



Hat's Off To Panama

The Panama Canal killed off the last of the windjammers. A century later it became the cruising sailor's friend. **Jenevora Swann** takes us on a trip across the isthmus

A man, a plan, a canal, Panama" is one of the most famous palindromes. A random fact, but one that struck a chord as the new Atlantic Bridge, that stretches across the Caribbean entrance to the Panama Canal, came into view. We were about to transit the Panama Canal and start a new adventure in the Pacific Ocean.

Instead of using an agent to organise our crossing, after considerable research, we decided to save money and do it ourselves. While it involved plenty of paperwork and phone calls, it was a surprisingly easy process. We completed the Panama Canal Authority (ACP) online forms and arranged a date for their admeasurer to inspect our boat and clear us for transit.

To meet the admeasurer, we headed into Shelter Bay Marina, just a few miles from the gateway to the Panama Canal. Situated in a cove, away from the noise of tankers and cruise ships, facilities include 200 slips, a restaurant, laundry,

swimming pool, gym, chandlers, sail loft and a free bus, which goes into Colon twice a day, ideal for shopping and provisioning needs. With Immigration and a Port Captain on site, it was also an easy place to check-in to Panama.

After a short meeting on the boat with the admeasurer, filling in more paperwork, he declared us shipshape to transit. Once we'd paid the ACP

ABOVE
Motoring through the canal with Hoodoo and Tourterelle behind us

BELOW
Two Drifters and Tourterelle relax in the Chagres River

our dues, we were given a choice of dates and had just over a week to get ourselves ready.

Instead of staying in the marina for the whole time, we took the opportunity to explore the area, and sailed eight miles to the Chagres River, where there are several beautiful and peaceful anchorages; a must-do for anyone with a few days to spare before their transit.





At the top of this tropical river is the Gatun Dam, which supplies the water for the Panama Canal locks. The wildlife and birdlife are abundant and, at dawn or dusk, the howler monkeys are out in force and crocodiles can easily be spotted.

Panama Canal – Day One

On the morning of our transit, we rang the ACP office to get instructions of where and when to meet our official adviser/pilot and to confirm which boats we would be rafted with. We had already requested to travel in tandem with our friends, Ian and Ann Clarke on *Tourterelle*, an Allures 45. Our other companion was *Hoodoo*, a Lagoon 380 catamaran, who was also in the marina, so we popped over to introduce ourselves to their crew.

Our transit was across two days, with an evening departure to make it through the first set of locks, followed by an overnight in Gatun Lake.

As a vessel under 38 metres (125 feet), *Two Drifters*, was classed for a

handline transit; meaning that, while in a lock, the lines between the nearest boats and the shore would be moved by people, not train engines. In addition to the captain, the ACP insists on four competent line handlers on each boat, plus an official adviser to direct and navigate the boat safely through the Panama Canal.

While in the marina, we recruited

ABOVE TOP RIGHT Fergus with Andrew the adviser concentrating on taking the raft of boats into the lock

ABOVE RIGHT Shelter Bay Marina with *Two Drifters* on the front row, far left

BELOW Rafting *Tourterelle* to *Two Drifters*



very capable line handlers in the form of friends from the Ocean Cruising Club (OCC), Alison and Andy Nelson, whose own boat *Venture Lady*, would be transiting the canal just 10 days after us. We were also grateful to have JuanJo Boschetti, the marina's general manager, who we had come to know well during our visits to Panama.

With a feeling of excitement and a little trepidation, we headed to the meeting place just outside the marina. At 6pm, the ACP pilot boat came alongside to drop an adviser off on each boat and, after a quick briefing, we were underway. After three years of sailing in the Caribbean, it was time to say goodbye to the Atlantic Ocean.

Motoring towards Gatun Lock, Kirsty, our adviser, filled us in on some of the history, telling us the Panama Canal was 50 miles long and, when it opened in 1914, it was one of the largest and most difficult engineering projects ever undertaken.

At 8pm, just outside the lock, the three boats safely rafted together. *Two Drifters* in the centre, with



Tourterelle to our port and Hoodoo to starboard. To be cost effective, most cruising boats share the locks with a commercial vessel so we followed the 73-metre (240 ft) National Geographic passenger ship, Quest, into the mile-long lock.

As Two Drifters was the centre yacht, we had the lead advisor on board to direct the raft. On our helm, it was a huge responsibility for Fergus, who, as captain, had to steer the boats into each of the three-linked chambers; judging the distance on either side to keep the boats off the walls, while dealing with a strong current running through the lock.

In the lock, thin lines, with a monkey fist (large weighted knot) at the end, were thrown down from linesmen on the shore to Tourterelle and Hoodoo. Their line handlers had to be fast to attach the throw lines to the long yacht lines, using a bowline. These were then hauled up by the linesmen and made fast, so the entire raft was secured within the lock by four lines; two each side, fore and aft.

When the huge lock doors closed behind us, water flooded in. As the levels changed, the line handlers on Tourterelle and Hoodoo were responsible for gradually tightening their lines as we ascended. A momentary lapse of attention could have caused our rafted boats to shift, putting us into serious difficulties.

We were very grateful for our adviser, who totally understood the lock conditions and was in constant VHF contact with the lockmaster and advisers on the other boats. Inside the lock, she was quick to call instructions on speed or engine changes to prevent any issues taking place.

In just over an hour, we were 'locked up'; raised a total of 25.91 metres (85 feet) through the three chambers.

Leaving the lock needed just as much concentration and skill on the helm as entering as we had prop wash from the ship to contend with, causing turbulence and our raft to corkscrew. It was difficult for Fergus to control the boats, but he did it

ABOVE LEFT
Gatun Lock gates close behind us

ABOVE RIGHT
Two Drifters' Panama Canal Crossing Team (Back) Andy Nelson, Juanjo Boschetti, (Middle) Alison Nelson, Jenevora Swann (Front) Fergus Dunipace

BELOW LEFT
At the top of the chamber in Miraflores Lock

BELOW RIGHT
Panama Canal pilot boat carrying the advisers

Two Drifters

Lagoon 440 Catamaran Owners Version 2008

LOA: 13.61m (44.65ft)

Beam: 7.70m (25.26ft)

Draught: 1.30m (4.27ft)

with deftness.

Once clear, we motored to the ship's buoy set aside for the three boats to raft up against in Gatun Lake. It was 9.30pm when our advisers were collected by a pilot boat; leaving us to enjoy a few drinks on the boat, at an unusual 85 feet above sea level!

Day Two

The pilot boat turned up at 9am, dropping off a different adviser, a charming man called Andrew, who joined us for the day as part of his commercial ships' pilot training. It was a relaxed and interesting four-hour motor to Pedro Miguel, our first of two locks, amid sunshine, rain, thunder and lightning; passing →



Costs

In January, for the first time in seven years, the ACP increased their fees and changed their banding; raising the small vessel limit to 19.81 metres (65 feet). For boats under 15.24 metres (50 feet) the price doubled from \$800 to \$1,600.

Add to that inspection and security charges and the price for a small vessel to transit Panama Canal is now an eye-watering \$1,784.

Budget too for marina fees, supplementary lines and fenders and line handlers, in addition to food and beverages for the crew and the adviser while transiting, and an agent if using one.

Despite the expense, transiting the Panama Canal is an essential nautical shortcut between two oceans; saving vessels a long and hazardous trip around Cape Horn. For Two Drifters, it was a priceless memory.



Cruising - Panama Canal



stunning scenery, cruise ships, cargo vessels and even crocodiles.

As we reached Pedro Miguel, we rafted up with Tourterelle and Hoodoo. This time going in to the lock first, with an extremely wide cargo vessel following us in, which could only just fit into the canal lane.

Fine tuning the process from the previous night's experience, Fergus worked well with the skippers from the other boats to control the raft; playing the boat's twin throttles like an instrument while the adviser called the direction and speed.

Now, we were in the process of 'locking-down'. Lines were thrown

ABOVE
a large cargo vessel behind our raft in Pedro Miguel Lock

ABOVE RIGHT
Two Drifters and Hoodoo passing traffic in the Panama Canal

BELOW LEFT
Fergus at the helm maneuvering the raft into Miraflores Lock

BELOW RIGHT
Gold Hill

FAR RIGHT
Line Handling - Tight lines at the bottom of Miraflores Lock

from the shore across to the other boats to secure the raft and the line handlers slacked the lines as we went down; getting closer to sea level as the water filtered out of the lock.

One more lock to go and, as we approached Miraflores, we could see the Pacific Ocean over the lock gates. Facing 15-20 knots of wind, it took several attempts to raft up.

The wind, combined with 3 - 4 knots of current from behind, made it more challenging and stressful for Fergus to guide the rafted boats safely into the two-chamber lock. The wind blowing us to port and the current running with us, meant

constant use of reverse on the throttles to stop the raft getting out of control or hitting the lock wall.

At Miraflores Lock, we had an audience; not just from the visitor centre, but also people watching on the webcam. Getting a message from my family to say they could see us, I waved excitedly at the webcam, and immediately got loads of people waving back from the viewing area!

In the lock, nearing the bottom of the second chamber, we felt very small against the sheer canyon walls, the looming lock gates and the hulk of the 106-foot wide cargo vessel behind. →





DIY Or Use An Agent?

We talked to many cruisers, who used an agent for the transit, and were grateful for the assistance with the form-filling and liaison with the Panama Canal Authority (ACP). If on a time limit, the ability to fast-track, especially during peak season (February to April) was flagged up as being very beneficial.

An agent also guarantees the payment to the ACP; covering the boat's bond, which dispenses with the need to pay a refundable deposit of \$891. They can also source long lines, fenders and organise line handlers.

We obtained three quotes from recommended agents and their fees differed from \$275 to \$700 to co-ordinate our transit. After reading many online blogs, we decided to save money and do it ourselves. With limited Spanish, language was our only barrier, but everyone we dealt with at the ACP spoke excellent English and was enormously helpful.



Tips For Doing It Yourself

As phone calls need to be made to the ACP, we purchased a local SIM card on arrival at Shelter Bay Marina, which cost \$10 for unlimited calls and data for a week.

Arranging The Admeasurer

- Download Procedures For Securing A Handline Transit Of The Panama Canal (Form 4352) and Handline Inspection (Form 4405) from pancanal.com. The latter is an easy-to-complete document to be emailed to: **ntot-ara@pancanal.com**.
- After emailing Form 4405, phone the Pan canal Cristobal office (507) 443 2293 to arrange a visit from the admeasurer. Re-confirm 24-hours beforehand.
- While the admeasurer will visit a boat at anchor, for ease we opted to be in Shelter Bay Marina. Our appointment involved measuring the boat's length from bow spit to stern, including all overhangs; and checking that our engine, VHF and horn were in working order.
- After completing the paperwork, the admeasurer presented us with our Ship Identification Number (SIN), a certificate confirming permission to transit within the next 60 days.

Bank Procedures

- Transit fees and the bond need to be paid prior to getting a transit date. The bond is a refundable deposit of \$891 to cover any additional charges, late arrival or fees incurred during the transit.
- The admeasurer left Form 4614 for us to complete, instructing the ACP's bank to reimburse us the bond, which is normally a couple of weeks after transit, minus a \$25 wire transfer fee.
- All forms completed with the admeasurer must be presented at the CitiBank in Colon or Panama City, along with your passport.
- While you can pay via bank wire transfer, it's quicker and easier to pay cash, which we were advised would speed up the bond repayment. We set aside our dollars in advance as there's no ATM at CitiBank in Colon.

While it's not recommended to walk

around Colon with huge amounts of money, our situation was made easier by taking Shelter Bay Marina's shopping bus to Colon. The driver kindly dropped us off directly at CitiBank at Cristobal Pier to make the payment.

Line Handlers, Lines & Fenders

- Once payment has cleared, call the Pan canal Cristobal office (507) 443 2293 for a transit date.
- The ACP requires each small vessel to have four capable line handlers, in addition to the Captain. Professional line handlers can be hired independently, via panlinehandler.com or through an agent for \$100 per person. They require overnight accommodation, food, beverages and return transportation.

Here's where being in a marina beforehand pays off. With many boats waiting to transit and in need of line handlers, there's a regular conveyor belt of sailors helping each other out for free. It's also a great way to get experience before taking your own boat through. The marina's noticeboard and daily VHF net is a good source of information.

- The ACP states 'each vessel must have four 38-metre lines of adequate strength for the size of vessel to maintain it stable in the lock chamber under strong turbulence'.
- Expect to be rafted with one or two other yachts, so if you plan to use your own lines, ensure they are strong enough for the weight of three vessels. We used six fenders each side.
- To rent lines and fenders, we were quoted between \$75 and \$375. An additional fee may be added for returning them by dinghy or boat taxi on the Pacific side of Panama Canal.



Cruising - Panama Canal



As the final lock gates opened, there was a momentous cheer from our rafted boats. But it was not over yet over for Fergus. Our advisor warned that as the fresh water in the lock mixed with the salt water of the Pacific, it would create very strong currents, so precise helming without oversteer was needed to guide us safely out. Timing was important, especially as the cargo vessel behind us was impatient to be on its way.

When the yachts separated for the last time, we headed under the Bridge of the Americas, which links North America to South America, and to the anchorage at La Playita.

Transiting the Panama Canal had been a fascinating experience. Now, with a few weeks to catch our breath before the challenge of crossing the Pacific, we could chill out and explore the beautiful and many Panamanian islands of Las Perlas. ✦



ABOVE LEFT
Fergus is very excited to see the Pacific Ocean for the first time

ABOVE RIGHT
Rafting Hoodoo to Two Drifters.

BELOW LEFT
The final gates at Miraflores Lock open and Two Drifters heads out into the Pacific Ocean

BELOW RIGHT
Las Perlas - Isla Contradora



Jenevora Swann and her husband Fergus Dunipace have been liveaboards on their catamaran Two Drifters since 2014. They sailed around Europe before crossing the Atlantic to explore the Caribbean, USA, South and Central America. They are now heading to the South Pacific. www.Facebook.com/TwoDriftersTravel

Fact Box

The Panama Cruisers Facebook page provides contacts for agents and other useful information on Panama

This article was written from the perspective of travelling south from the Atlantic to the Pacific. For north-bound vessels contact details will differ, so refer to pancanal.com

When transiting the Panama Canal, the captain and crew must wear face masks and maintain social distancing at all times



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