

49 DeFever RPH *Emma Jo* Transits the Panama Canal

By Jan Pedersen

On Wednesday, November 25, 2009 at approximately 2:00 p.m., we picked up a mooring ball at the Balboa Yacht Club near Panama City, having transited the Panama Canal exactly two years, ten months and four days after leaving south Florida on our way home to the Pacific Northwest. We have a tradition on *Emma Jo* called an “anchor dram,” a small toast to a successful passage – and as we unwound on the aft deck, we celebrated that nobody got hurt, nothing got bent, and *Emma Jo* and her crew performed admirably on this once-in-a-lifetime voyage.

Our crew for the transit consisted of ourselves, Dale and Linda Bixler (DF Cruisers # 556 owners of a 49 RPH [El Capitan](#) in Brownsville, Washington), Kim and John Pulkrabek, (backpackers from Chicago spending several months exploring Central America), Thompson (a professional line handler from Associated Steam Ship Agency who served as “line boss” and trainer), plus our two intrepid feline sailors Barclay and Maggie, who served as observers.



The process of preparing for a transit of the Panama Canal is straightforward, though fraught with opportunities to try your patience and skill.

First, if you’re arriving in either Colon or Balboa, you’ll need officers from Immigration, Customs, and the Health Department to come aboard to inspect and issue clearances that

you then need to take to the Port Captain who will issue a Cruise Permit and Zarpe (a document that spells out your next intended port of call). Each of these authorities will require a payment for their part in the process.

Second, your boat will need to be inspected and admeasured by the Panama Canal Authority (PCA). The admeasurer physically measures your vessel, and using a complex and arcane set of equations, calculates its length based on its volume and cargo capacity – making our 49-ft RPH admeasure out to 51 feet 8 inches for purposes of the Canal, and bumping up our transit fee from \$600 to about \$800. The admeasurer also inspects the lines, cleats, heads, winches, and general transit-worthiness of the boat. He also interviews you about transit preferences – sidewall tie, center tie, nested (rafted to other boats), or tied to a Panama Canal Tug. His inspection and interview results in the issue of an official SIM Number that stays with your boat for its lifetime, and is used any time the boat is in the Canal Zone. The admeasurer's \$50 fee is paid in cash at the Canal Authority's Bank.

Third, you'll need to take all of your approved paperwork and proof of payment to the Canal Authority Office to request a transit date. You'll need to pay for the transit (in our case about \$800) plus an \$850 damage deposit in case your vessel damages the canal (hah) with either with a cash deposit or wire transfer directly to the Canal Authority's bank account.

Once all of the paperwork and payment has been completed, you wait for the Canal Authority to assign you a transit date, which could mean a wait of anywhere between hours, days or weeks. And you need to be ready to transit when they call you, or you risk losing your deposit and paying a delay fee.

OR – you can hire a professional agency to arrange all immigration and cruising permits; collect and file the necessary forms and payments with the Canal Authorities and bank; organize the rental, delivery, and return of special 125-foot, 1-inch Panama lines; provide professional line handlers; and pretty much guarantee a requested transit date – all for a fee in addition to that charged by the Canal Authority. Agency fees depend on who you're using: a taxi driver with "connections" might charge you \$200, whereas a bonded ship's agent might charge \$500 or more.

In addition, your boat will require four line handlers (strong people who can follow directions and keep a boat centered against the incredible forces involved in filling and emptying locks); food, beverage, restroom, and sleeping arrangements for the line handlers and the Advisor; ample fendering against 100-year-old concrete walls and other boats; and reliable engines, steering, and generator. Some pleasure boats opt to supplement their own fenders with plastic-wrapped tires, which can be borrowed or rented at either end of the Canal. With six 10 x 24 fenders and four big ball fenders, we opted against tires, figuring they might be unwieldy if we had to raft up with other boats.

Because we were getting ready to turn the boat over to Dale and Linda Bixler as our first foray into "boat sharing" (subject of another article, no doubt) for the ten weeks of Ole's

contract on Independence of the Seas that was to begin on December 12; and because we are less than fluent enough in Spanish to dance the “paperwork cha-cha” without added stress, we opted to use the services of Associated Steam Ship Agency who handles all of the business for several cruise lines and cargo companies in the Canal. We dealt with two wonderful men there – Alessandro, Vice President of Operations, and Reuben, an agent from Colon. They dealt with all of our questions and needs with charm, alacrity and professionalism and we couldn’t have been happier with them. In addition, we were able to make one payment by credit card for all of the fees required.

We were counting on Ole to captain the boat, me to serve as cook and gopher, and Dale and Linda to handle lines, with two additional line handlers provided by the Agent. As luck would have it, the day before our scheduled transit two remarkable young backpackers from Chicago were walking the docks at Shelter Bay Marina for the second time, looking for a boat they could crew on for the transit. While Linda and I were picking up last minute supplies in Colon, Ole was busy hiring Kim and John Pulkrabek as our third and fourth line handlers. Even though they had youth, strength, and lots of determination to see the Canal firsthand, Kim and John had next to no boating experience, so we opted to have the agent provide just one professional line handler who would be the “line boss” and provide training to all of our line handlers.

Current procedures in the Canal require southbound pleasure boats (transiting from the Atlantic to the Pacific) schedule a two-day transit, locking up the three Gatun Locks in an afternoon or evening, spending the night on Gatun Lake in the dedicated anchorage, then locking down through Pedro Miguel and Miraflores Locks to the Pacific the next morning. Northbound boats are required to make a full transit in one day, departing Balboa early in the morning and arriving in Colon in the evening.

All vessels in the Panama Canal are assigned either a Pilot or an Advisor, responsible for the smooth transit of the vessel through the Canal, maintaining radio contact with the PCA, the locks, and other vessels, as well as directing the maneuvering of the vessel they are aboard. The difference between a Pilot and an Advisor is one of license – a Pilot is a fully qualified ship captain who has full responsibility for the vessel (the only place in the world where this is so); an Advisor is not necessarily a licensed ship captain, but is responsible for making recommendations as to the maneuvering of the vessel. This difference became clear to us in the later half of our transit!

On Tuesday, November 24, the Canal Authority directed us to be at the holding area known as “the Flats” by 2:00 p.m., as our Advisor would board at 5:30 p.m. if not earlier. Once all of our additional lines and line handlers were aboard and fed, we left the dock at Shelter Bay, dropping anchor in The Flats at 1:00 p.m. Captain Ole retired for a pre-transit nap, I monitored the radio, and our crew did a few training sessions with our line boss, Thompson. At about 3:30 p.m., the PCA contacted us to inform us that our Advisor would board at 7:00 p.m., so all of us opted for a nap, knowing it might be a long night. After an early dinner, we were on standby for our Advisor’s arrival, just a bit disappointed that the first half of our transit would take place in the dark of night. Finally,

at 7:35 p.m., the Pilot Boat approached and Ivan, our Advisor, boarded, confirming an appointment at the first Gatun Lock at 9:00 p.m.



As we cruised approximately two miles toward Gatun Locks, the red and green lights marking the channel looked like an airport approach – and we could clearly see the 85-foot uphill climb through the three locks we were about to undertake. Ivan informed us we would be transiting “nested” between two sailing catamarans. Our understanding was that as the center boat, we would be the heaviest, serving as anchor and power plant for the entire raft of boats. We also understood that as the center boat, our Advisor would be making decisions for the entire raft. As we approached the first of the three Gatun Locks, two 41ft French charter sailboats on their way to Tahiti approached us and tied alongside, with fore and aft as well as spring lines. This arrangement seemed like a good idea at the time, in that our line handlers would be free to just enjoy the ride as we locked up. Ivan would advise the entire raft, and Ole would steer Emma Jo on behalf of all three boats. Just as we were about to relax, it all went sideways -- literally.



For some reason, the decision was made that the two catamarans, Monte Verde on the port side and Tcaikovsky on the starboard, would do the steering, while we were to keep Emma Jo in neutral, meaning that four engines, two advisors, and two captains would try to control a raft of three boats, and our advisor and captain as well as line handlers would just be along for the ride. As our raft closed in to within 100 feet of the stern of the Indonesian freighter, Skylark, the whole raft veered to starboard, and the Tcaikovsky's crew were in danger of becoming human fenders as they used arms, legs, and boathooks to keep from being driven into the starboard lock wall. The captain on the Monte Verde overcompensated, his nervousness causing him to surge and back both his engines like a maniac. The Advisors on either side of Emma Jo were barking orders back and forth, both French captains seemed to ignore most of them, and the adrenaline level on Emma Jo increased as the giant lock gates closed and 26 million gallons of water boiled into the lock. At some point, Ivan, our Advisor, asked Ole to power up and try to stabilize the raft, but by that point, we were just two of six competing engines, as neither catamaran seemed to get the message. Luckily none of the three boats was damaged, but as the upward gate opened and we untied from the catamarans, Ivan suggested we transit alone, center tied, for the next two locks. Good decision!



The challenge when locking up is that the Canal line handlers toss monkey fists with heaving lines down to the deck, where our line handlers needed to quickly attach them to our Panama lines so they could be hauled up and secured to the bollards above. Once secured to the bollards at the top of the lock, the lines were controlled through the cleats on the deck of Emma Jo, with each line handler responsible for pulling in the slack and keeping the boat centered as she rose in the lock. With 20 6-foot in diameter valves opening simultaneously in a 110 by 1000 foot lock chamber, approximately 26 million gallons of water fill up each chamber in an average of eight minutes, creating some amazing turbulence and quite some pressure on the line handlers' physical strength. Once the gates were opened and the freighter ahead of us shifted into gear, the challenge of dealing with its turbulence added the need for quick reaction as the Canal line handlers tossed our lines back to us and our deckhands quickly hauled them aboard. The last thing anyone would want to have happen is to get a line fouled in the propellers in the middle of the lock!

We transited the remaining two of the Gatun Locks without incident, and our line handlers and feline observers got a great workout, performing admirably. Ivan guided us to the anchorage, just a half hour outside of the top Gatun Lock, where we opted to drop anchor rather than compete further with the catamarans for the one remaining mooring float. At 11:45 p.m., anchor secure, we partook of our first Canal anchor dram, had a midnight snack, and got all seven of us put to bed (two in the master stateroom, two in the forward stateroom, two on the pull-out sofa in the salon, and one on the pilot berth in

the pilothouse) ready for a 5:00 a.m. wakeup call, 5:30 a.m. breakfast, and 6:00 a.m. arrival of our second advisor.

Wednesday morning, November 25, everyone was excited about the next phase of the adventure – boarding a new advisor and cruising the 15 miles of Gatun Lake. We welcomed our second Advisor, Ray, aboard at 6:30, weighed the anchor, and relaxed as we cruised through this historic Canal. Because we had over five hours until our 12:00 appointment at Pedro Miguel Locks, we were able to relax and enjoy the ride. We had following wind and partly cloudy skies as we wound through the various channels looking for crocodiles, toucans, and howler monkeys. Everyone who wanted to took a turn at the helm, including our Chicago backpackers Kim and John.



Once we got through the Continental Divide it began to rain gently – and we could clearly see how the landslides of Culebra Cut had been such a challenge during construction. The rainwater draining off the sides of the cut was the color of chocolate milk, thick with the dark clay that covers the mountains.

Shortly after noon we entered Pedro Miguel Lock, advised to tie up alongside a large tour boat on our starboard side. The Advisor informed Ole that there was “a bit of a following current” for the “downhill” lockage, and asked that he approach the tour boat Fantasia by pointing Emma Jo’s nose to starboard, and aiming at the tour boat’s midsection to get the forward line across first, then kicking over the stern to attach our line. We had to make more than one attempt to toss the heavy, one-inch stern line across as the following current caught hold and swung our aft end away from Fantasia. There was almost no

turbulence, as the lock is emptied by gravity. Once the 31-foot elevator ride ended a short ten minutes after being secured, our lines were tossed back over to us and quickly hauled in. We then cruised Miraflores Lake about one mile toward our last set of locks.

While waiting for the Fantasia to get secured alongside the lock wall, Ole confirmed the Advisor's instruction to approach Fantasia bow-in, then requested that we approach it parallel owing to the following current. The Advisor reiterated his desire that we approach bow first, and Ole relented. Tying up in the first of Miraflores Locks was a bit more of a struggle, with the downhill flow of water from Pedro Miguel adding to the following current coursing through the locks. Again, we struggled getting the stern line across, but were finally secured. We enjoyed the live web-cam positioned perfectly to catch us on the west side of the lock, and spent ten minutes calling everyone we could think of to see if they could capture an image of us. The tour guide on Fantasia actually included our antics in his commentary, entertaining the cruise ship passengers who chatted with us over the side.



Because filling and emptying all of the locks of the Panama Canal are a function of simple gravity, tying up at the last Miraflores lock was a bit like trying to tie up at the base of an 85-foot waterfall. Again, the Advisor ordered Ole to approach Fantasia bow-in, Ole argued for a parallel approach, but the Advisor became insistent. After three tries at getting our one-inch stern line across once the bowline was secured, our stern was swept out by the current such that we were sitting cross-wise in the lock, thoroughly entertaining the watchers on the tour boat and at the Miraflores Visitors Center. When the

Advisor ordered the bow line let go so we could right ourselves and make another approach, Captain Ole made the decision to take a parallel approach to the tour boat Pacific Queen, just forward of the Fantasia, and we were secured starboard-to in a jiffy.

◀ Welcome ▶ Home ▶ Multimedia

Live Cameras

These live cameras show operations at the Miraflores & Gatun Locks, as well as other points of interest in the Canal.



The last down-lockage seemed to be the fastest, by 1:45 p.m. we were in the Pacific, by 2:15 the Pilot boat arrived to pick up Roy, and by 2:45 we were moored at Balboa Yacht Club.

We were able to modify the US Navy's "Order of the Ditch" certificates, and printed one each for all of our line handlers, then waved goodbye as the Balboa Yacht Club's launch picked up Kim, John, and Thompson from our stern.

We then had a quick anchor dram, took a much needed nap, and in the evening did a full debriefing of our experience. Some things worked very well – some things did not. But like all rich experiences, we learned a great deal. Here are the results of our debrief:

What worked:

1. Having at least one professional line handler to act as trainer/coach for the rest

2. Boating experience of two of our line handlers lent confidence to all of us
3. Steady, rested captain and crew
4. Giving people the space to freak out, get over it, and move on (each of us had our own particular “moment”)
5. Having one person to act as dedicated cook/gopher allowed everyone else to focus on their job
6. Having the cats out of the way
7. Planned menu

What didn't work:

1. Lack of communication and coordination with our rafting partners and their Advisors regarding the uplocking procedure created chaos and potential damage. Having three captains and three Advisors in charge collectively of six engines and twelve deckhands, each doing what he thought best, resulted in a sense of chaos, and put everyone's nerves on high alert.
2. When locking down, approaching bow in to our rafting partner allowed the current to make it difficult to throw the one-inch lines from the stern
3. We expected a meeting or confab with both Advisors about expectations, procedures, etc., but instead, got instructions “on the fly.”

Lessons Learned:

1. Flexibility. Hurry up and wait is the operative phrase when dealing with the Canal Authority.
2. The captain is the captain; the Advisor is the Advisor; the line handlers are the line handlers. As explained before, the Advisor is different than a Pilot, in that he does NOT have ultimate responsibility for the vessel. The Captain of the boat is fully within his rights to argue, and win, any conversations about maneuvering his own boat safely in the locks.
3. Rafting might have worked if all participants spoke English fluently With French and US Captains, Panamanian Advisors, US, French, and Panamanian crews, the potential for misunderstanding was high.
4. When rafting together for a transit, it needs to be clear that the center boat is the anchor boat, providing all powering, maneuvering, and instruction from its

Advisor, with the outside boats providing line handling.

5. Center tie alone was the easiest.
6. Food needs to be plentiful, not fancy. I struggled with a fairly fancy menu, working all day on a spectacular beef bourguignon (which the Panamanians smothered in hot sauce and John picked all the mushrooms out of) and a delicate Mediterranean pasta salad (which the Panamanians smothered in hot sauce and John picked all the veggies out of). If we were to do this again, I'd have a big buffet with bread, cold cuts, fruit, salads and snacks out and available all day and into the evening, with plenty of hot sauce as well as ways for carnivores to avoid having to ingest vegetables against their will.
7. We all agreed it would have been a good idea to crew for somebody else prior to taking our own boat through, to alleviate uncertainty and gain confidence. There are usually boats at either end of the Canal looking for line handlers, but our timing didn't allow us the luxury of waiting for a lift.
8. As long as nothing broke, nobody got hurt, the boat got safely moored, and we're all still friends, it was a successful transit!

In conclusion, we really want to express our heartfelt thanks to all of you who looked for us online, and most especially to Jim Roberts for his amazing patience and skill, capturing pictures of Emma Jo in the locks, as well as his good manners for destroying any screen captures of us sitting sideways! We've posted all of Jim's pictures on the DeFever Cruisers Forum. In addition, Dale and Linda Bixler detailed their experience on their blog, <http://www.elcapitan1.com>

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