

Travel

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CRUISING

PICTURE-PERFECT

Stopping at indigenous preserves, expat gardens, fortresses, and for photo critiques

BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PLAYA DE MUERTO, Panama — Three Emberá men with full-body tattoos, loincloths, and strings of beads crisscrossing their chests splashed through the surf to greet us. They guided our Zodiac toward the black-sand beach and offered us a hand as we slid out of the boat

and waded to shore. “Bia bua,” or “thank you,” we said in the local language. Daniel Fernández, our guide and ship’s cruise director, introduced us to the Emberá chief, Anibal, who had come with dozens of other villagers to welcome us to

this remote outpost on Panama’s southwestern coast. We had landed on Playa de Muerto at the edge of the Darién Jungle, 40 miles from the Colombian border. Tall mountains blanketed in lush jungle rose up behind the palm-fringed beach. The jungle

was so impenetrable that a 54-mile swath of it, called the Darién Gap, is the only break in the Pan-American Highway, a 30,000-mile network of roads stretching from Alaska to southern Argentina. No road reaches here.

NATURAL, Page M4



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:
A scarlet macaw, a black spiny-tailed iguana, an agave plant, all in Costa Rica; a Brahman cow in Portobelo, Panama.

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:
An Emberá child in Panama; kayaking off Portobelo, where the Kuna sell embroidered molas; a zebra heliconian.

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:
Three-fingered sloth in Costa Rica; Emberá at Playa de Muerto; the Pacific Explorer; Corcovado park shutterbugs.

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:
In Costa Rica: a Zodiac ferry; a cannonball tree flower; a white-throated capuchin monkey. A tattooed Emberá man.



MAX SCHECHTER

Wheee! The author’s daughter tubing in Jamaica.

A family cruise divided by 10, or is it each experience times 10?

By Stephen Jermanok
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT
OCHO RIOS, Jamaica — “It’s a muted turquoise,” said my niece Sarah. “No, it’s jade colored,” chimed in her brother Max. “I was the first-grade teacher who taught colors,” added my stepmother, Ginny, “and I definitely think it’s aqua.”

Peering down at the river as it snaked through the jungle-like interior, I had to agree with Ginny. We were in the hills above the town of Ocho Rios, where our cruise ship, the Ruby Princess, had docked. After a 30-minute drive on a rutted road, climbing out of civilization into an emerald green wonderland of ferns, banyan trees, and

overripe bananas, we were ready for takeoff on our tubing adventure. We planted our bums inside the tubes in the cool refreshing water and off we went with the gentle rapids through the Jamaica of yore. We cruised under a stone bridge built by the Spanish in the 17th century, and past

FAMILY, Page M2

INSIDE

AT SEA A ship as a destination. **M3** **SPANISH LESSONS** Onboard immersion. **M5**

EXPLORE NEW ENGLAND

WELLFLEET Where fungi remind you of the Crimea. **M6** **MAINE** Stays that are off the grid. **M6**



Native peoples, flora and fauna — and the canal

► **NATURAL**
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Playa de Muerto was one of eight stops on our Cruise West voyage from Los Sueños on Costa Rica's Pacific coast to Colón on Panama's Caribbean coast via the Panama Canal. Since the 100-passenger Pacific Explorer could duck into smaller bays and shallower waterways than the "big rig" liners, we could visit a private botanical garden, a tiny tropical island, and this traditional village. In fact, Cruise West is the only cruise company that stops here.

"This is not a tour, it is a life experience. At least that's how it always is for me," said Karla Taylor, a Costa Rican guide and one of the ship's exploration leaders. "This group of Emberá hasn't had a lot of exposure to outsiders, so we'll be sharing a real cultural experience."

"To give you an idea of what the Emberá are like, they use the same word for 'brother' and 'friend' — 'yaba,'" added Fernández.

We spent the afternoon visiting with the Emberá, who still follow their traditional way of life, hunting, spear-fishing, and growing what they need to survive. Groups of girls and women performed traditional dances under the large palapa, an open-sided thatched pavilion, and invited us to join them while several men played bamboo flutes and deer-skin drums. They gave us tours of their thatched homes, which are on stilts to protect against high tides, and showed us how to press sugar cane, then challenged our crew to a competitive but friendly soccer match.

Before heading back to the ship, we had a chance to buy colorful, intricate baskets so tightly woven they could hold water and cocobolo carvings made from a red hardwood, and get temporary tattoos made from a dye that comes from the local jagua fruit.

My friend Teri and I had signed up for this cruise because we wanted an experience that placed emphasis on nature, culture, and outdoor activities, rather than swanky shops, dressy

If you go . . .



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dinners, and umbrella drinks. For us avid photographers, this themed cruise held extra appeal: It included photo instruction by an award-winning, veteran shooter, Kerrick James, and a chance to use digital point-and-shoots, single-lens reflex cameras, and underwater equipment for free.

Our ship offered a perfect blend of casual accommodations and all the amenities we would need, including quiet lounges with oversized chairs, book and movie libraries, clothes dryers and, at each port, a fully stocked snack station. Mealtimes offered two options: a lighter selection served on the sundeck or a casual but white-linen meal in the ship's dining room. With just 64 passengers on board and 30 staff, it didn't take long for the crew to

learn our preferences.

Once underway, our days fell into a rhythm. We headed to shore after an early breakfast for two hours of exploration, often short, wildlife-spotting rambles, or else we swam, snorkeled, or kayaked and then tackled more strenuous walks after a hearty lunch on the ship. After some late-afternoon downtime, we would rendezvous for happy hour and a recap of the day, which was led by our onboard naturalists, and then enjoy a leisurely dinner followed by an evening presentation.

James held regular slideshow presentations on techniques for helping point-and-shooters and advanced photographers improve their shots. He also led photo hikes and hands-on sessions, and regularly critiqued our

GRAINS OF GOLD
See what other treasures Panama and Costa Rica have to offer the observant tourist at www.boston.com/travel.

images on his computer.

Each stop on the trip held something wonderfully unique. Since we could get to Costa Rica's second most popular national park, Manuel Antonio, by boat, we were able to arrive before the gates opened to walk-in visitors. Zodiacs dropped us off on a sprawling, white-sand beach, and we spent the first hour wandering peaceful trails, taking photos of iguanas on tree stumps, listening to the chirping and squeaking of white-throated monkeys, and spotting three-fingered sloths high up in the cecropia trees.

At Corcovado Conservation Area, a private park in southeastern Costa Rica, we spent hours photographing the area's endangered scarlet macaws as they perched in trees feeding on beach almonds. During a forest hike, we spotted a tinamou, a bird that looks like a quail but sounds like squeaky bus brakes, and listened to the squawks, hoots, and roars of the howler monkeys.

"We're impacting the ecosystem by being here, but very likely if we were not here, this would be a lychee or banana plantation," said Alex Lopez, one of the ship's exploration leaders, as we paused by a giant mango tree. "So we're affecting the rain forest a little bit, but we're helping protect Costa Rica's land. We have to disturb a little to protect a lot."

Twenty-five percent of Costa Rica is protected, but private reserves make up an important 8 percent of this land and provide vital links to national parks and reserves. In Golfo Dulce, we visited two private homesteads, including Casa Orquidea, where Ron McAllister, originally of Laconia, N.H., and his wife, Trudy, have lived off-the-grid for 30 years and created a flourishing botanical garden. (They power their cellphones, washing machine, computer, and lights with solar panels and a back-up generator, and get their gravity-fed water from a hillside spring.)

"We bought a van and drove to Central America in the '70s," said Trudy McAllister. "We ran

out of money and momentum in Costa Rica, and we really liked it here, so we stayed. In the early days, we grew pineapples and bananas and made coconut oil and that kept us going, but it's hard to make a living like that."

Now, the McAllisters offer guided and self-guided tours of their lush gardens. Here, we wandered through patches with nutmeg and wild cilantro, saw lychee and cashew trees, photographed zebra butterflies, and ducked under a palm tree with fronds that were bigger than any of us.

Our first stop in Panama took us to Granito de Oro, or "little grain of gold," in Coiba National Park. This white-sand islet, not more than an acre in size, consisted of a sandy mound capped with a small cluster of trees and had several rocky outcroppings that became separate "islands" when the tide rose. We passed a day here, snorkeling with parrot fish, white-tip sharks, and sea turtles on the coral reef.

Although we had thoroughly enjoyed exploring remote jungles, homesteads, and villages, transiting the Panama Canal proved a highlight, captivating all on board, including even the captain, Hernan Lara, who had navigated this waterway 139 times.

"This is my first time starting after 7 o'clock, so every time there is always something different," Lara said. While waiting for our canal pilot, we spent the morning at the Miraflores Locks Visitors Center, which documented the fascinating history of the 95-year-old canal and the system that would transport us up and over the narrowest stretch of the Isthmus of Panama via a series of locks and a man-made lake.

Our ship set off at twilight, passing under the Bridge of the Americas and following behind the White Dolphin, a refrigerated cargo vessel with which we

would make the entire 50-mile transit. We watched in awe as millions of gallons of water flooded or drained from each lock within minutes and "mules" (small tug locomotives that ran on tracks alongside each lock) carefully guided our two ships as we navigated the narrow passage.

Many of us stayed up until 3 a.m. to experience the entire transit. Our exploration leaders narrated the trip, offering information on the history of the canal and an explanation of its inner workings, while we watched our ships rise and fall like toys in a big bathtub.

Choppy seas kept us from visiting the San Blas Islands, home to the Kuna Indians, once we reached the Caribbean coast. Instead, we spent our final day exploring Portobelo, a historic fortress town visited by Christopher Columbus in 1502 and declared a World Heritage Site in 1980. It was hard to believe this sleepy enclave was once the main port for plundered gold and pirate spoils traveling from South America to Europe. For us, Portobelo's true value lay in its easy, carefree pace and idyllic setting, nestled between mangroves and tropical coves where we snorkeled around the colorful reefs.

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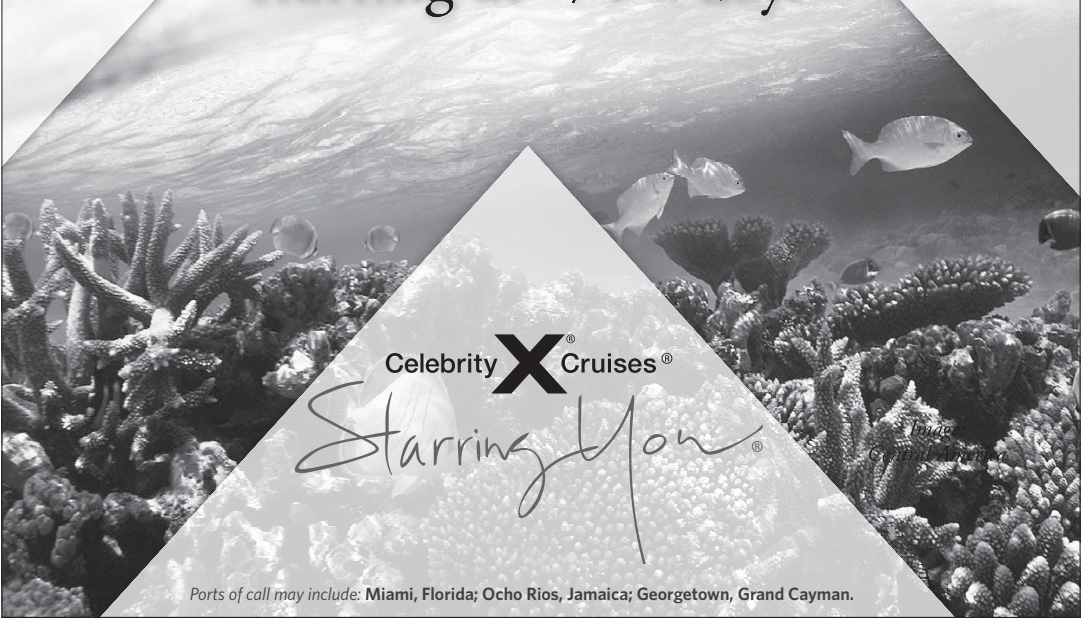
PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A squirrel monkey in Manuel Antonio National Park in Costa Rica; heading northbound through the Panama Canal at night, a seven- to nine-hour trip that saves 8,000 miles going from ocean to ocean; an Emberá man (his body painted with dye) and child.





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