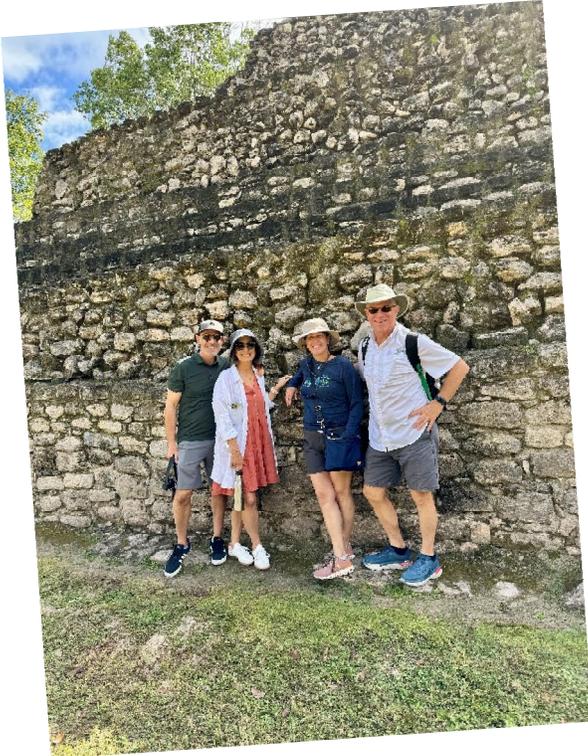


## Central American Travel Journal – Volume 1

Friday, February 16 to Sunday, February 18, 2024

We're off again, this time on a cruise through Central America and the Panama Canal. We're traveling with our friends Leora and Alan Diamond, who live down the street from us. We boarded the Oceania Sirena cruise ship on Friday in Miami, and following a day at sea on Saturday, we were supposed to spend Sunday in Cozumel, Mexico. However, the weather in Cozumel was so windy when we arrived that the ship couldn't dock, so we had another sea day on Sunday. Just what we needed, another day of relaxing.



sun throughout the year and the astronomical positions of Venus during its rotation of the sun atop their pyramids. By the time we returned to town there were four cruise ships dropping off thousands of passengers into a town the size of a Super Walmart, so we couldn't get back to our ship fast enough.

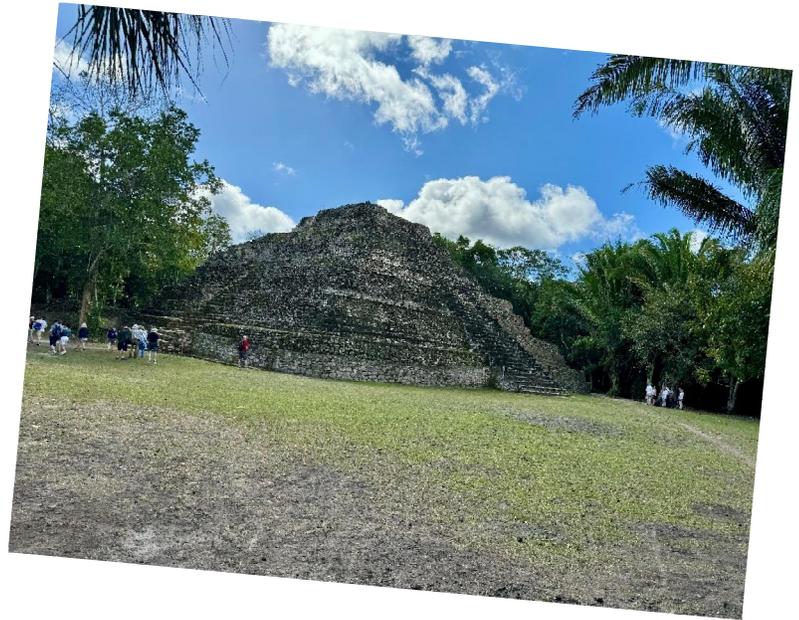
Tuesday, February 20, 2024

Our port today was Harvest Caye, Belize, an NCL-owned island. We got off the fabricated island and



Monday, February 19, 2024

We arrived in Costa Maya, Mexico this morning, a typical cruise-port village but without a Señor Frogs. We drove about an hour out of town and toured the Mayan ruins of Chacchoben, an ancient Mayan city that dates back to about 1,000 BC. We learned about some of the history and culture of the Mayans. Because of the dense jungle, the overgrown site wasn't discovered until the 1940s and more than 50 years passed before excavation was begun. The Mayans helped develop the calendar we use today by observing the positions of the



took a motorboat tour to the mainland to cruise the Monkey River, looking for wildlife in the surrounding rainforest. We also hiked with our guide through the jungle and spotted howler monkeys in the trees while he pointed out plants with medicinal qualities. On the boat ride back to our ship one of the two motors on the boat broke down, which, when combined with rough seas and waves spraying over the sides of the boat, scared the crap out of a few of the people in the boat. They proceeded to don life jackets and pray for survival. The rest of just got soaked.

Wednesday, February 21, 2024

After docking this morning in Santo Tomas, Guatemala, we drove about an hour through valleys and rainforests to the Mayan ruins at Quirigua. We explored the UNESCO World Heritage Site, an archaeological park full of excavated monuments that reflect the civilization that thrived there in the eighth century. Guatemala only gets a few cruise ships per month for a few months of the year, but it was obvious that they're trying to increase tourism in the country. The people were friendly, and we received some Guatemalan handicrafts from the tourist board. The word "Guatemala" means "land with lots of trees" in the language of people that lived there long ago, and it still has a lot of trees and banana plants.

Thursday, February 22, 2024

Today we docked in Roatan, Honduras where we were picked up by a driver in the worst piece of shit car we've ever been in, but not so bad by Honduran standards. He drove us through the town of Roatan to the Roatan Dive Center. They took us to beautiful coral reefs off the coast where Lori, Leora and Alan snorkeled, and I scuba dived. The underwater scenery was spectacular. After lunch we sat at a bar by the port and had the largest frozen tropical drinks in our lives. Tomorrow is a day at sea, so I'll pick up again on Saturday.

Love Lori and Stephen



## Central American Travel Journal – Volume 2

Saturday, February 24, 2024

Another day, another country. Today it's Costa Rica at the port city of Puerto Limon, where we had a whirlwind tour combining history and nature. We learned about Limon's early beginnings with the United Fruit Company, which later became Chiquita Bananas, visited a local banana plantation, took a scenic road trip along the coast, cruised through the Tortuguero Canals to spot sloths in the trees, crocodiles in the water and birds and other wildlife all around. We then went to Playa Bonita (Pretty Beach) for our first lunch of the day consisting of Costa Rican rice and beans made with coconut milk and fried whole red snapper. Upon returning to the ship, we had another lunch, then British-style high tea with even more food, then dinner in the ship's Asian-themed specialty restaurant. Thank



God there isn't a midnight buffet. We may fast tomorrow.

Sunday, February 25, 2024

Today we did what we came here for, to transit through the Panama Canal. The Panama Canal cuts between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, greatly reducing the time it takes for ships to travel between the two oceans. It is one of the largest and most difficult engineering projects ever undertaken and of significant economic and strategic importance. France began work on the canal in 1881 but stopped because of engineering problems and a high worker mortality rate. Estimates are that around 25,000 people died while the French tried building the canal, most from tropical diseases including yellow fever and malaria. The United States took



over the project in 1904 and completed the canal in 1914 after overcoming significant engineering the medical obstacles.

The canal's lock system lifts ships up 87 feet and back down again via man-made lakes and channels to cross mountainous sections of Panama. The passage is 51 miles long and took us about ten hours to cross. Between 13,000 and 14,000 ships use the canal every year. It was very worthwhile to experience.

In 1977, US President Jimmy Carter set in motion the process of transferring control of the canal to Panama for a nominal fee of \$1, passing full control to Panama in 1999. That's just one of several things Carter did during his presidency that prevented him from being re-elected.



We arrived in Panama City on the Pacific coast in the evening and had our last dinner on the ship. The food onboard was terrific, but I'm looking forward to not eating it, if you know what I mean.



district.

During the day our daughter Julia flew in to join us. Leora and Alan are flying home tomorrow and we're traveling on for several more days.

Tuesday, February 27

Today in Panama City UV index was in the red zone, and we took a Maximum UV-exposure tour, also known as a Panama City bike tour. We pedaled all around the city, revisiting some places from yesterday and seeing a lot of new areas. After lunch we shopped for and bought a Panama Hat and some artwork from indigenous Panamanians, all of which was probably made in China.

Tomorrow, we leave Panama City and fly to Cartagena, Colombia for a few days. Until the next journal...

Love Lori and Stephen

Monday, February 26

After disembarking the ship and dropping our luggage at our hotel in Panama City, we walked a few miles along the waterfront. Panama has two seasons, the rainy season and the dry season. Both are HOT, and we were soaked in sweat shortly into the walk. Afterwards, we were picked up by our tour guide, Ernesto, who took us to the Panama Canal Visitor Center to watch an IMAX movie on the history of the canal. It offers viewing stands to watch ships pass through the locks, but having experienced the locks from onboard a ship, we didn't wait around to watch another ship from the sidelines. We then drove out to Veracruz beach for lunch at a fish restaurant where local people eat, then back to Casco Antiguo, also known as Casco Viejo, or the 'old quarter,' Panama City's historic



## Travel Journal – Volume 3 Cartagena, Colombia

Wednesday, February 28, 2024

We left Panama City today and flew one hour to Cartagena, Colombia. Cartagena is on all the lists of the Places to Visit in Your Lifetime, and since we weren't that far away, why not?

Cartagena is one of the major ports on the northern coast of Colombia along the Caribbean Sea. The city's strategic location made it important for trade between Spain and its overseas empire, establishing its importance by the early 1540s. As a former Spanish colony, it was a key port for the export of Bolivian silver to Spain and for the import of enslaved Africans. Today it's a mix of all types of people, most of whom mix in the streets with cars, motorcycles, horse-drawn carriages, street vendors, and construction work. There are no crosswalks, stop signs or traffic lights, and I'm still trying to figure out who has the right of way. It's absolute chaos to the untrained foreigner (me).



Our boutique hotel is a beautifully converted home in the heart of the historic area. Interestingly, our bathroom opens to the outdoors (in a good way), so no matter how much I stink it up, there's always a supply of fresh air blowing in. If it rains, which it does during the eight months of the rainy season, there isn't a need to turn on the shower faucet. After a late lunch, we walked around the area and went to bed at 6:00 pm. Exhaustion is starting to set in.

Thursday, February 29

After a long night sleep we had a private tour of Cartagena, including Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas, the huge Spanish fort that protected the city in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries and whose trumpeter blew Julia away in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We also visited La Popa Convent on top of the mountain overlooking Cartagena, the Walled City of Cartagena (where our hotel is located), and of course, since no tour would be complete without visiting the local

cathedral, Catedral Santa Catalina de Alejandria. After the tour we went to La Serrezuela, a high-end shopping mall built from and incorporating the remains of the old bull-fighting arena. Dinner was at Restaurante Celele, on the list of the Top 50 Restaurants in Latin America. We all agreed it was one of the top five, if not the best meal we've ever eaten, especially @Flight.Attendant.Foodiee Julia.





Friday, March 1

After sleeping in late and skipping the free breakfast at the hotel, we had brunch at a popular café and walked around the hip Getsemani area of Cartagena. We wanted to stop at the supermarket to pick up some Colombian coffee and other items, but upon arriving at the store we couldn't find the entrance. All the signs above the doors read "EXITO." We finally asked the "guard" at the door if we could enter, and he let us in, no problemo. We then realized that the name of the store is EXITO. What a bunch of gringos we are!

In the late afternoon we did a Street Food Tour in Cartagena. We made ten stops at street stalls, push carts and walk-up restaurants to sample some of the foods that the people of Cartagena eat every day and that we would never have found or known about. It was a lot of fun and very filling.

Tomorrow, we conclude our trip and fly home. I hope you enjoyed reading about our travels as much as we enjoyed living them.

Talk to you soon.

Love Lori and Stephen

