



Panama Canal Transit

“It was one of the best experiences of my life!”

Andy and Nicky Gibb crossed the Atlantic in 2003 with their Westerly Oceanlord 41 Intrepid of Dover. This time, after what was their second ARC, they wanted to venture further afield. Now enjoying cruising in the Pacific, Andy describes their experience transiting the magnificent Panama Canal.

“Vessels of all sizes frequently sustain damage in the Canal and failure to complete a transit as scheduled can be very expensive”. (Source: The Captains Guide to transiting the Canal). Christian, Caroline Nicky and I spent Monday morning in the hot humid conditions preparing Intrepid, until Eric returned from Panama City and we talked through all the rope handling. Then just as it was getting dark, our pilot/advisor Miguel, (who is normally a tug boat captain), arrived at the Panama Canal Yacht Club where we were based in Colon on the Caribbean side of the Canal. In a tropical downpour and within three minutes we were on our way. Miguel told us we were supposed to meet and raft up with two other boats to go through, but when we arrived at Gatun Locks it was totally dark. The big ships were steaming past both ways in the narrow (80 metre wide) entrance channel, the wind was 30 knots gusting 40, and there was an unexplained two hour delay during which we tried to avoid being run down by large ships themselves battling the wind, tugboats and crew boats all in this channel just a few

metres from the huge lock gates. Adrenalin was surging all round our crew.

Finally we were in, tied up alongside an empty tourist boat, Christian's experience really helping with the difficult operation as the 30 knot wind gusted into the lock trying to throw Intrepid round. The other yacht going through (Sunstar - a Kiwi/Aussie boat) came alongside us, and it was quickly apparent that they were 'bunnies' - not completely in control so Nicky, Caroline and Eric had to do much of the work securing them. We were in the lock right behind a 600 foot long freighter, peering up at its stern. As soon as the vast gates were shut, the water rushed into the lock through 100 channels, and the lines stretched so much I thought they might break (they frequently do). But when we finally rose the 30 feet in the first lock and the freighter started to move into the second chamber we were hit with even worse turbulence. We had to motor into the second lock ourselves, still attached to Sunstar. With bright arc-lights throwing dramatic shadows and the wind still gusting this took time. Finally we were tied to our tourist boat, and again up 30 feet, and again until finally after three locks and 85 feet up at 10.30 pm we motored half a mile into fresh water Gatun Lake (40 feet deep - the largest man made lake in the world when it was constructed in 1910 to form the middle 20 miles of the canal and the water to drive the locks) and moored to an old buoy.



Immediately the pilot boat arrived to pick up Miguel. As he left he said that we had been “very professional”. Nice to hear. We collapsed in halfway celebration with chicken curry and beer.

Miguel had warned us to expect our Tuesday pilot to come at 6am, so I was up to meet him, but it wasn't until 7am that Reuben, our Tuesday pilot arrived by pilot boat, and with no time to lose we were off in another downpour that soaked everyone. We were concerned we might be too slow and cause delays because we might have been scheduled for 8 knots, so we dashed though Banana Cut short cut at a rollicking 7.5 knots spotting monkeys and toucans and parrots in the trees and only began to relax after three hours when we were just 7 miles from the first Pacific Lock and well ahead of our scheduled time of midday, and we ended up going 2 knots. Reuben (another tug boat captain) was a very different character to Miguel, he set up his golfing chair on the foredeck, and directed from there. He was a bit taciturn, but warmed up a bit when I asked how he became a Pilot. Apparently the Canal Authority used to train pilots on the small boats but now use full tug boat



Panama Canal Facts

The Panama Canal actually runs south east from the Atlantic to the Pacific (hence the Pub Quiz - if you go from the Atlantic on the Canal are you going east or west? Answer: East). The Frenchman de Lesseps had first try at a Canal in 1885, but tried to do it without locks, and went bust 10 years later, mainly because of malaria, yellow fever, and an impossible project concept. The Americans bought them out and redesigned the project to create a huge lake with 6 locks, and made huge efforts to successfully prevent malaria and yellow fever. The first transit was in 1914. The Canal was handed over to a Panamanian registered company on midday 31st December 1999 under the terms of a treaty signed by Jimmy Carter in 1977. The average toll for ships is about \$65,000, and about 38 ships transit each day.

Transit Information

Panama Canal Authority
www.pan canal.com
 For contact information and details of "handline" transit for small craft.

Tariffs

For a yacht of up to 50 feet, the basic charge is \$600, but there is an \$850 refundable deposit. This is paid into Citibank at the local branch, and the fees are laid out in an official PCA 3 page document. If a vessel causes damage or delay the deposit may be forfeited.

The charges can be paid by bank transfer or credit card. It is preferable to sign an open visa slip, then have CitiBank insert the amount given to them from the PCA. The alternative is to sign two separate forms, which would then both be processed, and the deposit is then paid back much later.

Yachts should be able to maintain a speed of 8.5 knots to meet their assigned transit schedule. Failure to do so may incur a penalty of \$4,500 for additional pilots.

Expect to take one day to complete all the forms; one day to be measured and to be assigned a scheduled transit, which may be several days ahead. Likely waiting time is five days.

The PCA document "Procedures for securing a handline transit of the Panama Canal" details requirements for measurements, payment, line handlers and lockage, and is available from the PCA website.

captains. Reuben explained that when the Americans were in charge of the Canal from when it was built in 1908-1914 (initiated by Teddy Roosevelt to allow the American Pacific fleet to get to the Atlantic and vice-versa) until the handover to the Panama Canal Authority in 1999, they had promoted mainly English speaking locals originally from Jamaica. These people were now in charge, and "poor" Reuben had to rotate between tugs and piloting.

There are three locks down to the Pacific - the first, Pedro Miguel is at the end of Guillard Cut, the most difficult stretch of the canal, 8 miles long and named after the American engineer in charge. It is still sliding into the canal and the authorities keep on widening it, to allow two Panamax ships to pass, and thereby increase traffic flow. We tied up next to another tourist boat, but this one was packed, so we were photographed from every angle and asked questions (e.g. how much had we paid to transit? Answer about \$2,000 - depending on how much of our deposit the Canal retain). Down 30 feet, then into the last pair, Miraflores with a webcam. On the first, Sunstar came up to raft with us at about 4 knots, and Caroline only had a second or so to attach their stern line and help them to stop. Neat work. Eric was the Intrepid photographer, plus bowman, while Nicky handled springs. Down 30 feet, then into the final lock. Here the Pacific salt water rushes in

under the fresh Gatun Lake water which then creates a 2-4 knot current out to the Pacific, so we had to tie on quickly; and Sunstar rushed up - unfortunately with her stern line wound round her stern rail. Christian noticed, and we unravelled it and helped them tie up finally. At last the gates nudged open and we motored slowly into the Pacific. Quite a feeling for all of us. The pilot boat came for Reuben, and as he left he forgot himself sufficiently to tell us we had all done very professionally. Two compliments in a row from two tug boat captains - we felt the hard work had paid off.

Then under the Bridge of Americas, which for a long time was the only land link between north and south America, and VHF 6 to Balboa Yacht Club. We had negotiated a reasonable mooring (there are no slips, but the moorings seem very secure (\$0.30/foot/day), and we admired the Pacific and the ships passing by only 100 metres away - a bit like camping by the M25, but the weather is superb - light breeze, low humidity and 8,000 miles of Pacific stretching to Australia. Job done - so far.

