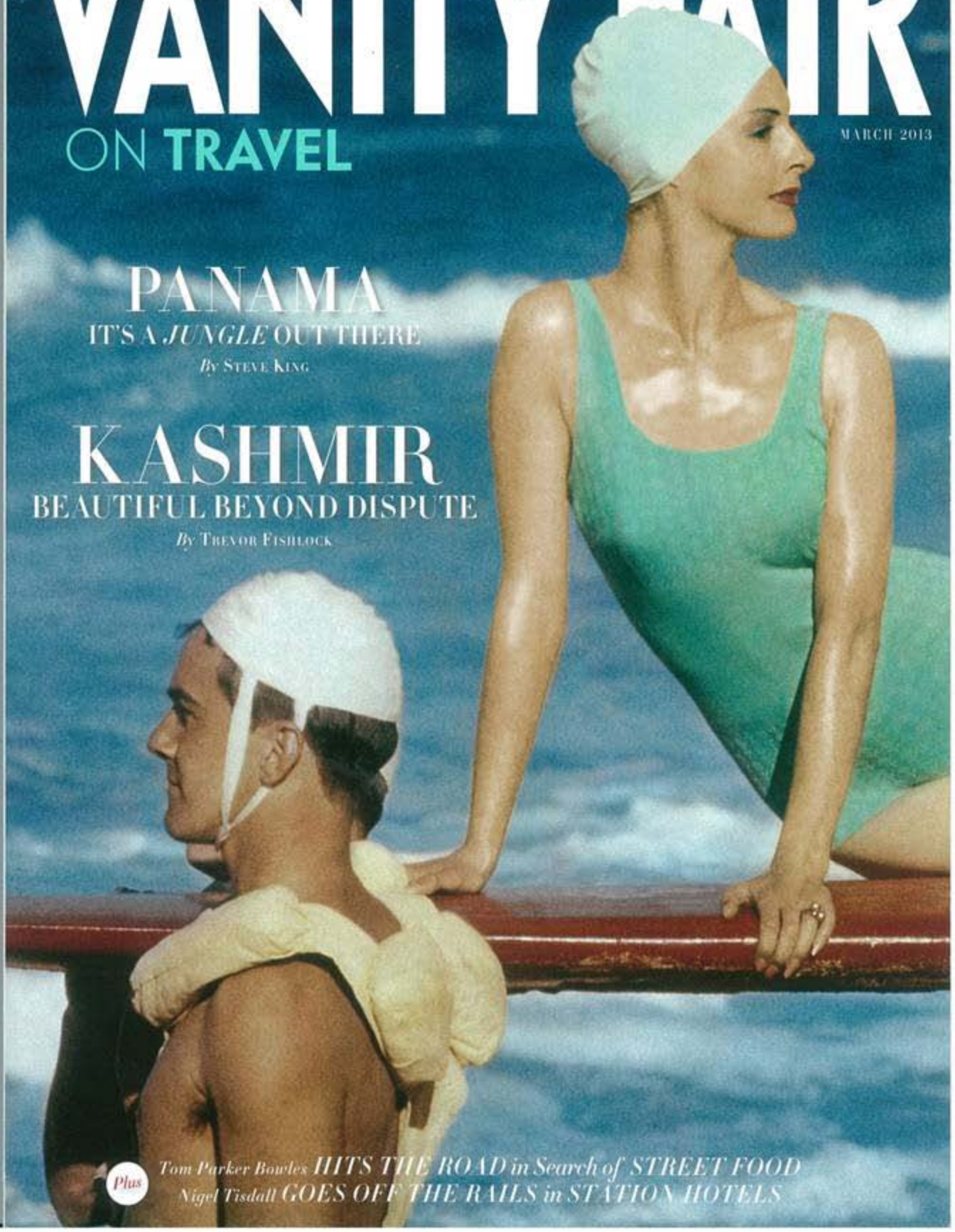
VANITY FAIR

ON TRAVEL

MARCH 2013



PANAMA

IT'S A *JUNGLE* OUT THERE

By Steve King

KASHMIR

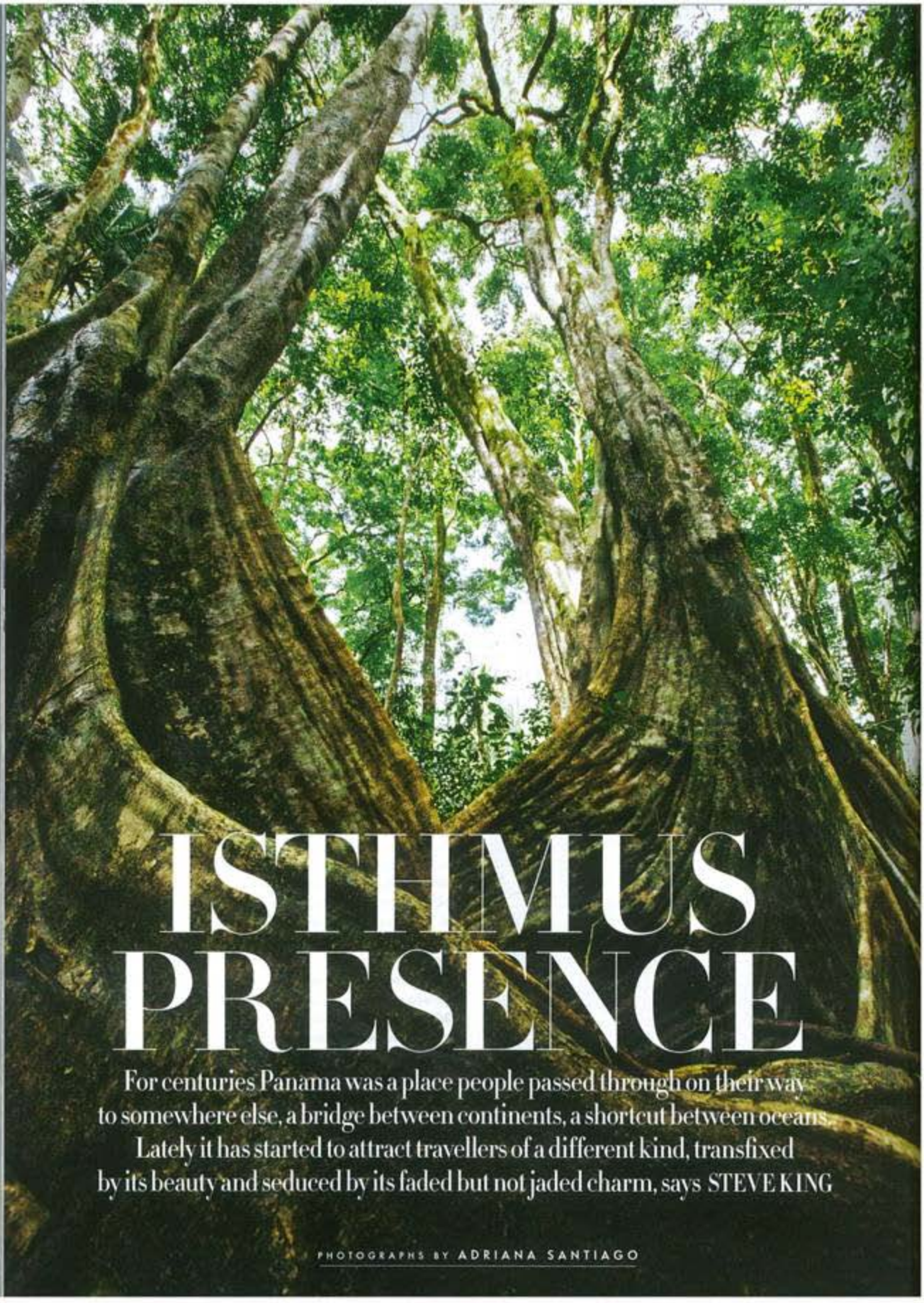
BEAUTIFUL BEYOND DISPUTE

By Trevor Fishlock

Plus

Tom Parker Bowles HITS THE ROAD in Search of STREET FOOD

Nigel Tisdall GOES OFF THE RAILS in STATION HOTELS



ISTHMUS PRESENCE

For centuries Panama was a place people passed through on their way to somewhere else, a bridge between continents, a shortcut between oceans. Lately it has started to attract travellers of a different kind, transfixed by its beauty and seduced by its faded but not jaded charm, says STEVE KING

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ADRIANA SANTIAGO

HEAVENS ABOVE

The Teatro Nacional, in Panama City. *Opposite page:* dense coastal jungle near Jean Pigozzi's Simca Island.

Shortly before noon on my last day in Panama I found myself tottering across the Miraflores Locks in hot pursuit of Stanley Motta. Stanley is a straight-talking, no-nonsense 67-year-old, a devoted family man and, officially at least, Panama's only billionaire, with interests in aviation, banking, property, insurance and the duty-free business. Part of the furniture of the nation. This explains why we were tottering across the Miraflores Locks. Not any old billionaire gets to do that. Which is just as well, because the locks are about two feet wide, with a life-threatening drop off one side into a yawning steel chamber large enough to hold a 105-by-950-foot Panamax container ship. "If you fall, fall to the other side," Stanley shouted over his shoulder. He was loving this. Lights were flashing, indicating that the locks were about to open. But Stanley wanted to show me the control tower in the middle and nobody was going to stop him. He was held in admiration, if not in reverence, by everyone to whom I mentioned his name. It was a stroke of good luck that allowed me to see Panamanian things, briefly, the other way round, through Stanley's eyes. There, safe and sound in the library hush and air-conditioned cool of the control tower at the Miraflores Locks, I saw him grinning like a schoolboy at what must be one of the few things on the face of the earth, apart perhaps from his grandchildren, that still renders him awestruck: the canal in action, a paradigm of efficiency and order.

"Doesn't it blow your mind?" he said.

It did. It does. There would be no Panama without the canal. *Punto.* But it came at a price.

November 3, 1903. Some say five shots were fired, some say six. A Chinese shopkeeper and a donkey of unrecorded origin were killed. The revolution was over in time for sundowners. In this fashion Panama gained its independence from Colombia. The gunships that Theodore Roosevelt had mustered offshore in support of the Panamanian rebels, together with the bribes his people had paid the Colombians to bugger off back to Bogotá, had done the trick. Roosevelt was used to keeping his foot firmly planted on the throats of would-be revolutionaries. This, he later recalled, was altogether easier. "I simply lifted my foot." In this fashion the United States gained the right to build and control the Panama Canal and a strip of territory on either side of it known as the Canal Zone.

It didn't take the Panamanians long to realise they'd been diddled. It took them another 96 years, however, to wrest control of the canal and the Zone from the Americans.

The canal opened in 1914, shortly after the outbreak of the First World War. Thanks to an ingenious system of staggered locks, a ship could make the 48-mile transit between the Atlantic and the Pacific in eight to 10 hours. The alternative was a long and dangerous voyage down one side of South America and up the other via Cape Horn.

The idea of building a canal across the tightly cinched isthmus of Panama wasn't new. Spanish conquistadors, English privateers, French dreamers– they had all tried, or talked about trying. Between 1880 and 1888 Ferdinand de Lesseps, the genius of the Suez Canal, wasted more than a billion francs and 20,000 lives on a doomed attempt to replicate his earlier triumph. Corruption, bad science and mosquitoes put paid to his dream. The fiasco broke him. He spent the last years of his life staring out a window clutching an old newspaper reporting his failure.

People who were there when the Panama Canal was being built spoke of it as "the highway of civilisation" and "the greatest liberty ever taken with nature". Nearly a century later it has lost none of its power to astonish. True, like

iron, concrete, ceramic tiles, bamboo, fibre-optic cable, Glidden paint in nursery tones with names like Sugared Lime and Sweet Baby Boy, Memphis-style furniture, a playful Murano chandelier and a couple of others from the set of the movie *Tower Heist*, in which Pigozzi had a cameo. All of which had to be loaded into containers and shipped across oceans from points north, south, east and west to Pigozzi's harbour. Where in the torrid heat it had to be unloaded and then loaded once more onto a quaint funicular that for years made its tireless way up and down a steep muddy hillside to the building site at the top of the mountain. Where it had to be unloaded all over again.

A bit too *Fitzcarraldo* for my taste. I remember thinking that the bath towels at Simca were so huge and heavy that the prospect of carrying a couple of them from my room to the pool was enough to make me lie down and take a nap instead.

Several household-name architects and interior designers were involved in the planning and execution of Simca, but the project is entirely and unmistakably Pigozzi's own. It has his pawprints all over it. It also has his contemporary African art all over it. Look out, if you get the chance—and you may get the chance, because Pigozzi has decided to make Simca available for rent—for the Seydou Keita prints in the downstairs bathroom by the swimming pools. And yes, that is pools, plural. There are two. Perrier in one, San Pellegrino in the other, as their owner likes to joke.

Pigozzi celebrated his 60th birthday on Simca in January 2012. People I spoke to who were there said it was an enchanted place to throw a party. The carbonate walls of the pavilion and the pools are fitted with thousands of LEDs that glow and pulsate and change colour in time to music. But I was there alone. Alone, that is, apart from the captain of Pigozzi's 220-foot yacht, *Amazon Express*, and a skeleton crew of perhaps 20 or 30 housekeeping, security and ground staff. I was pleased to have the place, relatively speaking, so much to myself. I didn't feel the faintest inclination to switch on an iPod or fire up the popcorn machine in the screening room. I turned the LEDs on once for the fun of it and then turned them off again. Otherwise I stared into space, across jungle canopy and sea and sky. The stupendous scene lived and breathed gigantically, extending to the horizon in every direction, animated by weather and tide, shifting light, the squawks and back-row chatter of wildlife. I was reminded of something Andy Warhol, of all people, said: "I think having land and not ruining it is the most beautiful art anybody could want to own."

In 1671 Panama City was captured from the Spanish by the Welsh pirate Henry Morgan, sacked and, after burning for four weeks, reduced to smouldering ashes. It has since bounced back impressively. More than a decade of accelerated economic growth has transformed the place beyond recognition. It's as though a fleet of skyscrapers was blown off course en route to Dubai and made landfall on the steamy, swampy shores of Panama City. The towers are arrayed like masts at a yacht club. The tallest and sparkliest of them occupy a strip of reclaimed land known as the Costa del Este. Eight years ago it simply wasn't there.

The boom is rippling rapidly outwards. Guillermo de Saint Malo Eleta—plain Guillé as he is more conveniently known—took me to see the Las Perlas archipelago, off the coast of Panama City, where the firm founded by his grandfather is building a luxury resort, Pearl Island. The exiled Shah of Iran had, he said, holed up for a while on nearby Contadora.

Guillé had brought his pal David Henesy, a restaurateur and former child actor (the original *Dark Shadows*), along for the ride. They seemed to embody a sort of Chamber of Commerce dream of a prosperous yet easy-going, business-minded yet eco-aware Panama. As we flew back into the city towards the vast beaded curtain of skyscrapers on the Costa del Este, Guillé said: "Looks great, doesn't it? Today Panama is dressed in a suit and tie. It's just missing the shoes and socks. We need to work on the shoes and socks."

Plenty of people are doing exactly that. Although the results may be more conspicuous in other parts of the city, they are most romantic and beguiling in Casco Antiguo, the raffish, sun-faded, elegantly tumbledown old town.

most modern highways, this one has a traffic problem. Ships queue at both ends. Industry observers fret about "dwell time", new trade routes, the next-generation class of post-Panamax mega-ships that are too big for the canal, the cost of expansion, the prospect of obsolescence. But the ships keep coming to Panama. They pass, almost silently, from one ocean to another, elevated for part of their transit 85 feet above sea level, as if they were weightless, as if, here, the laws of physics had ceased to apply. The highway is very much open. And the liberty taken with nature seems as great today as it ever did.

Panama has only one canal but many islands—an island, the brochures used to say, for every day of the year. Jean Pigozzi owns one of those islands, but there's nothing everyday about it.

It's on the Pacific side, about halfway along the isthmus, near Coiba National Park. You can sail there or you can fly. On maps the island is labelled Isla Canales de Tierra, but Pigozzi has renamed it Simca, after his father's car company. He's also bought up a sizeable slice of the neighbouring mainland, so that if you can see it from Simca, Pigozzi probably owns it. When I met him in London to talk about my Panama plans he pointed out that, in the daytime, guests on his island can't see another building or, at night, so much as a pin-prick of electric light. The darkness itself, he might have said, is his too.

As well as being an inheritor of the family automotive fortune, Pigozzi is a successful investor in his own right, an international party-circuit phenomenon, a colourful addition to *Vanity Fair*'s best-dressed list and the owner of what is probably the world's finest collection of contemporary African art. Everything about the man—his shoes, his spectacles, his rumbling *basso profundo*—is larger than life. A nice little bungalow on a quiet, convenient beach was never going to be an option for him. Thus, having bought the island, he immediately set about constructing a hi-tech, Bond-villain lair at its summit, together with a state-of-the-art marine-research station, the Liquid Jungle Lab, at its base. All that's missing is a white cat.

"It's built out of pure craziness," Pigozzi told me. That, plus several million dollars' worth of steel, glass,

A VIEW WITH A ROOM

From top: the coast near Simca Island; inside the main pavilion; the view from the roof, towards Coiba National Park.

K.C. Hardin, a laid-back thirtysomething from Florida, has been instrumental in the revitalisation of Casco. A corporate lawyer who got fed up with "squeezing his left brain", he found his calling, and his wife, while on a surfing sabbatical in Bocas del Toro in 2003. One thing led to another and before he knew it he had teamed up with a local business partner, bought an abandoned music school in Casco and turned it into affordable space for artists. Now he runs Conservatorio, a property company with a conscience, as well as two beautifully refurbished hotels, the Canal House and Las Clementinas. A third, the American Trade Hotel, is due to open this year.

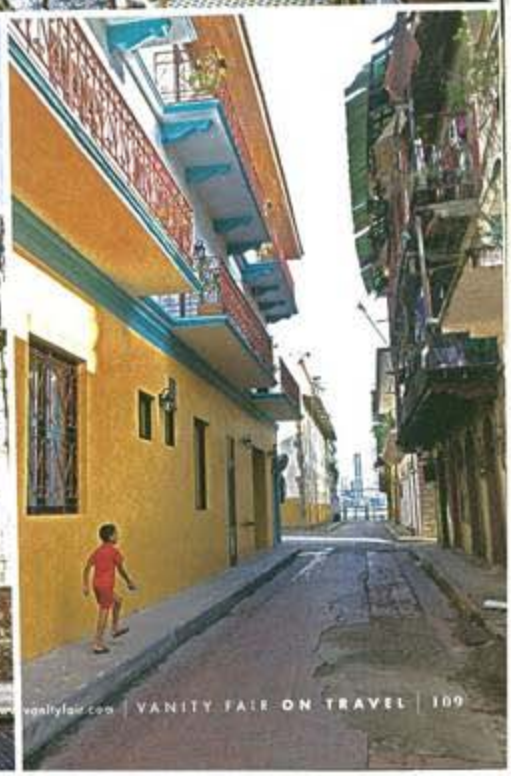
K.C.'s community-led, softly-softly approach has helped attract interest to a part of town that many had long since written off as a no-go area, and to restore it to something like its former glory.

It's a question of balance, he explained over tapas and a glass of rioja in a smart wine bar near the waterfront. "I grew up in Miami and saw what happened to South Beach. I worked in New York and saw what happened to Williamsburg. It's the same deal here. You can use up as much energy stopping forward movement as you can preserving the past, because there's a real risk of over-gentrification." It's a risk the locals seem on the whole happy to take. They adore K.C. In Casco streets where once he might have been mugged, today he's mobbed. Gringos adore him too. The last entry in the visitors' book at Las Clementinas when I checked in was signed "Bono". The garrulous Irishman had filled an entire page with a fulsome song of praise and self-referential observations on rock-star sunglasses and Central American politics, in neatest schoolboy hand. If it wasn't written by the man himself, it could only have been the work of Craig Brown.

Flying west to Boquete, the rusty iron rooftops looked like paperbacks that had been left open, face down, on a billiard table. Boquete is a misty, pretty town in the foothills of a volcano, near the border with Costa Rica. It is beloved of birdwatchers, coffee aficionados and white-water rafters. It also has the Panamonte Inn, an impeccable fold in time where Ingrid Bergman once came to get away from it all and dashing Admiral Byrd wrote his memoirs.

RIGHT: OLD STREET

From a pathe historic church in the district of San Francisco, Panama City, you can look down from a rooftop terrace [illegible] Spanish colonial buildings in the area's Casco Antiguo



I had been told to make a point of seeking out Inga Collins—Doña Inga—a Panama institution, whose family has owned the Panamonte since the 1940s. We met over a lunch magicked out of thin air and unpronounceable ingredients by her son Charlie, a chef.

"Sometimes I talk too much," said Doña Inga. After a couple of hours in her company this seemed wholly plausible, though I couldn't imagine anyone ever wanting her to pipe down. Doña Inga is pushing 90 and still going gangbusters. She's a dry cocktail of Swedish genes and American-educated directness, and a natural-born storyteller.

It's cooler in Boquete than it is at sea level. Doña Inga wore a shawl across her narrow shoulders. She had, she explained, seen governments come and go, insurgents enter stage left and dictators exit stage right. The US invasion of December 1989, when Manuel Noriega was deposed? Highly inconvenient. Ruined the Christmas dinner that she had spent days preparing because it prevented her husband, who was in Panama City on business when the *yanquis* arrived, from coming home until Boxing Day. But Panama had been good to the family, in shipping, fishing, farming and the hotel. "Ca-a-a-a-nned frui-i-i-i-t was the one thing that didn't pay off," Doña Inga said at last, and looked slightly surprised, as if the thought had only just occurred to her. She had a drawl like the Continental Divide that reminded me of John Huston.

"Anyhow. You were asking about Colón. We-e-e-e-ll. Back when I started going there, the Hotel Washington was the thing in Colón. Just the *thing*. We'd sit in the shade under the balcony, in those beautiful cane chairs they used to have, and we'd watch the ships go by. And there was the French bazaar. The Cuban fabric store. And the Strangers' Club." She started waving her hands in little Charleston circles, singing:

Ta-ra-ra boom-de-ay!
Did you get yours today?
I got mine yesterday!
That's why I walk this way...

Doña Inga straightened her shawl and returned her hands to her lap. "We-e-e-e-ll. Anyhow. That was Colón. We had to make our own fun."

Colón, the port city where the canal meets the Caribbean Sea, used to be the end of the Royal Road, a cobbled

conveyor belt for the conquistadors' loot. Some 300 years later it became the terminus of the Panama Canal railway line, the precursor of the modern canal. The city was burnt down in 1885 by an angry Colombian, then rebuilt in the French Colonial style. At the height of its prosperity it was one of the great cities of Latin America, cosmopolitan, elegant, thrumming with commerce.

Graham Greene visited Colón in the 1970s while in the throes of an unaccountable infatuation with Omar Torrijos, the sad-eyed dictator who signed the treaties with Jimmy Carter that would eventually return the canal and the Zone to Panama. The city had become, Greene wrote, a slum. He stopped to buy some film near the Hotel Washington and decided to walk the rest of the way. After a few hundred yards he was bundled into a police van and told that, although he was travelling with an armed bodyguard, he would be putting his life at risk if he remained on the street.

A similar thing happened to me when I was there. I too was travelling with a bodyguard—happily, one supplied by an elected president rather than an army general. And I too had been warned not to get out of the car in Colón. Why not, I asked Russell Goedjen, a beardy old Panama hand, originally from Wisconsin, who runs a marina in Colón and looks reassuringly like Captain Birdseye. "Too many kids running around with guns," he growled.

At the time the warnings seemed overcautious. People in Colón were friendly, inquisitive, chatty. I saw plenty of kids running around, but none with guns. The bold ones posed to have their picture taken. Younger brothers and sisters tagged along, hiding and shrieking behind their hands. I was invited to join a poker game by a woman with curlers in her hair and dollar bills piled high on the table in front of her.

The Hotel Washington, like the rest of the city, had clearly seen better days, but there was a kind of wasted grandeur about it. Coconut palms grew through cracked asphalt in a windswept courtyard by the sea. The ships on their way to and from the canal looked far away. A jet-black queen with braces on his teeth and denim hot pants on his buns loitered by the pool with a fat, freckly fellow who might have been his boyfriend or his pimp. Like everyone I met in Colón, they were happy to spare a few minutes to reflect on the human condition and the rise and fall of nations.

Six days later rioting broke out in Colón. Locals were protesting a plan to sell off the state-owned land on which the Zona Libre, the second-largest free-trade zone in the world and Colón's economic mainstay, is built. Reading online news reports at my desk in London I remembered something Doña Inga had said over lunch in Boquete when I asked how much Panama had changed in her lifetime and whether she felt anything had been lost. She adjusted her shawl and said: "Something is always lost." □

Vanity Fair TRAVELS TO...

PANAMA

WAY *to* GO

Copa (copaair.com) flies to and from dozens of cities in North and South America via Panama City. From Europe, it's simplest to pick up a connection in Miami or New York. Panama is on the whole navigable, but it doesn't hurt to have some expert help for anything off the beaten track: **Scott Dunn** (scottdunn.com) can tailor-make an itinerary for you based on your enthusiasm for beach, mountains, jungle, cities or any permutation thereof. In Panama City, the **Canal House** (canalhousepanama.com) and **Las Clementinas** (lasclementinas.com) are lovingly restored and right in the beating heart of Casco Antiguo. The bar and restaurant at Las Clementinas are superb, and not only staffed by friendly locals but also frequented by them. Boquete is charming, and the splendid **Panamonte Inn** (panamonte.com) alone makes the trip there worthwhile. **Simca Island** is available to rent; for details, ring Adam Coats at Abercrombie & Kent Villas on 01242 547932.

NEED *to* KNOW

DO take the train from Panama City to Colón and back. It's one of the routes that changed the world.
DON'T ignore words of caution where your safety is concerned; but don't be overly twitchy about it either—unless you're in the Darién, which you shouldn't be.
DO keep your eyes peeled. Panama's biodiversity rivals that of the Galápagos. Two points for a toucan, 10 for a jaguarundi.
DON'T think that just because you're on holiday you can avoid the kitchen completely. Charlie Collins (chefcharliecollins.com) runs classes to teach the uninitiated which end of a *ñamé* to hold.

READ ON

In terms of fiction, Panama has not been particularly well served. Non-fiction-wise, it's a different (true) story. On the canal, two of the best are *Hell's Gorge*, by Matthew Parker, and *The Path Between the Seas*, by David McCullough. On the state of the nation at the time of the Torrijos-Carter treaties, Graham Greene's *Getting to Know the General* is brilliant and baffling in equal measure.

PS

Coffee obsessives agree that the best beans in the world are grown in Boquete. Seriously. A cup of Geisha at **Café Ruiz** in Boquete (caferuiz-boquete.com), made from the most expensive beans on earth, costs $9 and is worth every cent.