

THROUGH THE CANAL AND ON...

By Chase Binder

It's thrilling to find a great deal on a destination that's been on your Bucket List for decades. But suppose you find that it also ranks high for some of your favorite travel pals? That says... get a group together and book it! And that's just what we did with a late-November repositioning cruise through the Panama Canal.

Back in the late 1990's Bud and I took a Caribbean cruise that touted a "partial transit" of the Panama Canal—meaning our ship would go through the locks on the eastern side of the canal, enter Gatun Lake, then turn around go back. It was a popular add-on to some Caribbean itineraries. We were fascinated with the history and the engineering and vowed to do the full transit, right through to the Pacific Ocean...someday.

Twenty years and several cruises through other parts of the world later, I got an email about a full-transit, 15-night repositioning cruise. The itinerary would begin in Fort Lauderdale, visit Grand Cayman, then head straight for the Panama Canal. The full transit would put us at the Pacific end of the canal experience, then we would go down the west coast of South America, with stops in Ecuador, Peru and Chile, ending at a port near Santiago. Not your same-old, same-old Caribbean cruise! Friends Chuck and Debra Douglas, Steve and Noreen Christensen and Erle Pierce hopped on board.

Even better were the prices. Repositioning cruises are often priced 30-50% below cruises with more traditional or destination-oriented itineraries. Why? Cruise lines literally reposition their ships from one area of the globe to another to ready them for seasonal market demands. Think Mediterranean in the summer, the Caribbean in the winter. For our Panama Canal cruise, Celebrity wanted to move the Millennium class ship, Infinity, from northern itineraries to South American itineraries—Santiago to Buenos Aires and back for the South American summer season (our winter).



One of the excursions near Lima, Peru took us to Hacienda Mamacona and featured Peruvian dancing as well as showcasing Peruvian Paso horses. These horses are descended from Berber horses that arrived from Spain during the conquest more than 400 years ago. Due to the extreme isolation of this area of Peru, the Paso breed is one of the most pure breeds in the world and is known for distinctive lateral gait and smooth movement.

Photo Courtesy of Steven C. Christensen



The canal accommodates small non-commercial traffic like this sailboat along with immense commercial ships. The Fidelio, which is designed to transport cars around the globe and can carry 7,500 cars, followed us through the canal. Owned by the Swedish company Wallenius Wilhelmsen, the Fidelio was sometimes directly behind us, and sometimes came through the locks beside us.

Photo Courtesy of Chase Binder



A seaman stands watch on the bridge of the Celebrity Infinity 24/7. Rules of the sea require that the ship's log record all sightings.

Photo Courtesy of Chase Binder

Many repositioning cruises are light on fascinating destinations. They are just deploying ships and stops along the way often relate to provisioning and logistical imperatives. The appeal is the price, the dreamy days at sea and, in this case, the Panama Canal. Our ports in Ecuador, Peru and Chile were all commercial seaports, all in the full throes of commercial activity. Excursions tended to be far-flung from the ship and there was no strolling off the ship to appealing local markets.

For us, it was all about the canal and the canal did not disappoint. It takes 8-10 hours to go from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific, depending on traffic and Celebrity had guest lecturers and experts doing pre- and post-programs as well as a running commentary during the transit itself. We entered the first locks in drizzle and fog and emerged 48 miles later on the Pacific to bright sun and blue skies. With three locks up to Gatun Lake 85' above sea level and three locks back down, it was an experience that left us amazed at the clever engineering and massive amount of shipping that the canal accommodates. It also left us shaking our heads at the number of deaths involved in the construction and low-tech solution of mosquito control that finally curbed disease and allowed the project to move forward. The politics were dizzying, even by today's standards.

For history aficionados, David McCullough's *The Path Between the Seas* is a compelling read. For those with less time, Wikipedia.com does a creditable job with lots of illustrations, facts and figures.

For us, going through the canal was a visual "you-gotta-be-there" event. We hope these images give readers an inkling of what it feels like to do a full transit of the Panama Canal.



Some of us enjoyed an excursion to fly over the ancient geoglyphs carved into the high plains of the Nazca Desert in Southern Peru. These carvings were designated a World Heritage Site in 1994 and are thought to have been made by the Nazca Culture between 500 BC and 500 AD. The 70+ carvings represent zoologic figures like monkeys and hummingbirds and extend up to 1200' long. While they are best seen from small aircraft, some can also be viewed from surrounding elevated points on land.

Photo Courtesy of Steven C. Christensen



Chuck and Bud watch as we make our way through a set of locks.
Photo Courtesy of Chase Binder



We saw lots of smiles. Photo Courtesy of Steven C. Christensen



Our itinerary ended on the coast of Chile, where excursions to Valparaíso (Valpo to locals) are popular. Valpo is known as a mecca for street artists and elaborate graffiti is everywhere. Free-spirited murals express all manner of social and political views—and all are embraced by the city. Photo Courtesy of Steven C. Christensen



The Miraflores Locks raises ships 54' in two stages, and museum and viewing station allow visitors to see just how tight the fit is—sometimes less than 2' clearance on either side. Ships navigate the canal under their own power, but side-to-side motion is controlled by powerful electric "mules" which guide the ship via immense steel cables. Each ship requires eight mules, two on each side of the bow and stern, to make the passage. Each mule or engine costs over \$1 million to build.

Photo Courtesy of Chase Binder

About the Celebrity and the Celebrity Infinity

Celebrity has been in the up-market cruise business since the 1980's and, though it is now owned by Royal Caribbean International, it retains place as an excellent option for cruisers who appreciate high quality, personal service and good value. Bud and I first sailed on the smaller now retired *Galaxy* in 1998 and have watched the line upgrade their fleet first with the Millennium Class ships (*Millennium*, *Summit*, *Constellation* and *Infinity*) in 2000-2, then the Solstice Class in 2008-9, and new this year, the Edge Class.

I was able to chat with The Celebrity Infinity's Hotel Director, Bosco Pires, 16-year veteran of the Celebrity line. The ship's hotel director is responsible for all non-marine functions of the ship—everything from food and beverage to entertainment, house keeping and guest services. And the food was terrific.

Imagine—almost 1000 overall crew and 2200 passengers! All of us had commented on how friendly and engaged the ship's staff seemed and Pires explained it. We have a saying "happy crew, happy guests." Such a simple, logical approach! We all could feel that the staff felt valued and see the direct impact that had on the overall level of service and the ambiance of the ship.

The Celebrity Infinity broke ground in terms of size (91,000 tons) and propulsion (gas turbine azipods) when she and her sister ships were launched in the early 2000's. With ships up to 117,000 tons, she is now a medium-sized ship—but nonetheless a seasoned gal with some impressive numbers!

- 965 feet long
- 2 propellers weighing 200 tons each
- 738,000 gallons of fuel with a burn rate of 2000 gal/hr
- 91,232 horsepower for propulsion system
- Ship produces 75 Megawatts of electricity