and Pam looked great in her slinky black dress with the hundreds of real stones stitched on to the collar. I wore my zoot suit tuxedo. In the evening John Martin, a world record-holding comedian, was the featured entertainer.

In 1964 Sir John Brocklebank, Chairman of Cunard, and Lord Aberconway, Chairman of John Brown, signed the contract to build this ship. In 1967 QEII launched the QE2. This has led to much confusion, as the ship is not named after the Queen, but after the first ship to bear the name QE. The ship arrives in Southampton for the first time in 1969, and begins service with a mini-crusie to the Canary Islands.

There is a lot of stuff on the table. There are five dining rooms aboard, ranging from the massive Mauretania room for the cheapest cabins, up to the Queen's Grill room for the rich people in suites, so there has to be a huge supply of dinnerware. Putting settings on all the tables requires an immense stock of dishes. There are more than 64000 plates and 51000 glasses aboard, along with nearly 36000 pieces of cutlery and 65000 pieces of tableware such as serving utensils and condiment sets.

In a typical week the dining rooms will use 2932 white tablecloths.

Pam's notes:

At sea, I am off to the gym this morning. Later we will do laundry. The laundry did not get done. We shall try again tomorrow.

I saw a shark this morning, then later I saw a turtle and a whole pod of dolphins. One of the dolphins was doing back flips so I am sure that what I saw was dolphins. I also saw six stick like fish that swam just under the surface. I haven't identified these and I don't know if I will be able to since they were only seen from above.

Thursday 18 January
At Sea approaching Acapulco
Lat/Long: 12° 02.8'N 094° 53.0'W
Weather: 27°C, sunny, 82% humidity

Another fine but slightly rough sea day. I attended the lecture on North Korea, and agreed with the conclusions, but disagreed with some of the characterizations of the DPRK.

The wine cellar here must be immense. There are 203 different labels, as well as a further 37 labels of champagne. Add to this the 171 spirits and liqueurs and we are awash in liquor. In a typical year they serve 135 000 bottles of wine and 73 000 bottles of champagne. The pub pours 20 000 litres of beer, and the bars will set up 65 700 litres of spirits.

These figures are still low, as the company hands out free bottles to various passengers as gifts and apologies and enticements. If every cabin got one bottle it would mean about 900 free bottles at a time; and this could happen every week on the north Atlantic, and perhaps monthly on a world cruise.

Pam's notes:

Formal dress tonight and I am wearing my shiny formal with a new hematite necklace. At the end of the evening there was a trail of shiny spots everywhere I have walked.



Pam and John in Britannia Grill