



Panama Canal, Pedro Miguel Lock

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Cruising the Panama Canal

The Panama Canal celebrates its centenary in 2014, so we thought we'd take a look at why people are fascinated by this extraordinary waterway, and why transit of the Panama Canal is climbing up the list of 'must do' cruising experiences.

Completed in 1914, the Panama Canal is one the world's greatest feats of engineering, stretching 48 miles across the continental divide, from Panama City on the Pacific side, to Colón on the Atlantic side. This extraordinary shipping lane, referred to by many as the 'eighth wonder of the world', can lift and lower ships in excess of 170 feet and involves a transit through three lock gates.

The general direction of the Canal is from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and this was the route that Fred. Olsen's Balmoral followed on her 2013 World Cruise. However, in 2014 the transit will be reversed with Balmoral passing under the Bridge of the Americas and entering the canal through the Miraflores Locks on the Pacific side.



[Watch video on YouTube here](#)

This two-stage lock system is just over a mile in length and has a total descent of a staggering 54ft, lowering ships into the Miraflores Lake. From here it is just a short cruise to the Pedro Miguel Locks, a single-stage lock which lower ships a further 31ft into the Culebra Cut. This artificial valley passes under the Centennial Bridge, one of the major crossings, and cutting through the dense rainforest that engulfs the canal.

After a short stint navigating the Chagres River, the largest river in the canal's watershed, the ship arrives at Gatun Lake which was created between 1907 and 1913. largest man-made lake in the world, it forms a 21-mile section of the canal, carrying ships across the Isthmus of Panama.

This part of the cruise affords time to relax on deck as the ship travels at a slow pace. The low dulled hum of the ship's engines interlaced with the rustling winds through the lush emerald foliage, providing a soothing backdrop. The views from the canal are phenomenal, with green leaf topped trees as far as the eye can see. This area of untouched, dense rainforest houses a vast array of Central American animal and plant species.

The final section before sailing out into the Atlantic is the Gatun Locks, a three-stage set of locks which lift the ships up 85ft. The shore-side 'mules' - four locomotives which run alongside the ships on rail tracks help vessels move seamlessly through the three gates.

The canal transit alone is phenomenal, but throw in calls to some fantastic Caribbean Islands and fascinating Central or South American cities, and you capture a truly memorable cruise experience.

Fred. Olsen's Balmoral will be transiting the canal on her 2014. Around the World Voyage, whilst the Black Watch will cruise the canal during her 2015 South American cruise. This unique and fascinating experience really is a 'must do' - so find your perfect Panama Canal cruise with Fred. Olsen.

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