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FLORIDA



The liftoff of a space shuttle is an awe-inspiring event and can be seen from several places in the coastal Central Florida area. NASA

CRUISES

Expanding in all directions

Tourism boom likely with Panama Canal project

By SHANNON MELNYK
Special Contributor

PANAMA CITY, Panama — It's a new day in Central America. The \$5.5 billion expansion of the hydraulic eighth wonder of the world, the Panama Canal, is expected to have a major impact on global trade in what has steadily become a bustling business hub of the Americas.

Widening and deepening the passage will make room for a new generation of monster ships carrying anything from humans to a million barrels of oil, shaving weeks off of current transport times and reshaping trade patterns throughout the world.

It also is expected to offer travelers new horizons to explore.

Fittingly, "Panama" — loosely translated from an indigenous dialect — means abundance. With the entrepreneurial enthusiasm of the former Walmart employee and new Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli, the new government plans to live up to the nation's name by profiting from world business with the birth of the bigger, better canal. In what may be a metaphorical baby shower, it's also injecting undisclosed millions into welcoming the world.

With sights set on giving neighboring Costa Rica a run for its tourism dollars, Panama is gearing up to become both a cosmopolitan and resort destination, luring tourists with its spectacular Old World

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STEVE MACNALLU/
Special Contributor

Danish cargo ship Olivia Maersk squeezes through a lock in the Panama Canal, which is being widened and deepened.

Catch the last shuttle

Only 5 launches are left in the 30-year-old program

By DAVID A. KELLY
Special Contributor

KENNEDY SPACE CENTER, Fla. — This year begins a new decade, but it also will see the end of the United States' trailblazing approach to manned space flight: the space shuttle program.

"In just five more flights, a chapter of history will be forever closed," says Mike Mullane, a three-time NASA space shuttle astronaut and author of *Riding Rockets*. "It will be decades — perhaps generations — before humans will again see a winged vehicle launch into space and glide back to a runway landing."

Under current plans, NASA's shuttle fleet will be retired by fall 2010. After that, there will be no more shuttle launches. But until then, travelers to Florida still have time to catch a launch.

"Watching a space shuttle launch is a dream come true for a lot of people," said Andrea Farmer, public relations manager at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex. "It's so powerful and amazing to see this colossal machine lift off into space. All of your senses are impacted by the launch: You see the shuttle launching, you hear the engines roar and you feel the ground rumbling under your feet."

Five shuttle missions are planned for 2010, starting with STS-130 on Feb. 7 and running through the last planned launch, in September. The year's missions are focused on stocking the International Space Station with enough spare parts and extra supplies to last until America has a new manned rocket system.

Planning to catch a shuttle launch requires flexibility. Shuttle schedules change frequently. The best plan is to sign up for

NASA e-mails on shuttle launches and watch for changes. Launch dates can shift by weeks if there are mechanical problems, or by days if the weather at the Kennedy Center landing site or one of NASA's three overseas emergency runways is questionable.

You have the highest likelihood of catching a launch if you plan ahead, keep travel plans flexible, arrange to stay in the area a few extra days, and are ready to take advantage of launch date changes if they happen. According to a 2007 analysis by The Associated Press, shuttles have a 40 percent record of launching on time.

Start your planning by checking the NASA shuttle Web site (www.nasa.gov/shuttle) as well as the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex Web site (www.kennedyspacecenter.com/launches/index.asp) and signing up for launch and event e-mails.

The next step is deciding where to view the launch: either from areas surrounding Kennedy Space Center or from the Kennedy

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DAVID A. KELLY/Special Contributor

Kennedy Space Center admission includes a tour to the Apollo/Saturn V Center.

Trump, Gehry help burnish Panama City

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history, hurricane-free tropical beaches, luxury shopping and jungle adventures.

Leading the way is real estate magnate Donald Trump's much-anticipated \$400 million, 70-story Trump Ocean Club, on the Pacific Peninsula in Panama City. Scheduled to open this year, it's getting the full Trump treatment of luxurious trappings complete with yacht club, international casino and gourmet restaurants in a crossover combination of business, residential and hotel condominiums.

The Donald might be trumped however, by another architectural marvel soon to be opened just outside the nation's capital. Frank Gehry of Guggenheim fame is blending art and science in his latest expression, the Bridge of Life Museum of Biodiversity.

Whoville meets a Tim Burton movie set in this post-modern vessel to nature's wonders. It's only blocks from the main cruise-ship port in Panama, and minutes from Panama's Soberania National Park, a lush rain-forest preserve adjacent to Panama City. Excited anticipation for the project runs high among scientists, environmentalists, artists

and tourists alike. Celebrity couple Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie have already taken a sneak peek.

Perhaps they were also drawn to the site of a scene in the James Bond movie *Quantum of Solace*, filmed at the colonial city of Casco Viejo, a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Golden Altar, the Plaza de Francia Square and Las Bóvedas are all getting a polish, as are the historical monuments at the ruins of Panama Vieja, the original settlement in Panama that was destroyed by the pirate Sir Henry Morgan in 1671.

Both government and the business community continue to invest in refurbishing the old and creating the new in this historical neighborhood for a new age of tourism.

In addition to resorts and all-inclusives dotting the coast and nestled in the tropical splendor of the vast rain forest, development has been equally hard and heavy in other parts of Panama City. Tour companies are beefing up adventure-til-you-drop fare such as fishing, diving, hiking, wet rappelling, zip trekking and jungle excursions.

Beach life meets the tropical surround of exotic fruit, monkeys and misty cascading falls. Panama is home to some of the world's sweetest pineapple and many species of rare

flora and wildlife. In what constitutes rural rain forest neighborhoods, tourists will also spot curious quirks of Latin life such as the industrious drive-in motels for lovers adorned with unassuming white signs and candy red hearts. Tu y Yo (You and Me) lodgings look like North American garages and are rumored to be owned by the crooner king of Latin America, Julio Iglesias.

Ecotourism is also growing in the little country that could. Volunteer work holidays and visits with indigenous rain-forest cultures are growing industries. Tourists can board small dugout canoes paddled by semi-learned natives in crocodile-infested waters to see an old way of life relatively untouched by modern society.

Tribes that include the Kuna and Embera Indians have been working with the government and tour companies to increase tourism opportunities by showcasing their authentic jewelry, crafts, cuisine and dance traditions.

The new Panama Canal may not open until 2014, but Panama is intent on encouraging a rebirth of its nation in the meantime.

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Making history, again

For the second time in 100 years, the Panama Canal will be site of the largest construction project in the world. Some fast facts about the canal:

- Originally conceived by Spanish colonial rulers and built by the U.S., the 50-mile passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans has been a vital link for world trade. By 2011, 37 percent of the world's modern ships will be too large to transit the present canal.

- With the expansion begun in 2007 and scheduled for completion in 2014, the wider passage will allow for a new breed of supertanker vessels known as post-Panamax ships. Capable of transporting up to 1 million barrels of oil, liquefied natural gas, metals, coal and other commodities, these bulk cargo vessels will have shorter passages and, as a result, shake up current global trade patterns.

- Beneficiaries will include trade from Asia to the central and eastern U.S., with the port of Houston likely to see a large boost in traffic.

- In its original construction, more than 60 million pounds of dynamite was used to excavate the canal, and it's estimated that more than 20,000 workers died during its construction due to dangerous working conditions, malaria and yellow fever.

- Today, excavators with scoops large enough to hold a vehicle dump rock and earth onto yellow container trucks with wheels twice as tall as an average person. It's estimated that 5.37 billion cubic feet of earth will be uprooted for the expansion; that's three-quarters of the amount blasted in the original construction.

- In addition to commodity tankers, cruise ships also bring significant business to the Panama Canal. The most expensive regular toll for passage to date was charged to the Disney Magic, which paid \$331,200.

When you go

When to go

Dry season is December through April. Average coastal temperature is 85 degrees.

Getting there

Frequent flights from Dallas are available on American Airlines and Continental. Flight time is about seven hours.

Where to stay

Rain-forest ecolodges, all-inclusives and ultramodern and boutique hotels are among the offerings with packages that include Panama City stays as well as coastal and jungle lodging. Contact: www.extremepanama.com and www.panamatourismtravel.com.

Excursions

Decameron Explorer offers more than 100 tours, such as to the Valle de Antón with a canopy tour, and ecotourism excursions, including jungle hikes, wet rappelling and scuba diving.

- Panama City tours offer shopping in Central America's largest and most modern centers as well as picturesque strolls along the Panama Canal and historic Casco Viejo.

- The Embera indigenous community welcomes visitors to the Chagres National Park, as do the Kuna Indians at the enchanting San Blas Kuna Yala Archipelago.

- Tours also include the panoramic route of the historic train that borders the canal along its length to the city of Colón and the Free Zone.

- Jungle Boat Excursions take visitors alongside the ships crossing Gatun Lake in the Panama Canal Basin.

Contact: www.decameron.com (click on "Decameron Explorer")

Resource

- Panama tourism: www.visitpanama.com

- Panama Canal Authority: www.pancanal.com



STEVE MACHAUILL/Special Contributor

Panama City's skyline is growing more cosmopolitan each day as new buildings spring up.