

Cruise West Panama to Costa Rica

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Cruise West met me on arrival at the Panama City Airport for the drive to the ship which was docked in Colon. The drive to Colon is about two hours on a 2-lane road that parallels the Panama Canal. We stopped at Miraflores Locks to watch some large ships pass through and to visit the museum there, which has an interesting film about the building of the canal. The ship was docked at the pier in Colon, sailing at 5pm.

We arrived about 10:00am in the San Blas Islands. These are very low lying islands, inhabited by Kuna people who make the colorful molas—embroidered and layered fabric hangings in geometric patterns. The islands are quite commercial—pictures of the people were \$1, molas were anywhere from \$10-30, which is really inexpensive given the amount of work involved.

After our visit we sailed to Portobello, the city where the Spanish used to ship all the gold they had gathered in Peru and the rest of South America to send it to Spain. It was sacked by pirates several times—very picturesque. Some of the Spanish fort survived, and there are some churches. There is also a wetlands area that we toured on the ship's zodiacs looking for wildlife.

The canal crossing was at night which was very interesting. We docked in an area at the mouth of the canal around 1pm, and the harbor pilot didn't come on board until around 4:30pm. The canal is really a 24 hour a day operation – the locks are very well lit at night, and you can see the mechanics of how the ships pass through. The trip from one side to the other takes about 8 hours.

The next day was a long crossing to the Darien province of Panama which is a very isolated jungle area, no roads going in. We visited an Imbara village which was the highlight of the trip for me. The people were just amazing—they came and took us by the hand and led us into their houses, fed us bananas, and didn't ask for anything in return, no money for pictures, etc. They did have some baskets that they were selling, but again it wasn't a commercial kind of feel at all. Cruise West asked the passengers the night before not to give anything to the children—they don't expect gifts or goodies. Cruise West does sponsor the school in the village through the sale of a DVD at the end of the trip. The cruise director takes pictures of everybody throughout the week, and at the end of the trip puts them onto a disc which is shown on the last night. Copies are sold for \$15; \$13 of this goes to the Imbara and \$2 covers the Cruise West expenses. All of the Cruise West itineraries sponsor a charity in the same way.

Next day was a snorkel stop at a beautiful little island before continuing on to Costa Rica. There were three stops in Costa Rica—one at Casa Orchedas which is a beautiful botanical garden owned by an American couple who have been in Costa Rica for 30 years. Then we visited Manuel Antonio National Park and Corcovado National Park.

Nature walks were offered at all of the stops in both Panama and Costa Rica, and the naturalists were excellent. I was impressed with how well the crew handled the various people on board. The slower ones were never made to feel uncomfortable and everyone was helped so they could participate in virtually everything if they wanted to.

The ship docked at the Marriott Los Suenos and buses transferred guests either to the airport or to the Courtyard Marriott Hotel for their return flight or to continue their adventures.