

THIS FAMOUS CANAL-BISECTED ISTHMUS HAS A LOT TO OFFER THESE DAYS, NOT ONLY TO TOURISTS AND **BOAT-SHOWGOERS** BUT TO CRUISERS AS WELL. BY JIM RAYCROFT

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Panama Rising

Thanks to the immense canal that bears its name, Panama is often seen as merely a place where all sorts of vessels, from giant commercial ships to relatively small recreational watercraft, can easily move from one ocean to another. And while having the experience of transiting the canal, whether from the Caribbean side or the Pacific, typically tops the bucket lists of many yachtsmen today, the country itself has never quite caught on as a popular cruising destination, although this odd state of affairs is changing rather rapidly these days.

Of course, Panama has always been associated with change and transition. With Costa Rica to the northwest and Colombia to the southeast, this country of mountainous jungles, beach towns, huge national parks, and top-tier urban sophistication is literally wedged between the disparate regions of Central and South America. Moreover, it was thoroughly ransacked by Spanish conquistadors during the 1500s, was subsequently made a province of Colombia by Spain, and eventually seceded from that arrangement with the backing of the United States, which began digging the Panama Canal in 1903, finished in 1914, and exercised sovereignty over the so-called Canal Zone until the late '70s, when a lengthy process began that ultimately returned control of the canal to the Republic of Panama and its people.

The success of that process is undeniable. During the past quarter-century Panama has established itself as an independent nation with a flourishing economy, a stable political landscape, and a government eager to expand the canal's capacity as well as Panama City's Pacific-washed waterfront with its high-rise hotels and their highly entertaining proximity to zip lines, ATV scrambles, and numerous other tourist attractions. This is all good news for cruising yachtsmen, by the way, especially those who want to enjoy the modern ambiance of an urban destination on the Pacific side but also cruise to their heart's content among the hundreds of gorgeously tropical, comparatively remote, coastal anchorages and islands on the Caribbean side.

The San Blas archipelago is the showpiece of this latter group. Located to the east and slightly north of the canal's Caribbean entrance, it is home to the indigenous Kuna Indians, who preserve their heritage by keeping their customs, village structures, and dress unchanged. The women wear traditional, handmade blouses adorned with colorful, rectangular-shaped, reverse-appliqued pieces of cloth called molas, and ornament their faces with nose rings and painted designs. On occasion, they approach cruising boats in the islands to sell the molas they've made at home, each a one-of-a-kind souvenir well worth buying.

The actual entrance to the canal from the Caribbean side is particularly stunning, especially when viewed for the first time. Dozens of modern tankers, car carriers, and cargo ships swing at anchor in an immense anchorage there waiting their turn to transit the canal. Canal operations run round the clock, but a daylight passage is the preferred timing, at least for yachts.

Up-to-the-minute modernity is the theme on the country's Pacific side. Whether you're the skipper of a cruise ship or a yacht, passing under the Bridge of the Americas (Puente de las Americas) signals an undoubtedly much anticipated approach to Panama City, a booming metropolis with a Latin beat. The old city, with narrow stone streets, charming cafés, and historical churches, is an easy walking experience. The Encima Rooftop Bar atop the Tántalo Hotel is an especially good place to enjoy a drink and an ocean breeze.

Look for transient dockage at the Flamenco Marina on Flamenco Island, the spot where the Ft. Lauderdale International Boat Show's producer Show Management is hosting the inaugural Panama International Boat Show (see: The Panama International Boat Show) this year. The marina is minutes from restaurants, shopping, hotels,

Now THAT! Is Radical

Yacht builder Cheoy Lee also builds one of the most maneuverable (and powerful) vessels in the world—the Panama Canal ASD (Azimuthing Stern Drive) ship-handling tug. By Capt. Bill Pike

I remember the first time I transited the Panama Canal back in the mid-80s. Besides the way the guys on the lockwalls sent monkey's fist-accoutered heaving lines back to us (I mean, with a vengeance), the one thing that impressed me most was the maneuverability of the canal-based, double-ended-looking tractor tugs. I was working on an oceangoing tug at the time and all I knew was that our vessel didn't get around with even a smidge of the agility and speed of these powerful vessels that nudged and prodded freighters, tankers, car carriers, and other immense vessels through the locks. I mean, the darn things went forward, astern, from side to side, and spun in place like piñatas, all at almost emergency-vehicle velocities. It was radical!

Of course, Cheoy Lee is a well-known yacht builder. But the company has for years also been active in the commercial shipbuilding trade and these days, with the expansion of the Panama Canal going great guns, they are fielding even gutsier, more agile canal tugs than the ones I remember, to shepherd even larger, post-Panamax ships from one ocean to the other.

Typically, the tugs that Cheoy Lee builds are powered by a Z-drive



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casinos, bars, and nightlife.

Arguably, much of the fun to be had during the show will be found at the Hard Rock Hotel Panama Megapolis, a 66-story glass tower with four restaurants, seven clubs, and an array of Rock Star Suites, each complete with a Fender electric guitar delivered to your door via room service. Visitors with a passion for even more variety and adventure should plan on hitting the Panama City districts of Casco Viejo, Calzada de Amador, and Calle Uruguay for classical music,

jazz, theater, dancing, and perhaps an intimate oceanside dinner or an exciting stint in one of the state-of-the-art night clubs.

Indeed, considering all these enticements, Panama today is not quite the isthmus it used to be. If it's your time to check another exotic and sophisticated destination off your bucket list, or better still, if you want to partake of the pleasures of a newly emergent, undeniably picturesque cruising destination, set a course for this famed global intersection. You'll be glad you did.

The Panama International Boat Show



The Panama International Boat Show takes place from June 20 through June 22, 2014, at the Flamenco Marina conveniently located near the heart of Panama City. The marina is a flourishing tourist attraction in its own right with a wide range of amenities, including 238 slips protected by two large breakwaters, Wi-Fi, and nine onsite restaurants. A newly completed section of the marina will host the new boat show. For tickets and more information go to: www.showmanagement.com/panama-international-boat-show-2014/event/