

Editor's Note: Holland America's Panama Canal cruise combines highlights of the Caribbean and the Mexican Riviera for an extended, open-ended voyage with a uniquely relaxed tempo. You choose where your cruise begins and ends, and how many days you'd like to stay on board. And of course, you experience midway the remarkable transit of the Canal itself.

Recently travel writer Angela Dodd sailed on a 12-day Panama Canal cruise from Ft. Lauderdale to Acapulco. We've printed her observations here.

On extended cruises like this one, a soothing transformation takes place within just a few days: With so much time and half the world still to come, any chronic worries subside, your muscles unravel, and a single day feels as rich with special moments as a whole week on shore.

Under the influence of tropical sunshine, good company and steady, unobtrusive service, your former sense of daily life disappears Your ship becomes the world you know.

My choices were between pleasure and pleasure: whether to catch a movie or join in an exhilarating volleyball game on the Sports Deck. To float in the pool or nap in my deck chair. To dance all night or rise early to catch the sunrise out on deck . . . where a delicate salt mist breaks over the bow and the first rays of sun gleam gold and rose and pale silver on the water.

And then the ports: diverse, exotic, each representing a different country and culture.

In St. Lucia, I took an excursion to a classic Caribbean beach for a dreamlike afternoon of swimming and sunning. I was delighted by the soft cream-coloured sand, incredibly clear water, and friendly, attractive local residents with their musical voices and charming accents.

A giant green and yellow parrot kept an eye on all of us; when I went up and squawked at him he responded, "Hi, how are you?" in perfect English. Later we drove back to the ship through unspoiled country-

REFLECTIONS on a Panama Canal Cruise



side with fan-shaped palm trees, almond trees and deep pink and orange blossoms everywhere.

In Curacao, I found tempting bargains on everything from Italian fashions to handcrafted jewelry made from Curacao's famous square nickel. A sales clerk told me that the local girls don't wear pearls until after they're married, because before, pearls bring tears.

Then Panama: the long-anticipated Canal Day! A skilled narrator provided facts and anecdotes about the Panama Canal throughout the day. Early in the morning, a brief jungle rain cleared and cooled the air as I watched the first lock lift our ship 28½

feet above sea level; altogether, we would rise a total of 85 feet.

Despite the size of the lock chambers, it took only eight minutes to fill them — that's as fast as a bathtub! The chamber walls were streaked with multicoloured layers of paint where some huge freighters barely scraped through.

Later, as we crossed man-made Gatun Lake, I sipped tea on the Lido. A slight breeze stirred the balmy air . . . herons, swifts and other birds flitted by overhead. I could hear a rapid chirrup sound coming from the lush green jungle to either side of the ship . . . the gentle clink of plates as the Lido luncheon was prepared . . . and the slight slosh and squeak of sandals on wet teak decks. A memorable moment of tranquility.

After Panama, a spell of uninterrupted sea days allowed ample time for me to continue friendships formed earlier in the cruise — and to start new ones. In fact, it's almost impossible not to make friends on a Panama Canal cruise! You meet an interesting man at lunch, and then see him again at morning aerobics. You run into a woman who used to live in your home town, and meet for drinks and conversation.

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I particularly enjoyed joining two new friends for afternoon tea on the Verandah . . . leisurely talk, pound cake with currants and musical accompaniment by a string quartet.

By the time we reached Acapulco, I felt years and worlds away from the life I'd left back home . . . relaxed, sun-lulled, well-feted — and surprised by possibilities. That, to me, is the touchstone of a true holiday. And I found it on the Panama Canal cruise.

— Angela Dodd