

Dear Friends,

Greetings (after the fact as usual) from Panama.

The origins of this trip go back about a year. In 1955 I started the fifth grade at a school in New York called Collegiate. Despite being very old and highly regarded, it was a crummy school, and I was not happy there. I had a lot of friends in my class, but I lost touch with most of them after being suddenly withdrawn from the school in 1959. But in 2008 my classmate Bernie Schachtel met my brother Christopher at a social event and asked him to pass a greeting to me, which he did. So I called Bernie at his home in Jupiter, Palm Beach County, Florida, and as he was coming to San Francisco on business we met for a drink in January 2009. It was great to see him. We caught up on the past 50 years, he arranged for me to get a class list, and I began reconnecting with friends from that time.

One of the friends I called was Philip McGuigan. We had been very close in the fifth through seventh grades. But in 1958 came the winnowing of the herd. Arbitrarily, it seemed to us, as at the last judgment, the sheep were separated from the goats; the sheep were sent to prep schools like Exeter and Choate, and the goats were left behind at Collegiate. I was a goat, but Phil was a sheep; he went off to Brooks in 1958, and I never saw him again. Bernie told me that Phil had retired in Panama, so I called him up. As with Bernie, it was terrific to talk with him, and we had no difficulty re-engaging after almost 52 years. Phil suggested I come down to visit him in Panama. He didn't have to ask me twice.

There are three main ways to get to Panama City by air from San Francisco – change at Los Angeles, Houston, or Miami. Los Angeles and Houston, ho hum; but if I went through Miami, I could visit Bernie. And while I was there, I could also visit Holly Schwartztol, who lives in Miami. She didn't go to Collegiate because Collegiate stopped admitting girls in 1890, but as Holly Wechsler she was nevertheless an honorary member of my class and one of my best friends in my high school days. I hadn't spoken to her since around 1964, but I called her and arranged to see her on my trip to Miami. And while I was reconnecting, I called my cousin Richard Sussman, whom I had not seen since childhood, and made plans to visit him in Palm Beach.

So I flew to Miami on December 29, rented a car and a motel room near the airport, and began paying calls the next day. On the 30th I drove up to Palm Beach, about 70 miles north of Miami, to visit my cousin in his apartment tower facing the sea. We sat in his living room and ate shrimp and watched the ocean. This picture, from the Internet, is of a different apartment a few blocks away, but it gives a good sense of his place. We talked of his path through life and mine – at 85 he is in a lot better shape than I am at 65. I met his



companion Barbara, who had been a professional breeder of racing greyhounds (she taught me the evocative term *brood matron*). We talked some about family, for example about his father, my great-uncle Sol, who in his youth was a trick bicycle rider on the vaudeville stage (“we got hurt a lot,” he told Richard). But we talked more about the present and future than about the past.



Then we went to dinner at a terrific restaurant where he knew everyone, and saw a little of Palm Beach, festooned at the end of December in festive Christmas lights. Palm Beach, although just a narrow strip of land between the Intercoastal Waterway and the Atlantic Ocean, is in parts a famous citadel of wealth and privilege. Vast mansions hide behind tall hedges (below left); Worth Avenue is a shopping district like Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, weighted heavily toward Cartier and Louis Vuitton and similar luxury outlets (below right, *Worth Avenue* by Lorraine Fouquet). It was a slice of life Richard enjoyed without adopting its jaded values. And then I drove back to Miami, to a neighborhood a lot more Denny’s than Cartier, and the evening and the morning were the first day.



The next day, New Year’s Eve, I went to see Holly. First I tried to visit the Art Deco District in Miami Beach, where I had not been for many years, but it was so jammed with cars (perhaps because



were closed off for the evening’s fireworks) that I fled, and it took me more than an hour even to flee.

Holly lives on the outermost edge of Brickell Key, a fortified island in Biscayne Bay, which gives her a magnificent wraparound view (see

arrow) of the very place the fireworks were to be set off. It was great to see her again, and Holly and her husband and two other couples and I made a very jolly dinner party,

with thick steaks and rich pies and lively conversation. From the balcony we watched dolphins frolicking in the bay as boats gathered for the fireworks – we of course didn't need a boat, as we were already at the water's edge and well above the level of the tallest



cruise ship. A nervous week after the so-called Christmas bomber, the lights of police boats colored the bay a throbbing red and blue. With Holly, as with Bernie and the other friends of my youth I have been re-encountering since his overture, there was a kind of eerie double vision – *within* the sexagenarians of today I could clearly see the adolescents of 50 years ago. They were the same in aspect and voice as I remembered them, and yet clearly not the same, just as I am not the same as I was when I was young. It don't see how anyone who knew me back then could possibly recognize me today, but they all say they can, and I can recognize them. This is a mystery that needs more thought.

Anyway New Year's came, and the fireworks went off right in front of us. It was the most vivid and profligate show of fireworks I've ever seen – plus we could also see the displays of neighboring towns like Miami Beach. And then, when I left, the first traffic jam of the year! I didn't get back to my hotel until nearly three, which wouldn't have mattered except that I had to get up at five to get to the cruise ship pier at Port Everglades, near Fort Lauderdale in Broward County. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

It was only a day trip from Port Everglades. But since I was going to be in Miami anyway, and it was possible to go to the Bahamas (arms below) and back on the M/v *Discovery Sun* for as little as \$29 and add a whole new country to my life list, why not go? So I bought a ticket on line – it turned out to be more than \$29 what with Bahamian port fees and the holiday surcharge for traveling on New Year's Day, and the extra cost of treating myself to a small cabin rather than having to stay in the lounges for ten hours at sea – but not a lot more. I was glad of the cabin, because I was so exhausted from having had only two hours of sleep that I slept almost the whole way over. As I came

ashore I asked several Bahamian immigration officials to stamp my passport, but they absolutely refused, saying I would be stamped on the way out.



Grand Bahama, the nearest island to Florida, is very flat and not very interesting, especially on New Year's Day. The island is used almost wholly for the deposit and shearing of tourists – they are carried in taxis from the cruise ship terminal to two malls and the tourist center of Lucaya, there to drink rum drinks and play in the water and buy souvenirs. I thought I would skip that and instead use my three hours ashore to see how people actually lived in Grand Bahama. There is a “people-to-people” program which matches visitors with volunteer locals, and I tried for that but was



told by the island coordinator that no one could see me on New Year's Day because everyone would have been out late the night before and would be resting up for the big parade that evening. So I hired a taxi for three hours and asked Mr. Grant, the driver, to show me around.

Mr. Grant took some persuading that I really wanted to see ordinary neighborhoods and not tourist attractions, but once he understood he drove me willingly. The problem was that there was just about no one around. The people-to-people people were right – everyone was asleep (or at least indoors) except for two or three Haitian settlers. I saw some ibises grazing on a lawn and a Haitian offered to catch one and sell it to me, but I thought a live ibis might be an encumbrance on the rest of the trip.



We passed poor houses and rich ones and ones inbetween. We passed a maritime fueling facility, and lots of closed churches, and stopped at an empty public beach (left), and drove through the town of Freeport (which looks like a Florida suburb), and everything was deserted. The only place apart from the ibis range where I saw anyone at all was in Lucaya, the very spot I was trying to avoid. I ended up going back to the ship early, having learned at least that New Year's is not the best

time for a day trip. But it was the only day I had – my other days in Florida were all spoken for. Bahamian immigration again refused to stamp my passport, this time because they only do it on arrival. But I did add another country (#65) to my list, which was the main reason for the excursion. I slept through the trip back also and got home around midnight. And the evening and the morning were – where was I? – the third day.



On January 2 I did some errands in Miami and then drove up to Jupiter to see Bernie. Did you have any trouble finding the place? Well, yes, I did – the South Florida habit of giving every street three different names but only marking one of them led me way off course, and I had to ask a mailman to point me the right way. But I found Bernie at last. He lives in a lofty, nobly proportioned house on an artificial island where every lot has a dock – it was pleasant to sit out by the water, watching the fish and the egrets and the cormorants beneath a cloudless sky. We spent an agreeable afternoon talking about his scientific work, and looking at the works of art, enjoying the tranquility, and then went to dinner with his wife and grown children. And after that I went back to Miami to pack for the trip to Panama, and the evening and the morning were the fourth day, and it was good.



The next day, January 3, I flew from Miami around Cuba but over Jamaica to Panama City. It was startling to see the city from the air, densely planted along the waterfront with high thin towers in the post-modern Dubai manner. I was met at the airport (country #66!) by Rene Guardiola, a friend of Phil's who had made a business of ferrying tourists around. I was a tourist, and he began by ferrying me to my hotel in a business district called El Cangrejo (which means *The Crab*). The hotel had been recommended as reasonably priced, all mod cons, and in a safe neighborhood. Researching it on the Internet, I thought the neighborhood might be a little *too* safe – boring and heavily gringofied – as indeed it turned out to be (see picture below). I found listings for hotels in more interesting neighborhoods but the reviews all said don't go near these places, so in the end I decided not to buck the system, but to go where I was steered.



The hotel was adequate, but noise was a problem. The air conditioning was so loud I couldn't sleep, and the traffic was so loud I couldn't turn the a/c off and open the window, and if I kept the a/c on and wore earplugs I couldn't hear my alarm. So I ended up most of the time sleeping with closed windows *and* no air conditioning. And it was hot – Panama City is about nine degrees north of the Equator. So the hotel

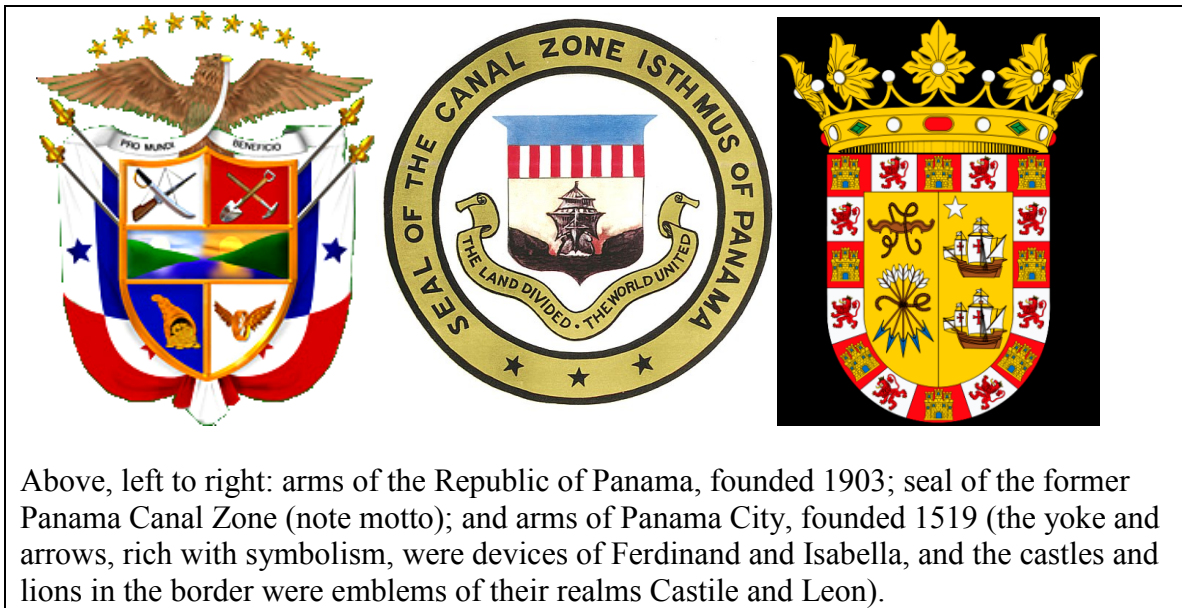
became a kind of test of Buddhist equanimity, which I passed but only barely, with a grade of about C+. My tropical rule of at least two showers a day was a great help.

Also a great help was Manolo's, a paradise of a restaurant just down the street. They were open for breakfast, they were open at midnight, and the food was superb. Bacon and eggs, juicy steaks, octopus in garlic sauce, little sweet clams, delicious fruit smoothies – whatever a person might want, there it was at their cool marble counter. I ate every meal there – it is the part of Panama City I enjoyed the most. Amazingly, you can drink the water in Panama City – Phil and Rene both told me so, and I



didn't believe them, but then I steeled myself to take my pills with tap water my first night in-country, and had no problem.

Rene was at my hotel the next morning to begin a tour of Panama City with a visit to the Canal. We went to the visitor center at the Miraflores Locks, within the former Canal Zone. If the Canal Zone were still an American possession, this would have been country #67, but it isn't – it is very frustrating to come to a place that would have counted, after it is too late to count. I blame President Carter.



Above, left to right: arms of the Republic of Panama, founded 1903; seal of the former Panama Canal Zone (note motto); and arms of Panama City, founded 1519 (the yoke and arrows, rich with symbolism, were devices of Ferdinand and Isabella, and the castles and lions in the border were emblems of their realms Castile and Leon).

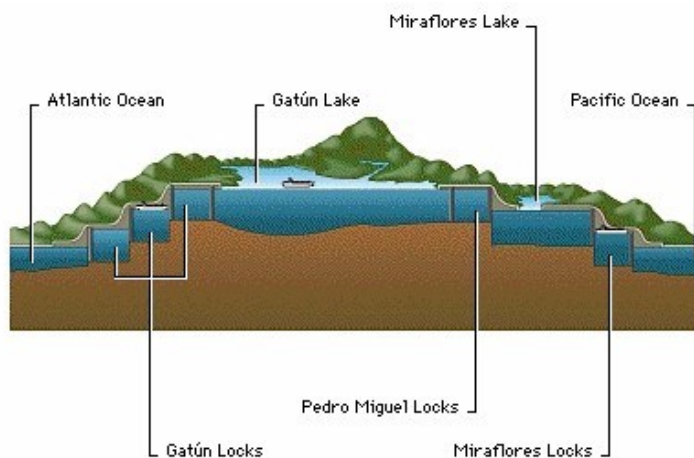
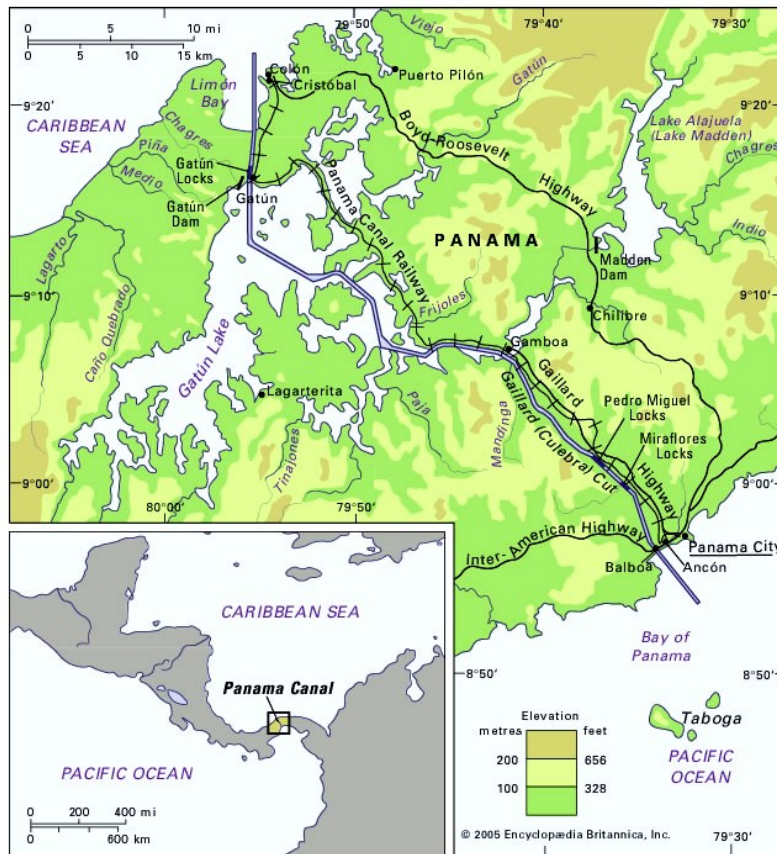


Despite not being in a separate jurisdiction any longer, the Miraflores area is still full of stately buildings with red-tiled roofs in the classic American military manner – like the Presidio of San Francisco, but in much better condition (left). The Miraflores Locks are the first of three sets of locks through which ships pass from the Pacific to the Caribbean. Although sea level is, of course, the same in both seas, the Pacific has much steeper tides than the Caribbean, so a single-ditch canal like the French wanted to build in the 19th century would not have worked at all. Also it would have required cutting through the central mountain *cordillera* down to sea level, which while not exactly impossible would have been needlessly difficult. Now a ship enters a lock, the gate closes behind her, fresh water is forced into the lock from below to raise the level, the ship rises in the lock, and then the gate in front opens and she moves on at a higher level.

After the two Miraflores Locks the canal continues north (not east) through a small man-made lake to another lock, then through a long ditch (the Culebra or Gaillard Cut) and out



onto Gatún Lake, the second-largest man-made lake in the world, formed by damming the Chagres River. In this lake the ships are at their highest point, 85 feet above sea level. Then they go down through a third set of locks and out into the Atlantic. The map and diagram below show the route, and the photographs illustrate the process (Gatún Locks above, and Miraflores Locks below). Note the angle at which the gates meet. The pressure of the water in the higher-filled chamber seals the mitered gap and prevents the gates from opening until the water levels are equal.



Miraflores Locks was only my first approach to the Canal – I made several others during my time in Panama, by air and rail and three roads and two kinds of ship. It really takes a number of different views to grasp something as enormous as the Panama Canal.



I spent the next few days in Panama City tourism. Panama City is not a very attractive or interesting city. The buildings are mostly a hodgepodge of styles – boxily modern like El Cangrejo, thin towers as on the skyline, and lots of stucco and grimy third-world concrete. There are not many districts (apart from the former American bases) where graceful older buildings are preserved. The original 16th century settlement (Panama Viejo) is now a ruin. The main historic district is the Casque Antiguo (left), which looks something like the French Quarter of New Orleans. It is mostly in pretty bad condition but is being restored. The President's office (below) is in Casque Antiguo.



I took a ride on the famous Panama Canal Railway (see canal map for route), which is mainly used for transporting containers from one side to the other but which also runs one observation car a day (see below) from Panama City to Colón. Rene met the train in Colón, and at



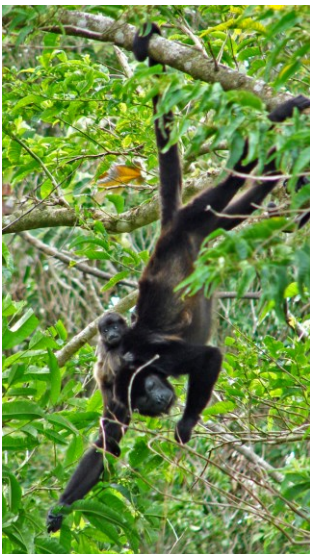
my insistence drove me around the city before making the hour-plus journey back. Colón is said to be very dangerous, and he made me promise not to get out of the car, but even from within its air-conditioned sanctuary I could see that Colón was something special, crammed





with jaw-dropping Art Deco buildings seen through a miasma of filth and neglect.

Colón (arms at right) is a kind of dream city, like Calcutta or Venice although hardly on that scale. Think of the old movies in which an expedition of pith-helmeted Europeans stumbles on a lost city hidden in the jungle. Then think of the futuristic movies like *Blade Runner* set in a crowded, violent, degraded version of a modern city. Colón is like a combination of these two imaginings. Below left is a typical street scene in the crowded downtown. Unfortunately I can't find good images of the Art Deco buildings on the Internet – a detail of one structure (below right) is the best I can do. But they were burned into my brain during my brief Colónoscopy. I have heard they are mostly condemned and have not yet been demolished only because they are filled with squatters. This suggests that some day “progress” will turn the dreamscape of Colón into a boring mishmash like Panama City. They say you cannot stop progress. Why not?



I did a bit more tourism, saw the famous murals in the old Canal Administration building, and hunted for heraldry books (found one) and a proper road atlas (no luck). I took a boat ride from Gamboa (see canal map) out onto Gatún Lake amid the maritime traffic, to a place where the tops of flooded hills had become islands, and watched the monkeys. Graceful howler monkeys (left) held on with their tails as they stretched for flowers to eat; capuchin monkeys (right; so named because the markings on their heads suggested Capuchin friars) leapt into our boat to beg for fruit. Enormous iguanas sat on boughs; turtles swam.

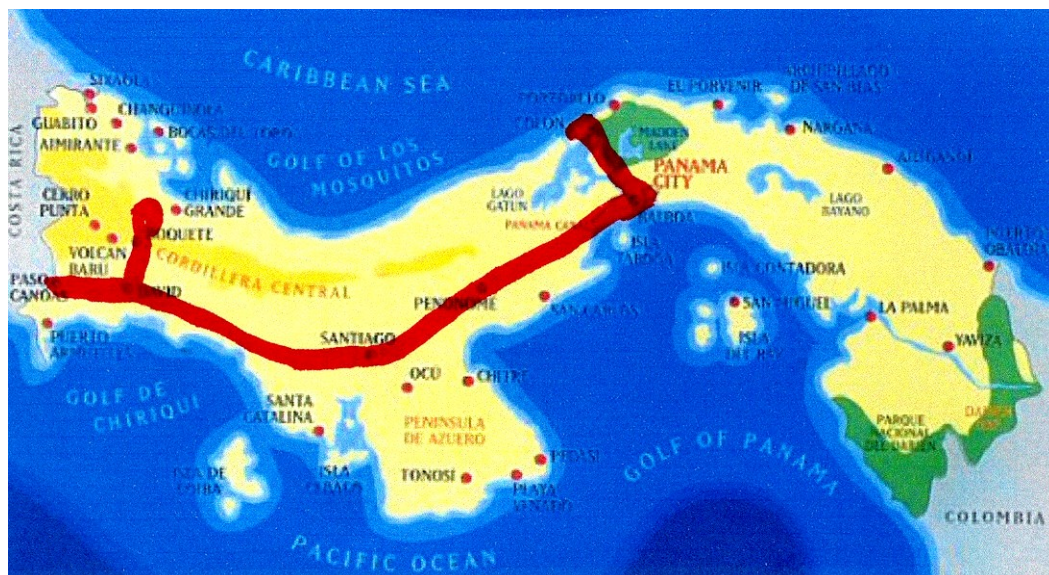


My Spanish is not good, and it didn't improve much in the short time I was in Panama. I managed OK at Manolo's, but Spanish words tended to come out in Italian, which sounds like it should work but actually doesn't. I brought down the house once asking for *arroz con maricones* – I thought I was asking for rice with shrimps (*camarones*), but *arroz con maricones* means *rice with homosexuals*. That turned out not to be on the menu – perhaps it was out of season? Before my recent trip to Italy I practiced with *Look and Learn Italian*, which helped a lot; this time I didn't prepare with *Look and Learn Spanish* and so hardly managed any Spanish at all. As always, if you don't do the reading you risk failing the test.

Panama has its own currency, called the *balboa* after the Spanish explorer who crossed the isthmus in 1513. But it is pegged to the dollar and there are no Panamanian banknotes – dollars are used instead, which is very convenient. They have coins, though, exactly the same as ours in size and weight and composition, which circulate along with American coins. Here is an enlarged scan of the very handsome quarter.

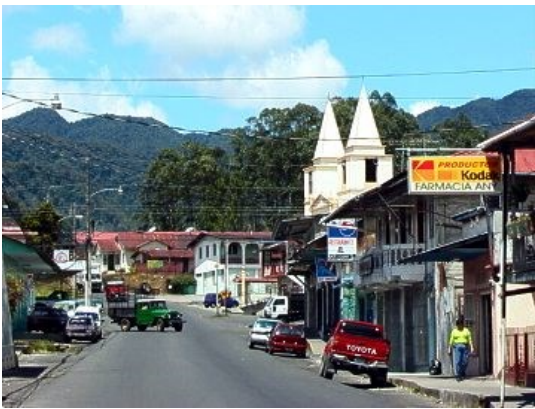


Having done about all I intended to do in Panama City, I took a day off. The next morning Rene drove me to the bus station and I left on the six-hour trip up the Pan-American Highway to the regional city of David, where Phil would meet me and take me to his home in Boquete. I had already been in two of the nine provinces of Panama – Panamá and Colón – and the bus trip took me into four more – Coclé, Herrera, Veraguas and Chiriquí. Here is a map showing my travels in Panama.





At first the land was agricultural – fields with corn and sugar cane, pasture for horses and cattle, and gentle hills. Except for the sugar cane and the low brightly-colored cement buildings, it looked more like Middle America than Central America. But then in Veraguas the country grew much wilder and less settled. There were mountains in the distance, and a rough landscape of mounds and gullies and forests. (Is there a difference between a tropical forest and a jungle?) Sloths loafed in the trees. Once into Chiriquí it began to look like farmland again, with curious fences formed of close-planted saplings, and peasants with straw hats and scythes like figures from Brueghel, and chickens on farmhouse porches, and pastures green enough to make me want to be a cow myself. At last we pulled into steamy David, and there was Phil, easily recognizable although completely different than when I last saw him in 1958.



Boquete is a small but not sleepy town in the Chiriquí highlands on the swift-rushing Caldera River. It is what in India would be called a hill station, the center of a district where the altitude keeps the climate temperate. It has attracted a lot of expatriates, mostly Americans, but not so many as to turn the place completely into a colony. Boquete town (left) feels a lot like Provincetown; viewed from a distance the red roofs among the green hills give the impression of an Alpine

village (below left). The red and green Chiriquí flag is seen all over the province, in original and varied forms, and as the basis for business logos. The 13 stars stand for the 13 districts in the province.



Phil and his wife Alicia have built a beautiful and very comfortable estate in the hills beyond Boquete. Ordinarily the weather there is very mild, but when I arrived, and for several days afterward, it felt like Scotland, gray and cold and windy and pouring rain. The rain had a curious motion – individual drops fell straight down, but the wind seemed to push the falling mass sideways. It was not near-horizontal rainfall, as in Okinawa – it looked like nothing I'd ever seen before.





Gradually it cleared, and in place of the unseasonable downpour the characteristic *bajareque* returned, a kind of cooling mist which evaporates instantly. The mist creates frequent rainbows, not the miserly stunted rainbows of America but big bright ones stretching across the sky, with pots of gold at both ends. There was even a double rainbow, just for show. Volcán Baru, the sacred volcano, was of course hidden by fog and rain at first, but after the weather cleared it showed itself gradually, like Sinai, with clouds continuing to veil the top, until on my last day it was revealed (above right).

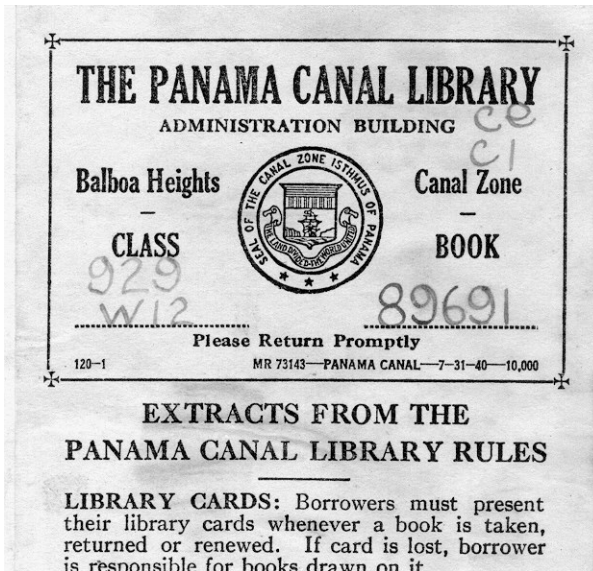


People who knew of my planned trip often said what? You're going to spend five days in the country with someone you haven't seen for 52 years? Are you nuts? But I was sure it was going to be all right, and it was – the peculiar double vision which let us recognize each other despite all the changes let us relate as if we had not been separated all those years, but allowed for the necessary rediscovery. It is very strange, but there

has never been any awkwardness with any of the people I have remet on this project of re-encounter.

One thing I really wanted to do on the trip to Boquete was to cross the not-very-distant border into Costa Rica (arms at left) and bring my country count up to 67. So Phil and I set off for David and the border town of Paso Canoas. To drive over the border in a private car takes hours of waiting and bureaucracy, but there is a kind of cross-border shopping zone where you can park on the side you came from, enter a store through its Panamanian door, and come out through the Costa Rican door on the other side (or *vice versa*) with no formalities at all. So we did this a few times, and I noticed a straight boulevard running out from the border shed. This boulevard was really *two* two-way boulevards right next to each other, with a median strip between them. On one of the boulevards all the cars had Panamanian license plates, and on the other they all had Costa Rican license plates. So that had to be the border, and we crossed that too for good measure. Phil took a photo (which for technical reasons I cannot attach here) to prove I had been to Costa Rica in case anyone denied it.





We spent five days in good companionship, going on Phil's routine rounds which were of course all new places for me. In an English-language bookshop in Boquete I even found a previously unknown heraldry book with the old Canal Library bookplate (the book was marked *discarded*). And then, when the time came to leave, I flew back to Panama City to do my one remaining tourist adventure – a transit of the Canal.

There are two tour boat companies which do regular *partial* transits, as far as Lake Gatún, but they each do a *complete* transit only once a month. I

planned my trip around one of these dates, and was there at the dock at seven in the morning ready to board the *Pacific Queen* (below left). The transit from the Panama City harbor to the port at Colón took all day – nine hours, and at that we beat the usual time by more than an hour. It was quite a thrill to go through all the locks and the cuts and the lakes as pelicans and sleek frigate birds cruised overhead. For part of the way we shared locks with *U.S.S. Sea Fighter*, an experimental twin-hulled stealth-technology warship (below right; for more on *Sea Fighter* see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea\\_Fighter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_Fighter)). At the dock in Colón there was an imposing four-masted square-rigged sailing vessel, the Russian naval training ship *Krusenshtern* now unaccountably wearing a Colombian ensign. Colombian and American naval vessels go free through the canal, but the toll for our little tour boat was \$4600.



And then it was over, and the next day I flew back to Miami. Airline shenanigans at the gate led to a missed connection, so I had to fly to Los Angeles instead of San Francisco and stay overnight at the Airport Hilton as a guest of American Airlines. The sign in the shuttle bus said “PLEASE REMEMBER YOUR BAGS” – yes, I thought, remember them well, for you will never see them again. But I did, and eventually made it home to my foggy oceanside nest, where after a few days' recovery I am writing this letter to you.

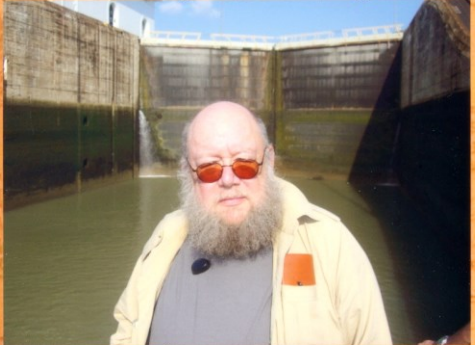
David

January 2010



**PANAMA CANAL TRANSIT**  
*Saturday, January 16, 2010*

North-Bound Full Transit



*Let it be known to all  
Ditch Diggers,  
Mosquito Swatters  
and Adventure  
Lovers, that I have  
transited the Panama  
Canal on board the  
good ship Pacific  
Queen*

**Been There.....  
Done That!**

