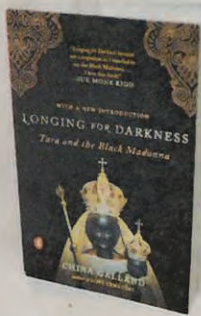


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WORD TRAVELS FAST

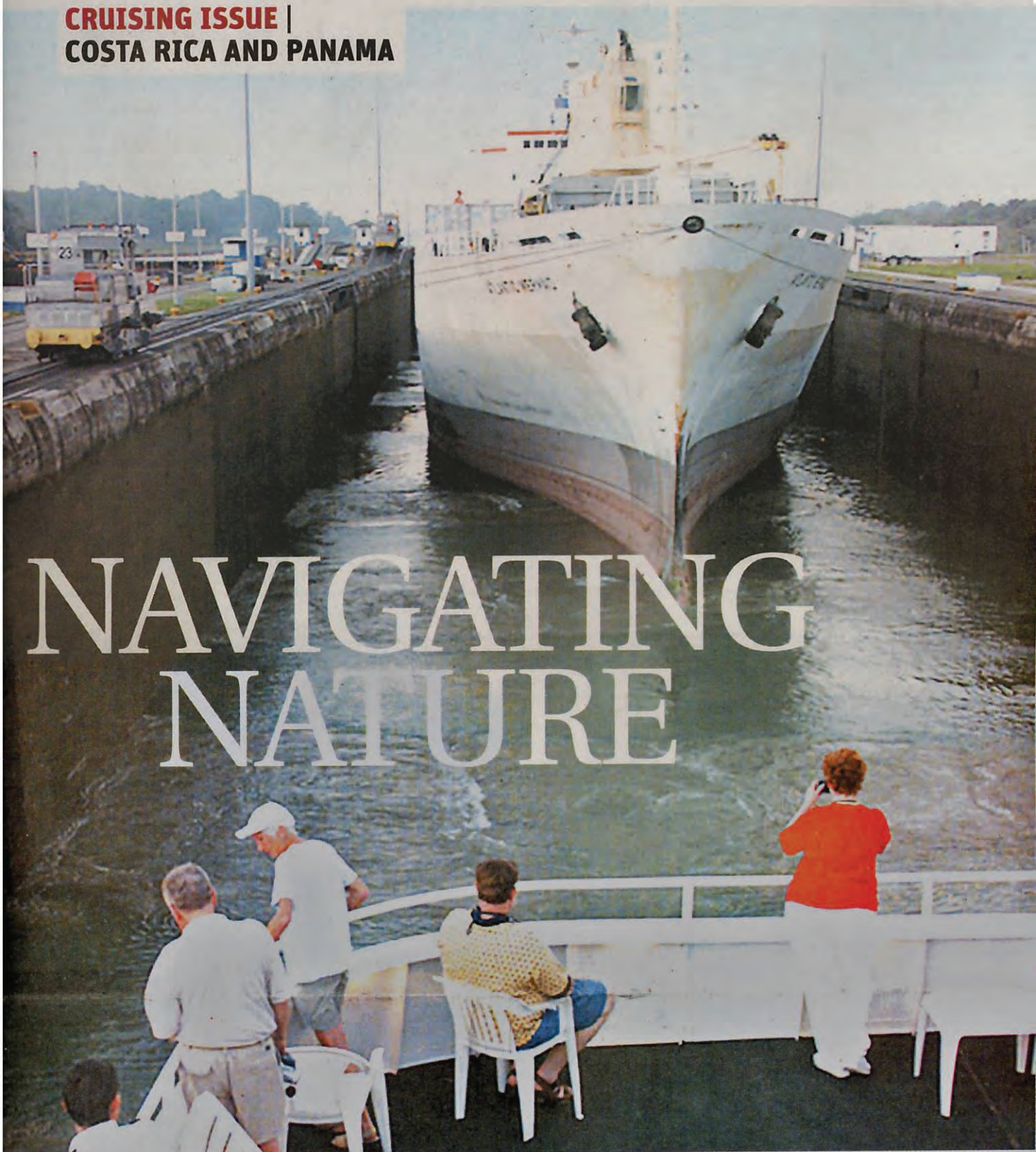
In search of a spirit

Author China Galland seeks two spiritualities by exploring Nepal, France and other places in *Longing for Darkness: Tara and the Black Madonna* (Penguin Books, \$16).

SUNDAY, MAY 20, 2007 | EDITOR: LISA LENOIR | (312) 321-2228

Let's get into it.

CRUISING ISSUE | COSTA RICA AND PANAMA



NAVIGATING NATURE

The Atlantic Mermaid joins the Pacific Explorer in the Gatún locks during our cruise through the Panama Canal. The Pacific Explorer is a small ship that bypasses the major ports for a more authentic experience. | STEVE HAGGERTY-COLOR WORLD Below: The carablanca monkey hangs in the trees in Costa Rica. | WWW.COSTARICAPHOTOS.COM

BEYOND SHORELINE | Cruise line charts more adventurous course between oceans

BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY

LOS SUENOS, Costa Rica — It was a banquet for the record books, with glowing speeches and heart-felt 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 10-day cruise to Costa Rica and Panama, with Panama Canal crossing, all hands pointed up for the sloths and monkeys.

On most Panama Canal cruises, the canal itself is the highlight of the voyage, a world traveler's rite of passage, the ultimate thrill. The trip through the massive locks that connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans are a show that keeps most passengers standing at the rail, transfixed by the machinery that makes it happen.

But the 100-passenger Pacific Explorer's itinerary, "Between the 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 passen-

ger 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 and Canada, checked into the Caesar Park Hotel for the night. The next day we boarded a shuttle bus for the drive to Colon, on the Atlantic side, to board the Explorer, and by sunset, we were gliding away from the pier toward the San Blas Islands.

That pier, as we soon discovered, was the last one we would see until the

cruise ended in Los Suenos, Costa Rica. Each day when we went ashore, it was in the ship's inflatable vinyl rafts, clambering in at the stern of the Explorer and climbing out through the surf, on the beach.

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 long that the Kuna people depend on tourist dollars. When a ship is due, they paddle to a central island set up to accommodate their stalls, don traditional colorful

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CRUISING | Trip skips popular ports in favor of hands-on adventures

dresses and glass jewelry and spread out their wares. Depending on the workmanship, these "molas," layered, embroidered fabrics, sell for \$5 and up. Shop carefully, and you can bring home some unique gifts.

Not far was our next stop, Portobelo, a village haunted by history. A busy port in the early 17th century, Portobelo was a way-station for Spanish gold, stolen from Peru, shipped to Central America, hauled across to the Atlantic side and stored in the fort for eventual shipment to Spain.

Now abandoned and untended, the fort's old walls and rows of rusty cannon speak louder than words. A small troupe of local dancers gather to entertain visitors, so bring your camera.

Searching for macaws

After crossing through the canal, we headed for Costa Rica's Corcovado National Park, 134 acres of virgin rainforest on the remote Osa Peninsula. Here, led by Rudy Zamora, we walked quietly inland beneath the towering canopy, in search of scarlet macaws. A small colony of these showy red parrots, endangered throughout Central America, remains in the national park, said Zamora, stopping to look through his binoculars. "When they start to squawk, then we'll be able to see them," he said.

The rain forest's 13 different habitats range from the spongy ground underfoot to the top of canopy, a complete ecosystem and, according to biologists, is the world's finest remaining Pacific coastal rainforest.

The ship also stopped in the Golfo Dulce at the Casa Orquideas, a botanical garden created by Ron and Trudy Macallister, Americans who moved to

Costa Rica in 1973. Six years later, they bought a piece of recently-logged coastal land, built a cabin and started to plant.

"At first, we grew things to feed ourselves," Trudy Macallister said. "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."

Though the garden contains few truly rare species, here's where you can see nearly all of Central America's better-known flora, identified by name. Led by Zamora, who could hardly contain his excitement, we wandered past more than 100 ornamental species in separate beds divided by gravel paths. Dozens of other, larger species of orchids, heliconias, bromeliads and palms crowded the periphery.

With a beach day planned, the ship anchored off Granita de Oro, a tiny islet with perfect sand beaches. The ship's crew ferried kayaks to the beach, set up a snack and drink table in the shade, and some passengers headed ashore — in the launch — with towels and snorkel gear. Others sat in the shade with a book or kayaked around the island.

The most popular excursions were the guided wildlife watching trips on coastal rivers. With a crew member operating the motor and a naturalist as a guide, small groups headed upstream into the forest. Camouflaged by leaves and sticks, the animals — two-toed sloths on tree limbs, iguanas sunbathing, boat-billed herons in shady thickets and boa constrictors wound around dusty sticks — blended into the back-

IF YOU GO

WHAT TO KNOW: The Between the Seas itinerary sails in December and from January through April. Cabins start at \$3,799 per person, double occupancy; the fare includes all shore excursions, meals, sports equipment, bus transfers, taxes, fees and tips. Alcoholic beverages are extra. For port information, maps and itineraries, go to www.cruise-west.com.

ground. It took Giovanni Bello's sharp eyes to find them, and a half-dozen pairs of binoculars passed from one person to the next, to see what he saw.

On one particularly humid day, we motored slowly up the Rio Rinco, into the heart of the mangrove swamps. Insects hummed and buzzed, the sun glared off the water and humidity hung in the air like smoke. When Bello spotted a pair of howler monkeys, high on a breezy branch, somebody was motivated to quip, "you wonder where the real monkeys are sitting!"

But no heat 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 coatimundis, monkeys, snakes, everything here depends on the mangroves."

It takes a village

The Pacific Explorer also stops at an Embera village on the edge of the forest on Panama's Pacific coast. Despite an occasional visitor, the Embera (em-bare-AH) 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 are much



Cruise West's Pacific Explorer spotlights small villages and rain forest adventures. | STEVE HAGGERTY~COLOR-WORLD Below: The most popular excursion on the Pacific Explorer were the guided wildlife watching trips on coastal rivers where passengers spied iguanas and two-toed sloths. | WWW.COSTARICAPHOTOS.COM

friendlier than the Kuna people), hung back as Zamora shook hands with the chief and followed us as the chief led our group past their vegetable plots and orchards.

Though the women wear knee-length sarongs, they go bare-breasted, decorating their faces, arms, legs and breasts with black designs. The men wear loin cloths or Western-style shorts. The children speak some Spanish, proba-

bly because coastal traders call here at intervals, exchanging plastic pails, pots, knives, men's shorts and bolts of printed cotton in exchange for arts and crafts.

Each time the Pacific Explorer visits, the ship's crew brings gifts of school supplies, soccer balls, clothes, food and candy. The government has done its bit, too, donating a gloomy cement-block community building and a side-

walk that goes nowhere.

As we motored out to the ship and turned to wave goodbye, the Embera people had already vanished into the forest. From the water, there was no trace that we — or they — were ever there. It only it could stay that way.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are California-based freelance writers.

