

## THE BRIDGE OF THE AMERICAS

If one were looking for a symbol for Panama then, apart from the Canal, of course, it would probably be the Bridge of the Americas (*Puente de las Américas*). While now only one of three bridges across the Canal (with a fourth nearing completion), when it opened it carried the Pan-American Highway (that now uses the Centennial Bridge, which opened in 2004) and appears to mark the link between North and South America (although, in fact, this is more correctly where the country's Darién province and Colombia meet at the top of South America).



Born in controversial circumstances, with disputes even over its name, and long promised by the US, when it did open in 1962 it was the first permanent and practicable crossing of the Canal. It replaced a ferry, which crossed at the same place as where the bridge was constructed, and after which the US chose to name the new bridge.

Begun formally began in December 1958,<sup>1</sup> and financed by the US Government, it was designed by the US civil engineering company Sverdrup & Parcel of St Louis, Missouri, which specialised in bridge design, with a contract signed in November 1957. It cost around \$20 million.



*The bridge bases under construction*

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<sup>1</sup> The final alignment had been settled in April 1958.

Construction of the bridge superstructure was undertaken by the John F Beasley Construction Company of Dallas, Texas under a 1960 contract. Building the bridge was obviously complicated by the need to avoid interference with, or disruption of, Canal traffic. When completed, it was 1,654 metres long and provided 61 metres clearance above sea-level (the highest point of the bridge is around 117 metres above sea-level). The main spar is 344 metres long, and was built with two lanes of motor traffic in each direction.<sup>2</sup> Almost 17 tons of steel was used in the bridge structure.



The final beam that connected the two ends was installed in May 1962, and the bridge was officially opened on 12 October 1962 by President Roberto F Chiari and the Governor of the Canal Zone, Robert J Fleming Jr. The ceremony included bands from the Panamanian National Guard and Canal Zone Police, with contributions from the US Army and Navy and USAF. However, the celebrations were cut short by protests.



*The bridge under construction in 1961*

The opening of the bridge had been delayed by 11 days because of the dispute over the name.<sup>3</sup> At the opening ceremony itself, the US speakers were advised to avoid controversy and to not actually mention the name of the bridge (despite the ribbon

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<sup>2</sup> <https://elfarodelcanal.com/historia-del-puente-de-las-americanas/>

The bridge was designed for the volume of traffic expected in 1990, but already by 2004 the bridge was carrying 35,000 vehicles per day. Present-day traffic, notwithstanding the existence of other bridges, far exceeds those estimates.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/publicando-historia/221002/sesenta-anos-puente-americanas>

being cut by a Mr Thatcher). Later the plaques at either end of the bridge saying “Thatcher Ferry Bridge, uniting the Americas” disappeared.<sup>4</sup>

The plan for the ceremony was that, following the formalities, the special guests would cross the bridge for the first time,<sup>5</sup> and around 11 am it would open to all who wanted to walk over it. Then, at 3 pm the movement of cars would begin. The events were to be broadcast, simultaneously, on both Canal Zone and Panamanian TV channels, and there would be around a thousand special guests and officials from Panama, the Canal Zone and the US Government.<sup>6</sup>



One of those attending the opening<sup>7</sup> described it as a “mess”. This was despite the Canal Zone authorities being forewarned of trouble,<sup>8</sup> and having put Army units on alert (the Lieutenant Governor was watching events from a house nearby, ready to call for troops to be deployed). The editor of the newspaper, *El Panamá América*, the former President Harmodio Arias Madrid, who had called for the Panamanian choice of name, somehow managed to get into the group at the actual cutting of the ribbon and, in an unseemly

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<sup>4</sup> <http://elsiglo.com.pa/panama/puente-unio-americas-panama/24198692>

<sup>5</sup> These were to include former Presidents Enrique A Jiménez, Arnulfo Arias, Ernesto de la Guardia, Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia, and Ricardo Arias Espinosa.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/llamo-fuerza-puente-americas-IKLE125951>

<sup>7</sup> Frank A Baldwin, then the Panama Canal Information Officer.

<sup>8</sup> US Ambassador Joseph Farland later admitted that he had feared that some unexpected event would tarnish the ceremony, prepared months in advance by a joint Panamanian/American team. At the time, he had told the State Department, “*The bridge should be called the Bridge of the Americas. That is what Panamanians want. A riot is going to form.*”

<https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/llamo-fuerza-puente-americas-IKLE125951>

scuffle, was thrown to the ground.<sup>9</sup> Then Panamanian youths swarmed up the steel framework of the bridge, waving Panamanian flags and shouting “*Thatcher No, Americas Si!*”, and the rest of the ceremony, including Mr Thatcher’s speech, was cancelled.<sup>10</sup> Only two speeches were made before the ceremony was disrupted – in the first the country’s Minister of Public Works used the name favoured by Panama, and then US Assistant Secretary of State, George Ball, referred to a “*a true bridge of the Americas*”, skilfully negotiating the controversy. The protesting students got to within 20 feet of the VIPs, while the Governor led Thatcher to cut the ribbon – and then the event was over.<sup>11</sup>



*Maurice Thatcher cutting the ribbon in 1962*

The night before the opening ceremony, Governor Fleming invited President Chiari for a cruise on his boat on the Canal, and then told the President that he had a surprise for him. They went to the bridge at around 9 or 10 pm, crossed the bridge and then drank champagne, joined by some construction supervisors. This was done because of fears of protests the next day, and so that the President could be the first Panamanian official to use the bridge.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/pcm/narratives/Baldwin\\_Memoirs2012.pdf](https://www.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/pcm/narratives/Baldwin_Memoirs2012.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://time.com/archive/6812174/panama-the-old-man-the-bridge/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/llamo-fuerza-puente-americas-IKLE125951>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/pcm/narratives/Baldwin\\_Memoirs2012.pdf](https://www.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/pcm/narratives/Baldwin_Memoirs2012.pdf)



Until the bridge opened, vehicular traffic over the Canal, and between the two halves of Panama, relied on ferries and temporary bridges, and obviously the Canal, the bridge and the immediate surroundings fell within the US-controlled Canal Zone, and therefore not part of the Republic of Panama.

The bridge would serve as a focus of anti-American feeling as long as the Canal Zone continued to exist. From the late 1950s, unrest and protests had increased,



culminating in the riots in 1964, following an attempt to raise the Panamanian flag in an area inside the Canal Zone.<sup>13</sup> In another symbolic act at the time, students attempted to raise a Panamanian flag on the bridge.

*Panamanian youths on the bridge on 12 October 1962*

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<sup>13</sup> Even though an agreement had been reached sometime in 1962 under President Kennedy to allow the Panamanian flag to be flown alongside the US flag at *civilian* locations (see, for example, on the photo of the bridge below), this was not being carried out.



The new bridge was closed again. In 1964, Panamanian students<sup>14</sup>, joined by other Panamanian citizens, entered the Canal Zone to raise the Panamanian flag alongside a US flag that students from Balboa High School had raised<sup>15</sup> – with it then being protected by students and parents. The Panamanians were confronted by Canal Zone Police, soon backed by US troops. In the resulting unrest, 22 people died, and more than 500 were injured.<sup>16</sup> Panama broke off diplomatic relations with the US, and the US declared a “state of war” and exercised its right to take steps to protect the Canal – resulting in the US interrupting traffic across the bridge.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Since its founding in the mid-1930s, the University of Panama had been a focus of nationalist sentiment amongst its students.

<sup>15</sup> The Kennedy administration had said that both flags should fly alongside one another in the Canal Zone, except at military bases. An “eternal flame” memorial now stands on the site.

<sup>16</sup> There were three days of riots, destruction of \$2 million worth of property, and at least 20 people killed. Panama broke off relations with the US (albeit relatively briefly) and accused it of aggression and appealed to the OAS and UN. The incident was used as a rallying cry among Panamanians against US authority in the Canal Zone. Shortly afterwards, President Johnson announced that the US would negotiate with Panama a new treaty to replace the 1903 one – which led in due course the 1977 Treaties and eventual handing over of the Canal.

<sup>17</sup> *The Role of the United States in Panama’s Journey Towards Independence* by LaVerne M Seales Soley of the Department of Languages and Cultures, California Lutheran University (International Journal of Humanities, Art and Social Studies (IJHAS), Vol 7 No 4, November 2022).



Life magazine covers the 1964 riots

Even the name of the bridge was a matter of dispute and disagreement. The US called it the Thatcher Ferry Bridge. It crossed the Canal above where that ferry also crossed, the ferry and hence the bridge itself, being named after Maurice Thatcher, one of the members of the Isthmian Canal Commission which had overseen the US construction of the Canal. The sole survivor of that Commission, it was Maurice Thatcher who cut the ribbon to officially open the bridge bearing his name in 1962.<sup>18</sup>



However, Panama never accepted the name given to the bridge by the US, always preferring the Bridge of the Americas title and, after gaining control of it, the

<sup>18</sup> Time Magazine referred to Mr Thatcher, a former Kentucky Congressman and Governor of the Canal Zone 1910-13, as “a gnarled, 92-year-old relic of Panama Canal construction days and still has a pioneer’s proprietary interest in the Canal Zone”. Time also reported that he had lobbied until the House Appropriations Committee inserted a provision into the relevant Canal Zone legislation naming the structure the Thatcher Ferry Bridge. He also resisted a request from President Kennedy to decline the honour of having the new bridge named after him, in order to avoid the expected protests.

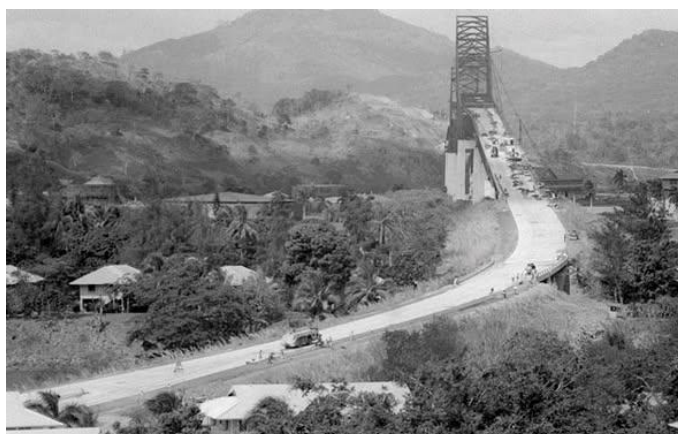
<https://time.com/archive/6812174/panama-the-old-man-the-bridge/>  
<https://www.czbrats.com/Builders/thatcher.htm>

government officially renamed it thus in 1981. In fact, just 10 days before it opened, on 2 October, the National Assembly passed legislation maintaining that the bridge would be called the Bridge of the Americas, and only that name would be used in any public documents. Furthermore, it said that the government would reject any document which used any other name.<sup>19</sup> Panamanian newspapers began using this name from 3 October.<sup>20</sup> To add fuel to the fire, the Canal Zone Government issued postage stamps commemorating the opening, and using the Thatcher Ferry Bridge name.



It was only after implementation of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties of 1977, and the abolition of the Canal Zone, that the bridge and the area around it became part of Panamanian territory., with the end of the Canal Zone on 1 October 1979.

As built, the bridge had pedestrian walkways on each side, but these were subsequently closed.



*The Bridge of the Americas in the 1960s*

Until 2004, when the Centennial Bridge (*Puente Centenario*) opened a little further along the Canal, the Bridge of the Americas was the only roadway across the Canal (the swing bridge across the Miraflores Locks by then being regarded

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/construccion-inauguracion-puente-de-las-americas/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/llamo-fuerza-puente-americas-IKLE125951>



as for “emergency” use once the Bridge – and finally dismantled in 2018. A third bridge, the Atlantic Bridge (*Puente Atlántico*), at the Atlantic end of the Canal in Colón Province, opened in 2019. A fourth bridge (and a tunnel beneath the Canal to carry a monorail metro line) are, as I write, under construction. However, rejected by the National Assembly, this Treaty never came into effect.

In May 2010, the bulk carrier *Atlantic Hero* struck one of the bridge’s protective piers after losing power. No damaged was caused to the bridge itself.



Neither was there any but cosmetic damage in 2026, when an explosion in a natural gas distribution centre beneath the Balboa end of the bridge engulfed that end in spectacular fashion. Closed as a precaution, it soon reopened.

## **LONG PROMISED**

The idea of building a permanent bridge across the Canal was first proposed in 1923 by Ricardo J Alfaro, Minister of Public Works. At the time (and until during World War 2), there was not even a highway between Panama City and Colón, let alone across the Canal. The proposal was put to the US Government and, in 1926, the Kellogg-Alfaro Treaty included provision for a bridge – at the Pedro Miguel Locks. However, while

signed by President Rodolo Chiari the treaty was rejected by the National Assembly, and thus never came into effect.<sup>21</sup>

A temporary bridge had existed as early as 1904, during early stages of the construction of the Canal, over the Culebra Cut,<sup>22</sup> but then had been dismantled. A bridge had also been budgeted for in 1913 by the US Government but, with the Canal due to soon open (as it did in August 1914), this was not built. Prior to that, suitable sites had been identified at Paraíso, Culebra and Gold Hills.

The promise of a bridge arose again during talks between Presidents Harmodio Arias Madrid and Franklyn Roosevelt that led to the Hull-Alfaro Treaty of 1936.<sup>23</sup> That Treaty symbolised a change in attitude on the part of the US Government (if not the Canal Zone Government, Zonians and the US Army – with ratification in the US Senate delayed until June 1939) given the Roosevelt Administration’s “Good Neighbor Policy”. This new Treaty formally recognised free transit for Panamanian across the Canal Zone – as it effectively divided the country in two, but *transit* and not the right of residence in the Canal Zone.<sup>24</sup>

In any case, the financial conditions before the war precluded any construction being contemplated, but in 1941 negotiations with engineering consulting firms for the project began.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The bridge would have followed the construction of the roads needed to provide communication with the interior of the country. The idea of a bridge over the Pedro Miguel Locks was because, at the time, the route to the interior on the western side of the Canal passed that way.

For more on the abortive 1926 Treaty, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/11/panama-in-world-war-2-panama-and-the-treaties/>

<sup>22</sup> At that time, this was the name given to the deep artificial valley that cuts through the Continental Divide that runs the length of the Americas, and the mountain ridge also called Culebra. To complicate matters, in 1913 the US renamed the passage the Gaillard Cut after the Army Corps of Engineers officer who led the excavation, but who died in December 1913. After the Canal was handed back to Panama in 2000 the original name was restored.

<sup>23</sup> Yes, the same Alfaro who had proposed a bridge in 1923.

<sup>24</sup> <https://read.dukeupress.edu/hahr/article/48/2/220/157650/Negotiating-New-Treaties-with-Panama-1936>

<sup>25</sup> This was at the same time that the Third Locks Project was underway, and construction of what would become the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway across the isthmus in the Canal Zone was underway. The swing bridge across the Miraflores Locks was built at this time, opened in 1942 as a necessary adjunct to the Third Locks Project.

However, by 1942 there had been no sign of movement on the bridge issue (although a swing bridge had opened across the Miraflores Locks that year) and, in May, a 12-Point Agreement between the US and Panama recognised Panama's request for a bridge or tunnel over the Canal and its eventual construction.<sup>26</sup> The government of Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia then designated the site at Balboa (i.e. the one that would eventually be used) as the most suitable one.<sup>27</sup>

A memorandum from the US State Department in 1948 identified a number of “*principal pending problems*” in the relationship with Panama. These included the question of a tunnel or bridge under or over the Canal at Balboa.<sup>28</sup> It expressed awareness of the importance to Panama of “*constant and rapid communication across the Canal*” at Balboa and stated a willingness to agree to the construction there of a tunnel or a bridge. It was noted that the commitment to address the question had been intended to follow the end of the war<sup>29</sup> and that, in the meantime the US had agreed to improve the existing ferry service (and a third ferry had been added to the 24-hour service during the war).

It was also mentioned by the State Department that Panama had shown more interest in US financial assistance towards completion of the Inter-American Highway to the Costa Rican border than a tunnel or bridge – but, in any case, it seemed the US had been unwilling to begin any serious consideration of a tunnel or bridge until plans for

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<sup>26</sup> Agreed on 18 May 1942, the 12 points had arisen as part of the negotiation for the many additional wartime defence sites required outside the Canal Zone, although the State Department did not consider them as linked to the eventual 1942 Defense Sites Agreement, but as separate and in return for Panama's cooperation in protection of the Canal. The State Department view was the 12 points were an “understanding” reached *simultaneously* with the Agreement.

*US-Panamanian Relations Since 1941* by Lester D Langley (Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs, Vol. 12, No. 3, July 1970), Cambridge University Press: [https://www.jstor.org/stable/175020?read-now=1&seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/175020?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

<sup>27</sup> Balboa was the *de facto* capital of the Canal Zone, and close to Panama City, capital of the Republic.

<sup>28</sup> *Memorandum by the Assistant Chief of the Division of Central America and Panama Affairs* (711.19/1–2048), 20 January 1948. Subject: General Relations Between the United States and Panama: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v09/d467>

<sup>29</sup> The US had been willing since 1942 to agree on the construction of a tunnel underneath, or a bridge over the Canal when the “emergency” (i.e. the war) was over.

the modernisation of the Canal have been completed and approved.<sup>30</sup> It was observed that a bridge would be much cheaper than a tunnel, the cost of the latter having been estimated at around \$30 million.

Through some chicanery outside the scope of this piece, the once-deposed Arnulfo Arias Madrid found himself installed as President once more in 1949.<sup>31</sup> While having moderated some of his previous policies (he had been elected in 1940 on a decidedly anti-American platform), he did return to the economic grievances he had raised with the US during the war and, in 1950, his government presented the US Government with a list of matters that it had problems with. Among these matters was again the question of a new bridge or tunnel at Balboa, which still no signs of progressing.

However, it would not be until the negotiations that led to the Remón-Eisenhower Treaty of 1955 that final agreement on the bridge was achieved.<sup>32</sup> The previous year it had been agreed that a bridge, rather than a tunnel, should be the favoured option.<sup>33</sup>

The new Treaty contained a number of concessions on the part of the US, such as giving up the monopoly contained in the original 1903 Treaty covering railroad and highway transportation across the isthmus. But if the concessions were intended to assuage Panamanian resentment it would seem they did little, and nationalist tensions continued to grow during the rest of the decade.

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<sup>30</sup> Even after the Third Locks Project was abandoned during the war, plans were discussed at length for improvements or replacement of the existing Canal. Postwar this included a lively debate over whether or not to attempt a sea-level canal. Despite some seemingly wild plans for using nuclear explosives to create a sea-level canal in the Darién or northern Colombia, no substantial improvement would be made until after control of the Canal had passed to Panama, with the new larger locks opening in 2016.

<sup>31</sup> He would be removed once more, in a far from bloodless coup, in 1951.

<sup>32</sup> For more about that Treaty, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/11/panama-the-1955-treaty-resolving-problems/>

<sup>33</sup> It was thought that the inherent instability of the underlying shale and clay – which had caused such problems during construction of the Canal – would make building a tunnel a nightmare. However, as I write, a tunnel beneath the Canal to carry the latest subway train line from the city is nearing completion.

In July 1956, President Eisenhower signed into law legislation authorising and directing the Panama Canal Company to build the bridge, and in the following August the process of obtaining the necessary studies and designs began.

## THE FERRY



In 1931, two ferries were built by the Mechanical Division of the Panama Canal,<sup>34</sup> each with a capacity of 30 cars.<sup>35</sup> These initially operated by the Pedro Miguel Locks, some miles along the Canal from Balboa and Panama City, before relocating in 1932 to the *La Boca* district in Balboa, where the Bridge of the Americas would eventually be built. A third ferry was added in November 1942 as, despite the opening of a new bridge over the Miraflores Locks (see below), the volume of vehicular traffic continued to increase.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The *President Amador* and the *President Roosevelt*. Described as “pumpkin-seed” ferryboats (due to their deck shape) with a largely unobstructed open deck, something of a recent invention in the 1930s, 125-feet long and diesel-powered. The legislation to establish the free-of-charge ferry service was sponsored by the same Maurice Thatcher who would attend the opening of the Bridge of the Americas in 1962.

<sup>35</sup> Though it is said that, at the time, they mostly carried locals’ horse-drawn carts and local workers travelling to and from Panama City.

<sup>36</sup> The new vessel was the *President Porras*. Bear in mind that the greatly expanded garrison, the many additional bases, airfields and defence sites, with new accommodation and other facilities, had seen a substantial increase in the numbers of vehicles on the move. This was one reason why in 1943, traffic in Panama was finally forced to drive on the right – the question of which side the road one *must* drive on not having been settled until then.



The ferry continued to operate, even as the new bridge was being built above it. Once the bridge was operational the ferry service ended.



*The new bridge  
overshadowing the ferry  
terminal*

## **THE MIRAFLORES LOCKS SWING BRIDGE**

As mentioned above, a swing bridge was built over the southern end of the Miraflores Locks, to assist in the Third Locks Project<sup>37</sup> – the site for the new Pacific locks being nearby but on the western bank of the Canal. This was initially restricted to only official traffic but, after the Project was suspended (it was never revived) in early 1942, it was opened to the public, this being in June 1942.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> For more on his project, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/10/the-wartime-panama-third-locks-project/>

<sup>38</sup> Some sources say it was open to traffic from 20 May.



*The bridge over the Miraflores Locks being built, with Fort Clayton and the Panama Canal Railroad line in the background<sup>39</sup>*

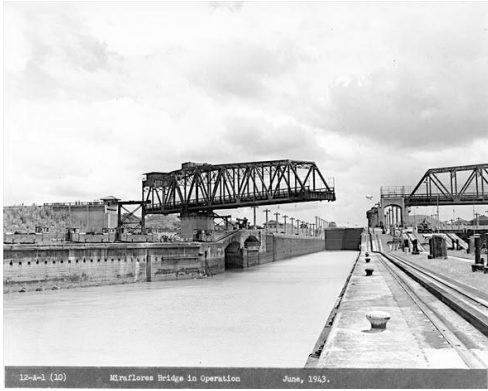


*The swing bridge in 1998*

It included both a roadway and rail line (a spur from the then more extensive trans-isthmus railway ran to the Locks, and was obviously needed for the purposes of the planned new locks). While raised on pillars, and with two separate arms passing over each of the two sets of locks, there was obviously no way a ship could pass through unless the bridge was swung open.

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.czimages.com/CZMemories/Photos/photoof1024.htm>



Of course, this was not an ideal arrangement, as the requirements of the road and rail traffic interfered with Canal traffic requirements, and *vice versa*. Nevertheless, it remained in existence, as an emergency back-up, until removed in 2018, following completion of the

new locks at Cocoli (part of the expansion of Canal capacity and opened in 2016).<sup>40</sup>



SPECIAL ENGINEERING DIVISION	THE PANAMA CANAL	DIABLO HEIGHTS, C.Z.
THE THIRD LOCKS PROJECT 7/28/42 M-10-830	MIRAFLORES BRIDGE. VIEW LOOKING EAST FROM HIGHWAY, R. R. CUT SHOWING WEST APPROACH COMPLETED BRIDGE IN USE.	CONTRACT NO. PCLp-583 PITTSBURG-DES MOINES STEEL CO.

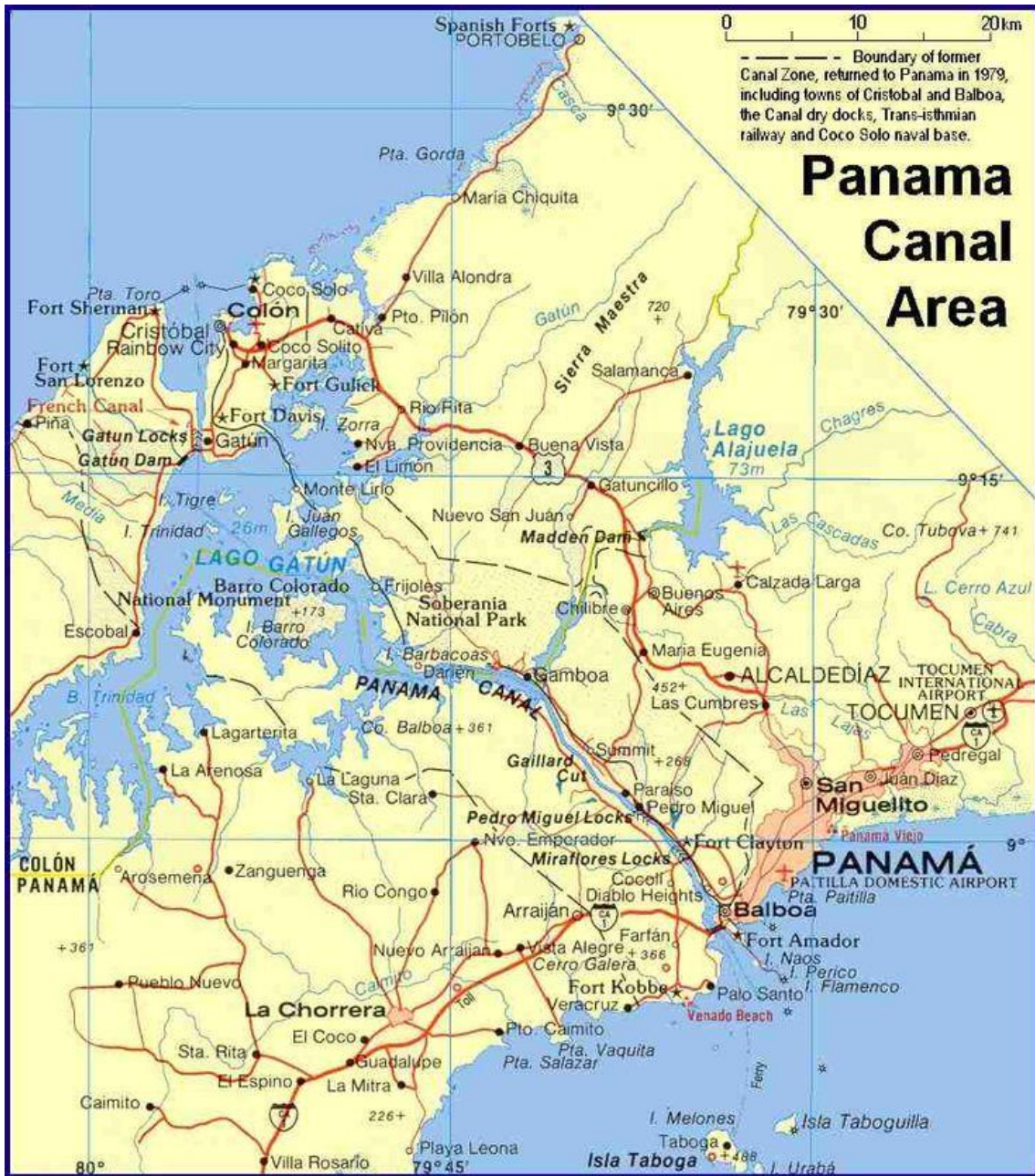


*Being dismantled in 2018*

<sup>40</sup> <https://madaboutpanama.com/panama-canal-cruise/what-you-will-see/pedro-miguel-and-miraflores/>



A MAP TO ASSIST WITH ORIENTATION



Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

4 May 2026