

# *Panama Canal Transit*

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

We anticipated our canal transit with mixed emotions. We were anxious to get to “the other side”, but we had heard horror stories about the mountain of paperwork and bureaucracy required to schedule transits on your own and the trials and tribulations of transits gone awry. We read as much as we could (there are entire books dedicated to the subject), talked to other cruisers who had already made the transit and proceeded to anchor in “The Flats” and get the wheels in motion.

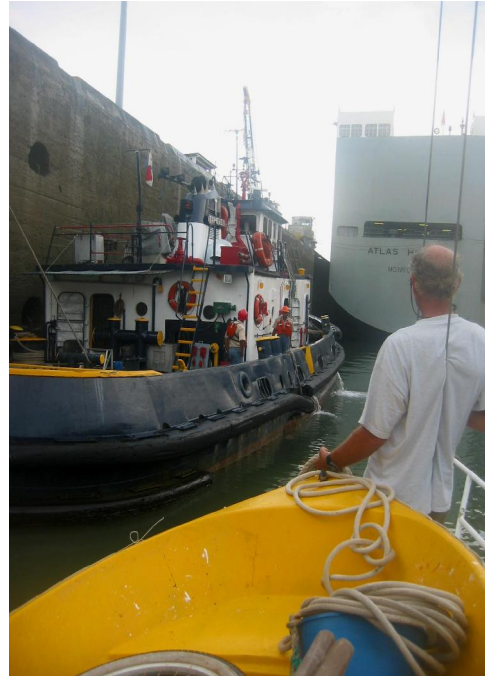
We determined that transiting with another boat as linehandlers first would lessen our anxiety and it did. It’s easy to spot a boat preparing for a transit...no other boat has quite as many tires hanging off the lifelines or as many heavy lines laying on deck. We noted one as soon as we arrived and stopped by to inquire if we could make the transit with them. A singlehander Frenchman from Bora Bora, and quite famous we were to learn later, Joan de Kat eyed us a bit suspiciously, then stated that though David could handle lines, he didn’t feel a woman was strong enough to manage the task. He finally succumbed to my charm (I offered to bring the pilot’s lunch) and we were informed he’d pick us up at the marina dock at 0445 on Sunday morning.



*Watching the lock doors open is a thrill  
(the first couple of times)*

The transit went without a hitch. Side-tied to a tug through each lock, we managed easily. Joan’s fourth linehandler never showed and he admitted

later (under duress) that it appeared women handled lines just as well as men. (Ah, what a relief to learn that!) On the Balboa side, the yacht club launch picked us up. We took a cab to Panama City’s Terminal Nacional bus station and 1-1/2 hours later, we were back in Colon heading to our boat. Some of the mystery of the transit had been revealed.



*David's ready as we approach a tug for tie-up*

Now, to schedule our own boat. First things, first. Being budget-minded, hiring an agent seemed a luxury we couldn’t afford. We asked around and found that Rudy, a local cab driver, was a fountain of information. He was able to procure tires for us (\$3 each, unless you’re lucky enough to get them off a northbound transit boat), as well as rental lines (four – 7/8” lines, 125 feet long at \$15 each). These need to be aboard before scheduling the Admeasurer, the first contact with the Canal Transit Authority (ACP). Their phone number is clearly displayed in the yacht club office. A quick call (they all spoke English) to them, during which we provided basic information about the boat, and we were scheduled for an appointment on the boat the next day.

The Admeasurer arrived on a pilot boat at the allotted time. He was courteous, quick and

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efficient, determining we had everything aboard that was required (lines, tires, a horn, etc.). The tolls are based on total length from the tip of the bowsprit to the end of the davits. We barely snuck in at 49.28 feet, the cut-off for the next toll level being 50 feet. There were, indeed, mountains of paperwork, but he completed it all when we met him at the air-conditioned yacht club bar 30 minutes later. All we did was answer some questions, review the paperwork and sign. He provided a descriptive brochure about the Canal and what to expect during transit, as well as excellent instructions for paying our toll (\$600 toll, plus \$850 refundable security deposit).

We dutifully went to the Citibank, within an easy, safe walking distance from the marina and used our VISA card to pay the toll and security deposit. By 6PM that evening, we were scheduled for a transit. We didn't like the original date given us and asked for a different one. They accommodated us easily and asked us to call back after 9am the day before departure when they would confirm the transit and provide the time the Advisor would board. Now all we needed were linehandlers!



*Our linehandlers, Donna & Sam,  
s/v Gertrude B. Abertnathy III*

The Cruiser's Net in Colon (Ch 74/0730 Mon-Sat) is active and helpful. I asked for volunteer linehandlers and was surprised to get a call from Donna & Sam on "Gertrude P. Abertnathy III" within minutes. We had met them on the Rio Chagres and they were delighted to make another transit (their 5<sup>th</sup>). We had contracted with Rudy (professional linehandler as well as cab driver), and I would be the fourth. We were ready.

One of the requirements of transiting boats is that all meals will be provided to the crew and Advisor. David spent the day before transit readying the boat. I spent the day cooking and cleaning up. Muffins, coffee and juice upon boarding; then breakfast of scrambled eggs with bacon and homemade English muffins. Lunch was cold grilled chicken and potato salad with chocolate chip cookies for dessert and snacks throughout the day. Lots of Cokes and cold water were consumed between lock transits. No one went hungry.

We were told our Advisor would board between 0345 and 0400...ouch! We hesitantly told our linehandlers the bad news, but troopers that they were, they were all gung ho and met us cheerfully at the dock at 0300. Once back aboard, the dinghy was raised and stowed on the foredeck. We began hauling anchor soon after in an attempt to clean off the thick, black mud which had accumulated in only a week at anchor in the Flats. The Advisor boarded via pilot boat at about 0415 and we were under way in minutes heading towards the Gatún Locks in the dark.

We arrived at Gatún Locks at first light. These locks consist of three chambers to be negotiated and are considered the toughest coming from the Atlantic side since these are "up-locking". We squeezed in behind a huge Greek freighter, St. Nicholas, and I assured everyone that traveling with Santa Claus couldn't be all that bad.

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*Our lockmate, the St. Nicholas*

Though we hoped we would travel side-tied to a tug as we had during our previous transit, we were scheduled for a “center lock”. The Advisor directed David into the lock chamber and gave instruction to us neophyte linehandlers. Canal line handlers tossed four monkey fists aboard and we tied them to our lines, which they then hauled in and secured via bowlines to the bollards on the side of the Canal. By the time we were tied up and secure, the lock chamber doors behind us were closed and with the sound of a bell, the water began gushing into the lock to raise us the first stage of the 85’ necessary to be level with Gatún Lake. We took in line as necessary to keep the boat secure, but nothing could have prepared us for the turbulence felt when old St. Nick in front of us, started his propellers to move to the next chamber. The prop wash was furiously strong and we thanked God we had secure, strong lines holding us in place.

The lines are cast off the bollards after each chamber is negotiated and we motored to the next chamber while the canal linehandlers walked our lines to the next set of bollards. The same drill all



*After the initial adrenaline rush of the Gatún Locks and serving up breakfast all around, the five hour ride across the Gatun Lake was a pleasant (but long) respite.*

over again and then once more in the third chamber until we reached Gatún Lake. Time for breakfast and the 28-mile motor trip across the scenic lake. The lake was formed by damming the Rio Chagres and tips of trees are still visible. A lazy caiman, sunning himself, watched us as we motored by. A Wounaan hut on stilts was visible on one of the small islands. The day was hot and long, sometimes peppered with heavy rains that stopped as suddenly as they started. The trip through the rugged Gaillard Cut (aka Culebra Cut) across the Continental Divide remains a testament to the labors of the Canal builders.

Many yachts do not make the transit in one day and I was hoping we would not be one of them. At Gamboa, we were told that St. Nicholas had already transited and there was no opportunity for another center lock transit until the next day. Did we wish to transit the subsequent locks “nested” or rafted to a catamaran? Absolutely! As it turned out, the nesting was easier than center locking.



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The catamaran was larger than we were and she was already in the Pedro Miguel lock chamber waiting for us. We snuggled up next to her, secured the lines and she maneuvered us into place where we handled the port lines and she



*The PanCan Cam at Miraflores Locks caught us "rafted" up to a catamaran.*

handled the starboard lines. Down-locking was easier than the up-locking since we were in front of the freighter this time. Watching the freighter enter the lock and come oh so very close, however, was a bit intimidating.

We traversed the short distance from Pedro Miguel to Miraflores Locks still rafted to the catamaran. The Miraflores Locks operates a live-cam aimed at the locks and we had told several friends and family members what time we anticipated our transit. There is also a viewing stand for tourists here and we waved, hooted and hollered as we passed. Two chambers needed to be negotiated here and then the lock gates opened to the Pacific. The catamaran cast us off and we were sailing towards the Bridge of the Americas, the only connection between North and South America. (Not for long though, a new bridge is under construction).

As we passed under the bridge, we paid our tribute to Neptune with a champagne toast, thankful for safe passage from the Atlantic and

asking for his continued protection for ship and crew in this brand new ocean.



*Our tribute to Neptune as we pass under the Bridge of the Americas...NOW, we're in the Pacific!*

The Balboa Yacht Club is just beyond the bridge to the left. We hailed them on Channel 6 and welcomed the sight of their launch waiting at a mooring ball, handing us lines. With a sigh of relief, we tied up securely and killed the engine. Exhausted, but ecstatic, we bade farewell to Advisor and linehandlers, tidied up the boat and slept our first night in the Pacific.

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