

# Up the River in Panamá...Rio Chagres

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

The Rio Chagres, one of Panamá's nearly 500 rivers, is part of Panamá's extensive national park system and is located only about 8 miles west of Colón. In 1912, the Chagres was dammed to form Gatún Lake, part of the Panama Canal transit route, and now only about 5½ miles of the river is navigable. We hadn't planned to stop at all, but German cruising friends insisted the river was worth a few days and we have to admit they were decidedly right in their assessment. The Rio Chagres is beautiful!



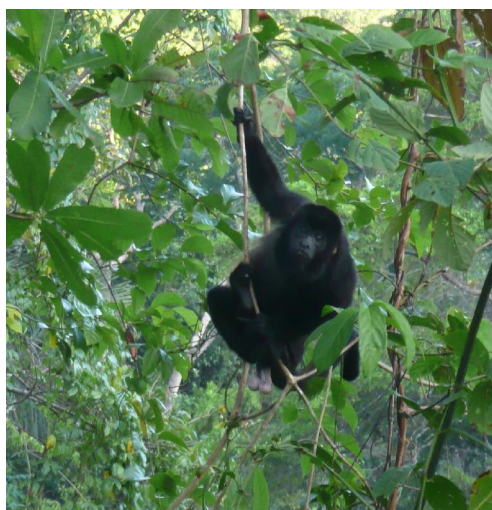
*View of Rio Chagres from Castillo de San Lorenzo*

Sitting high on a ragged bluff, a fort, Castillo de San Lorenzo, guards the river's entrance and provides a good landmark for negotiating a route between a reef and a sand spit which also mark the entry. Once past the initial hazards, the river is deep, wide and offers lots to explore. Zydler's "Panama Guide" provides chartlets for the river that were more than adequate. We anchored at the "third bend" and though we discovered later that there were six other boats in the river, we felt completely and pleasantly alone.

The trip up the river was a delight to the senses. It was calm and smooth, nary a ripple on the surface other than the wake made by the boat. We ate dinner each night in the cockpit and tried to identify all the sounds we heard... chirp, peep, flutter, ker-plonk, buzz, hum, squawk, whoosh, howl, screech, roar, tweet, ping, rustle-rustle, hoot. I'm sure we missed a few, but the jungle symphony was in high form and we were

enthralled. We distractedly hummed "Whim-o-way" until we drove each other crazy.

It rains nearly every day during the rainy season (summer months), but it's usually only a shower, a welcome addition to the water tanks and a pleasant respite from the heat. The roar of the howler monkeys was exceptionally loud right after the showers and we likened it to the sounds of boys in the locker room after a tough game.



*Troops of howler monkeys swung from trees and sounded more like lions than monkeys.*

The smell of wet leaves is pungent and familiar with a whiff of some sweet, spicy blossom drifting by every once in awhile. Despite the jungle noises, it is very quiet here. The buzz of the cicadas becomes white noise and unnoticeable after awhile. We spoke softly as it seemed that raising our voices would almost be a sacrilege. Jelly was on all-sense cat alert, perched on the top of the dodger, eyes wide, always on the lookout for caimans, bats, low flying, non-cat eating birds or maybe a small moth or fly.

The river is green, as is the dense wall of vegetation along its sides, but the greens are distinctly different. In fact, the number of shades, hues and shadows of the color green defy description. The water is sweet and fresh and it was the first time "Nine of Cups" had had a fresh-water bottom wash since last November's haul

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out! Though not for drinking, we used the water to bathe, as well as wash dishes and laundry. We took daily dips in the cool refreshing water, being ever vigilant for the alleged caimans, but we never saw any. We never let go of the tether line to the boat as there's a 1.5 knot current. Watching the water whoosh by the dinghy, confirmed the current's firm tug toward the sea.



*The Gatun Dam controls the flow of water on the Rio Chagres and the water level.*

We traveled up river in the dinghy for a close-up view of the huge Gatun Dam, one of the largest earthen dams in the world. We stayed close to the river's edge on the look out for jungle flora and fauna. We saw kingfishers, egrets and herons watching for a dinner opportunity. Kites, pelicans and great frigate birds circled overhead. Pairs of bright green parrots and lorokeets squawked their way across the river in their awkward, frenetic way. Brightly colored flowers were profuse and fragrant, providing a keen contrast to the lush green foliage. Butterflies and dragonflies were so abundant, it boggled the mind.

Not far from the dam we spotted a small dock and tied up. We followed a soggy path up moss-covered stone steps to another somewhat overgrown path that led further into the jungle. After a close encounter with a spider the size of a Buick, we retreated to the dinghy at my urging, with the excuse we were not dressed for jungle safari.

There are several tributaries to explore and we tried the Rio Indio, which nicely accommodated the dink. It meandered its way for a couple of miles back into the jungle area. The mud brown water appeared thick and dense. Delicate orchids dangled from the trees and long monkey vines conjured up Tarzan images. We never did see any caimans, but the highlight of the trip was the appearance of white-faced monkeys... a whole family of them including a mama with babe in arms. They went chattering through the canopy of trees, swinging from one branch to the next, oblivious to us... obviously on a mission to get somewhere in a hurry!



*Though dilapidated, the fort made for good exploring and great photos of the river.*

We spent one afternoon visiting the fort, which is easily accessible from a sturdy wharf. There's a well-maintained dirt road from the dock all the way up to the fort. Though quite dilapidated, you can wander around the ramparts and check out some of the smaller structures. Several rusted canons are still in place and the sentry boxes are intact. A caretaker is in residence at a small house nearby and sells fresh coconuts. The view of the sea and the river are fantastic and well worth the hike.

We went to the Rio Chagres planning to spend a night; we stayed a week and could have stayed a month. We can't imagine a better "remote" jungle

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adventure so close to civilization.



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