

US History

Panama Canal

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The Panama Canal is a 48 mile long man-made waterway that crosses the Isthmus of Panama. It uses a number of locks on each side to lower and raise ships to allow them to pass between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.

Why was it built?

The Panama Canal was built to lower the distance, cost, and time it took for ships to carry cargo between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. Before the canal, ships would have to go around the entire continent of South America. A ship traveling from New York to San Francisco saved around 8,000 miles and 5 months of travel by crossing at the canal. The Panama Canal was a huge boost to world trade and the economy. USS Mississippi transiting the Panama Canal Photo by the U.S. Navy.

Why a canal in Panama?

The Isthmus of Panama was chosen for the site of the canal because it is a very narrow strip of land between the two oceans. Although the canal was still a huge engineering project, this was the "easiest" place to build it.

When was it built?

The French began work on the canal in 1881, but failed due to disease and construction difficulties. In 1904, the United States began to work on the canal. It took 10 years of hard work, but the canal was officially opened on August 15, 1914.

Who built the Panama Canal?

Thousands of workers from around the world helped to build the canal. At one point there were as many as 45,000 men involved in the project. The United States funded the canal and the lead engineers were from the U.S. They included men such as John Stevens (who convinced President Teddy Roosevelt that the canal would have to be elevated), William Gorgas (who came up with ways to fight disease by killing mosquitoes), and George Goethals (who headed up the project from 1907).

Building the Canal

Building the canal was not easy. Workers had to battle disease, mudslides, poisonous snakes, scorpions, and poor living conditions. The completion of the canal took some of the best engineering skills and innovation of the time. There were three major construction projects involved in making the canal:

1. **Building the Locks** - Locks on each side of the canal lift and lower boats a total of 85 feet. The locks are immense. Each lock is 110 feet wide and 1,050 feet long. They have huge concrete walls and giant steel gates. The steel gates are over 6 feet thick and 60 feet tall.
2. **Digging the Culebra Cut** - This section of the canal had to be dug through the mountains of Panama. Dealing with landslides and falling rock made this the most difficult and dangerous part of the canal's construction.

3. **Building the Gatun Dam** - The designers of the canal decided to make a large artificial lake through the center of Panama. To do this they constructed a dam on the Gatun River creating Gatun Lake.

Ships traveling through the canal from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean would first go through the locks and be raised 85 feet. Then they would travel through the narrow Culebra Cut to Gatun Lake. After crossing the lake, they would travel through additional locks that would lower them to the Pacific Ocean.

The Panama Canal Today

In 1999, the United States transferred control of the canal to the country of Panama. Today, the canal remains an important part of international trade. Around 12,000 ships travel through the canal each year carrying over 200 million tons of cargo. Around 9,000 people currently work for the Panama Canal.

Interesting Facts About the Panama Canal

- In 1928, Richard Halliburton swam the length of the Panama Canal. He only had to pay a toll of 36 cents.
- Around 20,000 workers died (mostly from disease) while the French worked on the canal. Around 5,600 workers died during the U.S. construction of the canal.
- The canal cost \$375 million to construct. This would be over \$8 billion in today's dollars.
- Traveling through the canal isn't cheap. The average toll is around \$54,000 with some tolls going over \$300,000. This is still a lot cheaper than having to go all the way around South America.

Read more at: https://www.ducksters.com/history/us_1900s/panama_canal.php

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Panama Canal

Test Quiz

Questions on this quiz are based on information from Panama Canal.

- 1) What body of water does the Panama Canal connect to the Pacific Ocean?
 - a. Indian Ocean
 - b. Atlantic Ocean
 - c. Southern Ocean
 - d. Red Sea
 - e. Lake Erie
- 2) Around how long is the Panama Canal?
 - a. 2 miles
 - b. 14 miles
 - c. 48 miles
 - d. 200 miles
 - e. 800 miles
- 3) What country first began to build the canal in 1881, but failed?
 - a. Brazil
 - b. Germany
 - c. England
 - d. Spain
 - e. France
- 4) What country funded the construction of the canal?
 - a. France
 - b. United States
 - c. England
 - d. Russia
 - e. Japan
- 5) What year was the canal officially opened for traffic?
 - a. 1883
 - b. 1898
 - c. 1901
 - d. 1914
 - e. 1944

6) What was the name of the dam that was built to make an artificial lake in the center of Panama?

- a. Gatun Dam
- b. Aswan Dam
- c. Hoover Dam
- d. Panama Dam
- e. Three Gorges Dam

7) Around how many miles of travel are saved on a trip from San Francisco to New York by using the Panama Canal?

- a. 500 miles
- b. 1000 miles
- c. 2,000 miles
- d. 4,000 miles
- e. 8,000 miles

8) What was the most difficult and dangerous part of the construction of the canal?

- a. Three Gorges
- b. Gatun Lake
- c. Culebra Cut
- d. Pacific Canals
- e. Panama Cliffs

9) How high do the locks of the Panama Canal have to raise and lower boats?

- a. 8 feet
- b. 30 feet
- c. 50 feet
- d. 85 feet
- e. 172 feet

10) True or False: The Panama Canal is still an important part of international trade.

- a. TRUE
- b. FALSE

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