

TRAVEL

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CENTRAL AMERICA

Small ship takes guests beyond well-trodden shores

■ On this Panama Canal cruise, the canal transit is secondary to more adventurous activities along the coasts of Panama and Costa Rica.

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
Special to The Miami Herald

LOS SUENOS, Costa Rica — It was a banquet of memories — of the primitive Embera village, the virgin rainforest, the scarlet macaws, the embroidered finery of the San Blas Islands — of glowing speeches and heartfelt farewells. On board the Pacific Explorer, the 92 passengers exchanged e-mail addresses and jotted down phone numbers.

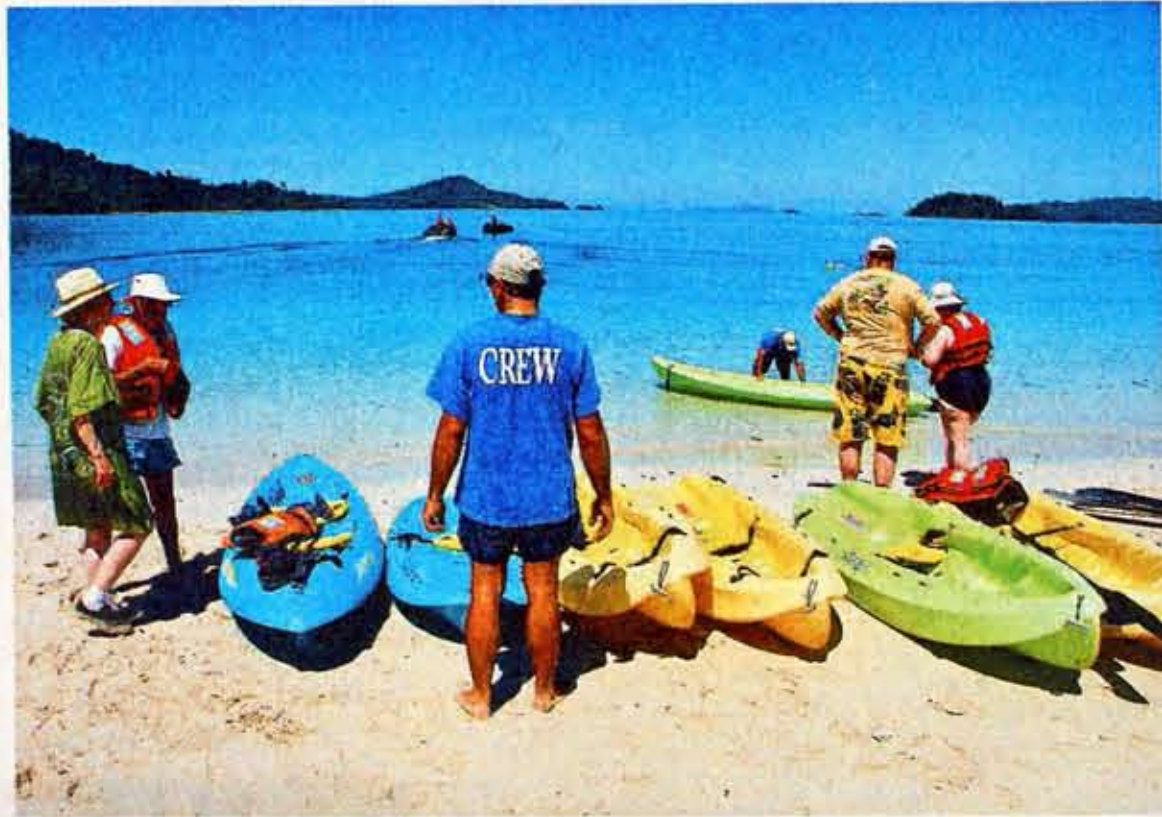
But when Stacy Hug, Cruise West's program coordinator, asked what we'd remember most from our ten-day cruise to Costa Rica and Panama, with a Panama Canal crossing, all hands went up for the sloths and the monkeys.

On most Panama Canal cruises, the canal itself is the highlight of the voyage, a world traveler's rite of passage. The passage through the three sets of double locks that connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans is a marvel that keeps most passengers standing at the rail, transfixed by the machinery that cut a path between two continents.

But the 100-passenger Pacific Explorer's itinerary, "Between Two Seas," sailing the coasts of Costa Rica and Panama, charts a more adventurous course.

"Most of our passengers have already been through the Canal," said Hug, who uses Cruise West's passenger profiles to customize the ship's activities. "By the time they join us they're ready for a smaller ship. They want to see what's beyond the trees on the shoreline."

Our trip began in Panama City, on the Canal's Pacific side, where the passengers, mostly from the United States



PHOTOS BY STEVE HAGGERTY/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

SURF AND TURF: Passengers aboard the Pacific Explorer stop at Granita de Oro, above. Below, they look for howler monkeys in Costa Rica's Manuel Antonio National Park.

and Canada, checked into the Caesar Park Hotel for the night. The next day we boarded a shuttle bus for the drive to Colón, on the Atlantic side, where we boarded the Explorer. A brief welcome champagne, and by sunset, we were gliding away from the dock toward the San Blas Islands.

That pier was the last one we would see until the cruise ended in Los Suenos, Costa Rica. When the passengers went ashore, it was in the ship's inflatable vinyl rafts, clambering in at the stern of the Explorer and climbing out on the beach, usually through gentle surf.

SAN BLAS ISLANDS

The exception was our first port of call, at the San Blas Islands, a popular stop for cruise ships. Visitors have been coming for so many years that the Kuna people now depend on tourist dollars, gathering at a central



island where they set up their craft stalls and don the traditional embroidered dress and gleaming glass beads.

Depending on the quality of the design and fine stitching of the layered, embroidered fabrics, *molas* sell for \$5 and up. Shop carefully, bargain tactfully and you'll bring home some unique artwork.

The ship's next stop was at the historic Spanish fort, Portobelo. A thriving port in the early 17th century, Portobelo was a hub for the transportation of gold that the Spanish looted or mined in Peru, shipped to Central America, hauled across the isthmus and stored under guard for eventual shipment to Spain. Now decaying and abandoned, the fort's limestone walls and rusty cannon echo its colorful past.

Highlights of this shore visit are a guided walking tour and folk dance performed by a dozen of the local residents.

THE OTHER SIDE

After the canal crossing, which takes a full day, the ship set a course for Corcovado National Park, 134 acres of virgin rainforest on remote Osa Peninsula on Costa Rica's west coast. Said to be one of the world's finest remaining Pacific Coast rainforests, the 134-acre preserve's ecosystem comprises 13 separate zones, from the spongy ground underfoot to the top of the canopy.

Landing on the beach, we walked inland, led by Rudy Zamora, the ship's naturalist, to look for scarlet macaws. A small colony of these showy red parrots, endangered throughout Central America, thrives here in one of the lower stories.

"Keep looking," advised Zamora, stopping to peer through binoculars. "When they start to squawk, then we'll be able to see them," he said. The guide's sharp ears heard them, then we spotted two on a tree branch.

Our next stop was at the Casa Orquideas, in the Golfo Dulce. A botanical garden created by Americans Ron and Trudy Macallister, the Casa Orquideas is an important botanical center where visitors can see most of Central America's best-known flora. The Macallisters, who moved to Costa Rica in 1973, bought a piece of logged coastal land in 1979, built a cabin and set about to create the garden.

"At first we grew things to feed ourselves," said Trudy. "Bananas, pineapple, sapote, citrus, vegetables, that sort of thing. Then we added a few flowers and discovered we could sell some of them. Then we added ornamental plants, began a landscaping business, and finally, in 1993, opened the place as a botanical garden."

Led by Zamora, who could hardly contain his excite-

CRUISING ON THE PACIFIC EXPLORER



● **The ship:** The Pacific Explorer, recently refurbished, has new carpets, blue-and-white print fabrics, comfortable furniture and bright lighting. All cabins are outside, with picture windows, air conditioning and tiny bathrooms with shower. Closet and drawer space are limited.

With only four decks, the ship's onboard activities are limited. The lounge and dining room are on the bottom deck; cabins are on decks two and three. Deck four has a closed lounge and library at the bow, an open sundeck at the stern and an open-air covered bar and lounge amidships. There are no elevators, swimming pool or exercise room.

● **Dining:** The dining room has open seating, with a buffet breakfast and lunch and sit-down dinners. The food is hearty American-style with no frills, and the addition of some local dishes.

● **The cruise:** The "Between Two Seas" itinerary sails in November and December 2008, and January-May 2009. Cabins start at \$5,299 per person, double occupancy. The fare includes all shore excursions, meals, soft drinks, sports equipment, bus transfers, taxes, fees and all tips. Wine and spirits cost extra.

● **Who takes the cruise:** Most passengers are between 40 and 60 years old and college educated. Some older passengers complained about noise levels at meal times.

● **What to take:** Bring only casual dress, with slacks, shorts, T-shirts and bathing suits. Waterproof sports sandals are essential; hats, sunscreen and quick-dry pants provide the best sun protection.

● **Information:** 888-851-8133 or www.cruise-west.com.

— ANNE Z. COOKE



GOOD FRIENDS: A little Kuna girl poses with her pet parrot.

got a laugh with, "you wonder where the real monkeys are sitting!"

But nothing could dampen Bello's enthusiasm. "Three of the world's 41 species of mangrove trees live along these banks," he said, peering into tangled thicket. "The trees pull salt from the brackish water and release it through the leaves. The leaves make oxygen to feed the roots. The coati-mundis, monkeys, snakes — everything here depends on the mangroves."

TIMELESS PEOPLE

My most memorable experience was

our visit to one of the primitive Embera villages tucked into the Darien Jungle on Panama's Pacific coast. Despite an occasional visitor, the Embera people continue to live as they always have, following traditional practices, building open-sided, thatched houses on stilts and wearing few clothes.

They greeted us with shy smiles and crowded hesitantly around as Zamora shook hands with the chief. Greeting us, he led a tour through the tribe's vegetable plots and past their houses.

Most of the women, wearing traditional knee-length sarongs, went bare-breasted, and all decorated their faces, arms, legs and chests with heavy black designs. The men wore loincloths or western-style shorts. The children spoke a few words of Spanish, apparently learned from coastal traders who call at intervals, exchanging plastic pails, pots, knives, men's shorts and bolts of printed cotton for weavings and carvings.

On each of its visits, the Pacific Explorer's crew bring gifts of pens and paper for the children, soccer balls, clothes, food and candy. The government has been here, too, doing its bit, building a cement sidewalk that goes nowhere and a cement-block community building that feels completely out of place.

As we motored out to the ship and turned to wave goodbye, even the Embera children had even vanished into the forest. From the ship's rail, there was no trace that we — or they — had ever been there. If only it could stay that way.

the man next to me