

WRITING YOUR LIFE DAY FIVE

A BUCKET LIST TRIP – SENSE OF TOUCH

As a child, one of the stories I enjoyed hearing the most, was that of the man who returned from Panama with his big gold watch, attached to his waist by a chain, thereby hitting him on his rear with every stride. The story was in the form of a song, and held the man up to ridicule, viewing his action as a boastful display of the fact that he had gone to Panama, and had returned a wealthy man.

Many years later, I ponder to myself, could the feel of the watch with each stride not serve as a constant reminder to the man that he was numbered among the lucky ones who returned to enjoy the fruits of his labour?

Many Jamaicans had migrated to Panama in the 1800s to work on the railway in the first wave and subsequently to work on the Panama Canal. Some returned home, some settled in Panama, and some were never heard of or from, again. One of my father's relatives had also gone to Panama, and was never heard of again.

The Panama Canal was one of the most difficult engineering projects ever undertaken, started by the French and finished by the Americans, over a period of several years. There was a high worker mortality rate.

Not too long ago, I was thrilled when my sister Mary and I booked a Central American cruise on the Holland America Cruise Line, on the ship, Zuiderdam. The itinerary listed the Panama Canal as one of the destinations and we looked forward to this experience with great excitement.

The Panama Canal is an artificial waterway, now 82 kilometers long, that cuts across the Isthmus of Panama, divides North and South America, and connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. It is a conduit for maritime trade and not only provides a faster route, but allows ships the option of avoiding the longer, more hazardous Cape Horn route around the southernmost tip of South America.

On the appointed day, we were up very early and took our front row seats at the bow, to witness this once in our lifetime event.

I remember watching the sun rise, feeling very cold and nipping back to my cabin to grab a cardigan. A member of the crew narrated what was about to happen. The ship was about to enter the canal which would lock at either end, and the water would rise, lifting the ship up to the artificial Gatun Lake, which was above sea level. The ship would then manoeuvre through the very narrow canal to the opposite end and the water would gradually lower, sufficient to lower the ship back to sea level, after which the gates would open. Strangely enough, we did not feel the ship rising or descending, as one would expect, but instead witnessed the administration buildings, which were level with the ship when we entered the canal, slowly diminish and get lower and lower, and lower.

Positioning the ship, waiting our turn, and crossing took a few hours after which we arrived on the Pacific side of Panama. By then the heat started to build up, and after disembarking passengers hurried to connect with their tour group. We had selected the tour which would take us through New Panama City to old Panama City.

The Tour Guide was very knowledgeable and gave us a history lesson on the building of the Panama Canal and the pride Panamanians felt to now be fully responsible for the Canal and of the widening of the canal, a massive and challenging undertaking that was then underway. The guide pointed out the slums, the farmlands, an area where Jamaicans had settled from the days of building the Canal, and remain up until the present time. She acknowledged the contribution of Jamaicans in building the infrastructure of Panama.

Words of the song about the man who had returned from Panama with his gold watch came to memory, and my sister and I wondered if the remains of our family were in Panama in the area identified. We experienced a wave of sadness.

We arrived in Old Panama, and by then, the heat became almost intolerable.

My focus started to shift to the next port of call, Cartagena, Colombia, and another item on my bucket list, a visit to the Government run Emerald Facility.