

PANAMAX 4

*Panamax: the maximum size ship designed to transit the Panama Canal
...and there were four of us*

April 18, 2007 (Wednesday) The sky was hazy as Alaska flight number eight headed east to Newark. At 35,000 feet nothing was visible below but farmland, flat and grey out to the horizon. We'd left University Place, in Washington State around 6:10 AM (GMT-8). The four of us, our driver and our luggage stuffed into a Lincoln Town Car. Had the air bags deployed we'd likely to have been crushed by our own luggage!

Our 737-800 lifted off from Seattle's SEATAC airport at 09:10. Thanks to Jim's Alaska miles we were flying First Class, again, something we haven't done since our cruise to Mexico in 2003. We arrived in Newark around 17:00 then took the "Supershuttle" to our hotel in midtown Manhattan. The worst Nor'easter in the last 15 years (nearly 10 inches of rain in central park) blew out of town just two days before we arrived.

We managed to land on time but it took over two hours to get to our hotel! The *Wellington* is a somewhat bedraggled 26 story hotel that was probably first class fifty or sixty years ago. But its location on 7th avenue between 54th and 55th streets is great- only one block from *Carnegie Hall* and just south of Central Park. It's close to the theater district, Times Square and 5th Avenue shopping. Streets are crowded with taxis, busses and trucks of all kinds and the sidewalks a moving river of people flowing turbulently along. It's just amazing that folks don't get run over. Just raise a hand and the yellow sharks (the taxis) swarm: a feeding frenzy on wheels. We ate late then walked down to Times Square with its teeming multitudes, neon lights and LED animated buildings.

April 19 (Thursday) Thursday we walked through Central Park to the *American Museum of Natural History*. The museum was wonderful, but is huge so we saw only a small fraction of the displays. Had an early dinner at the *Europa Café*, did some more shopping and then crashed.

April 20 (Friday) On Friday we took an all day comprehensive bus tour of Manhattan. We had a great guide and fearless driver. We drove by many New York landmarks including The Empire State, Flatiron, and Chrysler buildings and financial district. After the tour-provided lunch, we walked over to the *Winter Garden* to view the construction work at *Ground Zero*.

Bussing over to Battery Park, we caught a tour boat that took us under the Brooklyn Bridge and then out to the Statue of Liberty, all the while with great views of Lower Manhattan. Returning to the bus we began our journey uptown following the East River past many blocks of tenement housing, then through better neighborhoods before arriving at the United Nations Complex where we were given a tour by a United Nation (young and beautiful) employee which included visits to the Security Counsel and General Assembly chambers. Re-boarding our bus we crossed over to the West Side at Central Park before proceeding further uptown towards Grants Tomb and St. John the Devine Cathedral- where we stopped and went inside. Even under renovation its stonework exudes beauty and strength. The borough of Harlem seemed older and more worn than other parts of NYC though many of the old town homes and business are of elegant design and construction and well worth renovating. We bought food at a deli across the street and ate in our room. The Gray Line tour was well worth the money (80 dollars or so each).

The city was both more and less than I had expected- a mixture of old and new, affluence and poverty, hope and despair but mostly middle class pride and work ethic. I thought it remarkably clean for its size and surprisingly free of graffiti. Like a living organism the city infrastructure, some of it more than a century old, is in a constant state of repair- yet the city is healthy and robust. City government and employees should be commended.

New York City is certainly a world of its own, so large, comprehensive and socially self-sufficient that inhabitants can be born, grow up and die of old age with out ever setting foot outside its teeming boroughs- the city-state providing education, spouses, jobs, challenges, amusements, hobbies... and lifetimes worth of distractions. More so than other large American cities it's a world unto itself. I think it a great place to visit even for extended periods... but there's a whole other world outside.

April 21 (Saturday) The girls went shopping in the morning and returned just in time for us to check out of the Wellington and catch a taxi to the New York Passenger Terminal where the *M/S Noordam* (all 935 feet of her) was waiting for us. After assembling in a "barn" at the terminal we managed to work our way through security and boarded the newest and most beautiful cruise ship we'd ever been on- all 11 (above the waterline) decks. Our staterooms were immaculate and looked new. The *Noordam's* only been in service for about a year. A small army of workers were constantly cleaning and polishing all over the ship. It even smells new.

The weather was perfect as we pulled out. The Coast Guard escorted us nearly to the *Verazano Narrows Bridge*. Passing under the span in early evening- we headed out into the Atlantic.

April 23, (Monday) Our second full day at sea: we'd been moving south, out of sight of land since Saturday evening, crossing the Gulf Stream Sunday noonish. It was warmer now with just a few cumulous clouds- newborn and

widely spaced. This morning Jim and I worked out in the gym for a half hour or so using their diabolical machines- so sophisticated that can torture individual muscle groups. I left a little sore but impressed. Picking up the girls we headed out for our morning walk on the Promenade deck- three laps to the mile. Laveta, Jim and Carol abandoned me after five laps and headed off to breakfast. I managed another five laps on my own. The starboard half of the lap was warm and sunny, the port side cooler in the shade.

It's easy to overeat on cruise ships, the food is just so good (and you've already paid for it). It's also easy to lie around and read, watch the ocean go by, or take a nap (before the next meal). Of course there are stage shows, games and a host of other entertainment- including a casino, every day. The crew is friendly and attentive. Actually, I've never been waited on with such fervor, neither on another cruise ship or hotel. Now I know how slave owners felt.

April 24 (Tuesday) The alarm clock jangled me awake at 5:30 and I woke up sensing reduced speed. After some coffee I went out on deck to see *Half Moon Cay* about a thousand yards off our bow. I could just make out a few other islands beyond. *Half Moon Cay* is a coral island. I guess you could call it an Atoll since it has a small lagoon. Highest elevation is maybe 60-70 feet. It's small, about 2 x 5 miles with a large crescent bay and it's located about 160 miles east of Florida. Its part of the Bahamas and is owned by Holland America.

We boarded a tender at 08:00 and motored over. There's not much on the island, maybe a half mile of paved road, a very small church, a post office and souvenir shop. There were no tall trees but the island's covered with small trees, shrubs and grass. We saw lizards, snails and a great many birds. About a dozen of us went off on a guided nature walk that lasted about an hour and a half. The island wasn't much, but it did have one of the best beaches I've ever seen, composed of very fine coral sand. We weren't interested in sunbathing so we returned to the *Noordam* in time for lunch.

Laveta and Carol spent the afternoon reading on the Promenade Deck lounge chairs. Weather was sunny, about 80 degrees F. with a light breeze out of the south east.

April 25 (Wednesday) I woke up early, 05:30 ships time. At 06:00 Ft. Lauderdale announced its arrival with lights on the horizon- which transformed slowly into a skyline of tall buildings. Docking at *Port Everglades* we waited until US Customs called our deck numbers and checked our passports.

Disembarking into busses, our group headed to the "airboat ride" which turned out to be about 40 minutes west of the Port Everglades. The airboats were dual Cadillac-V8 powered machines with two props and 600 total horsepower! It was a strange sensation gliding over the Saw-grass. Our wingless planes took us far enough into the 'glades to appreciate the difficulty of living there... and we did spot a gator!

After the boat ride there was the obligatory gift shop and a wildlife exhibition of sorts. The "Gator" talk and the alligators themselves were more interesting than I'd expected. Jim and I got photos of Laveta and Carol holding a two and a half foot long gator- with its mouth tapped shut. We re-embarked about 2:00 PM. The Noordam pulled out of Port Everglades near sunset, heading easterly at first before bending nearly due south across the Florida Strait.

April 26 (Thursday) Sometime in the early morning hours the Noordam turned eastward. Getting up at first light and looking out of our window I could see some Cuban barrier islands hazily gliding past in the distance. The sky was intermediate between clear and cloudy (due to humidity). It was also a warm morning- 76 deg. F, with sea running about 8-10 ft. All day we ran 20 knots or so east-southeast paralleling the Cuban coast. At 14:00 we went to a "wine tasting" in the "Vista" dining room, and almost needed a wheelchair to get Laveta back to our stateroom.

After dinner we took a turn on deck. The mountains of Cuba materialized out of water saturated air, as did a few towns. The mountains tapered slowly to lowlands as we sailed eastwards. Later that night around 11:00 PM Laveta noticed a blinking light outside our stateroom (starboard) window. It was very bright, blinking at five second intervals.

From our relative motion I guessed it about five or six miles distant. Since we were moving south through the *Windward Passage* between Cuba and *Haiti*, the lighthouse was likely near *Malsi*, Cuba's easternmost point: A little later Noordam jogged slightly west to avoid Haiti (a very good idea) and then due south (along 75° west longitude) passing *Jamaica* to starboard. Since departing New York we've sailed over 1900 miles.

April 27 (Friday) Did nothing all day!

April 28 (Saturday) The seventh day of our voyage: At 06:00 the coastline of Columbia slipped past our windows along with the pilot boat. The retreating darkness revealed the skyline of *Cartagena*- tall buildings seemingly rooted in the sea. We disembarked into 40 or 50 waiting busses- ours headed for *Castillo San Felipe de Barajas*, the great fort built in 1657. After a tour of the fortifications we headed over to the "old town" section of the city where the closed to traffic streets were lined with beautiful colonial homes adorned with flowering balconies. Beautiful! We came to the entrance of the *Palacio de la Inquisition* (Perhaps there are graduates of this institution in the Bush administration). The tree filled *Plaza Bolivar* with its beautiful bronze of the *Presidente* on his war horse was filled with locals escaping the heat.

I don't know which was numerically higher, the heat or the humidity. It reminded me of a quote from Lawrence of Arabia's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, when he first stepped onto the shore of (now) Saudi Arabia- "the heat of Arabia came out like a drawn sword and struck us speechless." Now I understand..

The National Museum, convent and church of *Pedro Claver* was a beautiful quiet spot that contained the remains of the saint who lived to over 70 years in this climate! Seeing the small chapel with its eye-popping two story gold leaf altar was worth the stifling atmosphere. Afterwards we walked to the church of *Santo Domingo* and admired its beautiful dome.

Cartagena from a distance looks like a modern American or European city but up close it reveals a sad state of repair and a great deal of third world poverty. As tourists we were assaulted by waves of street vendors and beggars pretty much the whole time we were in town- probably because a docked cruise ship is pretty obvious. The city is beautifully located- really a group of islands nestled in a well protected bay. Cartagena's harbor is modern and efficient looking. Finally, the city seems new to cruise ship tourism- where nearly a couple of thousand tourists can be dropped off at once. Still, it was an interesting port of call and with better organized tours it could become a popular destination.

April 29th (Sunday) Laveta and I got up at 05:15 and went forward as the night was fading into morning. Jim and a sleepy Carol joined us on deck. The lights of *Colon* and from the many ships queued up for the canal reflected in *Limon Bay*. Daylight arrived with our pilot- then the *Noordam* aligned herself with the channel beacons (Although lighted buoys, they resembled runway markers). We saw three vertically oriented green control lights at the head of the first lock. With a tug in waiting, the *Noordam*'s 106 foot beam slowly approached the first of *Gatun*'s 32.3 meter (110 foot) wide locks. New to the canal, this was her first time but she fit... just barely! We tethered up to the lock's stainless steel *mules* (small cog locomotives) for our passage through the two Caribbean (Atlantic) side locks. In the process we were raised 26 meters onto *Gatun Lake* for our fresh water journey across the isthmus. As we were traversing east to west, we traveled due south across the width of Panama. (A west to

east traverse requires a northward heading- it's true, check a map!

Proceeding down the lake was more like going up-river, sometimes a couple of kilometers, sometimes 20 meters from shore. The jungle is beautiful, thick and the *Noordam* so quiet (at these speeds) we could hear birds. From time to time we'd encountered an oncoming container ship in a narrow part of the lake- leaving little room for passing. We were outside, forward and just above the navigation deck as the *Noordam* entered the *Miraflores* locks. We could see into the *Noordam*'s starboard flying bridge that juts sideways out from the ship, providing the helmsman better visibility. Inside, the captain was observing (pacing up and down) while the Panamanian pilot directed things on a hand held radio. The whole canal operation was complex but smoothly conducted by the Panamanians- the equipment, grounds and supporting infrastructure seemed well maintained. Of course, for the price they charge (two hundred thousand US dollars, for the *Noordam*'s passage) they can afford good maintenance.

Departing the last lock, we entered the salt water of the Pacific Ocean and then at *Balboa*, we passed under the high and graceful arch of the *Bridge of the Americas*. On our port side *Panama City* came into view and from our perspective on the *Noordam* it looked to be a large modern city in a beautiful setting. Gathering speed, we headed out on a still southerly course for some hours before gradually turning westward and finally northwest paralleling the Pacific coast of Central America.

April 30th (Monday) Jim and I got up early and worked out on the weight machines in the gym then came back to our staterooms, picked up the girls and did a quick five laps on the Promenade deck. After lunch (which came after breakfast) Laveta and I went forward for a look-see. There we saw about twenty sea birds riding the *Noordam*'s compression wave. They resembled frigate birds but were smaller than the one's we'd seen in 2003 off of *Tabuaeran Island* ~ two thousand kilometers south of Ha-

waii) and they lacked forked tails- (I'll have to look them up when we get home). The Noor-dam flock was indeed skilled in using our ships energy. Hardly moving their wings, they'd glide down our moving bow wave, scanning the ocean for fish. In so doing, they're actually stealing a very small amount of our energy. In affect they're being powered from the energy in our fuel oil, produced hundreds of millions of years ago from dead plants and animals- converted into kinetic energy by our marine diesels, drive shafts and screws (all paid for by the passengers). So as a result of a strangely wonderful chain of dependencies in time and space- these birds have become temporary parasites of our ship... beautiful, graceful parasites.

In late afternoon the captain plotted a "U" shaped course rimming *Golfo Dulce*, the southward facing gulf nestled between the *Osa Peninsula* and Costa Rica's South Pacific coast. Its warm blue waters are surrounded by cliffs and rain forests. Sunset in the gulf occurred during one of our "formal nights" while we were dining. Small dolphins were jumping amidships- and as we exited the gulf, we could see through our dining room "picture window" the sun setting over the very tip of the peninsula.

May 1st (Tuesday) Daybreak found us docking at *Puntarenas, Costa Rica*- a small country between Panama and Nicaragua- with an area of about 20,000 square miles and a population of about four and a half million. It has a 93% literacy rate, 75 year average life span, low infant mortality (8 per 1000), public education through high school (assisted loans for college) universal health care and *no military of any kind!* When I later pointed out to our tour guide that the absence of an army left the country vulnerable to unscrupulous neighbors (I was thinking of 1980's Nicaragua) he replied that they would rather spend the money on their citizens than on arms. "Education was their army" he said, "and "teachers their solders"! My first thought was that such idealism was misplaced and even foolish- but now I'm not so sure. While America does have responsibilities in the world of nations and must bear burdens

that small countries can't... I think we could learn a few things from Costa Rica.

At 08:00, our tour guide (who had lived and worked in the states for a number of years) met us at the dock. We then boarded Mercedes Benz busses for our excursion to *Poas Volcano National Park*. The drive, which was partly on the Pan American Highway, took a good two and a half hours. The road gained altitude quickly, then passed northward through the Great Central Valley where most "Ticos" (as they call themselves) live. Our route did take us through towns, but bypassed the capital of *San Jose*.

Climbing steeply out of the Great Central Valley, the road wound through sugar-cane and coffee plantations, Cashew orchards, and dairy farms. Near the park entrance we left the buses and walked an easy half mile through *Cloud Forest* to the volcano's crater rim at about 9000 feet. We had lots of company. It was Mayday, a national holiday, so the mixed crowd of tourists and locals walked together up the paved (but closed to traffic) road. The crater rim turned out to be a demarcation line between clear sky and cloud. But after fifteen minutes or so the wind alternately revealed then obscured the mile wide- thousand foot deep crater. Besides seeing the steaming yellow sulfurous vents in action- we could also from time to time- smell them. On the walk back to the park headquarters and gift shop, we checked out the flora and fauna of the Cloud Forest, which I thought more interesting than the cloud shrouded caldera.

On the return bus ride, we were held up at a highway bridge by a minor traffic accident. The two drivers would not move their cars off the roadway until the traffic police arrived. After about fifteen minutes a police car did arrive- but it was normal police not the traffic police- so traffic kept backing up- while we imagined our ship leaving port without us. Finally the "correct police" arrived and we got moving again. Thirty minutes later our bus had a problem with its air suspension, resulting in our driver disappearing under the rear of the bus for maybe twenty minutes or so- though it seemed

longer. We continued our drive back to Puntarenas through heavy traffic- arriving an hour and 45 minutes late but just in time for dinner aboard.

Costa Rica is a monetarily poor country and there was poverty, lots of it- although nothing like we'd seen in Cartagena (or in Mexico a few miles out of Puerto Vallarta). I found this egalitarian little country to be reasonably clean with minimal graffiti (at least by Third World standards). We saw no beggars or hustlers. The "Ticos" we did meet seemed healthy, friendly and their children happy and well kept. And though we had minimal contact, the folks we met spoke adequate English- probably because learning it is mandatory in school starting in the first grade. In order to preserve its stunning biodiversity, the country has set aside around one fourth of its land area off limits to construction or resource extraction- an extraordinary percentage! This seemed to me to be a small country with some big ideas. I very much enjoyed the visit and wish we could have stayed in port another day or two.

May 3rd (Thursday) We awoke as *Puerto Quetzal* slowly drifted into view. So- it's Thursday, we must be in *Guatemala*. We'd wanted to take the excursion to *Antigua* but it filled up early- so we settled for some local shopping- a buss taking us out and back. Actually the shopping turned out to be quite good. The local handicrafts were artistic, of good quality and the prices negotiable. The local beer was great. Laveta and I bought some shirts.

There are rules that forbid bringing hard liquor aboard cruise ships, the cruise lines wanting to sell it to you on board at a premium! Nevertheless I came across a stall that sold hard liquor, so I purchased a 375 ml. bottle of *Balantine* Scotch for eight dollars and used it to fill Jim's empty plastic water bottle... which I sneaked back onboard. My breathing quickened as I waited in line at the ship, I.D. in hand for scanning. Laying my camera and water bottle on the x ray machine, I walked nonchalantly through the metal detector. The security

officer even smiled as I walked past. Later that afternoon sipping some in our stateroom, I marveled at how much better it tasted having been smuggled aboard! Guess I must have a dark side.

May 4th (Friday) The morning began with whale watching. "Grey Whales" first as I walked past the indoor pool... old and flabby whales at that. Moving among them, I averted eye contact while mumbling "Good Morning" to the floor. After working out on the weight machines and doing a few laps around the ship I noticed two Whales (marine mammal types this time) blowing, although I couldn't see their bodies. After breakfast, while doing still more laps, Jim and I (and later the girls) were rewarded with some great Dolphin antics. Over a period of at least thirty minutes Dolphins leapt, spun, flipped and slapped their tails, singly and in groups. The display pretty much stopped the Promenade Deck-walkers, and brought them to the railing for a standing ovation.

At twelve noon the *Noordam* pulled into the seaside resort town of *Santa Cruz (Huatulco)* in the Mexican state of *Oaxaca*. There were a number of new resorts located in the cliffs above the beautiful, rocky bay. The stretches of sand below are covered with beach umbrellas and filled with sunbathers drinking *Coronas*. The five hour stopover was mainly for shopping, so we stayed aboard. We're docked close to shore in a central location- so walking around the ship allowed us to see pretty much everything going on. But the main attraction here was the Pelicans, probably forty to fifty of them repeatedly diving for fish near our ship. Jim pointed out the "bait ball" of small fish appearing as a moving dark patch in the water. The action was fast but I managed a few acceptable photos.

May 5th (Saturday) The *Noordam* docked in *Acapulco* at 07:30. Our excursion today was of the city itself and the famous cliff divers and the dives were the most interesting thing on our excursion. The cliffs *are* beautifully located. Actually, *Acapulco* is beautifully located too- a

world class location in a world class harbor. Back in the 50's, 60's and 70's, this was *the place* for the rich and famous, but the city (even with new construction) seems to me-long past its prime. As with other Mexican cities and towns there's lots of poverty, lots of trash, lots of squalor (except for the clean beaches). There are some very upscale areas south of town (e.g. the diamond district) with its gated communities, fences, armed guards and helicopter landing pads. But it's the juxtaposition of poverty and wealth that is so... so Mexican.

It seems (at least on Mexico's West Coast) that Jet Setters keep finding new hot vacation spots- like Cabo or Huatulco. What foreigners seem to crave most in a vacation destination is quaintness, a condition (somewhat akin to virginity) that's difficult to maintain into old age.

The four of us went up on deck to view our departure. Hawsers were cast off bollards and quickly reeled onboard. And for a long moment the Noordam lingered close to the pier, as if reluctant to leave. Then the ship's thrusters shoved us gently away and the main screws pulled us backwards into Acapulco bay. As the sun sank behind the hills, lights of the surrounding city began to appear, and the Noordam, clear now of all obstacles, spun 180 ° on her 935 foot axis. She seemed to dance in the bay as if celebrating the departing sun or perhaps paying homage to a city now filling with sparkling lights. In the time we were on deck, the hot air of the day had cooled into delightful perfection... Perhaps I'd misjudged Acapulco.

Three long blasts of our horn announced our departure- then speed building slowly- the Noordam headed into the darkening Pacific.

May 6th (Sunday) Yet another day at sea. I got up later than usual, slipped out of bed and went up to the Vista Lounge and grabbed up a cup of coffee. Sipping it slowly while leaning on the Promenade deck railing I surveyed both sea and sky- and felt the wind in the hairs on the back of my arms. The air smelled of salt and new paint. It was noticeably cooler this morning- around 75 °F with high, thin wispy

clouds. Yes, another day at sea- where it's very easy to fall into routine. The sun, moon, sky and sea (and most importantly the ship) have their own rhythms and after awhile you tend unconsciously to sync with them. Like two people walking together- its difficult *not* to keep in step.

May 7th (Monday) Sudoku. Blame it on Carol. It took me an hour to do a five minute puzzle. We arrived in *Cabo San Lucas* at 08.00 in beautiful clear 72 °F weather. The four of had been in "Cabo" back in '2001 (and since day trips to town are mostly for shopping) we elected to stay aboard. Camping out at a table in the Lido restaurant, we ate lunch, drank wine and goofed around (doing Sudoku stuff). The view of *Land Os End* out of the 9th deck's full height windows was absolutely outstanding- the best view in the *Sea of Cortez*. Actually the view is great because our anchorage is right in the center of things. Of course we're not really anchored. The thrusters controlled by the ships GPS keep us on station. Today was a very laid back day. The Noordam pulled out for Los Angeles around 16:00 ships time.

May 8th (Tuesday) I woke up early to a dark and foggy sea, the outside air temperature 58 °F. Going up to the Lido deck I got some coffee then went outside and walked around the Promenade Deck for about 45minutes. At first it was very foggy and the Noordam's fog horn was sounding about once a minute. As the sun rose the mists slowly cleared to reveal a mirror like sea- through which we moved at 22 knots in effortless silence. The windless sea continued for the next three hours. Off and on we'd check the sea for whales but didn't see any. Did nothing but read all day.

May 9th (Wednesday) Laveta woke me at 5:15 with exclamations about blinking lights and flares. Peeking out our stateroom window I saw an oil platform passing to starboard. At 07:00 we docked in *Long Beach* California right next to the *Queen Mary*. The flagships of two eras "parked" right next to each other! At

about 10:00 we took a bus tour to the *Getty Museum*. It was certainly a beautiful facility. Gaud knows what the buildings and grounds cost, never mind the art! We only had about two and a half hours and though we did see some neat stuff- we'd only skimmed the surface.

The tour bus dropped us off for an hour on *Rodeo Drive* in *Beverly Hills*. The stores were more than a little expensive, but there were lots of nice young bodies and fast cars to gawk at- I saw three Porsche Carrera's. The last time Laveta and I were in this part of Los Angeles was when we lived in Ontario (I was working in Pomona) back in '65 and we rode my motorcycle around LA (our leather and lace phase). It's weird how seeing street names of *Sepulveda*, *Wilshire*, *Artesia*, *Rosecrans* - can jog memories and feelings even after so many years. Yes- there was a time when Southern California was home... but it was long ago and far away. We arrived back at the Noordam at 16:15, leaving port on a northerly heading at 19:00.

May 10th – 11th (Thursday - Friday) Under mostly partly cloudy skies and lower 50 degree temperatures we sailed northwards against the *California Current* and Force-8 (gale force) winds. Seas were moderate- swells approximately 6 feet with the wind stripping some of the tops off. Heading into the wind, the Noordam doesn't alter her 22 knot speed at all. I could sense only the slightly increased vibration of the engines working just a little bit harder. But with five marine diesels (plus one emergency gas turbine) generating up to 26,000 horsepower – she's not straining.

May 12th (Saturday) We arrived in Vancouver BC around 07:30. Some high clouds but nice weather otherwise. Since we've been to Vancouver multiple times before, we elected to skip the tour. We still had to go through US Customs though, and it was strange- doing it in another country! We left the boat went into Canada, saw US Department of Homeland Security officials then walked back onboard the

Noordam. We were told we wouldn't have to go through security again in Seattle. Maybe we're outsourcing customs inspection to Canada! Maybe the Bush Administration is trying to confuse terrorists. Anyway the Vancouver was beautiful as always- with snow showing on the higher surrounding peaks.

May 13th (Sunday) 7200 or so nautical miles had passed beneath the Noordam's hull by the time we docked in Seattle. We tied up at Pier Thirty, south of downtown and left our floating home for the final time around 09:30. A 40 mile van ride under cool and cloudy skies ended the trip.

New York seems well in the past now, as do the jungles of Panama, the cloud forest of Costa Rica, the streets of Cartagena and all of the other things we saw and felt and did. It was a great trip, altering our perspective on the world a little- one of the wonderful gifts that travel confers upon willing adventurers. Like nearly all voyages of personal discovery- we'd traveled outward and around to see and experience... ending up personally changed for the better, with a new appreciation of home. We had a wonderful time.

But it is good to be home!

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