



## Old town Panama City

### Preface

Once populated by gangs, Casco Viejo is now a major draw for its hotels, shops and galleries.

### Writer

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### Photographer

Juan Felipe Rubio

Before the end of their lunch break, a few Panameños find respite under the shade of four shimbillo trees in Plaza Herrera. Once a bullfighting arena, this square in the Casco Viejo has been a focal point in the neighbourhood for centuries. In the centre is a statue of national hero Tomás Herrera, a general who fought across South America in the wars of independence.

To the right of the effigy is the Panamericana, a hostel crowded with European backpackers. Perpendicular to it is a beer garden, Mojitos sin Mojitos, and adjacent there's a four-storey building that's being renovated by a Californian businessman. But no property in the Plaza is as striking as the American Trade Hotel.

Opened six months ago, the ATH has quickly become a symbol of the neighbourhood's resurgence. "There used to be gangs living on each of the floors; people crossing the square were at risk of getting caught in the frequent shootouts," says Ramón Arias, one third of Conservatorio, a property company dedicated to revitalising the district. "This was a no-go zone, you couldn't walk these streets," adds KC Hardin, an American who came to Panama on a surf trip and decided to stay, joining Ramón and his wife Hildegard to form Conservatorio years later.

All three members of Conservatorio live in the neighbourhood and have been fundamental in changing its landscape, remodelling a dozen old buildings that were about to crumble, and empowering locals in the process. "Our aim is to build a society, not just a hotel," says Ramón. "We're very inclusive in our projects; some of the employees here are rehabilitated gangsters."

That sense of community has brought different social classes together and it has



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## Property guide

It's easy to buy property in Panama and the requirements for a foreigner are the same as for a local. You need to clear an initial deposit and if you're asking for a loan, the bank will ask you for your credit history, tax returns and standard paperwork.

### Prices (average)

**1 bedroom:** 50 sq m to 100 sq m – \$150,000 to \$300,000 (€100,000 to €215,000)

**2 bedroom:** 100 sq m to 200 sq m – \$300,000 to \$600,000 (€215,000 to €430,000)

**3 bedroom:** 200 sq m to 300 sq m – \$900,000 to \$900,000 (€430,000 to €650,000)

### Estate agent

Arco Properties

Patrizia Pinzón

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### The resident

Ramón Arias

"Casco is a great place to bring up kids; mine always walk around the district. If I'm not around the neighbours keep an eye on them and let me know what they're up to."

- 01 Casco Viejo rooftops
- 02 American Trade Hotel
- 03 Ramón Arias
- 04 KC Hardin's home
- 05 Teatro Amador
- 06 Living room of Marie André Soundy and Ricardo Arosemena
- 07 Residents Marie André Soundy and Ricardo Arosemena
- 08 Casco Viejo street
- 09 Casa Mondo store
- 10 Diablo Fiasco café
- 11 Stopping for a chat on the waterfront



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## Stay

**1 American Trade Hotel**  
This property is a collaboration between *Atelier Ace* (of *Ace Hotels*), *Conservatorio* and *Commune Design*.  
[acehotel.com/panama](http://acehotel.com/panama)

## Shop

**2 Casa Mondo**  
Run by a South African, this concept store sells everything from Filipino leather wallets to Iris Hartverk brushes from Sweden.  
[casamondo.com.pa](http://casamondo.com.pa)

## Eat & drink

**3 GranClement**  
The cure for the occasional scorching sun that hits Casco is an ice-cream cone. Choose from a selection of gelatos and sorbets, made from tropical fruits, including guanabana and passion fruit.  
[granclement.com](http://granclement.com)

**4 Diablo Rosso**  
A space that includes a cafe, a gallery exhibiting Latin American art, and a concept store.  
[diablorosso.com](http://diablorosso.com)

**5 Teatro Amador**  
A former cinema, *Teatro Amador* is now a bar and nightclub hosting top international DJs. Opened by Spaniard Omar Ynzenga, the top floor houses *Atelier*, a more relaxed bar that will soon be converted into a high-end restaurant.  
[teatroamador.com](http://teatroamador.com)

**6 Espacio Panama**  
Overlooking the *Calle 9a Este*, this club is set in a recovered building that was previously falling apart. The four main walls remain but the rest was torn down and the salvaged pieces were used to make the bar, tables and other pieces that decorate the space.  
*Calle 9a Este and Avenida B*

## Culture

**7 Jazz Bar**  
Next to the *American Trade* hotel, this small concert hall serves as a stage for local bands that have trained or been sponsored by Danilo Perez, artistic director of the *Global Jazz Institute* at *Berklee* music college.  
*Avenida Central and Calle 10*



### The residents

Ricardo Arosemena and Marie Andree Soudry  
"There's no place like this neighbourhood. Here we all know each other, it's a tight community. Like a small city within a larger one."



also attracted foreign investors; one of them is Andrew Hyde, a 29-year-old who moved to Panama after finishing his studies at *Cornell University*. He currently runs the *Espacio Panama* bar and is about to open *Jeronimo*, a residential edifice (once owned by a Freemason dentist) built in the French colonial style, just a block from the *ATH*. "All of us buying property here have the same vision," says Hyde as we sit down in front of the *Santo Domingo* church for an al-fresco dinner with his Argentinean business partner. "It's a joint effort to build a cultural infrastructure."

As the sun fades away, Casco is abuzz with locals who drive here from across town – from areas that look like cheap versions of Dubai – to eat at one of the many newly opened restaurants. In front of the *Jazz Club* – a live music bar opened by musical maestro Danilo Perez – a queue forms. Patrons wait for their tables to be assigned, anticipating the act that will soon perform. A few hours later they will walk down Casco's cobbled streets, unfringed, taking the time to sit on a bench in *Plaza Herrera* and chat for a while before calling it a night. — (M)

