

# Divided Sky - Panama Highlights

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## PANAMA AND THE CANAL TRANSIT

This would be our fourth time through the Panama Canal, but this time would be different. It was the first time that several of Jeanne's family members were able to join us in the transit. We were very excited that they were making the effort. On route to Panama were Jeanne's sister, Judith; brother, John; nephews Will and Harry (John's 13 year old twin boys); and Pete (father-in-law of Judith's son). Their arrival on the 18 March meant that we had heaps to do from the moment our feet landed on the ground at Shelter Bay Marina, Colon, Panama.

Planning space, food, and activities for 7 people on a 40' boat was a challenge. This was pleasantly compounded by the arrival of around 30lbs of US junk food in the crew's luggage – mostly treats which we adore eating on long, arduous passages: Hershey's Chocolates, M&Ms, Pennsylvania Dutch pretzels, Cheez Its, Trail Mix, and Tasty Cakes.

The first job we tackled was the continued clean-up of the deluge from our saltwater mishap off of the Columbian coast. There were at least 5 loads of laundry to attack including saltwater soaked sheets and mattress cover (rinsed in the San Blas Islands, but still needing a proper wash).

Somehow Col managed to sweet talk Amanda, the laundress, into moving our loads up the priority list, so that all was done in one day. Meanwhile Jeanne travelled on the free shopping bus to the supermarket to stock up on the mediocre fresh produce but good, cheap (1L @ \$2.39US) Chilean box wine provided by the Rey Supermarket. Col then tackled all of the engine maintenance issues: oil change, fuel filters changed, engine mounts tightened and lubricated, etc. The v-berth, which served as our "garage", had to be cleared out for Judith, the main saloon had to be neatened for Pete and John, plus the cockpit enclosure had to be set up for the twins to sleep there as it had been raining most nights.

Besides yacht clean-up, we also had to clear customs, immigration and port authorities; arrange and pay for a Cruising Permit for Panama; plus arrange for the "Admeasure" of the yacht. This required a measurement of the potential cargo space of the vessel. Our 40' "Divided Sky" was measured at 46' due to overhangs from the dinghy, davits and bow sprit.

Our Official SIN (Ship Identification Number) was then provided. Our agent could next work with the authorities to schedule our transit.

The marina provided one terrific diversion, a swimming pool. This proved to be a great way for the crew to have some time away from the boat chilling out. Did I say "chilling out?" All of the new crew had flown down from North America, where late season snow storms had blanketed their homes. Judith asked "Is it warm there?" To which I replied, "No it is hot." Within hours of arriving Judith changed that wording of temperature gauge level to PHOT, a.k.a. Panama HOT - over 40c and 100% humidity. So the pool was a blessing for all of us, especially when the fresh water supply, including showers, was cut off on two occasions.

With the help of Erick Galvez, our agent, we were able to schedule the Panama Canal transit on the Friday/Saturday after everyone arrived. This gave them time to visit the Miraflores Lock Museum; travel by Tourist train along the Canal from Panama City (Pacific) to Colon (Atlantic); take a local bus, lovingly named the "Princesca Jessica" on the windscreen and adorned with purple and pink boas, to

Portobello (a famous pirate “hang-out”); meet some of the characters at the marina; eat and drink at the semi-air conditioned restaurant; use the marina amenities; swim; and relax a bit. We even practised sending Harry (the lightest person) up the mast in the hope that we could have some overhead shots of the yacht in the canal locks.

The Canal Commission required that each yacht have on board a Canal Advisor, 4 adult line handlers, a helmsman, 4 adequate lines at least 125’, and payment of around \$800 (for yachts under 50’). Ten tires wrapped in plastic and 4 x 125’ lines arrived from our agent, to be used for the transit. John and Judy presented all of us with tee shirts commemorating the team transit of the Canal. This all added to the excitement as we readied the yacht for the two day adventure.

Friday arrived. We departed the marina and headed out to rendezvous with our Canal Advisor at 3:30 pm. We still did not know what the tie up configuration within the lock would be. On all previous occasions, we had rafted in lots of three yachts. Twice we were in the locks with only yachts (15 yachts in 5 rafts the last time), and once our raft plus one other raft of yachts transited with a large ship also in the lock. Twice we were the centre yacht of the raft, which meant that all of the lines to the sidewall were handled by the outside yachts. This time would be altogether different.

Because of the topography of Panama, the Canal consists of: 3 locks going up to man-made Lake Gatun from the Atlantic; then a 26 mile sail across the lake; followed by 3 down locks to the Pacific. The first 3 locks, called Gatun Locks, are adjoining, with each lock 110’ (33.53m) wide by 1000’ (304.8m) long. As we approached these locks our advisors seemed a bit muddled. First we were to raft to a larger catamaran, then at the last minute, it was decided that the Catamaran and “Divided Sky” would raft to a commercial tour boat. The tour boat would tie off to the port sidewall. The Cat would tie to them. We would tie to the Cat, without any lines to the starboard wall. All three of these vessels would be locked behind a large tanker called “Great Success.” This configuration did not result in great success.

We were to learn from our next advisors the following day that “we NEVER un-raft yachts inside the locks” due to the turbulence. But that was untrue. In the middle of the 3 Gatun Locks our advisor told us to un-raft from the Cat before “Great Success” had settled into the final lock. Col replied “It’s too turbulent.” But the advisor said, “Go,” and cast our lines off of the Cat. Moving forward into the turbulence, Col lost all steerage. “Divided Sky” swung to port and lay across the bows and bowsprit of the Cat. Without lines to the sidewalls, we had no way to extricate ourselves until John was able to get a line ashore, and with turbulence less, we were able to pull our bow around to free ourselves from the entangled mess. Quick thinking crew had fended us off as best they could, but minor damage was done to the starboard bow of the Cat and to our port toe rail. We were lucky that the Cat’s bowsprit didn’t take out our lifelines!

The Cat’s French owner made noises about the quality of our insurance, until in the 3rd Gatun Lock his starboard engine failed. Needing thrust and power to leave the lock, we agreed to remain rafted to the Cat to serve as a starboard engine and help him safely move to the night mooring – and thus also avoid incurring the \$5,000 penalty for not propelling yourself out of the lock!

Once tied to the huge ship mooring, we were able to relax, have dinner and get an early night of sleep before the 6 am return of advisors for the transit of the 3 remaining locks: Pedro Miguel Lock and 2 adjoining locks at Miraflores. Happily these were transited without trauma, as we were tied portside to the Cat with their lines to the port sidewall and our lines to the starboard sidewall as our own crews successfully managed the 87’ (27m) drop to the Pacific Ocean sea level.

Pete had to leave us from Panama City. John and the twins sailed to Isla Taboga (another pirate haunt in the old days) before departing. Under Col's instruction, Harry and Will quickly became proficient in dinghy handling before leaving for Colorado and snowboarding the next weekend.

Judith stayed aboard and had a great sail with us to the resort island of Isla Contadora in Las Perlas Islands (near to Mogo Mogo where TV series "Survivor" was filmed) before her departure by ferry. A few cleaning and recovery days later we island hopped down thru Las Perlas, then departed for the 900 mile journey to the Galapagos.

