

Tropical South America and Cuba Tour 2016

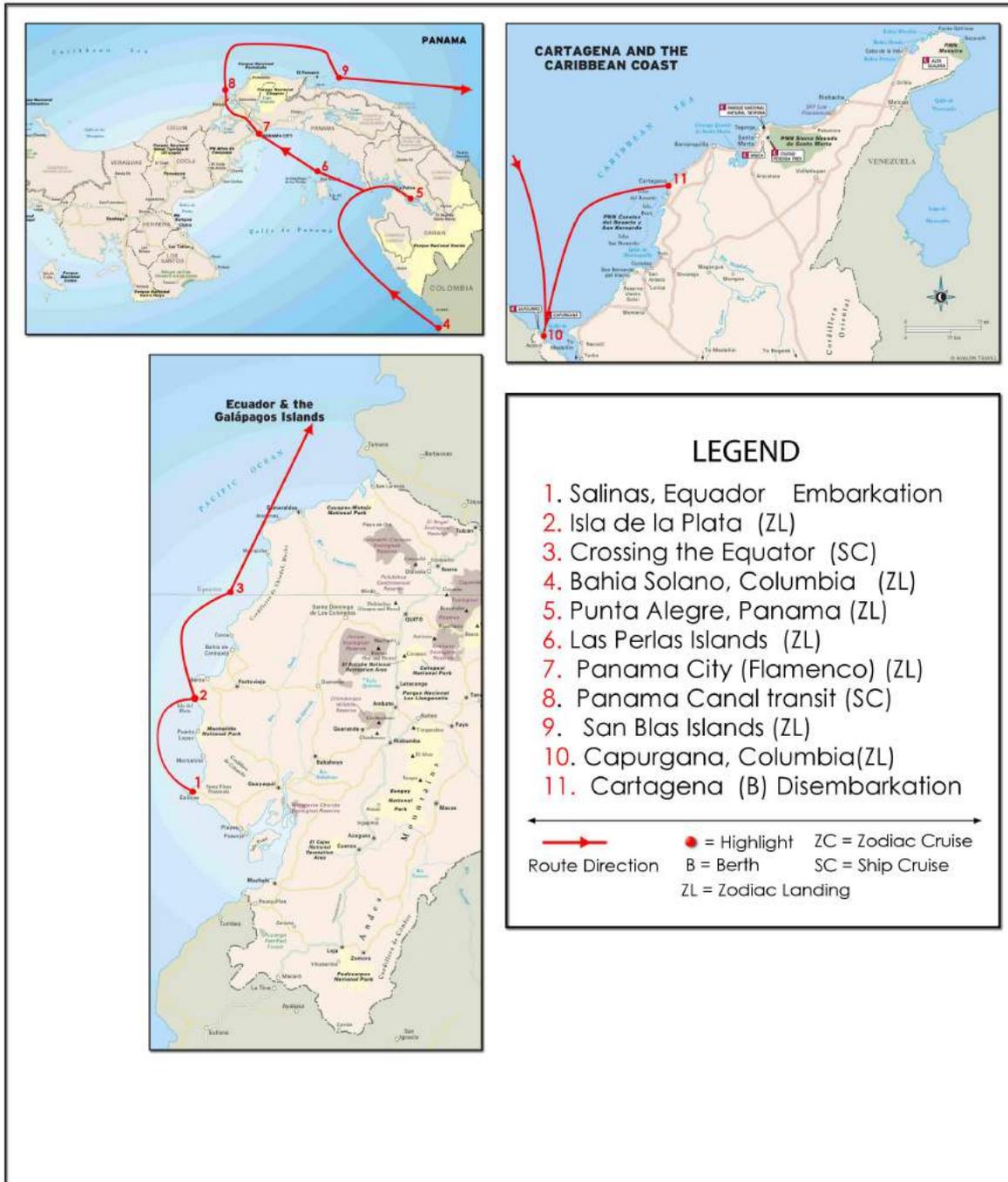
Report: Part 2- Cruise on the MV Expedition along the coasts of Ecuador, Columbia and Panama.



West Coast of South America

aboard *M/S Expedition* with G Adventures

April 17, 2016 - April 27, 2016 Total Distance = 1,927 nautical miles



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The next section of the tour began early in the evening when the group met with a representative from G Adventures to learn about the procedure for joining the ship the next day. At the conclusion of this meeting, the group gathered downstairs in the bar area to enjoy a celebratory Pina Colada.

Suddenly everything began juddering. The dangling light fittings jangled, the shaking intensified and there was there was the sound of falling glass. Then the lights went out. By then the realisation that this was an earthquake had dawned and getting out was imperative. The emergency lights came on and fortunately being on the ground floor, the group was able to exit relatively easily.

Considerable time was then spent outside the hotel, while hotel staff went from room to room, first making sure that the building was evacuated and then to inspect for damage. Meanwhile the group conducted a sweepstakes to guess the intensity of the quake. Estimates ranged from 2.8 to 6.4 with veteran Colin travellers, who had experienced the China earthquake, having the advantage. It was later established that the quake measured 7.8, the epicentre being off the coast some 300 kms away.

While waiting outside, reports began to circulate of an overpass collapse in Guayaquil itself, crushing a car and killing one person, but otherwise, life seemed to continue as usual with only an occasional siren heard. Only much later did the group become aware of the dreadful death toll of over 400 in the coastal region and appreciate how lucky they had been. The hotel had been built to withstand such shocks and suffered only superficial damage so the all clear was given and re-entry was permitted.

Still, it was an unsettling experience and everyone made sure he/she knew where the exit points were, some even sleeping fully dressed with a torch and packed bag nearby, just in case.



Figure 1 Earthquake region

The following morning, masonry still falling inside the hotel was a reminder that the events of the previous night were very real. Despite the pandemonium in the north of the country, the schedule for the day went ahead, with a few modifications to cater for closed roads and other possible disruptions.

The MV Expedition had started its journey in Ushuaia at the bottom of Sth America, slowly making its way up the west coast. Our group of 11, now including a member who arrived amidst the earthquake confusion, became part of a larger party of 25 new passengers joining the ship for the last leg, Guayaquil to Cartagena.

The bus headed to the coast, with the local guides pointing out the extent of the banana plantations, the groves of teak trees being grown for commercial purposes and the place where the Pope conducted mass on his recent visit to Ecuador. Turning off the highway into hilly territory, a stop was made at La Hacienda de la Castille, a vast cocoa plantation originally started by Germans. On a patio shaded by an enormous kapok tree, cacao juice (crushed from the fruit around the all important seed) was served.

An extensive walking tour of the plantation then began to acquaint the group with the different plants, birds and insects on the property. The focus was, understandably, on cacao, learning about the types of cacao being grown including the local variety, the International variety preferred by Swiss chocolatiers and the hybrid version now being produced that combines the faster maturing qualities of the former with the taste of the latter. Once it commences producing fruit, a single cocoa bush can produce over 1000 sacs per year and its productive life can be up to 20 years. On this planation the fruit sacs are harvested every 15 days and the seeds extracted.

The harvest is then spread on racks in the dry season, but in the rainy season a roaster is used to dry the seeds. They are then de-husked, crushed, mixed with cocoa butter and a natural sweetener (also

grown on the plantation) and the product is 100% chocolate, dark, strong and very rich. Samples of 70% and 50% completed the experience.

Returning to the shaded patio area, a lovely lunch was served, concluding with a dessert of fresh fruit, covered in, not surprisingly, chocolate sauce.

Continuing towards the coast the bus crossed flatter lands covered with vast banana plantations. Previously these lands were largely unused but since the introduction of irrigation, they have become very productive. The guide commented, however, that the pursuit of the standard banana for the export market has meant the demise of smaller, tastier bananas.

There was a quick tour of Salinas, the Surfers Paradise of Ecuador, with tall apartment blocks right to the edge of the long expanse of sand where the beautiful people gather before heading to the port facilities. There the new passengers transferred to zodiacs for the rather bumpy ride to the MV Expedition, anchored about 2 miles off shore.

Once aboard, there was time to explore the ship including the cabins, the lounge, dining room, deck space, library, gym and so on before gathering for a number of meetings that included a safety drill, an introduction to the G Adventures team (expedition leader, lecturers, equipment officers and an artist) and a welcome by the Captain. It was time for dinner – a five course affair, the first of many.

At one more meeting after dinner the expedition leader explained that due to the earthquake, a State of Emergency had been declared in Ecuador so that all resources could be channelled into rescue efforts and the restoration of services. Government officers were therefore preoccupied and the movements of the ship could be restricted. There was, however, clearance to sail further north, so the anchor was hauled and the next part of the journey began.



Over night the ship moved up the Ecuadorian coast and anchored off Isla da la Plata. It was uncertain whether permission to land would be granted due to the State of Emergency but luck prevailed and local tenders arrived to take passengers ashore.

Isla da la Plata is known as 'little Galapagos' due to the variety of wild life, especially birds on the island. Unlike the Galapagos, it is a continental island, not a volcanic one and there are no Marine Iguanas. It is also close enough to the mainland for unwanted species (rats, for example) to arrive. It's name comes from the suggestion that Francis Drake, in his role of serving the Queen (read piracy), buried treasure there (plata meaning silver).

Once on land, groups were formed for different activities – some to take tender rides around the island looking at the bird life, some to do different grade walks on the island itself. Local guides and Machalilla NP officials accompanied each group.

One of the walks involved a steep climb up a gorge to reach a look out with fabulous views to the rocky coast, then followed tracks across the top of the island, through the dry vegetation. This took participants past courting Blue Footed Booby pairs to a colony of Frigate birds where many of the males had inflated their red throat sacs in an impressive display designed to attract a mate.

Despite having set out early with the intention of beating the harsh Ecuadorian sun, the heat was enervating so the walkers descended to the shore where tenders awaited to take them to Drake Bay for swimming and snorkelling. Taking a dip was pleasant, but the snorkelling was disappointing, as

the visibility was poor and the water murky, a possible consequence of the off shore earthquake. Sea turtles and a school of Angel fish were spotted, however.

By lunchtime all passengers were back on the ship and had a quiet afternoon. There was one scheduled lecture, intriguingly entitled 'British Culture from Bloody Mary to Charles Darwin'. It was presented by a Chilean historian who demonstrated the strong links Chile has had with Britain from the time of Mary I, who through virtue of her marriage to Philip of Spain was in fact Queen of Chile, to the more recent siding with the British against Argentina in the Falkland contretemps.

In the late afternoon, out on the stern there was the sheer non-sense of an Equator crossing ceremony. King Neptune's permission had to be sought to cross the line into the northern hemisphere and the 'slimy pollywogs', those who had not previously crossed the equator by boat, had to be initiated to appease him. This involved chosen ones having to kiss a large fish (and King Neptune's feet), before they had eggs broken over their heads, flour rubbed in their hair and they were unceremoniously dumped into a 'pool' set up on deck for the occasion. It was all good fun, but needless to say in light of this punishment not all 'slimy pollywogs' confessed to their uninitiated state!

Just before 9pm local time, the ship did indeed cross the equator with a loud blast of the horn.



Day 14 was spent 'at sea'. This provided an opportunity for people to attend scheduled lectures. The first of these was on the Theory of Continental Drift presented by Dr Norman P. Lasca, where in one hour he compressed many of the mechanisms that present as evidence for this theory. Starting with fitting crustal plate boundaries together to make one big continent called Pangaea he went on to discuss magnetic anomalies, earthquake and volcanic activity both past and present, faulting at the surface and folding beneath the surface of rock layers, and overlaid the Paleontology record with this information. Additional evidence that is not discussed as much included ancient glacier presence and movement and satellite telemetry (aka remote sensing).

The second lecture was on sea birds and coastal birds especially Boobies, Gulls, Terns and Albatross. Discussion focused on rehabilitation of their natural habitats and nesting areas after the damage done by introduced species. Rats that have swum ashore from sailing vessels are the major culprits. An eradication program established on South Georgia Island has reduced rat numbers by 80%.

After lunch the movie "Master and Commander" was shown. Set on a sailing ship in the 19th century, commencing in Brazil and ending in Galapagos, it was interesting to see a film showcasing places so recently visited. Other afternoon activities included an Art class, a lecture on the history of Ecuador, gym sessions, bird watching or simply watching the sea go by.



By the following morning, the ship was anchored off Bahai Solano in the Choco region of Columbia. It has the highest rainfall in the world (13,000mm pa) and much of the area is pristine forest. Its remote location and inaccessibility (it can only be reached by plane or by boat) made it an ideal location for

black slaves escaping from the Spanish. Many settled in the area so the majority of the current population of 12,000 is dark skinned.

Coming ashore at the township of Mutis passengers again divided into groups, each led by a local guide. Options included taking a tender ride further along the coast the before coming ashore and walking to Botanic Gardens, hiking through the rain forest to the village of Huina, walking to a waterfall and or simply wandering in the town.

The town wanderers had a pleasant time discovering the simple church, the school and the town square where handicrafts were being sold.

The waterfall explorers were taken by small decrepit vans to the vicinity of the rustic airport (very small aircraft only) where they entered the forest and commenced their walk upstream to reach a cascade falling into a brown, churned up pool. The colour of the water was the result of three days of torrential rain following a prolonged (by their standards) dry spell attributed to El Nino. A number of brave souls clambered over slippery rocks to swim at the base of the fall while the remainder waded in the stream. To return to the village, some of the group decided to walk, spotting a Cayman resting quietly beside a pool on the way (not the one in which people had been swimming).

The town and waterfall groups returned to the ship, which relocated to near Huina during lunch. People from those groups were ready to head out to the beach for a swim when the Huina hikers began to appear back on board, four hours after they had set off. However, it was the benign sounding Botanical Gardens Walk that earned the title of the 'Death March'. Those mud covered and exhausted participants, some carrying injuries, emerged from the forest even later in the afternoon.

The Huina beach itself was pleasant – fringed with coconut trees, a village at one end with kids playing in the waves, resort at the other. The water, however, was disappointing. Possibly the three days of rain had stirred it up, but it was full of rubbish, both natural and man-made.



Overnight the ship moved into Panamanian waters near Punta Alegre, but had to wait until high tide to move into position off the coast from the Darien Jungle Reserve. Departure time was also determined by the tides so wasn't until about 11.30am that passengers began to board local boats (some of them rather leaky) for the two mile trip across open water to the mouth of the Mogue River.

The cooling breeze from the ocean dropped immediately and the heat intensified as the canoes headed inland. At first the going was easy travelling up the mangrove lined river but soon the passage began to narrow and became quite shallow, not assisted by the fact it was low tide and that this region too has suffered an El Nino related dry spell.

The mangroves persisted along the river edge but behind them were the tall trees of the rain forest. Along the way plenty of herons, Panama Swallows, Great Tailed Grakels, and a King Fisher were sighted along with a fleeting glimpse of a raccoon.

Eventually the river was little more than a series of pools obliging the passengers to disembark, climb the muddy slope where the local pigs had been snuffling out crabs, and walk some distance into the village of Mogue.

At the top of the steps where the boats should have landed was a reception committee of the Embera people, dressed in brightly coloured traditional garb handing out cups of coconut water while others played traditional instruments including drums (one made from a tortoise shell) and a reed flute.

Passengers were then escorted into the village itself, a collection of open sided huts on stilts. In the 'town square', women demonstrated the grinding of corn, the process of pounding the grain to make flour and the crushing of sugar cane. Handicrafts, mostly beautiful objects made from woven palm leaves, were spread out for sale. One could even join the tribe with an Embera design 'tattoo'.

When all the boatloads had finally arrived the passengers received an official welcome by the chief of the tribe. They then witnessed a demonstration of how palm leaves are stripped to create the fibre that is prepared and dyed for weaving and watched two dances by the women of the community – a Toucan dance and a White Faced Capuchin Monkey dance.

There was then time to make purchases before heading back to the boats. By this stage, the tide had turned, so the return journey was far more straightforward. Once everyone was aboard, the MV Expedition wasted no time in moving out to deeper water.

Later there was an interesting lecture on the mammals of the Amazon Rainforest, part of which had been visited that day. An astounding 75% of all mammals in the forest are bats and rodents and of the remainder, there are 6 species of large cats, 2 species of wild dog along with Capybara, Tapir, Anteaters, Armadillo, deer, raccoons to mention a few. The top predator is the Jaguar, with a powerful jaw that gives a bite capable of breaking the shell of a turtle. A film clip demonstrated its effectiveness as a killer showing one swimming across a river to attack a large Cayman, taking it out with one bite.

After dinner, there was a documentary about the trials and tribulations of building the engineering marvel, the Panama Canal.



By the next morning the ship was among the idyllic Pearl Islands (Panama). While most of these contain resorts and homes for the rich and (in)famous, there are few uninhabited islands in the chain and passengers were soon being off loading onto one of these, Mogo Mogo Island, the setting for one of the 'Survivor' series.

There were white sand beaches on either side of the island, rocky points to explore and extensive shallows for snorkelling. Most people headed straight to the water, while others strolled along the beaches or found a shady spot to relax.

Although the water was clear, apart from some puffer fish, there was not a lot of marine life to be seen (perhaps the Survivors had eaten it all). On the beach, it was the array of shells that provided the greatest interest.

Lunch was back aboard the ship then the keen ones went ashore again, this time to Chapera Island. The island, the story goes, had been bought by a Columbian drug lord who fell foul of the Panamanian government when he wouldn't resell the island to the son of one of the politicians. He ended up in gaol, but on his release, sued the Panamanian Government. The issue is still in the courts.

After landing at a pleasant, secluded beach people again went snorkelling while others observed the striations in the rocks, the result of two plates colliding millions of years ago, and watched the antics of jumping lizards. Attempts to reach the new Survivor set being constructed in the nearby bay were useless as there was a mangrove swamp in between.

Later that afternoon, there was an interesting lecture by the Chilean historian who lives in Columbia, about Columbia's complicated and traumatic history. That was followed, in the evening by a

disturbing documentary about the son of Pablo Escobar, the notorious Columbian drug lord, coming to terms with the enormity of his father's crimes and the impact this has had on his life. His attempt to be reconciled with the sons of the politicians that Escobar had executed was quite moving.

By this stage the ship was anchored off Panama City, the outlines of the skyscrapers plainly visible.



Day 18 began with a swift zodiac ride to the marina on Flamingo Island where passengers boarded buses for the trip into Panama City itself. On the way they learned from local guides about how spoil from the canal digging was used as landfill between islands forming land bridges to connect them to the mainland and about the broad streets and barrack-like buildings that once housed American construction teams which have now become educational institutions while some remain vacant, post the American withdrawal.

First stop of the day was the visitor centre at the Miraflores Locks. Here, those wearing covered shoes were afforded the opportunity to pass through the security fence and stand within 2 metres of the locks for a very close look at the tow mules and lock gates. Next was a video presentation on the construction of the locks then a guided tour through the adjacent museum. On view were models of construction machines, dredges, and ships. Visitors could also stand in a simulator control room and experience the operation of the locks from that perspective. Above the four floors of museum was a viewing platform from where the visitors watched the passage of a container ship through the locks.

The tour continued to the old quarter of Panama – an area dominated by colonial buildings in the French, Spanish and European styles – now protected by UNESCO. The walk to the restaurant provided many tantalising glimpses down narrow side streets of areas worth visiting, but passengers had to wait until after lunch, which turned out to be a prolonged affair, before being able to explore. They then wandered by beautifully restored houses, ruined churches and town squares to the market place on the point overlooking the harbour. There, a vast array of handicrafts was on offer along with Panama hats, of course. Some passengers did a little shopping, buying molasses, intricate appliqued panels that form part of the women's traditional dress, sewn by the Kuna people.

Then it was back aboard the bus to be whisked past high rise condominiums, towering bank buildings with internationally recognised names and malls while heading towards the ruins of the oldest city in Panama. This archaeological site is the remains of the city destroyed by Captain Morgan when he burned and pillaged in the 1670's. After wandering among the photogenic ruins, it was time to escape the sun and humidity by returning to the ship.



The following day was, for most passengers, the highlight of the cruise – the transit of the Panama Canal. During breakfast the pilot came aboard, as did a narrator who through a combination of narrative and fact, explained the process as the ship progressed. Thus prepared MV Expedition made its way under the Bridge of the Americas (the road link between North and South America) towards the mouth of the Canal.

Approaching the Miraflores Locks, line handlers came aboard the ship while the shore operators swung into action. Men in a small row boat came out to collect the ship's ropes and link them to shore. Those ropes were then connected to cables that were attached to the ship's bollards and tensioned with mechanical mules running on tracks beside the locks, serving to keep the ship centred.

Seeing all the personnel and equipment involved gave a greater appreciation of the costs involved in operating the Canal and why it is so expensive to use - the daytime transit for the MV Expedition cost in the vicinity of US \$100,000.

Then, in sight of the Visitors Centre (and the web cam) the ship entered the first lock. Not being a large ship there was still room in the lock for two Tug boats to follow. The gates closed behind, the water bubbled from the massive gravity fed inlet pipes in the base of the lock and the ship rose. When the water level had reached sufficient height the front gate opened and the ship moved into the next lock where the process was repeated.

The amazing thing is that this is the same procedure that has been in operation with little modification for 102 years. Within sight of the Miraflores Lock is the Panama Extension, the new even larger lock system built to accommodate supersized ships. It's operating mechanism and water retention system may be more modern than the existing locks but the principle is the same.

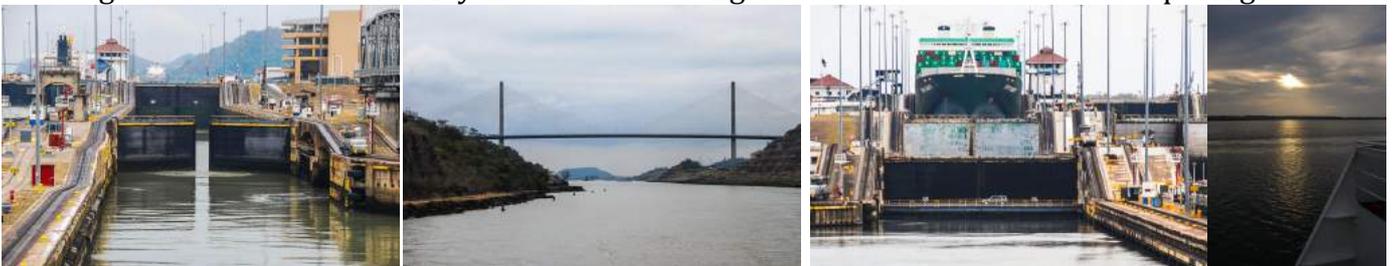
Having negotiated the Miraflores Locks the ship steamed ahead to the Pedro Miguel Lock, to complete the three steps to reach 85 feet above sea level enabling entry to the Culebra Cut, the narrowest section of the Canal. During the building of the Canal the effort of making the cut through the Continental Divide was the most expensive in terms of both time and loss of life. It was notorious for landslides, accidents (often with explosives) and disease.

Once through the Cut the channel opened up into the huge Gatun Lake, created by damming the Chagres and other rivers. In these broader waters were ships heading in the opposite direction, the MV Expedition being the last northbound ship for that session.

Across the lake were the Gatun locks. Negotiating these required more line handlers (the others had left the ship after Miraflores) and once again the process was repeated except that this time the ship dropped three steps to sea level, losing millions of litres of water from the lake with each fall.

A large container ship preceded the MV Expedition into the west channel of the lock and in the east channel was a monstrous tanker. Both completely filled the lock with inches to spare on either side – the definition of Panamax.

Back at sea level, and having shed the pilot and narrator who had kept passengers well informed en route, the ship headed for the breakwater that marked the end of canal and the entrance to the Caribbean Sea. MV Expedition had crossed from the Pacific to the Atlantic by climbing a mountain. That night there was a celebratory drink to mark the great achievement and the safe passage.



As the sun rose over the ocean on the 25th April, there was a moving Anzac Day service on deck, conducted by one of the passengers. It was well attended by the Aussies and New Zealanders aboard. The chef had even made Anzac biscuits for the occasion.

By breakfast, the ship had arrived at the San Blas archipelago, a collection of 378 small tropical islands, most uninhabited but all considered home to the indigenous Kuna people.

Passengers were collected by local boats and taken to Carti Sugdub, a densely packed island of about 1000 inhabitants. Fresh water is piped to the island from the mainland and there is a solar powered electricity supply. These utilities, along with medical and educational facilities mean that this island is a desirable place to live but this has led to serious issues of overcrowding and waste disposal.

Passing through the crowded, narrow alleyways between dwellings that had the look of the makeshift becoming permanent, passengers came to one of the only concrete buildings on the island, the small school. In the courtyard cum playground, the students entertained with a demonstration of a native dance, the music being provided by the boys playing panpipes and the girls, maracas.

Performance over, passengers were hurried through the 'town', with little time to look at the handicrafts of the Kuna people, particularly the *mola* created by the women.

The boats then sped past islands that could only be described as tropical paradises – azure water, white sand, green vegetation and coconut palms, eventually landing on one of these idyllic islands (Isla Perlo Chico) where there was the opportunity to swim, snorkel or laze around.

At lunchtime passengers were moved to another delightful island with a large open-air restaurant serving whole grilled snapper. There was then more time to swim, watch the starfish or peruse the craft stores that magically appeared.



Overnight the ship moved back into Columbian waters and by morning was anchored off the isolated township of Capurgana, once again in the Choco region (the Atlantic side).

The last full day of the cruise was to be an active one, with four options on offer – a hike up over a ridge behind the town and down to the seaside settlement of Sapzurro, a hike to a waterfall, a boat ride around the coast to another village or time to explore Capurgana itself. All options included the chance to swim and snorkel.

Despite the intense heat (it rose to over 40°C during the day) and 90% humidity, the intrepid set off. The waterfall walkers evidently followed a roadway for a while before branching into the jungle and following a watercourse where they were able to cool off in a number of pools.

The 'Up and Over' group had the benefit of two local guides; English speaking Raphael and Nelson, a native of the area. They began by walking through the town, passing the open square where all the important events take place and the small airport, before taking a bush track between small farms. They then began to climb, grateful for two things: the cover provided by the jungle and the fact that there had been no rain in the last 24 hours, otherwise the track would have been treacherous.

Near the top of the ridge there was a welcome break at Nelson's 'farm', a small cleared patch where tropical fruit trees had been cultivated. The hikers were given a taste of some of this produce; mango, star fruit, banana, cacao, and a brown skinned fruit (known locally as an aphrodisiac) as well as juices made from these fruits. Meanwhile, Nelson's wife found a tiny black and green Poison Dart Frog for the visitors to view.

Revived, the group set off again, but the next twenty minutes were a struggle being the steepest section of the climb. The reward at the top, however, was well worth the effort as there were fabulous views back towards Capurgana and down towards the azure waters of Sapzurro.

The track followed the ridge for a short distance and then headed down through the forest. By comparison, the descent was quite pleasant. The group spread out so it was quite possible for an individual to be wandering, seemingly alone, in the Columbian jungle with vivid butterflies drifting by. Fortunately, no drug mules were encountered and the hike ended safely at the shore where masses of ripe mangos were simply dropping from the trees.

After lunch at an open air restaurant beside the water, there was the opportunity to swim and snorkel in the beautiful clear waters of the cove. Later the hikers were transported by boat back to Capurgana to meet up with the other groups and then returned to the ship where later that evening there were celebrations to mark the end of what had been for some, a five week cruise.



The following morning, under perfect blue skies, MV Expedition sailed past the old defences at the mouth of the bay following a Princess liner into the harbour of Cartagena de Indias. With the gleaming modern city in the background, a fire tender played its hoses in a gesture of welcome.

Cartagena is Columbia's fifth largest city (population approaching a million) and second largest port. It was established by the Spanish in 1533 and became significant as the port from which all the treasure 'acquired' in South America was shipped directly across the Atlantic to Spain. It was therefore heavily defended from pirates, buccaneers and other unsavoury characters.

After disembarking and being processed by Immigration, the now ex-passengers were transported into the city, passing the extensive system of defences built by the Spanish to protect 'their' treasure and the walled old town along the way. In the newer section of the city, among the high rise and overlooking the beach, was a relic of colonial glory, the Hotel Caribe. It offered a very welcome reprieve from the sticky heat while the enclosed garden provided its own jungle experience with macaws, a toucan and even a couple of fawn roaming through the thick vegetation.

With no planned activities, members of the group were free to wander and during the afternoon most of them made their way to the historical part of the city. Some of the group joined a Hop On/Hop Off bus tour of the city. This took them through the upmarket end of town then round the bay past the Naval Base and the modern civic buildings to the old town.

There they alighted to join a walking tour that led into the narrow lanes of the walled city, past some wonderful old churches, charming buildings, interesting plazas and colourful characters. The tour also included visits to the Gold and Emerald museums, the former housed in a vault and displaying some of the craftsmanship of Incan goldsmiths while the latter showed how and where Columbian emeralds (70-90% of the world market) are mined and processed before being turned into jewellery.

Re-joining the bus, the tour continued past the battlements leading to the mighty Spanish fortress of Castillo de San Felipe, along the sea side wall of the old city, past a famous convent, now a luxury hotel and beside the Caribbean coast, then through a popular shopping district, back to the Hotel Caribe.

