

SUEZ CANAL

SUEZ CANAL TRANSIT

by Ted Cookson

During the quarter of a century that I have lived in Egypt I have driven along the highway that runs parallel to the Suez Canal several times while taking day trips to Port Said. I have seen large and small ships steaming through the Great Bitter Lake when on holiday near Fayid. I once crossed the canal on a small car ferry when returning to Cairo from El Arish; and of course I have driven through the 1.63-km (1-mile)-long Ahmed Hamdi Tunnel under the canal many, many times en route to and from various Sinai beach resorts. (I haven't had a chance yet to drive over the canal at El Qantara on the beautiful Mubarak Peace Bridge which opened in October 2001. This, the Egyptian-Japanese Friendship Bridge, which was built with Japanese assistance, has a clearance of 70 meters or 230 feet.)

I have always been intrigued to see vessels plying the Suez Canal. Indeed, the ship convoys often appeared to be floating across the desert as if by magic if I was situated far enough away from the canal at the time of sighting. So I'm sure no one will be surprised when I admit that I have long wondered how



a local resident could sail through the canal.

Unfortunately, I never found an answer to that question. However, in the autumn of 2004 and again in the spring of 2008 I was able to join two international cruises which included Suez Canal transits. In November 2004 I sailed south from Alexandria to Mombassa, Kenya on the 10,000-ton, 208-passenger *Seabourn Spirit*; and in May 2008 I sailed north during an Africa circumnavigation cruise on Holland America Line's 38,000-ton, 793-passenger *Prinsendam*.

The Suez Canal was constructed by



forced labour at a cost of USD 100 million over a 10 1/2-year period by Ferdinand de Lesseps' Universal Company for the Suez Maritime Canal, which was formed in 1858. The canal was opened on November 17, 1869 by the French Empress Eugenie. 163 km (101 miles) long and 600 meters (1,968 feet) wide in its narrowest stretch, the canal links the Mediterranean at Port Said to the Red Sea at Suez. With an average transit time of 15 hours, the canal saves ships 11,829 km (7,350 miles) compared to the circumnavigation of Africa.

The Suez Canal, which has no locks, accommodates about 50 ships daily and is capable of handling up to 80 ships in a single day. The current maximum draft allowed is 16 meters (53 feet), and modifications now underway should increase this to 22 meters (72 feet); while ships which displace up to 150,000 tons can now transit the canal, after 2010 fully-laden supertankers will also be able to pass. At present supertankers



have the option of transferring a portion of their cargo onto an Egyptian boat and then reloading after their canal transit.

Incredibly, the average toll is USD 205,000. So it is difficult to imagine what the cost must be to operate a supertanker all the way around the Cape of Good Hope. No wonder supertankers would bother to offload and reload cargo in order to transit the canal! In 2005 some 18,193 vessels, or about 7.5% of worldwide shipping, crossed through the Suez Canal. Transit fees routinely total well over USD 3 billion.

While only a single shipping lane exists in the canal, there are two major turnouts for passing. Typically three convoys transit the canal daily. The initial southbound convoy departs Port Said and proceeds as far as the Great Bitter Lake south of Ismailia. There the convoy awaits the northbound convoy before continuing south to Suez. The second southbound convoy is passed by the northbound convoy in the bypass at El Ballah between Ismailia and El Qantara. In order to reduce erosion, transit speeds are held to about 8 knots or some 15 km (9 miles) per hour.

Both of my Suez Canal transits were a little unusual. The journey begins very early in the morning no matter which direction one's ship is travelling. In 2004 *Seabourn Spirit* got the usual pre-dawn start from Port Said. But our southbound transit time was greatly increased due to a reported minor ship collision in the northbound convoy. The ensuing delay caused us to be sidelined in the Great Bitter Lake for a number of extra hours, and we only exited the canal at Suez very late that night.

On the other hand, in 2008 the captain of the *Prinsendam* was contacted by Suez Canal Authority officials a couple of hours early, at about 4 AM, and told to proceed as the lead ship in that day's northbound convoy. As the captain thought it best to avoid making a public announcement on board at that early hour, by the time most passengers



awoke, expecting to see Suez from their balconies, our ship was already sailing in the Little Bitter Lake.

As is the case on Nile cruises, passengers who transit the Suez Canal will glimpse many interesting vignettes of local life. The bad news is that, while lying at anchor, the local flies are nothing short of murderous!

Unfortunately there is still no way for locals to enjoy a simple transit of the Suez Canal. Only those willing to consider taking a full cruise will ever have the unique opportunity to experience a Suez Canal transit.

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