

## Making fantasy real in Panama

### LOWLANDS: Return visit gives deeper look at canal's ties to nature, culture

Lynn Ferrin, Special to The Chronicle  
Sunday, May 14, 2006

**Gatun Lake, Panama** -- A terrible, hoarse roar echoed through the forest. Howler monkeys. In a large tree hanging over the water, a dozen of them leapt up from their naps, fidgeted through the branches and glared down at us. We peered back and added them to our list of jungle spottings for the day: red-naped tamarins and white-faced capuchins, three-toed sloths, wattled jacanas and a 50,000-ton, blue-and-orange container ship.



[More...](#)

Not the usual fare in most deep-jungle nature preserves, but in **Panama**, where the world's best-known waterway slices through miles of primeval rain forest, economy and ecology are irrevocably intertwined. The result is pristine rain forest teeming with wildlife that is both protected and accessible because without it, one of the world's grandest engineering projects and one of its busiest waterways could not function.

Fourteen years ago I had sailed the canal on a cruise ship. I hadn't expected to be so spellbound by this marvel of engineering and courage, so fascinated that its early 20th century design still works so well. I stood on deck all day watching the dance of line handlers, the electric "mules" towing the vessels, the gigantic doors on the locks (still the originals).

But I was surprised that so much of the transit was across a lake within a tropical rain forest, which (I thought) surely must shelter monkeys, toucans and a wealth of other wildlife, as well as indigenous cultures. I promised myself that I would return someday for a closer look at this land linking oceans and continents.

I even harbored a fantasy, silly really, of kayaking the canal.

When I finally returned recently as part of a nine-day tour focusing on the natural and human history of the Isthmus of **Panama**, I was delighted to arrive at the striking Gamboa Rainforest Resort. It sprawls along a hillside midway along the canal at its junction with the upper Chagres River. It was the Chagres that was dammed in 1908 to create 23-mile-long Gatun Lake, which provides the water for the canal.

At sunset we sat on the verandah drinking chilled Gamboa beer with our guide, Rich Cahill, a Panamanian whose parents were American expats. Across the river, the guayacan trees were in electric yellow bloom.

"You're lucky," Cahill told us. "These trees bloom for only one week, to get an early hit by the pollinators, then drop their flowers." It was true: A week later the trees were bare, their golden petals littering the forest floor -- and providing for some fun nano-parades of leaf-cutter ants.

Cahill, like most Panamanians we met, is fiercely proud of his country's natural treasures and growing prosperity in the world economy.

The United States turned the canal over to **Panama** on the last day of the 20th century, and the Panamanians are doing a fine job with it, increasing the tonnage passing through by 22 percent and decreasing the transit time. There are plans to increase capacity by adding a third lane and widening the canal, although it's a hot political potato in **Panama** -- the project likely will cost billions and take years to complete and pay for.

For nature lovers, it's a fortunate twist of ecological fate that the entire canal operation depends upon an enormous supply of fresh water and rainfall. Each ship passing through uses 52 million gallons of fresh water, which then flows out to sea. So **Panama** must protect the watershed and its precious rain forest, which serves as a giant sponge and protects against erosion. No rain forest, no canal, no megabucks for **Panama**. Without the canal, conversely, the jungle would be threatened by economic forces -- lumber, ranching, real estate.

#### Wildlife and life in the wild

Next morning we climbed into a motorboat to explore Gatun Lake, crossing the shipping lanes into the lagoons along the lake's edges. I was glad to be here in spring, with its flowering trees and courting birds -- a biological rush hour. And Cahill knew his stuff. We saw not only the primates and sloths, but many species of birds. Banners of black-bellied whistling ducks skittered away at our approach. Green herons and wattled jacanas strode the water's edge. Caciques fluttered out of their pendulous, woven nests. An osprey perched on a snag, munching on a fish.

Loud cracks, like pistol shots, rang out. "Golden-collared manikins," said Cahill. "The males snap their wings together to attract females."

At dusk, swinging in the hammock on my balcony, I heard howler monkeys roaring in the distant hills and the racket of parakeets settling into nearby trees. Below, the swimming pool had become the dominion of bellowing bullfrogs and swooping bats.

When not mesmerized by **Panama's** flora and fauna, we examined the human footprint on this tiny country. For the next week we crisscrossed the Isthmus of **Panama** -- easy to do, because it is only 50 miles wide. It took just an hour to ride the historic **Panama** Railroad from the Atlantic to the Pacific. At the new visitor center at the Miraflores Locks, we watched ships squeeze through, studied the exhibits, and dined at the fine restaurant overlooking the action.

I was struck by how interwoven are the histories of **Panama** and San Francisco. In the early years of the California Gold Rush, prospectors sailed down to the Caribbean side, struggled on foot or mule across the isthmus on the old Las Cruces Trail (the same one used by 16th century conquistadors to carry the looted Inca gold), then caught ships north to San Francisco. After the United States built the **Panama** Railroad in 1855, travelers crossed by train. A billion and a half dollars worth of California's gold was schlepped across the isthmus, headed for the vaults of Eastern banks. In 1915, San Francisco celebrated the recovery from its earthquake and the completion of the canal with the **Panama-Pacific** Exposition.

In **Panama** City, on the Pacific, we found a modern capital, its waterfront lined with a broad promenade, with an imposing statue of Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, in 1513 the first European to see the Pacific. The city's fine colonial section is now being gentrified. In the warm evening, we walked along the old Spanish seawall. Across the water twinkled the lights of the skyscrapers and the flotilla of ships waiting their turn to transit the canal.

The Caribbean side has a completely different feel: steamy and edgy, with a history of conquistadors and buccaneers; Columbus came calling in 1502. The Spanish built forts here to protect the looted Inca gold headed for Spain, but British pirates managed to sack the towns anyway.

The biggest city, Colón, is dangerous and derelict except for the mammoth shopping malls in the Free Trade Zone. Our van crawled through streets filled with reggae music, shouting peddlers and packed buses decorated with images of everything from Moses to Mickey Mouse.

We stayed on Gatun Lake at the Melia **Panama** Canal, a posh new hotel in an old building with an unsettling history: It was once the School of the Americas, where the U.S. Army trained foreign soldiers -- and some of Latin America's more notorious human-rights violators. I loved the hotel's swimming pools and the euphonias nesting in the trees, but the long dim hallways gave me the creeps.

Wherever we went, we kept our binoculars and a spotting scope handy for birding. More than 900 species have been counted in **Panama**, which hosts migratory species from both continents. I loved the names of some birding spots -- Explosives Division, Secret Police, Dredging Division -- at canal and government sites.

We spent a morning walking along the famous Pipeline Road, where 385 avian species have been spotted in one day. A few parties of other birders were there, too. We shared scopes to scrutinize birds I'd never heard of: yellow-bellied elenas, violaceous and slaty-tailed trogons, cinnamon woodpeckers. Every now and then we caught glimpses of agoutis and coatimundis scurrying across the road. Once an iridescent blue morpho butterfly, big as a saucer, flitted through the leaves.

#### Answer to a fantasy

One morning we set out to explore the upper Chagres River and meet the indigenous Embara people, who resettled here from the Darien jungles. We climbed into motorized dugout canoes and headed into the mountains. The river, which supplies drinking water for much of central **Panama**, runs clear and sparkling. Soon we were in shallow rapids, and the Embara had to climb out and drag the boats.

In their village of neat thatched houses, now an "ecotour" destination, the Embara seemed to have a pretty good thing going. They danced for us -- and with us -- in their bright native dress. They practiced their English and fed us delicious grilled tilapia (a local freshwater fish) folded into banana leaves. In the middle of town, next to a phone booth with a thatched roof, children were playing Frisbee with a compact disc. We dropped a lot of U.S. dollars -- one of two official currencies in **Panama** -- on their intricate woodwork, baskets and "ivory nut" carvings.

Back at the hotel I noticed some kayaks, and they revived my old fantasy. I asked the marina attendant: Can I take one out into the canal? (It was about half a mile away.)

"No. You must stay within sight of the marina."

"Well," I said, "if you go out and stand at the very end of that pier, you can almost see me." He blinked.

"I'll make it worth your trouble," I said.

Soon I was paddling toward the railroad bridge in an awkward yellow plastic kayak with no back rest. Fifteen minutes later I poked my bow into the canal, watched an oil tanker go by and turned back. I fought against sudden headwinds and motorboat wakes -- like trying to paddle a big balloon in a typhoon -- and took almost an hour. With blistered hands and an aching back, I slipped the man \$5.

And I could say, sort of truthfully, "I've kayaked the **Panama** Canal."