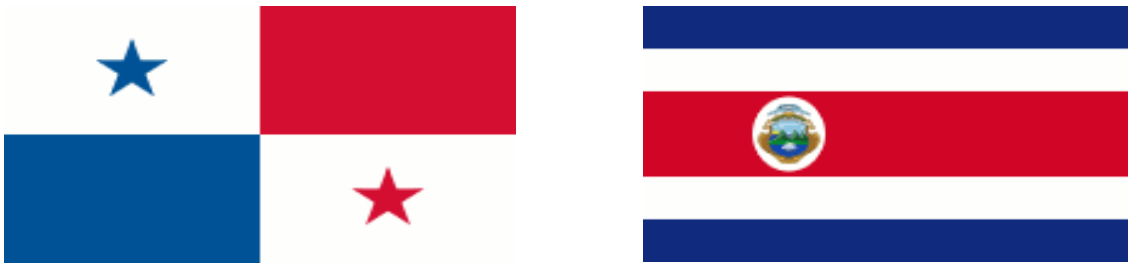


2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 1 – Wed. March 1st – Travel to Panama



Today Marie and Kal and Marcia and Jim (that's me) start a fourteen day tour of Panama and Costa Rica. Marie and Marcia are sisters and the four of us really enjoy traveling together. This is the 20th International trip that the four of us have taken together over the past 13 years. Marie and Kal live south of Dayton OH and Marcia and I north of Pittsburgh so these trips give us a chance to spend time together.



Panama and Costa Rica are small, adjoining countries in Central America. Panama's land area covers about 30,000 square miles, about the size of South Carolina, and has about 4 million inhabitants. Costa Rica covers about 20,000 square miles, about the size of West Virginia, and has about 4.8 million



inhabitants. Both are known for their tropical flora and animals.

We have decided to travel on an organized tour rather than travel on our own, as

to avoid language and logistical issues. We also feel we will learn more with a professional Tour Director and probably save some money as the tour companies negotiate good rates for meals and at hotels. We have chosen Odysseys Unlimited's "Panama Canal Cruise with Costa Rica". Odysseys Unlimited is a Boston based tour operator known for small group sizes and catering to 55+ year old travelers. They are also known for having great Tour Directors and high quality hotel accommodations and included meals. We have previously had excellent experiences traveling with OU in Costa Rica in January of 2013 (mostly in a different area of that country than we will visit on this tour), China, Croatia, Southern Africa, Northern Italy and Turkey. In addition, Marie and Kal toured Nepal and Bhutan with OU last fall.

On this tour we will first fly to Panama City, stay in a waterfront hotel for two nights, and explore ecological sites and museums.

On day three we will board a small excursion ship for the next 10 days/ 9 nights. We will first cruise the famous Panama Canal and then travel up the Pacific Coast of Panama and Costa Rica visiting ecological sites. We are told we will have time for swimming and snorkeling in the Pacific Ocean. On day twelve we will leave our ship and drive to San Jose, Costa Rica's capital, for two days of exploration. Here's a calendar of what is planned:



2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour



Time is the same as EST in Panama; -1 hr. in C.R.
Average Hi Temp: 88 Average Lo Temp 70
Sunrise/Sunset 6:30 (Panama); 45 min. earlier CR

| | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
|  | <p>Wed. 3/1 <u>Arrive Panama</u> -11:10AM Depart Pittsbrgh -5:50PM Depart Atlanta -9:58PM Arrive Panama City Meals: None Htl: Hilton</p> | <p>Thurs. 3/2 <u>Panama City</u> -Soberania N.P. -Rainforest Ctr -Gamboa Resort -Aerial Tram to the Rainforest Canopy & Tower -Meals: B, L & D Htl: Hilton</p> | <p>Fri. 3/3 <u>Panama City</u> -Biodiversity Musm. -Board M/Y Callisto early afternoon -Cruise thru two sets of locks into Gatun Lake Meals: B, L & D Ship: M/Y Callisto</p> |
| <p>Sun. 3/5 <u>Panama City</u> -Canal Museum -View Miraflores Locks -Ceviche Demo -Walking Tour of Old Panama City Meals: B, L & D Ship: M/Y Callisto</p> | <p>Mon. 3/6 <u>Punta Patino</u> -Dugout canoes thru Punta Patino Nature Reserve -Visit Embera people in Mogue -Set sail to Coiba I Meals: B, L & D Ship: M/Y Callisto</p> | <p>Tues. 3/7 <u>Cruising</u> -Arrive Coiba Is. late afternoon -Anchor at Granito de Oro -Swimming and snorkeling Meals: B, L & D Shp: M/Y Calisto</p> | <p>Wed. 3/8 <u>Coiba Nat. Park</u> -Explore Coiba Nature Reserve -Beach barbecue lunch with swimming & snorkeling Meals: B, L & D Shp: M/Y Calisto</p> |
| <p>Thurs. 3/9 <u>Colfito</u> -Enter Costa Rica -Casa Orquideas tropical gardens -Rainforest walk on Osa Peninsula -Sail to Quepos Meals: B, L & D Ship: M/Y Calisto</p> | <p>Fri. 3/10 <u>Manuel Antonio NP</u> -Walking tour of Manuel Antonio National Park -Sail to Playa Bisanz -Optional Zip Line or River Float Trip Meals: B, L & D Ship: M/Y Calisto</p> | <p>Sat. 3/11 <u>Tortuga Island</u> -Tour Curu Natural Wildlife Refuge -Cruise to Tortuga -Barbecue Lunch on Beach -Swim & Snorkel Meals: B, L & D Ship: M/Y Calisto</p> | <p>Sun. 3/12 <u>San Jose CR</u> -Disembark at Puntarenas -Drive to San Jose -City Tour and visit to the Gold Museum Meals: B & L Htl: Marriott</p> |
| <p>Mon. 3/13 <u>San Jose CR</u> -Visit to Poas Volcano National Park -Doka Coffee Estate -Farewell Dinner Meals: B, L & D Htl: Marriott</p> | <p>Tues. 3/14 <u>Back to the USA</u> -7:00AM Depart San Jose -1:03PM Arrive Atlanta -3:50PM Depart Atlanta -5:31 Arrive Pittsburgh</p> |  |  |

2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 2 –Thursday March 2nd – Panama City

Yesterday each of us flew out of our hometown airports, Dayton and Pittsburgh, in the late morning on one+ hour flights to Atlanta. At the Pittsburgh Airport we first met two of our fellow tour travelers, Pam and Rosemarie from Pittsburgh. We met up with Marie and Kal in Atlanta and enjoyed lunch. At our departure gate in Atlanta we met two more folks on our tour, Deanna and John from North Carolina. As John was wearing a Pittsburgh Pirates hat we asked and discovered that they both had lived most of their lives in the Pittsburgh area. There will only be a total of sixteen people on this tour, so it will have a good Pittsburgh contingent!



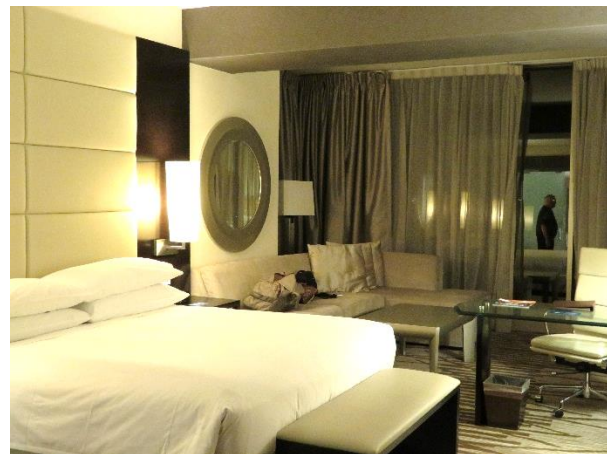
We departed Atlanta at 6 PM on a Delta 737 on a four hour flight to Panama City, landing just after 10 PM. To the left is a daylight picture of Panama City that I borrowed from the internet.

It was not the most comfortable flight but we are in the same time zone as EST, so no real jet lag.

Temperature is 86 degrees and it is humid when we land. The forecast for most of our tour calls for daytime highs in the low 90s

and lows in the mid-70s. Our mini-bus driver meets us and drives us to the Panama Hilton where we meet our Tour Director, Erick Ramirez Binns. It is just after midnight when we access our rooms.

What a beautiful hotel. The rooms are huge and fancy. Both couples have corner rooms on upper floors. The views from our rooms of the bay and buildings bordering the bay are outstanding.





After a short night's sleep we were up very early for breakfast and then a 7:30 AM briefing from Tour Director Erick. He tells us he has been in the tour guide business for twenty years and working with Odysseys Unlimited for fifteen. He is a Costa Rican as is trainee Katia who is assisting him.

At 8:30 AM we board our mini-bus and meet local guide Jesus. Both Erick and Jesus seem very knowledgeable and are most funny. Jesus informs us that there is no significant manufacturing in Panama. The major industries are Import/Export, Banking and Finance, Tourism and the Canal.

We drive to the 55,000 acre Soberania National Park and the Gamboa Resort where we ride a chair lift up 280 feet to above the rainforest canopy. We then climb up to the top of an observation platform. We spot a two-toed Sloth and get great views of the Gamboa River and the Canal.





Back down at the Gamboa Resort we observe the tiny ½" long tropical frogs including the red Strawberry Poison Dart Frog. We also enjoy touring their butterfly pavillion.



At noontime, we enjoy a nice lunch along the water and then drive to the Panama Rainforest Discovery Center. We stop along the way to observe a family of Howler Monkeys. Marcia determines that this one is a male.



We walk for about a mile through the rainforest and get expert information about the vegetation and wildlife from our three guides. We now climb 180 steps to the top of an observation tower for interesting views from above the rainforest canopy.





Mid-afternoon we drive back to Panama City, mostly along the canal. Jesus explains that from 1904 until 1999 the USA owned and controlled the Canal Zone. The area of the zone covered five miles on either side of the fifty mile long canal. In 1979 President Jimmy Carter negotiated the handover of the zone to Panama. This had been pretty much eventually mandated by early treaties. We drive by the former US Air Force base which is now a regional airport and the former US Army base where the buildings have been turned into a university.

We now are told that Jesus has negotiated a special treat for us; something not on the schedule. He will take us on a tour of the Panama Canal Administration Building which is not normally accessible to tourists.



It is a beautiful large building perched on a large hill overlooking the canal. It was built by the Americans and first opened in July of 1914 just before the official opening of the canal. As the canal is now run by Panama the building is occupied by the Panamanian Canal Authority. We are told all Panamanians are very proud of how well Panama has administered the canal since the handover.



We first walk through the high domed rotunda. Jesus explains the history of the building and explains the murals, painted by New Yorker William Van Ingen. We view the busts of those that first conceived and then built the canal, King Carlos V of Spain, France's de Lesseps, and US President Teddy Roosevelt.

We then walk down to the monument honoring Chief Engineer George Goethals of the US Army who completed the construction of the canal. Here is a picture of the

monument from the steps of the Administration building. In the background is the American Bridge that carries the Pan American highway over the canal area. I really enjoyed this special visit.

The weather today has been very hot, probably low 90s, and humid. We return to our hotel in time to relax a bit and clean up before our welcome dinner.



At 7:30 AM we meet and drive to an old part of Panama City for our welcome dinner.

We dine at a gourmet French restaurant "Las Bovedas". The food is exceptional. Most interestingly, the restaurant has been built inside an old, abandoned prison.

This has been a most interesting but somewhat grueling day!

Tomorrow we will be boarding our small ship for our ten day cruise of the canal and the west coast of Panama and Costa Rica. The ship is said to have Wi-Fi but we don't know how good it will be. So...don't be worried if we do not post updates every day. We will eventually get them posted.

2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 3 – Friday March 3rd – Panama City

We check out and depart from the Panama Hilton at 10 AM after two nights. What a great hotel! Panama City, with a population of 1.3 million, has surprised us a little bit. It is a clean and modern city with good roads and OK traffic. It is right at the top of the list of nicest cities we have visited in Latin America.

We first drive to Panama's Biodiversity Museum. We learn about the formation of the Isthmus, its geography, flora and fauna, and the evolution of its human inhabitants.



After a good lunch at a city restaurant we drive out to the marina to board our small ship which will be our home for the next ten days, the M/Y Callisto.

While waiting to board our ship we run into two familiar faces, Leanne and Ken with whom we spent the month of February 2016 on an OAT tour of Peru and Ecuador, which included the Galapagos Islands. They were our favorite traveling

companions on that trip and it was great to see them again. They are waiting to board their ship for the continuation of an OAT/Grand Circle tour.



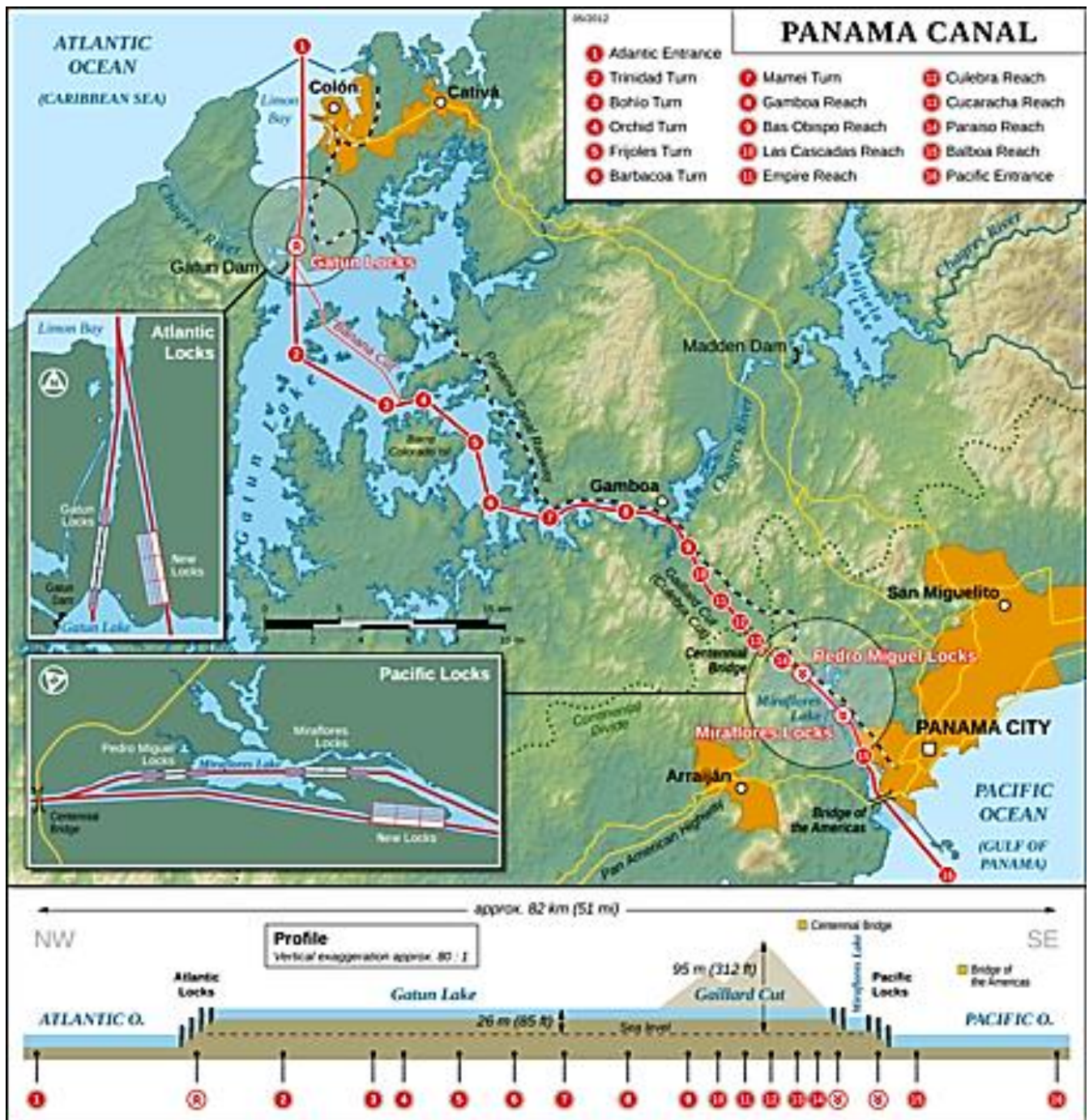
We board the M/Y Callsito's Zodiac rubber motor boat and motor out and board the ship.



We first receive a briefing from the ship's Hotel Manager about life on the ship. AH!!!! We are distressed to hear that the ship does not have Wi-Fi, as had been promised in both Odysseys Unlimited's catalogue and web site and the ship line's. This will prevent us from having contact with family back home (Marcia is not happy!!) and from sending out these daily travel updates.

We next are escorted to our cabins which look to be spartan but acceptable for our stay.

At 3 PM our ship raises anchor and gets underway for the Panama Canal.



Our ship's Naturalist now gives a presentation on the Panama Canal. He explains that the French attempt in the 1870s to build a sea level canal failed due to diseases like Malaria and Yellow Fever and an inability to cut a channel through the continental divide at what came to be known as the Gaillard Cut. The Americans, starting in 1904, decided on building a "lock canal" by damming the Gatun River

and forming a large lake in the center of the canal path. This would not only create a large passage area for ships but supply water to fill the locks to raise ships from one ocean and lower them to the other.

It was a huge undertaking. The disease problem was solved first by recognizing that mosquitos spread malaria and yellow fever and not decaying wet soil as widely thought. The engineering, construction and leadership were top notch and the canal was opened in 1914 ahead of schedule and under budget. It cut the traveling distance for a ship from New York City to San Francisco from 13,000 miles to 8,000.



The locks on the Panama Canal were huge for the time; 1000 feet long and 110 feet wide. Large enough, by far, to accommodate the largest ships afloat, like the Titanic. Our World War II battleships, mostly built in the 1920s and 30s were designed to just fit in the locks, as shown above. Our WW2 fleet aircraft carriers, however, could not, due to the large size of their flight decks.

In 1979 President Jimmy Carter negotiated a treaty with Panama to turn over the canal and Canal Zone to Panama in 1999. Many had concerns about the Panamanians ability to run and maintain the canal. They have done an excellent job. They have also successfully built new parallel sets of locks that are 1400 feet in length and 180 feet wide. These can accommodate massive cruise ships and a new generation of huge container vessels and more than doubles the capacity of the canal. In the picture above one of the sets of new locks is shown below and the older set of locks (which will still be heavily used) above.

Ships pay a fee to use the canal. Our small ship pays \$13,000 for our partial traverse while a large cruise ship or container ship can pay almost 1 million dollars per passage. Panama has greatly increased fees since the handover but it still makes economic sense for most shipping companies to use the canal.

After a great dinner, a “Canal Pilot” boards our ship (all ship going through the canal must have an assigned local pilot) and we get underway for the canal. All small ships and most passenger ships are assigned night time transits but the lock areas are well lit so we still have an enjoyable time viewing our

transit through the Miraflores and Pedro Miguel locks which we clear at 11 PM. Time for bed. The M/Y Callisto continues into Lake Gutan and drops anchor at 2 AM on Saturday.

Below are some pictures of our night time transit.



Marcia on the bow of our ship in front of Miraflores Lock



Ship behind us in the Milaflores Lock



Centennial Bridge after clearing the last locks and entering Lake Gatun

2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 4 – Saturday March 4th – Gatun Lake



We wake up with the M/Y Callisto anchored on Gatun Lake. At 8 AM we board our Zodiac bound for the shore where we meet our local guide,

Kenney, and board a mini-bus. We cross over the canal on a folding bridge that opens and closes with the Gatun locks. We view the remains of the start of the narrow French Canal, dug the late 1800s. We stop and view a Three Toed Sloth high in a tree and several Howler monkeys.



We pass the remains of the officer's barracks at Fort Sherman, a large US Army base positioned to protect the Atlantic approaches to the canal. This sighting is very exciting for one of our tour mates, Bettie, as her father served at Fort Sherman in the early 1930s and her brother was conceived here.

We continue our twenty-mile drive through the tropical rain forest and arrive at the ruins of Fort San Lorenzo on Panama's Atlantic coast. The fort was built in 1597 during the Spanish colonial period on the outlet of the Chagres River and the

Caribbean Sea. Its mission was to protect the gold route, which came up the west coast of South America and then across the Panama Isthmus, from other countries and from pirates. We view the outlet of the Chagres River, the fort ruins, and one of the pads that supported Army gun emplacement positioned here during World War II to protect the canal.

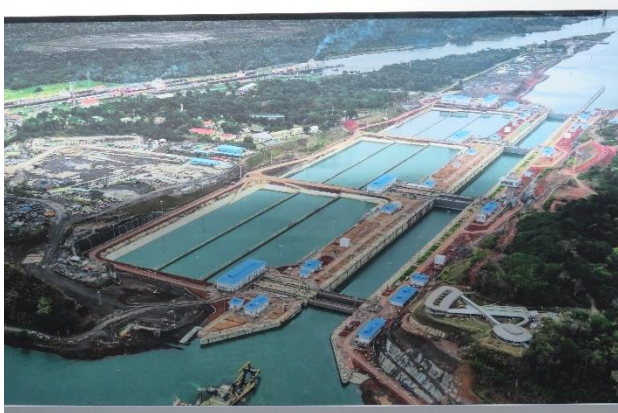




This morning has been a little cloudier and windier than the last couple of days. We even had a brief shower. It is, as always, hot.

We cross the canal near Colon on the Atlantic side on a car ferry. Unfortunately there is a long line of vehicles waiting their turn so we have to wait for over an hour before we can complete a three minute crossing. Behind the ferry in the picture at left are the supports for a new billion dollar bridge that will span the canal and rectify the traffic

problem.



We now drive to the Aqua Clara Visitors Center to view the new, wider locks on the Atlantic side of the canal. The visitor's center is new and quite nice. I watch a twelve-minute movie that covers the history of the canal with emphasis on the canal widening project. In the picture above, left, the older locks are at the top of the picture and the new locks to the right. The "side pools" in the center were built to

recycle 60% of the water from the locks. This prevents the possibility of draining Lake Gatun, the principle source of water for lock operations, during the dry season.

We watch a gigantic container ship enter the new locks. They announce that it is 1093 feet long. This appears to be close to the new locks' capacity (they are 1400 feet long) as there are also tug boats at the bow and stern of the big ship inside the lock. It is another hot day. Temperatures are now in the humid low nineties.



We return the M/Y Callisto at 2 PM rather than the planned 12:45 for a late lunch. The ship's Naturalist shows a great NOVA TV documentary, in the ships lounge, on the history and building of the canal. It was produced and narrated by Pittsburgh native David McCollough. He is the author of the definitive 1977 book on the canal, "The Path Between the Seas". One of the photos shown in the documentary was the famous one of President Teddy Roosevelt, who was visiting the Panama Canal (the first President to leave the United States during his term in office) sitting at the controls of a huge Bucyrus steam shovel.

It is windy tonight so dinner is moved from the open back deck to the enclosed dining room. We motor overnight from Lake Gatun through the locks to the marina near Panama City.

2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 5 – Sunday March 5th – Panama City

At 9 AM we board the zodiac and go to the marina dock and again join our excellent local Panama City guide, Jesus. As our Tour Director Erick and trainee Katia are also with us we have plenty of guides for our sixteen-member tour. We first stop by the colorful Panama sign near the entrance to the city. Jesus tells us that Panama means "abundance".



Next, we have a short stop at a Supermarket/Pharmacy to pick up provisions.

Now, we drive to the ruins of the original Panama City, also known as Casco Antiguo. It was established in 1519 and was the first permanent inhabitation by Europeans on the Pacific Coast. It was mostly built to protect the Spanish "Gold Route" that was bringing up pillaged gold and silver from Peru for shipment across the isthmus and then on galleons to Spain.



We see the remains of the first church, built in the mid-1500s and a huge Banyan Tree.



We walk to the remains of the cathedral which was built in 1623. Marie and Marcia climb to the top of the tower.

Jesus details for us the destruction of the original Panama City. In 1671 the infamous pirate Morgan was anchored on the Atlantic coast of Panama with thirty-six ships and 3000 men. He starts to march his army of Pirates across the isthmus. The governor of Panama becomes aware and orders the gunpowder warehouse in Panama City blown up so that the gunpowder does not fall into Pirate hands. The resulting explosion starts a fire that destroys the city. The Pirates arrive and the Spanish garrison and townpeople fight them but the Pirates prevail. They sack the town and take all the gold, silver and other valuables from the warehouses.

We now drive through modern Panama City. Jesus shows us a station on the new eleven-mile subway and the modern air-conditioned buses. Rides cost thirty-five cents.



The skyline of the very modern Panama City is striking. Tall skyscrapers, hotels, condominiums, banks, and office buildings.

Jesus points out to us the Trump Hotel (it is the tall building on the right with the sloping roof). When he does the retired school teachers on our tour “boo” while many of the grey-haired men on our mini-bus respond with a cheer. Yes, we have a divided country!



We now drive to “Old Town” Panama City. This the area where Panama City was rebuilt after the original one was destroyed during the Pirate Morgan raid.

At noontime we arrive at the El Virrey Restaurant for our included lunch. We first have a demonstration of the preparation of Ceviche, a popular Latin American dish. It consists of raw fish or other main ingredients, plus seasonings, marinated in citrus juice. Our lunch’s first course is Ceviche. We should have realized we were in

trouble when they could not deliver to our tables the required plates of mushroom ceviche, even though we had called them in with our meal choice several hours earlier. They say they ran out of mushrooms.

The one real positive about the restaurant is that it has W-Fi and we were able to send messages back home (but no Trip Journal update).



Our main courses take forever to arrive. Tour Director Erick is livid. Talking with the staff he discovers that the owners (of this reliable restaurant he has used many times before) are in Peru and the staff is apparently slacking off. At 2 PM (after arriving two hours earlier) we have been waiting fifteen minutes for our ice cream desert.....how hard can that be? Erick and Jesus instruct us to leave and they take us across the street to an ice cream shop where they buy us desert.

We next start our walking tour of the Old Town. It is under renovation to return it to its original 1700s/1800s appearance. We first stop at a "Panama Hat" shop as a few in our group are considering purchases. This was good timing as we experience a brief rain shower. We view many restored buildings, the Santa Domingo Monestary, the San Francisco Church built in 1679, and the walk along the ocean past vendors booths.





Back to our ship. We enjoy a great dinner. All of the meals we have been served onboard have been excellent. All go to bed early as we will leave early tomorrow for our journey into the jungle.

2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 6 – Monday March 6th – Punta Patino



We are up very early this morning for our trip to visit an indigenous tribe deep in the Panamanian jungle. We need to get an early start so that we can enter and later exit the small river that will take us to their village. The river is only accessible by shallow draft boats during high tide. Overnight the M/Y

Callisto motored from Panama City to Punta Patino on Panama's remote Darien Peninsula, shown on the right side of the map, above.



The Darien Peninsula is one of the most inaccessible places on earth. Shown on the left is the route of the Pan American Highway. It runs from the north shore of Alaska to the southern tip of Argentina. However, as shown on the map on the left, there is a 100 mile gap in the highway in Darien, called the "Darien Gap". The gap may never be finished as it is most remote and covered with jungle and marshland and very difficult to bridge. There is also opposition from environmentalist and native groups and concern about cattle from South America spreading hoof and mouth disease into North America.

There are seven indigenous groups in Panama. We will be visiting an Embera people's village. The Embera are said to be the most "unspoiled" of the indigenous groups.

At 7:15 AM we are picked up at the stern of the M/Y Callisto by two small motorized wooden boats.





After an hour trip up the rapidly narrowing Mogue River we arrive at the Embera village and receive a warm welcome.



We walk for about fifteen minutes to their village. We first view some of their houses, all built on stilts. We visit with the oldest person in the village, a lady at least ninety years old. We have a good local guide translating for us.





We walk to the center of the village and watch the Embera squeeze cane for sugar water and process corn for flour.



There is time for shopping for their hand-made crafts.



More entertainment, dancing, and then lunch. The main course is Iguana. We skip lunch.



Tour guide trainee Katia gets a not-so-permanent (we hope) tattoo.



Elliott, give a lecture on the rain forest.

These folks are amazingly open, warm and friendly. They never ask to be paid for having their picture taken. For the fifteen minute walk back to our boats kids take our hands and walk with us.

It is hot. We return to our ship which sets sail mid-afternoon up the western coast of Panama. This will be the longest sea leg of our trip, 240 miles, and we will cruise all day and night reaching our next destination mid-afternoon tomorrow.

Mid-afternoon our onboard Naturalist,

Later, on the open back deck, we see dolphins racing along on both sides of our ship. Elliott tells us that they are Pan-Tropical dolphins. At 6 PM Erick hosts a cocktail party for us on the back deck and leads us in an interesting discussion about the indigenous people.

Here are the crafts that Marcia and I bought from the Embera people.



2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 7 – Tuesday March 7th – Cruising



We cruise overnight as part of our 240 mile trip to Coiba Island. The M/Y Callisto is not a fast ship. With a maximum speed of under 10 knots this segment will take about 24 hours. We hit some really rough patches overnight but it is clear and calm when we wake up.

We spend our cruising time today chatting with our fellow travelers and enjoying the view from the open rear deck.



At 10 AM we have a surprise lecture by one of our fellow independent travelers, David Sutherland from England. He is past president of the Royal Aeronautical Society and held several important positions in the European Space Agency. His talk is about the 2005 landing of the European Research Module on Titan, a moon of Saturn, and a later mission, the 2014 landing of a module on the Rosetta Comet, both of which he had key roles in. This presentation, both the content and his delivery, are excellent!



Mid-afternoon we anchor off of the very small island of Granito de Oro.

The crew has given us excellent and almost new snorkel gear (flippers and masks) and we depart for the shore of the island for an afternoon of swimming and snorkeling. The water temperature is in the mid-80s, so we certainly don't need wet suits! The snorkeling right off of the beach is outstanding. We see many fish, turtles, eels

and white tipped sharks. The water is great; what a relaxing place.





Back on board we enjoy cocktails on deck and then a nice dinner outside on the rear deck.

2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 8 – Wednesday March 8th – Coiba NP



We depart the M/Y Callisto at 8 AM for a wet zodiac landing on Cobia Island. The whole island was a Panamanian penal colony from 1919 through 2005. It mostly held political prisoners. The island, uninhabited except for a few park rangers, is now a National Park. It is the largest island off the coast of Central America. Once on shore we go on a walking tour of the area around the beach.



We spot many vultures and a few other birds. We spot an Iguana and Marcia gets a good shot of a hummingbird.

There is much excitement when we spot Tito in the lagoon. He is a twelve foot long crocodile that the crew has not seen in over a year; he's been away.



A few of us now snorkel in the warm waters off the beach.



At lunchtime, many of the crew come ashore with tables and provisions and prepare for us a delicious barbeque lunch. On the lower left the M/Y Callisto's Captain supervises the grilling. He is on the right.



2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 9 – Thursday March 9th – Colfito



We wake up this morning anchored off Golfito, Costa Roca. We enjoy a nice sunrise.

The Costa Rican authorities come on board to check passports, all of which have been in the possession of the ships' officers. This seems to take a while. I assume there is no problem with the passanger's passports as we are all Americans and Brits. I am guessing there could be some questions with the crew which is Greek, Croatian, Egyptian, Ukrainian, Costa Rican and from

the Mauritius Islands east of Madagascar, (and possibly other countries).



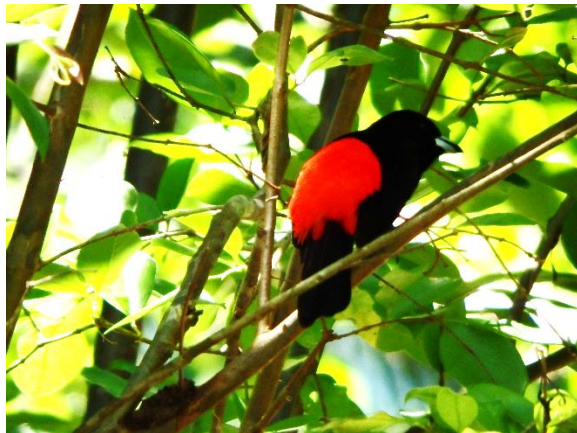
The Captain now elects to take on fresh water. As a result we reach Golfo Dulce two hours later than planned and disembark at 10 AM rather than the scheduled 8 AM. The temperature and humidity are both in the 90s when we arrive at Casa Orquideas, a flower and bird sanctuary designed and maintained by two American expatriates.

We see orchids, other flowers, birds and animals. We have a local guide. It is very hot.



We are back on board at Noon. Due to the schedule delay, the "Photo Editing Workshop" Marcia had volunteered to conduct, has been postponed until Saturday afternoon.

During lunch, we motor across the gulf to the Osa Peninsula. We disembark for a two-and-a-half hour guided hike through the tropical rainforest. We see Howler Monkeys, Iguanas, Sloths, Monkeys and other interesting critters. It is incredibly hot and humid.





After our hike, at our request, the local guide company drives us to an open air bar near the pier that is said to have acceptable W-Fi. It does! Marcia is able to send out links to days three through seven of this trip journal.

Tomorrow we will go to Manuel Antonio National Park which we think will be a highlight of the trip.

2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 10 – Fri. March 10 – Manuel Antonio NP



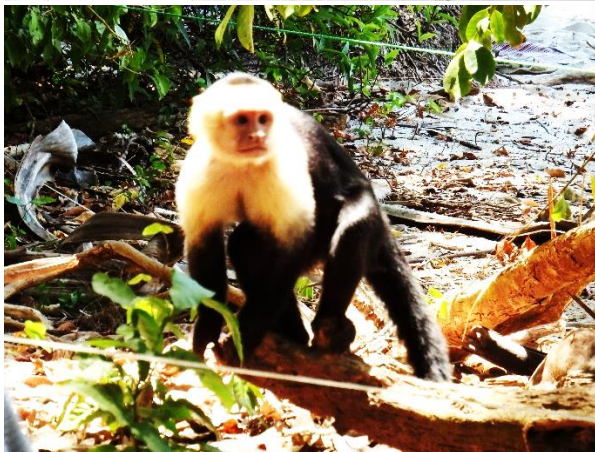
Over night we motor 110 miles and anchor off of the city of Quepos on the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica. We take the zodiac to shore early, at 7:50 AM, in an attempt to avoid the highest heat of the day and the crowds of other tourists that we expect.

We pick up our local guide. He and guide trainee Katia will show the sixteen of us around Manuel Antonio National Park. Our guide tells us, proudly, that Costa Rica has a 96.6% literacy rate and abolished its army in 1948. He also tells us that the park is the most popular attraction in Costa Rica. It is only 7.5 square miles in size but attracts 437,000 visitors a year. We drive through the city which is home to both Katia and our Tour Director Erick.

We enter the park. Unlike most other places we have visited in Panama and Costa Rica the park is very crowded. Both our guide and Katia carry telescopes which they set up to help us see some of the wildlife we spot. We see a Bat, a Gladiator Tree Frog, a Chameleon, a Three Toed Sloth, a Lessor Night Hawk, a Spiney Tail Black Iquana, strange Spiders, a Red Eye Leaf Frog, and a ground nesting Bird. It is hot and humid.



Our hike takes us to the Manuel Antonio Beach, said to be the best in Costa Rica. The water is incredibly warm. Tour Director Erick consults his watch/thermometer and says that the air temperature is 95 degrees. At the beach we see many Monkeys and long nosed Coatie that are obviously very used to being around humans. I have yet to use insect spray on this trip and have had no problems with insects in Panama or Costa Rica.





We walk back much of the way on a nice pathway; mostly a raised wooden walkway. We spot a Deer, the National Mammal of Costa Rica. Overall, we did not think Manuel Antonio park lived up to its hype. I think the reason they get so many visitors is the cruise ship passengers can access the park. Also, people have to go through the park to get to the beach. A few folks in our group now leave for an optional Zip Line excursion.

Erick and Katia take us up into the mountains to the top floor of a luxury hotel for lunch, La Luna Hotel. We have nice views of the Pacific Ocean and great food.



After lunch we view the Macaws in the hotel's Macaw Recovery area. We also spot a huge Iguana.

2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 11 – Sat. March 11th – Tortuga Island



Today is our last full day on the M/Y Callisto.

This morning we go to Curu Wildlife Refuge. It was Costa Rica's first private wildlife refuge, established in 1983.

The tides on the Pacific coast near the equator are huge, +/- 20 feet. We make a wet landing off of our zodiac at low tide on Curu Island.

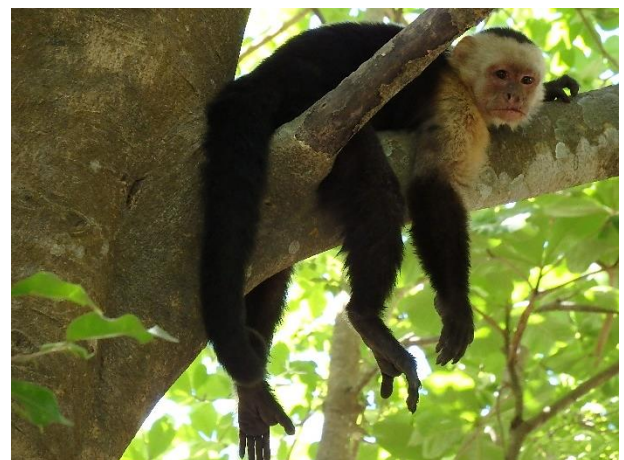
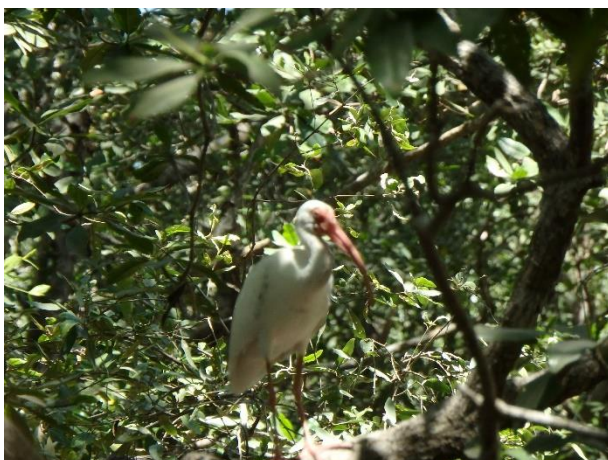
We immediately see many Monkeys, Racoons and Coaties running around the camp near shore.



We start our hike along a trail through a Mangrove Forest and then a Semi-Discidious Forest. As with all of the shore excursions the sixteen members of the Odysseys Unlimited Tour go separately from the other travelers on the ship. In this case only five of us OU travelers elect to go on this included excursion. We have three guides; the local Curu guide, our Tour Director Erick and guide trainee Katia.

The nine other folks, independently traveling on our ship, start out on another trail with the very good ship's Naturalist Elliott.

We seem to be the only tourists in the park and we walk along shaded secluded trails. We see Deer, Lizards, Birds and Capucin Monkeys.



After about a three mile walk we return to our ship at 11:30 AM. We really enjoyed this excursion. It's our favorite wildlife event so far; much better than the highly hyped Manual Antonio Park.



The M/Y Callisto now motors about two miles to Tortuga Island where we will enjoy a barbeque lunch on a beach. In the arial photo, above, the beach is visable on the lower left.



It is a Saturday so there are many locals over from the mainland enjoying the beach. Members of our crew arrived earlier this morning and reserved a nice shaded area for us, with tables, at one end of the beach. After lunch there is time for swimming in the warm waters. We are back on our ship mid-afternoon and it sets sail for Puntarenas where we will disembark.



Marcia has volunteered to give a lecture/workshop this afternoon, in the ship's lounge, on Photo Editing on Computers and tablets. Most everyone attends. It is well received.

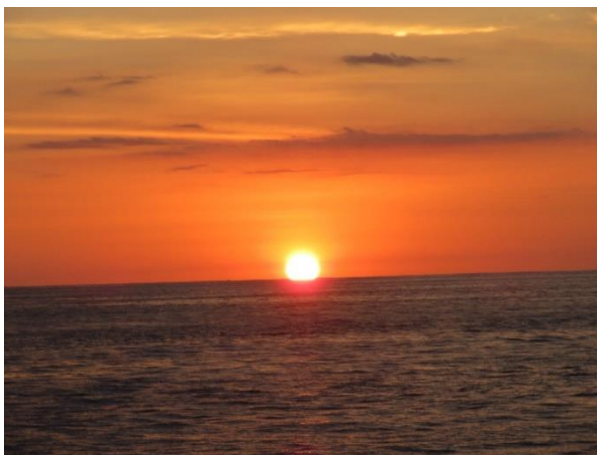
She uses real pictures that we have taken on the tour excursions and then shows and explains the tools that can be used to fix issues with pics. The example below is a picture that I took in murky water of a sea turtle and the "fixed" one included, earlier, in the Trip Journal.



Tonight is the Captain's Farewell Dinner. Near dinner's end the Captain, Elliott the (very good) ship's Naturalist, and Marco the ship's Hotel Manager address the passengers and tactfully request that we don't "bag" them too badly for some of the issues with this cruise and the condition of the M/Y Callisto...more on this tomorrow.



Back on the M/Y Callisto we enjoy the sunset and then the music and dancing from a local group. Tour Director Erick hosts an open bar for the Odysseys Unlimited group.



2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 12 – Sunday March 12th – San Jose CR



At 8 AM we disembark from the M/Y Callisto which is docked in Puntarenas Costa Rica. We have been on board for nine days.

We feel that the cruise portion of this tour was only "good" at best. The ship's crew was uniformly efficient and friendly, the food excellent, and the included shore excursions mostly good.

However, the ship itself is slow, old and tired. The cabins are cramped as are the common areas. The lack of Wi-Fi, although advertised as available by both the cruise line and our tour company, was a major disappointment as it prevented us from staying in touch with family, mailing out this Trip Journal daily, and staying current with the news. The ship was not up to Odysseys Unlimited standards.



The sixteen of us board a full size motor coach so we are quite comfortable. We head out on a two-and-a-half hour drive to San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica.

We stop at a good store selling all types of souvenirs and then at a fruit stand where Erick shows us the produce grown in Costa Rica.

We climb to 4000 feet as we enter San Jose. This area has a population of 2.5 million people; half of the country's population. It is a

beautiful clear day. The temperature at this altitude is in the mid-70s.



We drive and walk through the central part of San Jose. A highlight is the National Theater built in 1897. We tour the Gold Museum.



At 3:30 PM we check into our hotel for the next two nights, a beautiful Marriott.



Dinner is on our own tonight. Due to the late lunch, the four of us opt for a snack in Marriott's Sports Bar. We have a blast. Tomorrow is the last full day of this tour.

2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 13 – Monday March 13 – San Jose CR

We enjoy a good night's sleep at the Marriott San Jose.



Today's included tour activities include a visit to the Poas Volcano National Park and the Doka Coffee Estate. The four of us did those activities in January 2013 on the other Odysseys Unlimited tour of Costa Rica; the only duplicates between their two tours. So, Erick has arranged for us to do something else at our own expense. We will visit Lapaz Waterfall Park located on the slope of the Poas Volcano. At 8 AM our driver Pablo picks the four of us up for the hour-and-fifteen-minute drive to the park. It is another beautiful sunny day.

The park features birds, insects, and animals in captivity. Their signs claim "None of the animals in the park were taken from their natural habitat. Most were taken from illegal pet owners and given to the park by the government". We first tour the bird house and see many varieties including Macaws, Parrots, and Toucans. Marcia and Marie hand feed a Toucan.



We next walk through the beautiful Butterfly Garden. It puts all others that we have seen to shame. Our favorite butterfly is the Blue Morpho. Its wing tops are bright blue while the undersides have eyes that make it look like an Owl to predators. See below!



Next we watch the playful Capuchin and Spider Monkeys.



Next we are off to the Hummingbird feeding area.

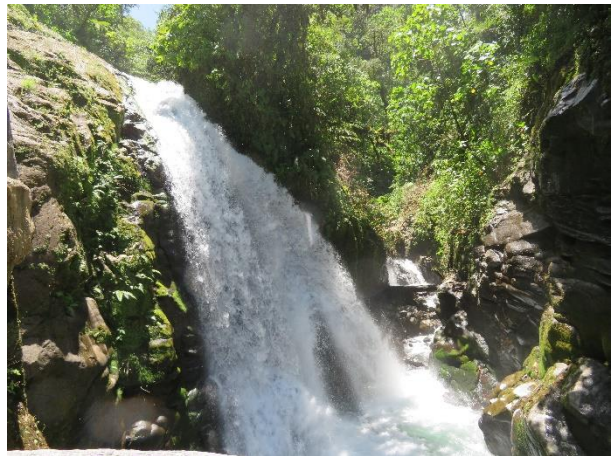
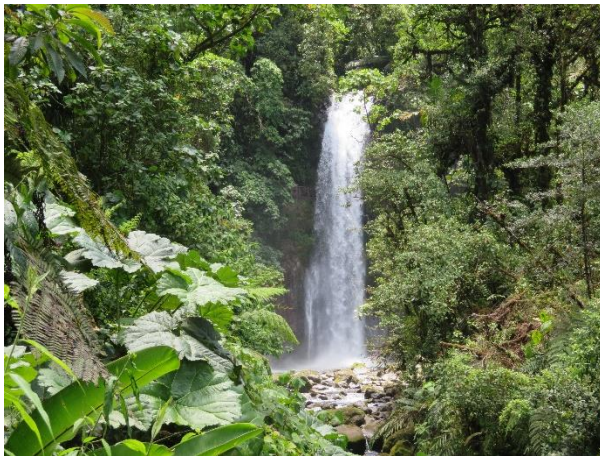
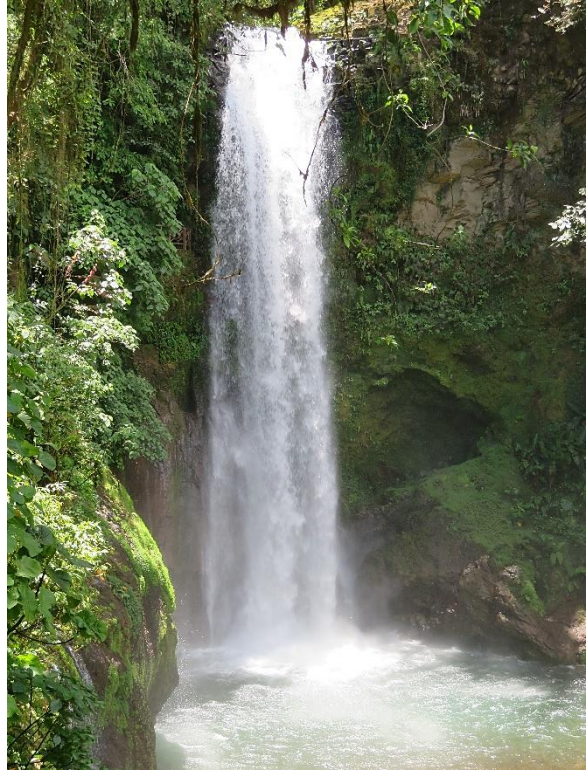


We now see the big cats, Puma, Ocelot, Cougar, Jaguar, and others.



We also toured the Snake and Reptile, Frog, and Spider exhibits. What a place? Beautifully landscaped, clean, and with good signage.

We now hike to view the five spectacular waterfalls.



We have a nice lunch at a small restaurant near the Trout Ponds.

What a place. And, no crowds. Definitely an attraction to visit if you are in the San Jose area.

We meet back up with Pablo at 2 PM and he drives us back to the Marriott. We arrive at 3:15 PM.



At 6 PM we all meet with Erick who answers our questions about Costa Rica. Later, we move into a banquet room for our Farewell Dinner. Erick continues to talk with us during dinner, asking us to talk about our favorite experiences on the tour.

Tomorrow we will be up early as we leave for the airport at 4 AM for our flight home.

2017 Panama & Costa Rica Tour – Day 14 – Tuesday March 14th – Back to USA



Today we leave Central America for our homes. Above is a “goodbye” photo taken yesterday at the Lapaz Waterfall Park of two Oxen hauling a traditional Costa Rican painted cart.

We depart the excellent Marriott Hotel at 4 AM for a quick ten-minute ride to the airport. We have bagged breakfasts in hand secured by Tour Guides Erick and Katia.

At the airport, bizarrely, we stand in line for well over an hour as Delta has only one (semi-competent) agent to check in the main cabin; all others will only handle those with boarding passes or premium customers. Also, our tour guides got boarding passes for all of our fellow travelers but not for the 4 of us. So they went directly to baggage check in unlike the fantastic four. Next to us Coba Airlines (who are they?) has ten agents to handle regular folks. Our flights home are fine and the Tinkas get home to Dayton and the Elvings to Pittsburgh by 6 PM.



Our dog, Pepper, is happy to see Marcia. We are not happy to see winter again. Below are some of the souvenirs we got (minus the jewelry).



OK.....here are my comments on the good and the bad on this trip. These are my opinions only; Marcia, Kal and Marie might not agree. Overall I can only rate this as a good tour (and I am an **easy** grader)!

The Good

- Pre and Post Tour Hotels; Hilton in Panama and Marriott in San Jose
- Tour Director Erick
- Local Panama Guide Jesus
- Everything about the Panama Canal; excursions and viewing
- Weather was fine; a great winter break.
- M/Y Callisto Crew; always friendly and helpful
- M/Y Callisto Food...really good
- Panama City and the Old Cities
- US\$ being always accepted in Panama and Costa Rica
- The visit to the indigenous Embera people
- Snorkeling at Granito de Ora with the excellent, free, snorkeling gear from the M/Y Callisto
- Traveling companions Marie and Kal
- The two beach barbecues with snorkeling and swimming (thanks M/Y Callisto)
- Osa Peninsula Hike
- Most of the included meals when not on the M/Y Callisto
- Cura Wildlife Refuge hike
- Lapaz Waterfall Park near San Jose
- The hospitality and friendliness of all of the Panamanians and Costa Ricans that we met

The Not So Good

- The old, slow, and tired ship M/Y Callisto (not at all, in my opinion, up to Odysseys Unlimited Standards)
- Cramped and smelly Cabins on the ship
- Cramped and hot common areas on the ship

-Manual Antonio Park.....highly overrated

-Having our mid-February departure cancelled by Odysseys Unlimited (after we had booked many months earlier and reserved the lowest cost "B" Cabins) and the offered the March 1st sailing only to be told later the Elvings had to take the most expensive "P" Cabins [(after being promised an A cabin)] (+\$1,990) and the Tinkas "A" Cabins (+\$1190). These "upgraded" cabins were no better than the cheaper "B" cabins. The only difference was porthole vs. window. Odysseys Unlimited sure did disappoint us here. Best, Jim



