

Tips for Paddling Across the Panama Canal in a Canoe

Many canoeists think paddling across the Panama Canal is a piece of cake, but that's just not true. To successfully cross from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic in a canoe requires planning.

First you'll need a laptop with wireless Internet to carry along in your canoe. Why? So you can communicate with the people who run the Panama Canal. You'll need to be in touch with them at least 3 hours before you show up at the Miraflores Locks on the Pacific side of the canal. Send them a short email along the lines of:

"Hi there! I'm paddling a canoe from San Francisco to New York and would like to cross the canal later this morning. Thanks for letting me know what procedures to follow."

Don't be surprised if you receive the following response:

"Senor, it is impossible, completely impossible, for you to cross the Panama Canal in a canoe. Aside from the danger of accidentally bumping into a 50,000 ton ship in one of the locks, the toll for crossing the canal is \$45,000."

Don't let such an email discourage you. Just follow up with a message along the lines of:

"I was so much looking forward to crossing the canal today. I've paddled this canoe several thousand miles down the coast from San Francisco. The toll fee is no problem. I have a credit card on me."

The Panama Canal authorities need your business. And while they might act as if they don't, just continue sending encouraging emails and they'll buckle.

"Senor, you may cross the canal today, but you'll need to pay the \$45,000 in quarters. We now require exact change in quarters to go through our toll booth. A tugboat will come out to meet you to exchange \$45,000 from your credit card for quarters. "

Don't let them do this. The quarters will weigh down your canoe. Say something like:

"I can cross the canal today, but the quarters won't work. You folks don't accept MasterCard?"

"Senor, we have approved your crossing but we must warn you that you will have to wait in line behind a ship from Chile carrying 50,000 tons of fruit to New York."

Answer something like:

"I don't mind waiting behind a vehicle carrying 50,000 tons of fruit. I do it all the time on the Jersey Turnpike."

Don't be surprised if the Panama Canal authorities suddenly change their mind and refuse your passage across the canal. You may get a message saying:

"Senor, it has come to our attention that canoes are prohibited from crossing the canal. Sorry."

This is where you pull out your trump card.

"I appreciate your letting me know. As the grandson of John Stevens, the third American to oversee the construction of the canal, I would find it inconvenient to have to paddle my canoe back to San Francisco."

That statement gets them every time. In case they become obstinate, just add:

"I have the email address of five different reporters from the New York Times on my laptop. How would you like to see the following headline on the front page of tomorrow's New York Times: "Descendant of Panama Canal Builder Refused Passage Across the Canal.""

The Panama Canal authorities adore the New York Times and would feel crushed if the Times had any negative news stories about the canal. It's good to know, too, that sometimes the Panama Canal authorities will gripe about the quantity of fresh water that is needed to raise and lower boats traveling through the locks. They may say something like:

"Senor, I hope you realize that it takes an average of 52 million gallons of fresh water to raise and lower each ship that crosses the canal."

A quick response to this is:

"Yes, I realize it does take a lot of fresh water from Gatun Lake to raise and lower ships. But Panama receives an average of over 60 inches of rainfall a year. This rain water travels down the Chagres River and easily replenishes Gatun Lake. In fact, excessive rainfall was the main problem in building the canal, causing mudslides and increasing the quantity of mosquito-borne disease."

"Senor, we would like to let you cross the canal in your canoe, but we can only let 25 ships a day cross the canal."

"What?! An average of 37 ships a day cross the canal. Almost a million ships have crossed the canal since its opening in 1914. I'm afraid you have your facts wrong."

Then you'll hear the oldest excuse in the book:

"Senor, it has come to our attention that Panama has many crocodiles. It would be too dangerous for you cross the canal in your canoe."

Just reply:

"Hmmm, the crocodiles didn't stop Richard Halliburton from swimming the length of the canal in 1928. I'll take my chances. Besides, I have a repellent spray that works for both mosquitoes and crocodiles. It says right here on the spray bottle, 'If you see mosquitoes or crocodiles hovering around your head, apply spray liberally to arm and neck areas...' Speaking of insecticide, you do realize that one of John Stevens greatest achievements in overseeing construction of the canal was the eradication of the mosquito-borne yellow fever. He did this by ordering 120 tons of insecticide and \$90,000 worth of window screens."

"Senor, it seems as if you know your Panama Canal facts quite well. We are sorry we inconvenienced you and welcome you crossing the canal."

"Not so fast! I have yet to mention that at the height of construction of the canal, 200 train loads a day of earth were removed from the Culebra Cut, the man-made path cutting through the major mountain range in Panama. 200 train loads per day! Can you imagine the magnitude of that operation?"

"Yes, and?"

"And that 50 different companies in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, provided the steel for the construction of the locks on both the Pacific and Atlantic sides of the canal. Those steel mills were humming."

"Okay..."

"And that the entire Panama Canal project came in under budget. The canal was completed for less than the \$325 million that was budgeted for it. And most people don't realize that..."

"Senor, thank you for the facts. Now please cross the canal. Please will you cross the canal and get this over?"

"Yes, I surely will. Thank you for your time and assistance. I'll see you shortly at the Miraflores Locks on the Pacific side of the canal."

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