

VOYAGE IN PRINCIPITO

PART-6 Panama Canal

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Left Contadora bound for Taboga and anchored in the large bay to the East. Great to be moving again. This is going to be a very technical part of the trip. Paperwork and meeting deadlines.

Normand had agreed he would stay on the boat with Matey while Julianne and I went to the Canal to arrange all that we needed to schedule our transit. We also would volunteer to help on other boats going through ahead of us.

Once we got to the yacht club we found all the opportunities we needed to get on a boat and signed on to join them immediately. We had told Normand that we might be longer than 2 days if we got a run through the Canal. The first group was going through in the morning. We



Visas for Panama

had not seen Bill C. yet but we had time since we were scheduled in 4 days. We would plan on staying in Balboa tonight on a friends boat, go through the Canal tomorrow and return to Taboga in the evening. This is a time where a ship to shore radio would have made things easier.

After a good nights sleep everyone aboard was up and fed and ready to take on the Canal. I was thinking Matey will love this. So much new excitement!

THE PANAMA CANAL

First of all and most importantly, keep in mind the Canal is geared towards servicing large tankers. Fees are calculated based on tonnage. A small tanker can weigh [40,000 tons] Principito's displacement is 9 tons and is, thereby, the reason so little attention is given to the yachts. Principito had been through the Canal before and had all the paperwork attendant to that fact but here is what is involved when going through for the first time:

The Boat Must be Measured. The Canal has a very strict system for measuring ships of any kind and they adhere, forcefully, to their protocols. An appointment has to be scheduled and the yacht must be brought to the measuring dock or located in the anchorage at the appointed time. Nothing can happen until the boat is measured and registered.

Pay the Fees. A Yacht less than 50 ft in length might run

80 to 100 dollars [1982] - These fees are astronomically greater today.

Find 4 Line Handlers Among Your Friends (all boats are required to have 4 line handlers, a skipper and a Panamanian pilot and all sailors transiting the Canal volunteer on each other's boat to make it through. Barring friends being available handlers are available for hire.

Panamanian Pilot Required on all Vessels of any Size

Schedule the Transit. There are 3 ways to go through the Canal:

1-Side Tied to the Concrete Side Wall.

The locks fill with water on the Pacific side raising the ships/boats to the level of Gatun lake in the center of the Canal then lowering them to the Caribbean/Atlantic side. Imagine a wooden boat scraping up and down the concrete wall of the locks when they are being filled or drained.

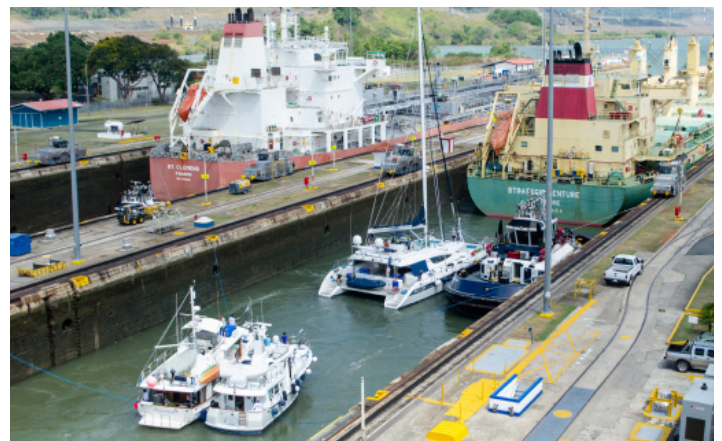
2-Side Tied or Rafted to a Tug.

Same as above but the tug boat is tied to the wall meaning the tug is next to the concrete wall and we are simply floating next to the tug and going up and down with the tug.

3-Center Tied

Principito will be floating in the center of the lock either in front if going down or behind a larger ship If Going up. Requires (4) Hawsers (heavy ropes)100ft. long. After picking up the pilot and the 4 line handlers and establishing yourself in the center of the lock. Official/trained Canal line handlers standing on the top of the lock walls on each side of the lock will toss small diameter lines with monkey fists at the ends at the line handlers below on the yacht. The hawsers are laid out in advance on the deck one on each quarter. The lines are caught by the handlers on the yacht and threaded through the hawsers so that the Canal handlers can pull up the ends of the hawsers and tie them off on bollards. Hopefully the ends of the hawsers were secured to the yacht!

Also Rafted / CenterTied...



Center-tied and Rafted on the Left and Side Tied to a Tug on the Right

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Boat on Right Waiting to Side Tie to the Tug Boat and Boat to the Left to Raft up with Boat on the Right

The boat we were heading out on to cross Panama was tied up at the main dock, in Balboa, awaiting the arrival of the Panamanian pilot. Everything else was in place for the transit. We were getting an early start and the captain was starting to get a little snappy with the crew. The pilot was about 20 minutes late. Upon his arrival we set right off.

The Canal is an amazing feat of engineering and was constructed at a very large human cost - over 22,000 workers died between 1881 and 1889 when the French were building it. The US took over construction in 1904 under President Theodore Roosevelt. The opening of the Canal in August 1914 signified that ships would no longer have to round the horn of South America. Now in one 51 mile trip across Panama they could transition from the Pacific to the Atlantic the outcome of many dreams, losses and sacrifices.

GATUN LAKE

Artificially created in 1913 by damming the Chagres River, Gatun Lake is an essential part of the Panama Canal. At the time it was formed, Gatun Lake was the largest human-made lake in the world. The lake is 85' above sea level and provides the water necessary to operate the locks.

There are 3 Locks on the Pacific /Balboa side that raise the ships to the level of Gatun lake and 3 locks on the Atlantic/ Colon side lowering ships from Gatun lake to the Atlantic/ Caribbean.

The captain had chosen to go through the Canal side tied to a tug. This is where the Pilot earns his stars choreographing where and when the yacht is to move into position once the main ship is in position ready to enter the lock. In this case the yacht we were on was going to be in back of the ship in the lock. That meant letting the tug into the lock first and once the tug is tied to the wall then the 2 yachts can raft one to the tug and the second rafts to the 1st yacht.

The tugs pull or push and direct the ship to the lock and once the ship's bow is inside the lock the line handlers

drag the hawsers up to the train cars on all 4 corners of the ship. The ship is not moving in the lock under its own power its being controlled by the 8 train cars running on tracks built in to the top of the lock walls.

Excited we all took a coffee break before the lock starts filling. The first time in the lock is the hardest because even though it's been explained to you, doing it reveals the system underlying it all. I could only marvel at the design. I am not an engineer but I can appreciate what it might have taken to complete this wonder. The 3 locks would take us a total of 85 feet above sea level at Balboa on the Pacific side. The lock fills quite rapidly and the Canal Authority represented by the pilot want you to be ready to go to the next lock.

The Miraflores 2 and 3 Locks are a repeat of the first lock. The vessels you start out with on the Pacific side locks will be the same in each lock..

Once out of the Miraflores locks you're sitting at the same level as Gatun Lake 85 feet above sea level then it's a matter of following the boats ahead of you to the other end of the Canal ending up at the Atlantic.



Train Cars that Pull the Ship through the Lock

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Gatun Lake is larger than one would expect and because of some ships getting backed up on the Gatun locks side of the lake we were asked to find moorings at the Gatun Yacht Club to await further instructions. It was very windy now, getting late and a decision had to be made. The pilot was on the radio and came back to the skipper and gave him 2 options they could continue and end up going through at night or the pilot could take the train back to Panama City and come back in the morning and set off then.

It would mean staying overnight on Gatun lake. The skipper decided to wait till morning to finish the transit and took the pilot ashore. There were 5 of us left aboard after the skipper returned and we all collaborated on putting together a meal for everyone. The pilot was standing on the train platform at the appointed time, the following morning, and I went to pick him up.

The Canal was run by the US until 1977 when an agreement was put in place to hand over the Canal to the Panamanians and until 1999 when the Canal would be entirely under the Control of the Panamanian government the US and Panama ran the operation co-jointly. I think some things fell through the cracks.

I understand that a typical ship is paying 10s of thousands of dollars to go through the Canal and that an average yacht less than a hundred but there seems to be an attitude that the yachts don't matter and the operations crews are not concerned about these small entities.

When we got into the last lock that would take us to the level of the Atlantic we took position in the front of the lock side tied to the tug but this time there were more yachts some side tied to us and some to the wall behind us. It looked like the water level was a little different on either side of the lock doors (they shouldn't have been different) causing a rush of water, when the doors opened that caused large turbulences causing one of the yachts, about a 35 footer, to start spinning in the lock and careening off other boats taking most of the port side stantions and ripping them off the deck of the boat we were on.

We finished motoring to the Panama Canal Yacht Club where we picked up a mooring. An official from the Authority showed up and met with the skipper and tried to calm him down saying they would repair it for him. I think under these circumstances it's impossible to make it right all the way since it's not just the damage to the boat but the other things that it affects. They'll probably have to sit here, in Colon, for a week before the work gets approved, scheduled and completed etc..

Received a note at the yacht club from Bill C. that he was scheduled to go through the Canal on Susurro, the day after tomorrow.



Tanker in First Lock - Gatun Lake in Back - Going Down

We took the next train back to the other side of Panama and the ferry to Taboga and got somebody to taxi us out to our boat which we could see out in the harbor. The dinghy was floating next to the boat so Normand must be on board.

Matey was excited beyond words as we were to see him.

Normand was very excited to tell us what he'd been doing while we were away. He had met a beautiful Panamanian woman and he was going to go hang out with her somewhere in the country just North of the Canal where she had family. He seemed really excited about this person and explained that he'd be leaving in the morning to meet up with her. Normand had been to the market and insisted on making dinner. He hoped that we would return when we did because he really wanted to be with his new friend. "Just the ticket" I thought. "Good on you mate"

Normand and I had been through a lot together and he'd always been a very solid friend. I met him at the Sky Diving Center in Saint Andre Avelin about a hundred miles West of Montreal. He's the reason I was able to get a job in Film in Montreal. He was connected to everybody in the film industry there and had gotten me on a film | a Canadian film called U Turn starring Maud Adams, a Swedish beauty, who went on to be a Bond girl. Strangely I didn't feel upset. I really felt bad for my friend and I was happy he'd found a companion to go have an adventure with.

When I returned to Canada I met her. She had left Panama to be with him and they had married. She was a sweetheart and I felt happy for Normand.

We opened a nice bottle of Puligny Montrachet from our stash in the cellar [Bilge] and partook of a Polish dish he called Yayashnitza [Ya Ya Shnitzel] made up of sausage with anything else you had around. He made it with rice, tomatoes, ham, random spices and wine.

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I made coffee in the morning, took him to the dock. We said goodbye to one another knowing we would see each other again I was sure of it.

Later that day we decided we should sail to Balboa to the yacht club and take up a mooring. The boats cannot be left tied up to the docks they must take moorings because of the extreme tides. The boat would be safe there. Matey can stay for the day on board. He was trained to pee on a piece of astro turf that I had affixed a piece of rope to. With the other end tied around the base of a stantion aft and when we were sailing we'd toss it overboard and let it drag in the water for a bit then retrieve it and set it back on the floor of the cockpit. We also had a collapsible canvas bucket rigged similarly that we could drop in the water and it would fill itself up so we could rinse the floor and stow away flat when not in use.

We would take Matey with us on Principito when we went through ourselves but I didn't want to take him where we would have to go ashore and take the train, for instance. Most countries have quarantine requirements for animals being imported. The exception in some countries is if you don't bring the animal ashore or tie up to a pier.

We spent the rest of the morning stowing loose items and cleaning up. We deflated the Avon dinghy and stowed it in the forward storage area next to the anchor chain. The outboard was secured in it's dedicated spot under the aft seat in the cockpit.

Leaving matey on the boat while we're gone has the added benefit that any one who would try and board Principito would be in for a rude shock. So far on our adventure and all the places we had been we never locked the boat up (the doors to the cabin swelled up once we got into high humidity territory so we couldn't close them. The doors would shrink once we reached the higher latitudes.

Second trip through the Canal - Susurro

We had heard that Bill C. was at the Balboa Yacht Club, in the bar. We picked up a mooring and put our wood dinghy in the water. We hadn't seen Bill since leaving Santa Barbara.. As you may recall, Susurro, Bill's yacht, was in the moorings at Puntarenas while he was in California.

Bill had only known me with a beard and I had recently shaved it all off. It was a lot more "clean cut" this way and anyway it was a lot less itchy. On our way over to Balboa I found an old black leather billfold and I fashioned a badge out of some aluminum foil with the shiniest side out and secured it inside the wallet. Bill was sitting at the bar with his back to the harbor and I walked up to him, flashed the badge at him and in my most gravelly voice: "Mr. C.... FBI. He froze for a moment and I said: Hi Bill.



Bill C. on Susurro

He saw Julianne and recognized her immediately. I owed him that because when we were hanging out together I couldn't hang on to any of my nice clothes because he would go through my lockers and garb whatever he Liked. At first I was amazed at how similar our taste in clothing was then I soon realized what was up.

Bill had heard me talk about my concerns in the locks and the difficulties, the last boat we crewed on, had going through the Canal. He was persuaded, however, that he could get through side tied to a tug and it would be OK.

I won't go into detail on this trip through since it was, for the most part a breeze. Susurro is a fine wooden boat, a yacht in the strictest sense.

We made it through all the locks until we reached the first Gatun lock.

We were the first yacht to enter the lock and the Tug Boat was behind us pulling the ship into position to be taken through by the trains on either side of the lock. But, before we got very deep into the lock we hit a whirlpool of churning water and it took Sussuro and made it rotate to the left more than 90 degrees and like a jousting on a galloping steed Susurro went bow first directly toward the concrete side wall. Bill had the engine in full reverse with no effect. I was on the bow. The bowsprit stopping our forward movement with a jerk, Bill didn't say anything, in the moment, but I know it really shook him up. Hell I was shaken, we all were!

After the bowsprit stopped our forward movement whatever was causing the turbulence ceased and we were able to regain control of the boat to motor over to the tug and side tie to it!

Now, both times we went through the canal, boats were damaged and the accidents were not the fault of the respective skippers. This gave me pause...

Now, I was going to insist on going through the Canal "Center Tied". We got off to a late start. We had waited at the Balboa Yacht Club for over an hour waiting for the right combination of boats to allow us to "center tie" in

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the lock. The Panamanian pilot was really going to bat for us as he was doing the insisting to the Canal Authority.

I was lucky to have gone through the locks a couple of times to understand what it took to make it through the Canal without mishap.

Excerpt from Letter to Kathy N. fr. Portobello

It was a pleasant day and everyone, including me was relaxed. Charlie was off the "Spray" a replica of Joshua Slocum's vessel Slocum immortalized in "Voyage Alone Around the World". Slocum disappeared in 1904 on a trip to South America from Haven Connecticut never to be seen again. Charlie was Australian and had some harrowing tales of his own to tell. Charlie, Bill C and Linda from Sussuro and Julianne made up the crew with the Pilot and me with Matey watching over us all. That was 5 people on Principito whose work it was to handle lines in the locks and otherwise avoid banging into one another...

Due to the late start we were directed to the Gatun Yacht Club on Gatun lake. Charlie was on the bow with the Gaff ready to pick up the mooring in front of the club. The mooring was bright red and uncharacteristically large.

I was at the helm and as we got nearer Charlie turned around and gave me a quizzical, not quite bordering on alarm, and I snapped out of the daze I was in and realized we were coming up on the mooring too fast and I was going to run it down. I backed off the throttle, veered hard to port and the mooring slipped past. I was close to mesmerized by the hum of the engine and misjudged the distance.

We put the dinghy in the water and took Bill and Linda to the train station. The Pilot was picked up by a Canal work boat. They would all return in the morning.

Charlie stayed the night and helped us finish our booze.

In the morning we were in the first Gatun lock with everyone looking forward to be clear of the Canal.

We cleared the last Gatun lock and we were now in the Caribbean, heading for the Panama Canal Yacht Club in Colon that would be our home for at least 2 weeks. This would be our chance to provision for the next important leg of our journey.

The PCYC was convenient as convenient as it can get. The anchoring protocol is to approach the dock which in this case was parallel to shore, turn so that the boat is perpendicular to the dock. Set the anchor on the bow and reverse till you can get a stern line to reach the Star



Monkey's Fist

Principito Getting Set to Start its Journey Through the Canal



Waiting for our Ship to Load



Julianne - Gatun Lake



Charlie from the "Spray"



Our Pilot



Matey Supervising



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“The Cut”

board cleat on the dock. Center the boat with a second line on the port side. Having the bow anchor tensioned acted as a spring maintaining forward pressure and keeping the stern from hitting the dock.

Reaching the dock required rigging a plank to run from the dock to the afterdeck and securing it to the dock and the afterdeck. The previous tenant had left the plank for us to use.

Colon had 2 things going for it on the convenience for yachts front. One is the dock we were anchored at was a short distance from the lot where you get a lift to the second, and most important convenience. Within a mile or two was a Commissary on the nearby military base with just about everything you could need for a trip like ours. We got an invitation to use the facility through a friend of a friend.

Eventually and possibly in the not too distant future these military installations will be gone. The agreement reached in 1977 gives the Canal and its operation back to the Panamanians with the US sharing control until 1999.

We all witnessed the disjointed operational difficulties they were having. There is probably a lot of resentment directed at the United States. These are challenges particular to landing in large centers when you travel as we are. Constant is the experience of being on the edge of trouble mostly with the officials because they are the ones you come into contact with. We did not venture into the city. We heard many first hand accounts of violence and threatening events experienced by sailors venturing into Colon

I had checked out at immigration on the Pacific side of Panama before we traversed the Canal on the advice of sailors who had waited till Colon to check out and had harrowing experiences with the officials there.

4 days before we left Colon we were visited by the Mosquito Abatement Official who showed up unannounced but not without stimulating Matey's olfactory radar. As I reached the gangway matey was holding the gentleman

hostage on the plank where he was frozen in place and could not move lest he lose his balance and fall into the harbor. He had pretty good balance but he was carrying his spray canister and couldn't let go of it. I was able to get Matey sorted out and went aft to lend him a hand. He handed me the canister and I grabbed his hand to help him steady himself and he was aboard. He explained that Panamanian law required any foreign vessel to be fumigated by his department. Since we didn't have a choice we left for the afternoon after helping him get off.

Insects are a problem in the tropics the cockroaches in Costa Rica fly and they're the size of my big toe. Nice thing is they can fly away.

If you're on a boat, in the tropics, you are going to have some type of cockroach on your boat especially an older one. The open markets, you have to buy stuff in, have them all over the place. They enjoy burrowing into cardboard boxes or jumping on board when your tied to a dock. This abatement would take care of them. I always wonder what effect these sprayings have on us humans when I see the person who is doing the spraying dressed in a special suit with an elaborate mask with filters. Not toxic they all say!!!

Excerpt from Letter to Kathy N. fr. Portobello

Our experience with officials had been very good until I got involved in a squabble between the, so called, Immigration Officer, who spoke English and a French person, named Serge, who spoke only French. He was told by the officer that he would have to pay 800 dollars to get through the Canal. Mostly because the officer was in cahoots with the agent which he insisted Serge use for his papers. His boat was close to the same size as ours and like us had been through the Canal and thus had been measured.

When I met Serge he was really upset. Someone told him I spoke French. After introductions-he was coming from Guadeloupe - He asked me how much I had paid to go through the Canal and I told him \$50.00. He was shocked and relieved when I told him he was being taken by these people who didn't sound like they were officials...

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Panama Canal Yacht Club - Colon

He said the officials cornered him at the club, told him to find an interpreter, then come back to the club and meet them in the dining room presumably so they could get a free meal and terrorize my new friend for entertainment.

I told Serge I would meet him at the club. I wanted to take the dinghy over to the loading dock where I could pick up some supplies we bought at the Commissary. I tied up the dinghy at the club dock.

A few minutes later the so called agency guys showed up and ordered off the menu insisting that all yachts, by some new Panamanian law, were required to be represented by an agent. I told them that all the yachts I knew of had been self-represented. Alright they said how's your friend going to get the 500 gallons of fuel he requested without an agent?

I tried not to laugh. Serge said he already had all the fuel he needed.

The rest of the meal was had in abject silence. Partly because Serge didn't speak English, I'm not much for idle chatter as you well know and, at any rate, I didn't want to say the wrong thing since it looked like we were going to get away with buying their lunch and they were going to leave.

Before they left the more threatening of the two asked me where my boat was. It was just around the corner to the left but fortunately I had brought the tiny wood dinghy to the dock and I quickly said "It's in the outer anchorage" and I pointed to my dinghy. It was a very windy day, the dinghy looked as big as a teacup and the anchorage was quite a distance away three reasons for them to forgo a trip out there. Thank God! But it meant we needed to get out of there ASAP!

Serge and I went directly to the Port Captain's office and paid the fees and went through Immigration for his Visa. His total fees were 75 dollars. By then it was late morning

After those events and those unsavory characters it was pretty clear we needed to be on our way. After I said good-bye to Serge I loaded up the dinghy and rowed back to the boat.

The following morning we prepared to leave, however the starter broke. It wouldn't engage the flywheel. I took the starter out and that same morning, along with my new friend Serge who was hanging around, with starter in hand, took the train to Panama City.

I hired a taxi to take us to the industrial area of the city and went into every truck parts store we could find. After about 3 such places we found a matching starter. I'm not sure whether this starter will make it to Europe. I may call you from Jamaica or wherever we end up to get the part from Bay Engine in San Francisco. I was very anxious to get out of Colon and into some well anticipated traveling.

The word got out that I was a passable translator From French to English and vice versa and had experience with Panamanian Immigration and Custom officials because 2 new French sailors showed up at the boat.

Jean Francois and Patrice were delivering a 40 ft sailboat to Japan. They were from la Rochelle and were dealing with the same creep my friend Serge had dealt with. Cain Michel was none to happy to see me. Jean Francois and Patrice had been up to the Port captain's office and told to go back tot their boat and wait for the measuring officer. Cain Michel seemed to not remember me or this was just a tactic to piss me off. He looked at the Frenchmen's passports and said "where are the stamps ? You must have the stamps!

" Well as I just explained the man at your office refused to give the stamps", said I

Ah! He's a new boy he said in his accented English. Saying Bwoy [Sic] for Boy

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What? I said not understanding what he was trying to say.

He's a new Buoy, a new buoy. Come with me now I fix it up, he replied. He meant the guy was new at this job.

He gave his associate a knowing look and they both laughed out loud. Eyeing us suspiciously. So, he said we should meet him at the office. He wasn't pushing the agent requirement now but it still felt very uncomfortable.

Upon arriving at his office which was not much larger than a bathroom but perfect for its pair of occupants Cain Michel and some character with a dirty white T shirt and cowboy boots stretched out almost horizontal looking at us with unbridled suspicion.

Since I was translating everything for both sides everyone was waiting for and expecting me to work things out.

Michel told me he was French. I must not have acted sufficiently impressed so he pulled out his badge which displayed a perfect resemblance of his mean disposition and repeated "French" see! I suppose he was trying to say friend.

He sent us over to have a time scheduled for transit which was the wrong thing to do since they hadn't been measured yet. In the spirit of not reacting to him again to increase his ire. We went over to talk to the Scheduler. I had the man call over to him and work it out. Unfortunately Cain Michel still had their passports so we had to return to the Kiosk. He stamped the passports and collected the money.

At this point he reminded me that we were going to take him to lunch at the club?/? OK I said let's go. We hopped into his car a large black American car, a make I didn't recognize. He proceeded to put a white handkerchief in his mouth and chewed on it as he drove. Every so often he would hold the kerchief up to his mouth and move his teeth open and closed open and closed in a most unbecoming way. The windshield was blocked on my side of the car by a poster of a close up focused on the crotch of a large reclining nude.

At the club he ordered food to go and continued to be aggressive. He was pointing to anybody who was around in the club or on the dock and asking where are their passports and where are your line handlers and he was demanding \$20 for each Visa. We had all had enough and I recommended to my French friends to pay him to be rid of him before he causes more trouble.

So they paid him off and not too soon. I was thinking of my own papers. As I mentioned before we checked out of Panama in preparation for going to San Blas.

The reason I may sound a little uncertain of our next whereabouts is that the winds have settled down and may

make more choices available. I wanted to end up in the French Islands, St Barts specifically, but we may have to settle for Jamaica. We left in such haste from Colon that we didn't have time to have money sent. I think we have a 100 dollar travelers check....

Our experience, overall, was pretty good based on what we had heard from other sailors about the canal and especially Colon. We stayed out of the City with a short stint to the Duty Free Zone near the yacht club in Colon. Large buildings with all the French and Italian designers at good prices. The immediate surrounding environment was dramatically different from the Duty Free Zone and very poor indeed. It reminded me of the main street in Singapore with shops offering the latest fashions and right behind them looking down the street - dirt roads and shanties.

There were two destinations that were a must visit for me. One was Isla del Coco and the other, the San Blas Islands of Panama where we were currently headed...