THE PANAMA CANAL - KEY HISTORICAL DATES/EVENTS: ©DrJohnFreedman2026

2.7M YRS AGO	The isthmus is formed by volcanic eruptions
14,000 YRS AGO	The first *Homo sapiens* arrive
2500 BC	Paleo-indigenous Monagrillo culture masters pottery-making
1501	Spaniard Rodrigo de Bastidis 'discovers' Panama; Columbus visits the next year on his 4th and final voyage
1510	First Spanish settlements – Santa Maria La Antigua del Darién & Nombre de Dios - founded
1513	Balboa crosses the isthmus and sights the 'South Sea' (Pacific)
1519	Panama city founded **1534** King Charles V of Spain orders surveying for a possible canal across the isthmus
1538	*Audiencia Real de Panama* established – with jurisdiction from Nicaragua to Cape Horn
1540s onward	The isthmus is critical for overland transport of gold & silver from Peru & Bolivia to Caribbean and then Spain
1573	Sir Francis Drake ('The Queen's Pirate') takes the mule train laden with silver & gold outside of Nombre de Dios
1671	Henry Morgan sacks and burns Panama City – the city is soon reborn 5 miles away
1713	Panama becomes part of the Viceroyalty of New Granada **1819** New Granada wins independence as 'Gran Colombia'
1820s onward	Panama separatist movements wax and wane **1855** Panama Railway opens
1881	The French break ground on their Canal project 12 years after their acclaimed success at Suez
1889	The French suspend the project after 22,000 lives lost, most to yellow fever & malaria
1903	Panama separatists win independence from Colombia - with U.S. backing
1904	U.S. acquires the canal project from France and begins work
1906	Teddy ("I took the isthmus") Roosevelt visits the Canal site (and becomes first US President to travel abroad)
1914	August 15: *SS Ancon* completes a transit and the Canal officially opens
1928	Adventurer Richard Halliburton swims the Canal and pays the record low tariff of 36 cents
1962	The first bridge over the Canal, the Bridge of the Americas, opens on the Pacific side
1976	Amidst debate over turning the Canal over to Panama, U.S. Senator S.I. Hayakawa famously quips, "We stole it fair and square."
1977	U.S. & Panama sign treaty that will eventually turn over control of the Canal to Panama
1979	Control formally handed over to joint U.S.-Panama 'Panama Canal Commission'
	USN hydrofoil *Pegasus* sets the record for fastest transit: 2 hr 41 mins
1999	December 31: Complete control handed over to the Republic of Panama's 'Panama Canal Authority'
2004	A second bridge opens 100 years after American work on the Canal began, the Centennial Bridge
2007	$5.2 billion expansion project for 'New Panama Canal' begun
2010	Chinese freighter *Fortune Plum* becomes the MILLIONTH ship to pass the Canal
	Norwegian Pearl cruise ship sets record for highest toll ever paid: $375,600
2016	Canal expansion completed in July – 'New Panamax' locks open
	MOL *Benefactor* Neopanamax freighter sets the record for the highest toll ever paid on the Canal: $829,468
2018	5000-passenger *Norwegian Bliss* sets new record for cruise ship size and highest toll: $891,600
2019	The third bridge opens, the Atlantic Bridge, on the Atlantic side north of Gatun Locks
2022	The Canal records record annual tonnage, transits (>14,000), and revenue (>$4 billion)

(continued)

2023 El Niño-related drought with resultant lower water levels leads to: (1) reductions in maximum draft allowance (forcing carriers to lighten loads, thus decreasing cargo), ad (2) decreased transits/day with delays and significant disruption in worldwide shipping.

2024 U.S. President Donald Trump threatens to "take back" the Panama Canal in response to increasing Chinese influence and concerns that the U.S. is being "overcharged". Drought eases.

2025 At his January 20 inauguration, Trump declared "We gave it to Panama, and we're taking it back," and declined to rule out military or economic coercion to "retake" the canal.
On Feb 5, the U.S. announced an agreement allowing its government vessels free passage through the canal.
On Feb 6, newly-elected Panamian President Mulino announced Panama's withdrawal from China's Belt and Road Initiative, following pressure from a visit by Secretary of State Marco Rubio
On March 4, a consortium led by BlackRock announced a prospective plan to buy the Balboa and Cristóbal ports from Hong Kong's CK Hutchison (along with 43 ports in 23 countries total) for $23 billion— widely seen as a political win for the Trump administration's campaign against perceived Chinese influence over the canal. The deal quickly ran into Beijing's objections, with China pushing for its state-owned Cosco to be included directly. In addition, Chinese regulators opened an antitrust review. By late July, CK Hutchison was discussing bringing in a Chinese "strategic investor" to satisfy regulators. The original negotiating window for the deal expired in Oct 2025 without a signed deal, leaving the sale in limbo.

Construction of a new (as yet un-named) 4th bridge over the Canal at the Pacific end between the Bridge of the Americas and Balboa was begun. It is projected to open in late 2028 or 2029 to carry local traffic (the 6-lane Pan-American Highway will continue to traverse the Centennial Bridge at the south end of the Culebra Cut.

2026 On January 29, Panama's Supreme Court ruled that the original concession to Hong Kong's CK Hutchison's to operate the Balboa and Cristóbal terminals was unconstitutional. On February 23, **the Panamanian government officially revoked Hutchison's concession rights and seized direct control of the Balboa and Cristóbal terminals.** This bypassed the stalled BlackRock deal.

The 10th anniversary of the expanded (Neopanamax) locks was celebrated in June 2026. Fittingly, the woman who oversaw the highly successful Panama Canal Expansion, **marine engineer Ilya Espino de Marotta, is elected as the first female Chief Administrator of the Panama Canal Authority.** She takes office amid new El Niño-related drought concerns and a **major 7.7 earthquake in October** which shook the Canal but ultimately did not cause damage or significantly affect operations.

Operationally, the canal rebounded strongly in fiscal year 2025-26 (the Canal's fiscal year runs from Oct 1 to Sept 30) setting a **new record in total annual cargo moved: 521 million tons and a new record of $6.6B in revenue**

However, predicted drought conditions from the 2026 El Niño spurred modest draft restrictions and traffic reduction controls in August=September of 2026. Auctioning of transit permits in the face of traffic reductions leads to a **new record toll of $5.4M** paid by South Korean company SK Gas for its liquid natural gas carrier *Arete*.

On October 26, 2026 a joint German-South Korean consortium completed the drilling of a tunnel underneath the Canal in the Balboa area about 1 mile north of the Bridge of the Americas. A tunnel is planned to be completed in late 2028 to carry Line 3 of the Panama City monorail public railway.

With actual water levels and drought conditions less dire than cautiously predicted, draft and traffic restrictions are being decrementally relaxed as of this writing in November 2026.