

The Panama Canal.

Here are some great pictures of the Panama Canal and some of the ships that use this fantastic facility. Almost all merchant seafarers have been through the Panama Canal at least once. I personally journeyed three (3) times through that canal, and each time I saw something different. Something I hadn't noticed before. As I look at these pictures I am filled with wonder at what a magnificent structure it is, especially as so much of it was manual labour intensive. Modern day speak about a very elderly construction.

OK, just a little bit of history coming up..... The Panama Canal was eventually built on the second try. The first time it was tried was in the 1880's. The second attempt was after the unrest that led to the Panamanian people getting a new government in the early 1900's. In 1903, the new Panamanian Government gave permission to a Frenchman by the name of Philippe Banau-Varilla to negotiate with the United States to build the canal. The resulting 'treaty' was weighted heavily in favour of America. Although they agreed to, and built the Panama Canal, they had virtual ownership of the canal and a 5 mile wide strip on both sides of the canal was US territory. This strip, 5 miles wide and 50 miles long on either side of the canal, was American controlled and split Panama into two separate parts and stirred up much tension between the two nations for a very long time. 1914 to 1960's is a long time, but then there were riots and fighting on and off in the streets until 1977 when the two governments finally came to an agreement that returned 60% of the 'strip' to the Panamanian people. The remaining 40% was formally returned to Panama at mid-day on December the 31st 1999. Even then there were conditions attached to the canal and agreed to before the hand-over. The whole canal, for all time, is now a "Neutral International Waterway". Even in the case of war, 'any vessel is always guaranteed safe passage'. After the handover, both America and Panama share the duties to defend the canal. Any ship using the Canal to access the other Ocean and the other coast of the US, whether from East to West or vice versa, shorten their journey by about 8,000 miles. The time to negotiate the canal is approximately 15 hours and it is estimated that most of that time is spent just waiting at anchor for ships heading in the opposite direction to clear the locks.

In 2007 work began on expanding/improving the Panama Canal so the future upcoming larger ships will be able to make passage through the waterway. The completion date was set at 2014, but owing to a hold up in the manufacturing of making a 100 year concrete, the date has been moved to about April 2015.

Many of the pictures with this short history were taken from different angles and positions that I could never get to, so appear to be a bit different from my memories. Anyway, using your memory, look at the precision that the lock workers have to work with and think of how easy our ships moved in and out of the locks. Some of those ships seem to need a shoehorn to get in and out without scratching or scraping the paintwork. Think too, in the near future those ships will be even larger still. WOW.