

Reading Part 4

Read the text and answer the questions. Use a maximum of five words for each question.

The Panama Canal

The Panama Canal is a vital shipping lane linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Opened in 1914, it was one of the greatest engineering projects of the modern age. However, the concept of a canal through the Isthmus of Panama, a comparatively narrow strip of land linking North and South America, had been thought of as far back as the 16th century. When the Spanish explorer Vasco Núñez de Balboa led an expedition across the Isthmus of Panama in 1513, he saw the potential for a passage that would allow access from sea to sea without having to navigate around Cape Horn at the southernmost tip of South America.

In 1534, Charles V, King of Spain, formally ordered further investigation into the possibility of the construction of a ship canal across the Isthmus. The surveyed route followed, to a large extent, the course of the present-day Panama Canal. However, the governor politely informed Charles V that the undertaking of such an engineering operation was impossible.

Not until the late 18th century was a new Panama Canal construction project given much serious thought. This was when the historic 1789-1794 scientific expedition led by Alessandro Malaspina landed in Panama. By actually planning the excavation of the Panama Canal, Malaspina was able, for the first time, to demonstrate the feasibility of such a huge project.

Overland links continued on the Isthmus of Panama, facilitated by the construction of a railway in 1855. By then, Panama was free of Spanish colonial rule, but the idea of a water route through the Isthmus of Panama had not been forgotten. A new phase in the history of the Panama Canal was beginning.

In 1882, a French company under the renowned engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps, who had earlier built the Suez Canal, finally set about the construction. Their attempt was a disaster. Malaria and yellow fever killed most of the workforce, equipment failed in the heat and humidity, and geological and hydrological considerations were badly managed. The project was abandoned in 1889 at the expense of over 20,000 lives.

The construction of the Panama Canal would finally be realized when the United States, during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, bought out the French company, its equipment and excavations. Work began in 1904 and the Panama Canal was finally opened in 1914. The two great oceans, the Atlantic and the Pacific, had finally been linked through the landmass of Latin America.

The canal is approximately 80 kilometres long and incorporates a series of three locks, which are basically watertight compartments. The first raises ships to the Gatun Lake, the second lowers ships to another lake and the third lowers ships to sea level. The whole trip takes between eight to ten hours.

1. Which part of South America did Balboa want to avoid?

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2. What was Charles V told about his plan for a canal?

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3. What did Malaspina do to show the canal could be built?

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4. What made the crossing of Panama easier in the 19th century?

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5. What important political development occurred in the 19th century?

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6. How long did the French attempt at canal construction last?

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7. What happened to the French company?

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