

In December I traveled briefly to the U.S. for family visits and a Caribbean cruise. The visit began in Miami Beach and it was a special time because the international art fair Art Basel was going on in conjunction with Miami Beach’s annual art week. I had been to Miami before (always on business), but never to Miami Beach. It is really beautiful, the beach sand sparkling white and with creative lifeguard huts! The restoration of sand dune vegetation provided for



beach shade and animal life.

The people-watching was incredible and Spanish was the primary language. I made do with



sign language.

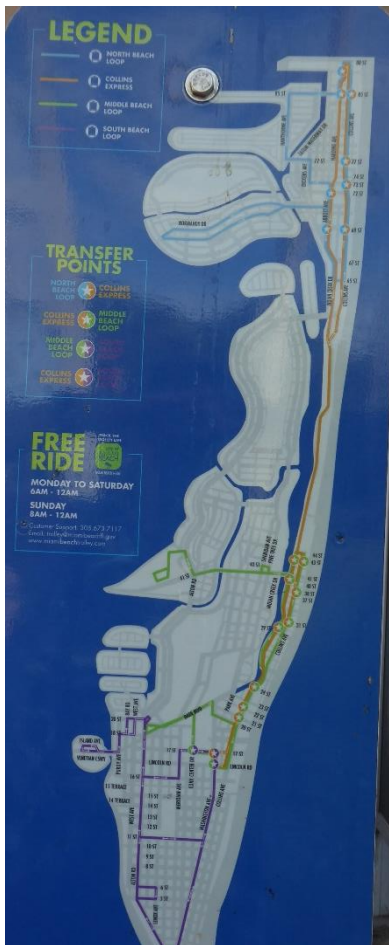
Although Art Basel was at the convention center, giant tents adjacent to the beach housed many other galleries’ offerings, all with stiff admission fees! These are events for serious art collectors. Some pieces were on public view.



We had great views from a friend’s condo the day before my ship’s departure, including Royal Caribbean’s Symphony of the Sea, the largest active cruise ship.



Over the three days I managed to do all the routes of the city's free hop on hop off trolley, seeing everything from neighborhoods of modest scale (but I'm sure not modest prices!) to luxury hotels and high-rise apartments.



Thanks to Barbara Baer Captman, starting in the mid-1970's over 800 of the Art Deco buildings have been preserved and many are still under restoration. This was the first urban 20<sup>th</sup> C historic district to gain recognition on the National Registry of Historic Places. Exciting to see and a reason to visit.







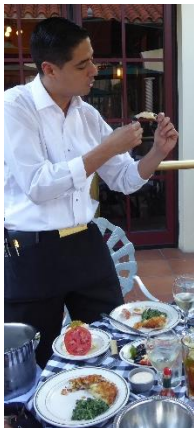
I loved the diner, also!

My daughter and partner came for a week and rented a lovely centrally located Airbnb. The corner bodega had freshly squeezed orange juice and excellent coffee. For bread, in addition to tacos and bagels, there was some baguette-type bread that almost worked with the raw milk French cheeses I had brought to share.

One of the art installations on a barge made the point that the USA is not America. The Western Hemisphere is America. The barge cruised the coast morning, afternoon and evening all week. That was a good send-off for my cruise with destinations of Jamaica, Aruba, Cartagena Colombia, Panama and the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico.



A local specialty of Florida is stone crab claws. (The claws re-grow.) We splurged, going to Joe's Stone Crab for lunch. The waiter explains how to carefully remove all of the succulent meat.



The MSC Divina is part of cruise line I had taken January, 2018. Because it are some unique aspects, the evening shows is an plus there was an classical music



the same Italian from Rio in is Italian there such as one of opera excerpt, afternoon performance.

The passengers we met at meals and on excursions were global – from Asia to all parts of Europe, Scandinavia, Australia and some Americans. The cuisine appeals to these varied tastes.

The pools on this boat were of a depth that I could do my morning water aerobics. I chose to use the indoor one. What I hadn't counted on was that when the sea had large swells so did the pool. At least one day the pool waves were more than I could handle!



The onboard newsletter each day had a quote. I liked this one from William Faulkner: "You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore."

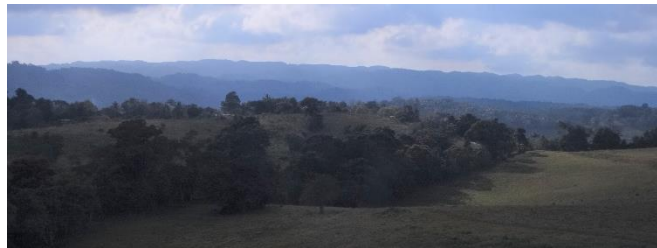


The first stop on the cruise was Ocho Rios, Jamaica – Yeah Mon. Just after sunrise we docked at Reynolds Pier (as in aluminum) and I really liked the greater-than-life-size tributes to Jamaica's athletes as we walked to shore.





I chose an excursion to Bob Marley's birth and burial place in the town of Nine Mile. Jamaica is 150 miles wide by 50 miles, the third largest of the Caribbean islands. Since Nine Mile was about an hour's drive on the old Ocho Rios-Kingston highway I got to see dense vegetation, mangroves, and go through a mountain pass at 3500'. The highest point is Blue Mountain at 7000' where coffee of the same name is grown. According to our guide this was the coffee served on Air Force One until 2016. Truth or fiction? Who knows?



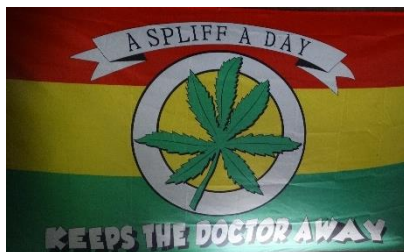
Our guide on the bus had a non-stop patter of facts (and opinions) on Jamaica interspersed with Bob Marley and other Jamaican music. The bus of 15 people originated from all over the globe! We stopped for a snack and later on, lunch at Bumper's Lawn.



For sure there are a lot of churches. Some statistics say the most per capita or per square mile of any country. And always a graveyard associated with it.

I liked the country's motto: out of many, one people.

Part of Marley's life included substantial marijuana use which is perhaps Jamaica's largest cash crop.



Others include coffee, sugar cane, bananas and crushed limestone.



The Rastafarian religion which he practiced prohibited eating of flesh. Before he died, however, he was confirmed into the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The memorial site is impressive including his mother's house and both of their burial mausoleums. A small chapel is under construction. His mother was a very talented doll maker, many cases of which are on display in the house.



His small bedroom and the rock on which he sat to meditate can be seen and photographed (but not the mausoleums). He died at age 36 of brain cancer.

Jamaican housing construction is primarily of cinder block and typically starts with one room then added on to as finances permit.



In towns



some houses were quite large, although with ever-present goats roaming the streets.



On our return students were getting out of school. All wore uniforms, either khaki for the public schools or various other



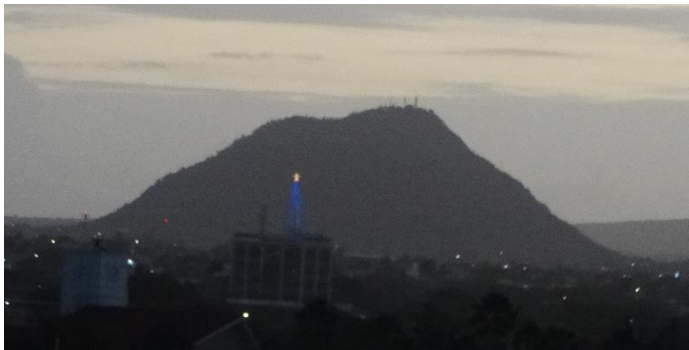
designs for the many church schools.



There was small scale commerce along the roads in every town and village.



The second cruise stop was Aruba, a rather extreme contrast in island size, topography, vegetation, history and culture! When arriving in port at Oranjestad the view is dominated by Mt Hooiberg, meaning haystack in Dutch. At 541 feet it is the second highest point on the



island. The tour of this highly developed small island (19 miles long by 6 miles at its widest point) was capped by a boat trip in a submersible capsule over the shipwreck Antilla. This was a very interesting story. A commercial freighter, she was ready to make port in 1939 (Aruba is part of the Netherlands). The Captain sent all of the crew ashore

then set the boat on fire and sank her. Hitler had just invaded the Netherlands so captain and crew spent the next five years as prisoners of war on Aruba.

In 1986 Aruba became an independent entity within the Netherlands. It has an elected legislature and manages its domestic affairs. Courts, military and international relations are handled by the Netherlands.



In a bus tour it is feasible to see both the highly developed resort/beach area as well as the wilder, windy north coast within a day. About ¼ of the island is preserved as a national wildlife



park. Many people were renting all-terrain vehicles for travel through the rocks and dunes. Primary vegetation is a vertical cactus (with some areas of prickly pear cactus) and a native divi

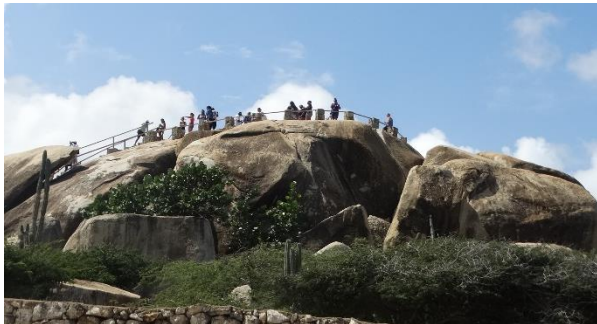


divi tree which assumes shapes due to the prevailing winds.

California lighthouse at the far northern end of the island is named for another shipwreck and was built by a French architect in 1910.



Massive boulders are another natural feature and are a geological mystery.



Our tour stopped at Ayo but I chose not to make the climb. The license plate says One Happy Island.





Gold was discovered in the 1800's and dominated the economy until the early 1900's. A mine entrance can still be seen on the north coast. Subsequently an oil refinery operation employing 2500 people became the economic mainstay until the early 1990's but now employs only 100. Our guide said Russia is negotiating to buy out Citgo, the Venezuelan owner. Another interesting

economic "fact" was that of the 300 grocery stores on the island, all but 2 are owned by Chinese residents whose community numbers about 5000.

Venezuelans are the primary population seeking work opportunities here and tourism is the primary economic engine today. Dutch is the official language with most people speaking both English and Spanish. For higher education students must go to the Netherlands where their rights are the same as local Dutch citizens.

A highlight of the tour was a trip in Seaworld Explorer where you are viewing marine life from 5

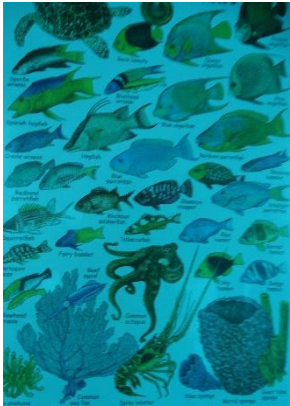


feet below the surface. (Not recommended for claustrophobics.) I took photos through the glass, a few of which are passable. Snorkelers, the shipwreck, and coral reef life.



Together with the species poster, this at least provided some documentation of the under-sea coral reef life I would see a few days later when I went snorkeling off the coast at Costa Maya, Mexico. I would describe this Aruba coral reef as basically "dead", but what I saw in Costa Maya

was healthy and much more colorful in terms of plant life. Fish were about the same.



I was intrigued by a ship at the dock called Freewinds Sea Organization Motor Vessel with no cruise line name. It turns out it is for Church of Scientology advanced religious retreats.

Our next stop was Cartagena in Colombia. The Caribbean coast was the first conquered by the Spanish and contains Colombia's two oldest surviving cities – Santa Marta (founded 1525) and Cartagena (founded 1533). Highly developed indigenous populations included the Tayrona and Sinu. Cartagena was constructed as a walled military fortress to protect against English, Dutch and French pirates as this was the major point for export of the riches of South America. Sir Francis Drake sacked the city in 1568. It actually took 200 years to complete the fortifications, a mere 25 years before independence from Spain! The Castillo San Felipe de Barajas was the strongest fort ever built by the Spanish in the colonies.



The region's population is still largely of African descent. The first slave ship arrived in 1564 sending thousands of slaves all over the continent. More than 1 million slaves passed through Cartagena, becoming the largest slave market in the new world. The slave market was at feria de negros at the entrance of the old city. Today there is a major candy market under the arches.





As elsewhere in the hemisphere, culture, traditions, songs and dances from Africa intermixed with Catholic, animist and Islamic rituals.

I took the hop on hop off bus tour of the city which started at our cruise ship dock. We first passed through the colorful Getsemani neighborhood before starting our walking tour of the historic center.



In 1810 Cartagena was one of the first to claim independence from Spain, signing a declaration on 11/11/1811. A square honoring 11 heroes of the independence movement was highly decorated for the holidays during our visit. Independence finally came in 1820.





The historic zone is known by the original name, Calamari (meaning crab). Walking the old city, I just include photos, no effort at location details. Except for Balzac Place which was full of locals playing dominoes and board games plus entertainers doing break dancing, juggling, etc.



Juice sellers were very popular given the heat.



I also really liked the sculptures depicting traditional local trades outside the Museum of Modern Art. This is just a couple of them. They are by Eduardo Carmona. In the same area is the sculpture of the monk Pedro Claver who worked tirelessly to improve the lives of the imported slaves.





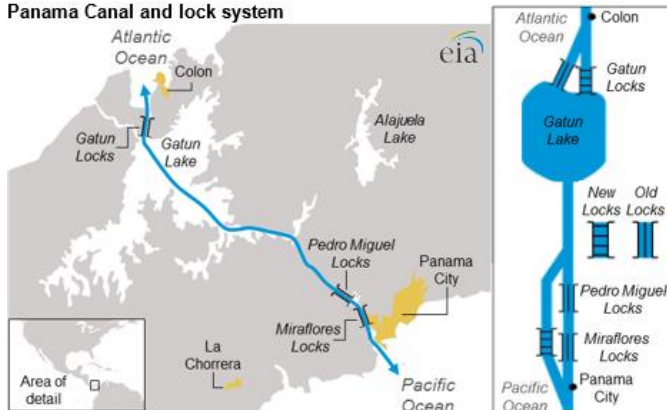
I then re-joined the hop on hop off tour bus.

The tourist zone sits on a peninsula with beaches on the Caribbean, high rise hotels, and is somewhat-anchored by the Hilton Hotel and Hotel Caribe.



The next stop, Panama was a highlight for me. The canal was originally a French project begun in 1881 under the direction of Count Ferdinand de Lesseps, builder of Egypt's Suez Canal. It was completed in 1914 by the US which took over the project in 1907. During the French construction era over 22,000 people died mostly from malaria and yellow fever before the project went bankrupt in 1899. It was medical advances against these diseases that permitted the US project to proceed. Total cost of the original canal was \$375 million.

Panama Canal and lock system



This diagram is courtesy of the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Our cruise ship was docked at Colon and we took a bus about an hour to enter the canal at Gamboa on Gatun Lake.

Although I had been through locks before, never between two oceans and there are differences. The canal is freshwater, obtaining its water from three dammed rivers encompassing a vast watershed as

boats are raised a total of 85' through multiple locks before being lowered to sea level on the opposite ocean. The means ~600 million gallons of fresh water are required for each passage along a 50-mile distance. Each lock is 110' wide, 1000' long and 72' in depth with the maximum transiting vessel size 106' wide, 965' long and 39.5' draft.

The Maersk Bogor is this maximum size.



When the Champion Istva entered the lock behind us we could see how close each side was to the walls of the lock.



The vessel is held in place by electric mules for guidance, although the vessel is under its own power under command of a transit canal pilot. Passenger ferries (such as mine)



are scheduled



in conjunction with vessels of less than the maximum length. So, we were preceded by the Maersk Bogor that filled the lock and then we had to wait to be joined by Champion Istva which filled the width but not the length.

The Maersk proceeded ahead of us to the next series of locks, but was never really very far ahead of us.

We encountered a fierce thunderstorm (typical for this time of year) whose overhead clap of thunder just as Champion Istva was coming in behind us was scary! But I realized, there was no jolt of the boat, i.e. Istva hadn't hit us, it was the power of the thunderclap!



The smaller tour boat that joined us, the Islamorada, has an interesting history. Built in 1912 in Boston, she was owned by Al Capone for rum

running during Prohibition. After Capone's incarceration in Alcatraz she was seized by US Customs and then requisitioned for use in World War II by the US Navy. She arrived in Panama in the 1960s to serve as a floating hotel for sport fishing and was later acquired by present owners [Canal and Bay Tours](#), which run Canal cruises three or four times a week.





Here she is joining us. Bogor is in the adjacent lock and will descend and continue on her way while we wait for Istva.

The toll for a maximum sized PANAMAX ship is ~\$0.5 million while our ferry holding up to 500 passengers paid \$3000.

We could see the new canal adjacent to us. It can handle container ships with almost three times the capacity (13,000 containers vs 5,000) and the largest toll paid to date is \$1,200,000. It cannot, however, handle the largest container ships of 20,000 containers which can be accommodated by the Suez Canal. Nor can it handle the largest class of cruise ships due to the clearance under the Bridge of the Americas on the Pacific side. Evergreen's Ever Leading was crossing in our direction on the new canal.



Average transit time is 8-10 hours. From our start at Gamboa our transit took 4 ½ hours exiting at the Pacific Ocean where we had views of Panama City to our left (south) and the entrance to the new canal to our right.

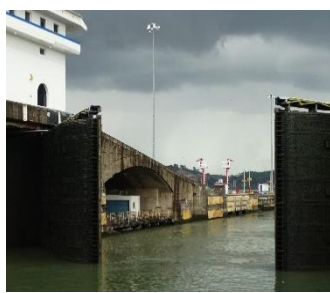


We entered in the lake and so passed through the Pedro Miguel and Miraflores locks (a total of 3 locks) before reaching the Pacific. There are two parallel locks at each phase. So, three transfers of ~8-meter elevation each gets one down through the "cut" i.e. continental divide to the Pacific elevation. The three Gatun locks at Colon provide the same elevation change ~85' at the Atlantic side.

The Centennial bridge at the cut was completed in 2004, the second bridge to traverse the canal.



Here are photos of us being lowered. The emptying process takes only about 8 minutes.



The Panama Canal Zone was a territory of the US from 1904 to 1979 (completely surrounded by the Republic of Panama) when it reverted to Panama by treaty. The canal itself was officially turned over to Panama ownership in 1999. In 2006 the Panama Canal authority's proposal to expand the canal was approved by the government and people of Panama (via referendum) and the new canal opened in 2014 at a cost of ~ \$6 billion in bonds financed by tolls.

The new locks are 1400' long by 180' wide and 60' deep permitting vessels up to 160' wide by 1200' in length. We saw some of those (Pusan C, CMA CGM, and KLC Oriental) waiting their turn to pass. Traffic goes Atlantic to Pacific at certain hours and the reverse other hours. The new canal is able to recycle 40% of the water it uses due to a new holding pond design.



35 to 40 vessels transit the canal each day generating about \$6 million in daily revenues. There are about 10,000 employees including the pilots.

Near the Pacific side adjacent to one of the Miraflores locks was a large visitor center. One interesting fact is that the gates of the locks on the Pacific side are much thicker and stronger due to the force of the larger tides (19') on the Pacific side versus the Atlantic side (4').



A few Panama facts:

- It rains ~ 8 months per year ~275 days. We were lucky and had only an afternoon thunderstorm.
- The “Panama” hat actually comes from Ecuador but when President Teddy Roosevelt travelled to Panama and brought back the hat it came to be known as Panama.
- Panama’s flags are manufactured in Roseland, NJ.
- The gates of the locks were manufactured in Pittsburgh in 1912.
- Panama City has the largest number of banks after NYC and is the largest duty-free zone after Hong Kong.
- Frigate and other birds gather to hunt at the Pacific entrance when the fish become confused due to all the fresh water intruding on their salt water environment. I think I solved the mystery of the bird that followed our cruise ship from Rio last January. I think it was a frigate bird, not an albatross.



Once on the Pacific side we had other views including the Frank Gehry-designed Museum of biodiversity, MSC (parent company of our cruise line) freighters, and the line-up of ships waiting for Pacific to Atlantic transit times to begin.



We also had a glimpse of “normal” Panama life and a dramatic sunset view as we returned by bus to our ship in Colon.



Returning to the cruise, on a day at sea we pass along the coasts of Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Honduras plus Cuba before arriving in Costa Maya on the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico.

This is a small port, just one pier and a nice small touristy set of shops and restaurants. My excitement is that I have booked an excursion to go snorkeling which I haven't done in a long time and never in these waters. It is quite cold and windy and the people at the dive center very generously offer me use of a wet suit at no extra charge. Although the water was a comfortable temperature the air was not, so I was grateful for it.

I have a guide who is basically swimming me while I hold a ring. Part of the time we are over a coral reef and I saw fans and other vegetation like I saw from the submersible in Aruba plus many of the same colorful small fish. Then we swam to an area of sandy grassy bottom and I saw turtles. I think the largest had a shell ~ 15" in diameter and one of them had two fish on its back eating whatever was on its shell! I was swimming with some of them.



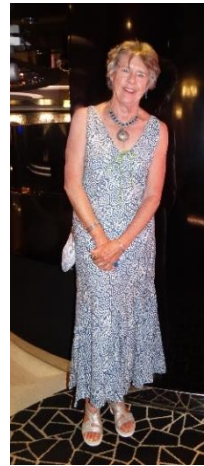
This was definitely a highlight of the trip – but then, there was a highlight in each country!



The days on board were full with plenty of entertainments plus the nightly Las Vegas type shows and excellent food and service. They also provided me with the time to read and write in a sumptuous environment!



We are on board for my birthday and our dinner wait staff, Jonathan from San Salvador and Joseph from the Philippines provided a special dessert. That was also the evening of the



Captain's cocktail for returning MSC guests, which made the day particularly special.

After the cruise I flew to Detroit and spent Christmas with my other daughter and grandchildren. In addition to traditional Christmas events we enjoyed a special evening at Greenfield Village's Holiday Nights with carolers, fireworks, ice skating and a carousel as well as many village shops in the historic houses.



That completes the major travels of 2018. I wish everyone a healthy and happy 2019. Another quote of the day that I liked, "You can never visit the same place twice. Each time it is a different story.", Maureen Johnson. I will have that in mind when in 2019 I re-visit some prior favorite destinations.