



Greece's Corinth Canal

by Ted Cookson

On the afternoon of 24 May 2007 I was a passenger on the 208-passenger, 10,000-ton *Seabourn Spirit* when that vessel made a transit of the 3.9-mile (6.3-km)-long Corinth Canal from west to east. *Seabourn Spirit* is 439 feet (134 meters) long and 63 feet (19.2 meters) wide.

The Corinth Canal connects the Gulf of Corinth with the Aegean Sea's Saronic Gulf. Cutting through the sandy alluvial soil of the Isthmus of Corinth, the canal separates the Peloponnesian peninsula from the Greek mainland. In effect, the canal creates

an island out of the Peloponnesus.

The Corinth Canal, only 68.9 feet (21 meters) wide and 26 feet (8 meters) deep, was constructed between 1881 and 1893. First the two ends were dug by a French firm. Then, after that company went bankrupt, a Greek contractor completed the work. The opening of the Corinth Canal a mere two dozen years after the opening of the Suez Canal helped to propel the Greek port of Piraeus into a major Mediterranean port. However, the expected windfall from canal tolls never materialized. In this age of super-tankers, the Corinth Canal bears an anachronistic charm.

Because of the dangers faced by ancient mariners in their small boats, the idea of a canal across the narrow Isthmus of Corinth arose thousands of years ago. The first to attempt the construction of a canal was Periander, the seventh-



Control tower at eastern end



Approaching the canal





Waiter serving drinks



Watching around the Jacuzzi



Seabourn Spirit

century ruler of Corinth. Although Periander failed to dig much, he did improve upon the previous method of hauling small craft across the isthmus. That method involved pulling boats over large wooden rollers. Under Periander a stone track way was built on which wheeled, flat vehicles could be used to pull boats. In fact, that system of portage remained in use until the twelfth century, and traces of the track way can still be seen today near the canal's western end.

Roman Emperor Julius Caesar, who ruled from 48 to 44 B. C., also planned to build a canal across the Isthmus of Corinth. However, Caesar, of course, was assassinated. Later, in 54-68 A. D., the infamous Roman Emperor Nero actually participated in a ground-breaking ceremony for a canal using a golden pick, and six thousand Judean slaves began the excavation. But Nero, too, died shortly thereafter and the project was then abandoned until the late nineteenth century.

Small ships coming from the Western Mediterranean or from the Adriatic which are bound for the Eastern Mediterranean or the Black Sea find the Corinth Canal useful. Although ships narrow enough to utilize the canal can shave 248 miles (400 kilometers) off their journey, most of the 12,000 annual canal transits are now made for touristic purposes. Interestingly, the ships transiting the canal hail from more than 50 different countries.



Kilometer marker

Two sightseeing options are available to those not able to sail on a cruise ship through the Corinth Canal. The canal can be viewed safely from the sidewalk of a highway bridge over the canal within a short distance of the town of Corinth.

Also, according to www.periandros.gr, the web site of the company which has a 30-year management contract for the canal, a 75-minute canal sightseeing cruise operates daily at 10 AM. This web site also features a toll calculator for ships. The calculation of tolls is based on a vessel's flag, the type of vessel, its port of origin, and its previous and next port in addition to the net tonnage.

On line at www.eptours.com/t0711-corinth.htm readers will find links to three video clips showing my canal transit. *Seabourn Spirit* is seen being pulled by a tugboat, surrounded by the canal's very steep walls, which are 170 feet (52 meters) high. One video clip shows a movable bridge and the control tower at the eastern end of the canal. In addition, in that clip the current appears to flow from east to west through the canal. The difference between high and low water levels in the canal is approximately two feet (60 cm).

No extra room on side!



Bridges

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