

## Travel Notes from Panama

Alphonse Capone, a/k/a Scarface, the notorious gangster, occupies a footnote in my family history. Back in the '20s and '30s in Miami, Big Al had a mansion on an island in Biscayne Bay, Hibiscus Island if memory serves. When the tensions of mob rule got to be too much, Capone would call for his chiropractor, Dr. Bill, to make a house call, or island mansion call, to be more correct.

Dr. Bill was my uncle; he was also chiropractor to Babe Ruth and some other prominent figures in South Florida's early years.

Capone was a yachtsman of sorts; he commissioned the construction of an elegant seagoing motor yacht, the *Islamorada* (say eye-la-mo-rada, not isla-anything), obviously named for one of the uppermost communities in the Florida Keys. The yacht was more than a fishing or pleasure boat - it held many secrets, mostly having to do with the hidden cabinets used to hide Cuba's best quality rum – smuggling hooch was a growth industry during prohibition.

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Fast forward to March of this year. The *Islamorada* is under way once more. This time she's carrying a boatload of tourists, me included, down the Panama Canal and through the Miraflores and Pedro Miguel locks on this fourth day of our week with Caravan Tours.

The thirty or so of us began our vacation in downtown Panama City at a fairly nice hotel, where we stayed over for the first two nights. We had booked with Caravan Tours, one of the largest tour companies operating in Panama. Other than some excursions by boat, we traveled by air-conditioned bus for the week. (There was no bathroom on the bus so we had a chance to learn patience.) Throughout the trip, we were afforded accommodations that ranged from more than adequate to really unique and excellent.

Almost all of our meals were buffet style and we were offered a very good array of choices that included local favorites, including lots of seafood, and more traditional fare. I listened to a couple grouching about the food at one locale, but decided that grouching was part of what they looked forward to while traveling. Nice folks otherwise. When we did order in a restaurant, we were advised that the service would be very slow and the cuisine excellent – right on both counts; the food was worth the wait.

Panama City is exploding. There are over 90 skyscrapers in the city and 150 more under construction. Yes, 150 more. The Canal, and the international trade that it engenders, are the engine that is driving this latest building boom. It was disconcerting, in the midst of this commercial opulence, to see more than a few signs of abject poverty.

A note or two about my traveling companions: Of the 30 or so of us signed on for the tour, about three-fourths of our group were either from India or were first-generation immigrants to the U.S from India. Two ladies were from the Bahamas and a handful of us were from the U.S. It was a wonderful grouping with an international flavor and the instant camaraderie and

sharing were the best part of the trip for me. Although I was traveling alone, I felt like a welcome member of a large and warm family.

Some other highlights of our Panama tour:

- From several experts, museum trips, and films, we acquired a great deal of information and appreciation for the extraordinary, often terrible, history of the incredible engineering feat that carved a navigable canal from a hostile jungle environment.
- We laughed and danced with a tribe of natives in their relocated village. These people, genuinely warm, seem almost lost between their traditional lifestyles and the pressures and perks of the present day.
- We were afforded several opportunities to meet and purchase crafts from local artisans. Many of the items were unique and made nice gifts and souvenirs.
- Throughout the week, we were treated to colorful pageants and dancing that ranged from exotic to the traditional, patriotic dances of the country.
- We spent the better part of two days at Playa Blanca at a nice, too-touristy resort on the Pacific coast. (Memo to self – a bracelet that allows unlimited mix drinks can lead to a bout of profound personal recrimination.)
- Caravan Tours run an efficient and generally interesting trip. Our guide and bus drivers seemed genuinely concerned for our well-being and comfort.

Some reflections: I've helped lead tours before; never been on one – most of my traveling is a bit more rugged and remote. This was a good experience for me but I may or may not travel this way again. I wouldn't hesitate to book with Caravan if I did decide on a future tour. Traveling alone can be pricey – my room costs were about 50% more than would be true of the expense incurred by each of two people sharing a room. Lastly, this is being written to a PG audience – don't even ask me about the treatment afforded me by the TSA at LAX.