



VOYAGE THE AMERICAS

Colour me happy: an exotic adventure

The Panama canal, and the wildlife, are striking highlights on **Kate Armstrong's** cruise from Barbados to Ecuador.



As our ship works its way through the locks of the Panama Canal, virtually everyone braves the showers – to be on deck to admire this incredible feat of engineering.

When the canal – an artificial 82-kilometre waterway that connects the Pacific and Atlantic oceans – first opened in August 1914, the event garnered little notice in the press. World attention was too focused on that other global event, the outbreak of World War I.

By cutting through the Panamanian isthmus, the canal reduced travel distance by 19,300km; ships no longer had to sail the long, dangerous Cape Horn route around the southernmost tip of South America. It had a dramatic impact on trade, allowing ships speedier and safer access to key destinations.

The canal was constructed predominantly for cargo ships, but cruise liners and other passenger vessels have become major users too since American SS Ancon became the first vessel to transit the Panama Canal, in 1914.

This is Venture's first passage through too, as part of its maiden voyage, and I'm lucky enough to be on board.

The brand new polar-class, purpose-built expedition ship is quite the feat of engineering itself: luxury engineering that is, with 134 stylish, all-mod-cons, all-verandah suites for up to 264 guests. There are 120 crew, creating a guest-to-crew ratio of around 2:1.

There are two custom-built submarines in which passengers can undertake their own explorations with a specially trained sub pilot. Passengers sit in two giant spheres that flank the pilot's central station.

"The technology is amazing," says fellow passenger (and keen submariner), Grant Osborne from the Gold Coast. "The viewing area is phenomenal; it's nice to be at the sharp end of anything that's new."

The submarines are a popular talking point during the cruise. (Another guest, who has naval credentials, points out they are great, but more "toy submarines", and who are we to quibble.) They add a sense of adventure and excitement for all guests, who comprise 11 nationalities, but are mainly American and British.

My 10 days aboard begins five days before we pass through the canal – when I embark in Bridgetown, Barbados.

Many passengers, I quickly discover, are



I love the canal's engineering, all these moving parts and tons of moving water.
Captain Stigg Betten

loyal "Seabourners", well familiar with the brand, being repeat guests who appreciate the line's ambience and relaxed design style. This is on display throughout the ship, especially in the spacious guest Verandah Suites, which have a separate lounge area, complete with a sizeable flat-screen TV. The floor-to-ceiling window slides open to a large verandah, and the walk-in wardrobe is the size of a New York loft.

The public areas are just as special such as the Constellation Lounge, with 270-degree views – a great spot for afternoon tea or a sunset cocktail with new friends (it's a very social ship).

Said lounge has a cineflex camera that can capture wildlife up to eight kilometres away, beaming the images onto monitors found throughout the ship's public areas, as well as in guest suites. Whether you're in Central America or the Arctic, sit and read a book, confident you won't miss a sighting.

The heart of the ship, the Expedition Lounge, has fireplaces and fur-covered cushions that make for a cosy rendezvous, albeit arguably more suited to Antarctic adventures. The ship's other main indoor

social hub, the Club, hosts the daily trivia competition, where self-named teams – including "Venturers", "Dusty Carpets" and "(Un)masked Boobies" (a play on the masked booby, one of our regular bird sightings) – compete for prizes, including jewellery from the gift shop.

My section of the sailing includes quite a few sea days, which I spend armed with my Swarovski binoculars – provided in our suites – hanging out with Joe, the ship's ornithologist, on deck.

Most days, we're in luck. Masked boobies fly alongside the ship, before they suddenly fold their wings and dive like darts, seeking schools of flying fish. Frigate birds, brown boobies and peregrine falcons also coast by.

After two days at sea, we dock at Santa Marta, Colombia's oldest city. We explore the city on foot, then we're off on a transfer for the two-hour journey to the spectacular and lush Quebrada Valencia Nature Reserve in the rainforest.

The heat means bird spotting is limited in the reserve, but we enjoy meandering along the track and criss-crossing the shallow creek.

Two sailing days later, we arrive at Bocas del Toro in Panama, a town on Isla Colón within an archipelago renowned for its beaches, banana plantations and mangrove waterways.

After a half-day excursion, I lounge around the ship for the afternoon given an ace card of the cruise – passing through the Panama Canal – is scheduled for the following day. Meanwhile, onboard comforts provide ample diversion.

I get an early night and rise just after



Clockwise from main: What an office! A crew member aboard one of the two submarines on Seabourn Venture; the route map; a chestnut-mandibled toucan; inside the two-storey Wintergarden Suite.

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Need to know
Similar sailing
Seabourn Venture will sail South America and The Humboldt Current between October 15-31, 2023. A lead-in suite starts at \$16,999, and the top-level Owner's Suite starts from \$37,199. Prices are per person, based on double occupancy. See seabourn.com for more information.

Seabourn Venture

On board The new ship hosts 264 guests in 134 staterooms and has 120 crew, including a 26-member expedition team. It houses a number of double kayaks, 24 Zodiacs and two submarines.

Restaurants and bars Eight dining options in total, including The Restaurant, an upmarket venue with white tablecloths. Don't miss their grilled fillet of beef tenderloin, a Seabourn classic. The Colonnade serves buffet meals and daily specials. The Club whips up great cocktails and sushi, while the Constellation Lounge serves afternoon teas, cocktails and tapas.

Wellness offering The Spa provides a range of beauty and relaxation treatments. A small stretch room, compact gym and hair salon keeps you supple, fit and immaculate.

Where the ship will sail Venture is part of the newly launched Seabourn Expedition Voyages, and sister ship, Seabourn Pursuit, is slated to launch next year. Venture will head to Antarctica from March to October.

dawn. Even though it's 6am, the heat fogs my glasses as I wander onto the bow. It starts to rain, but I'm determined not to miss the start of a passage that will take us eight to 12 hours.

Large cargo ships are waiting to enter the first lock. Regulations require a canal official must provide the commentary on our 80km journey, and he's delivered to Venture in a small boat.

As far back as the 16th century, people including King Charles V, contemplated construction of a route through the isthmus of Panama. In 1881, the French became the first nation to actively begin work, before abandoning the attempt due primarily to construction problems and cost. The Americans then took over, completing the canal between 1904 and 1914.

All up, more than 27,000 workers died from accidents and tropical diseases. The United States spent more than \$US375 million on the project. It was worth it to them: Panama Canal facilitated the movement of cargo to and from the US, and created a huge geopolitical advantage, cementing the US as the world's superpower.

Venture enters the Gatun locks from Limón Bay in the North Atlantic, three hydraulic chambers hoisting the ship up 26 metres. I peer over the side, watching as a small rowboat comes alongside. It carries workers who attach cables to the sides of the ship: The cables extend from locomotives or "mules", whose job is to keep the ship centred as we pass through.

The ship enters onto Gatun Lake, then passes the mouth of the Chagres River at the small town of Gamboa, before heading through the Culebra Cut, the cleaved section of the Continental Divide.

Despite having navigated the canal half a dozen times, the ship's Captain Stigg Betten is enthusiastic. "I love its engineering, history, the whole lake's operation," he says. "It's so huge: All these moving parts and tons of moving water. The levelling of the locks. Keeping the right level in the lake depending on rainfall."

On Deck 10, the ship's highest level, "Birding Joe" (as I affectionately dub him) is camped out for the day, aiming to identify 50 bird species: both seabirds and those that nest in the thick jungle around Gatun Lake.

He nails it, hitting the 70 mark by day's end, ticking off a social flycatcher and blue-winged teal, plus a brown pelican and chestnut-mandibled toucan.

We disembark next at Manta in Ecuador, the 'world capital of tuna': 70 per cent of global supply comes from here. Manta is also a ship building centre; along the beachfront, wooden frames appear like giant whale skeletons.

We're driven 11km to Montecristi, the village known for the Panama hat (contrary to its name, this style of chapeau is Ecuadorian).

Outside a storefront we spot a weaver, her body bent over a rudimentary tripod for support, braiding strands of toquilla straw. It can take up to six months to make a hat, depending on how coarse or fine the weave is.

Several passengers return to the bus, carrying their new headwear, which can cost anything between \$US25 (\$38) and \$US5000 (\$7810).

Not buying a hat is my only regret of the entire adventure. **✎**

The writer was a guest of Seabourn.