

THE GRANDEST CANAL

Take in a modern man-made wonder of the world, postcard-worthy islands and riverside towns from a luxurious small-ship point of view. It will feel like you're holidaying on your own private yacht, with all the trimmings.

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STAR OF PANAMA

Opposite page: There are six guest decks on the *Star Pride*. This page (clockwise from top left): Experience the fascinating workings of the Panama Canal; Miraflores lock; enjoy a newly refurbished suite; you can relax with five-star service; keep an eye out – you may spot a sloth or two as you explore the rainforests; the deck is a top location to watch the world go by.



Marvellous, marvellous,” says Tom, a retired New Zealand engineer, as we stand on the deck of *Star Pride*, watching muddy water gush from one of the Panama Canal locks on our way to Costa Rica.

Next minute, Tom is applauding and we all join in spontaneously, waving to the camera on the Miraflores lock that captures the experience for family and friends back home. “You just can’t imagine the challenges everyone faced building the Panama Canal. It’s a true marvel and I’ve waited years to see this,” he says.

Tom’s enthusiasm is well justified as nothing prepares you for the first glimpse of the famous man-made

waterway that links the Atlantic and Pacific oceans so ships can avoid the long trip around the Horn.

It’s not until you experience this masterpiece of modern engineering that you fully appreciate the vision, struggle and sacrifice that went into building the 77-kilometre waterway across the Isthmus of Panama. One of the seven wonders of the modern world, construction started in 1881 by the French company that developed the Suez Canal but was abandoned in 1894. Taken over by the US in 1904, it was completed a decade later. Over those years, 25,000 workers perished from malaria and other diseases.

And only very recently, extensions allowed for the transit of megaships – for a fee. A huge container ship

recently paid \$829,468 in tolls for one crossing. In contrast, when he swam the canal in 1928, American adventurer Richard Halliburton paid just 36 cents.

Today most of the 212 passengers are out on deck of the sleek powered yacht for the celebrations and we stand in awe of the canal’s grandeur and the foresight of those pioneers. Some of our number have come specifically to experience the canal, while others have been drawn by the rest of the route – from Colon in Panama to Puerto Caldera in Costa Rica. The seven-day itinerary offers postcard-worthy islands and quaint riverside towns, all set among magnificent scenery.

John Delaney, the new head of Windstar Cruises, who is on board for the first President’s cruise, says ▶



it's the exciting itineraries and small-ship experience that sets Windstar apart. "We want passengers to feel like this is their own private yacht with all the trimmings," he says.

There's certainly a holiday feel about the all-suite *Star Pride* and it doesn't take long to settle in.

After passing through three canal locks, we cruise around Costa Rica – known as one of the happiest countries on earth, where the average life expectancy is about 79 years. It's a clean green country – for example, its army was disbanded in 1948 with those funds going towards education and health.

POSTCARD FROM PARADISE

Our first stop is the beautiful Isla Parida, one of 50 islands in the Chiriqui Marine National Park. Blue waters, white sandy beaches and swaying palm trees are given a context by a lively Costa Rican band. Lunch is a feast with barbecued fish, beef and chicken, piles of prawns and tropical fruit.

Later, our naturalist Gustava takes us for a vigorous hike to point out local flora and fauna. A swim in the shallows, where the crystal clear water is 27°C year round, is welcome after the trek.

Other highlights include the town of Puerto Jimenez, which is the gateway to waters described as the most biologically diverse marine habitat in the world. We soon discover it's true – the waters off Osa Peninsula are home to audience-loving dolphins, sea turtles and manta rays.

We experience a different side of Costa Rica near the UNESCO-protected Bahía Drake, a small bay on the northern side of the Osa Peninsula. A river excursion takes us to the National Wetland Terraba-Sierpe, 24,000 hectares of virgin mangroves.

Throughout the day, our guide Andreas points out howler monkeys that you hear long before you see, plus exotic birds, turtles, frogs and the alligator-like caimans. His ambition is to find us a sleepy sloth and we scan the riverside foliage before dining at one of the rustic restaurants. Returning along the river, we hear Andreas give a joyful shout, as he points to a sloth doing what they do so well – sleeping.

We get up close and personal with more sloths at Quepos, a small harbour town in the Punta Arenas province where two young women founded the Kids Saving the Rainforest Wildlife Sanctuary in 1999 to educate people around the world about the importance of rainforests.

ALL DECKED OUT

Despite its small-ship status, there are plenty of diverting on-board activities, such as yoga, pilates, dance classes, lectures and cooking demonstrations. A benefit of this style of cruising is how easily you can take a dip in the ocean or head out on kayaks, paddleboards and sailboats from the watersports platform – though I'm a little more inclined to go the pampering route at WindSpa.

While the dining options are not as diverse as a mega cruise, there is plenty to like. Breakfast and lunch

is served in the Veranda restaurant – the freshly baked bread is hard to resist and homemade (or should that be ship-made) ice-cream has a big following. At night, it's transformed into the romantic Candles restaurant with flickering lights, soft music and an excellent menu. A second dinner option is the elegant downstairs restaurant Amphora. Here it's a grand affair with global wine offerings and a menu featuring lobster thermidor.

The weekly open deck barbecue offers up the biggest paella pan I've seen, along with piles of prawns, lobster, salads, plus delicious desserts. Wear your dancing shoes and be prepared to join a conga line that snakes across the dance floor.

The top deck Yacht Club lounge, with its own barista, is a popular haunt for coffee lovers and there's a library for quiet time. Our cabin steward, Juan, ensures nothing is out of place in our comfortable suite with walk-in wardrobe, spacious ensuite and a Juliet balcony. As for that most special moment – it's watching a blood red sunset with Costa Rican Delight in hand as the Windstar flag is raised to the stirring tune of Vangelis's *1942 Conquest of Paradise*. 

LIVE THE ADVENTURE

Clockwise (from top left): There are cultural performances and entertaining activities on board and during shore excursions; disembark from the watersports platform for a dip in the ocean; you can take out a sailboat, paddleboard or kayak; Windstar Island Experiences make every day full of fun.



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WHEN & WHERE

Come find the natural and man-made wonders combined on *Star Pride's* exotic Costa Rica and Panama Canal cruise. Prices for the seven-day voyage start from \$1699 per person/twin share. This includes port changes and taxes. There are departures from December this year until March, 2018, from Colón to Puerto Caldera. For more information and bookings, contact your travel agent, call 1300 749 875 or visit windstarcruises.com.