

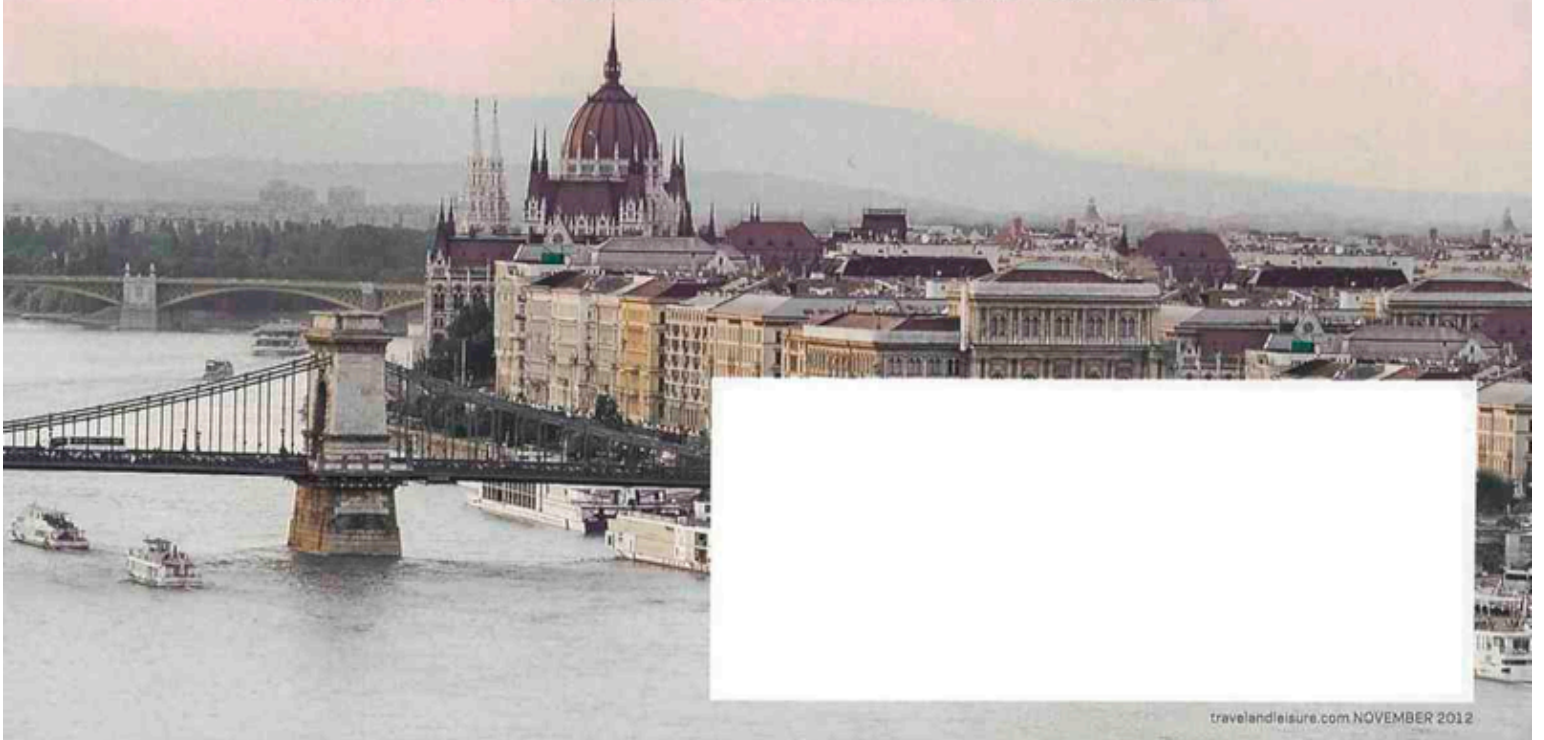
AIRPORT SECRETS HOW TO AVOID FLIGHT DELAYS AND MORE

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

101

PLACES

EVERY TRAVELER SHOULD KNOW



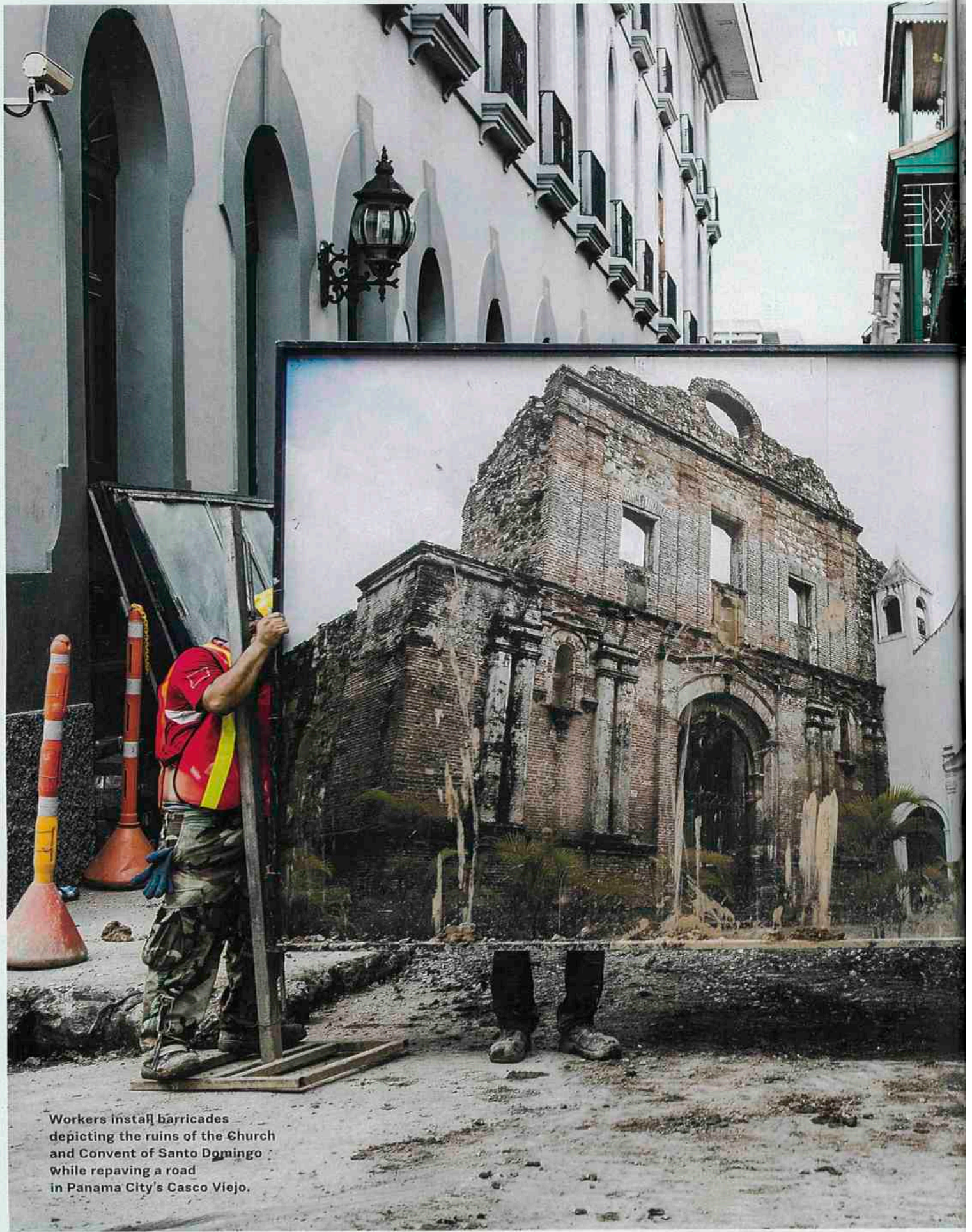
TRAVEL+LEISURE

November 2012

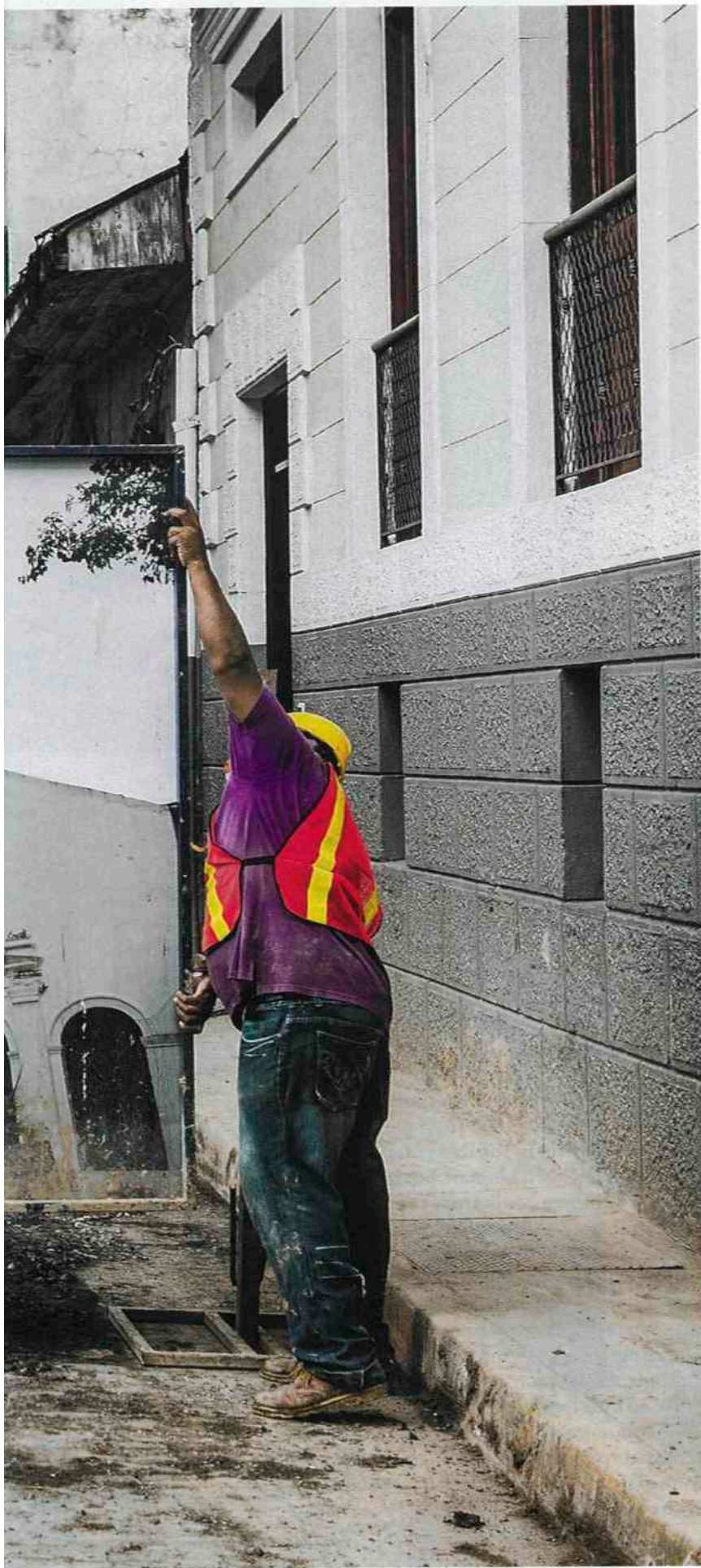
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Patrizia Pinzón, one of the pioneers behind the revitalization of Panama City's Casco Viejo neighborhood, at home.



Workers install barricades depicting the ruins of the Church and Convent of Santo Domingo while repaving a road in Panama City's Casco Viejo.



C A S C O

V I E J O

R I S I N G

**WITH ITS
ATMOSPHERIC
BUILDINGS AND
HIDDEN-GEM
HOTELS,
PANAMA CITY'S
COLONIAL-ERA
DISTRICT
IS ON THE
VERGE OF WORLD
DISCOVERY.
BY STEPHEN
DRUCKER**

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY
**DAVE
LAURIDSEN**

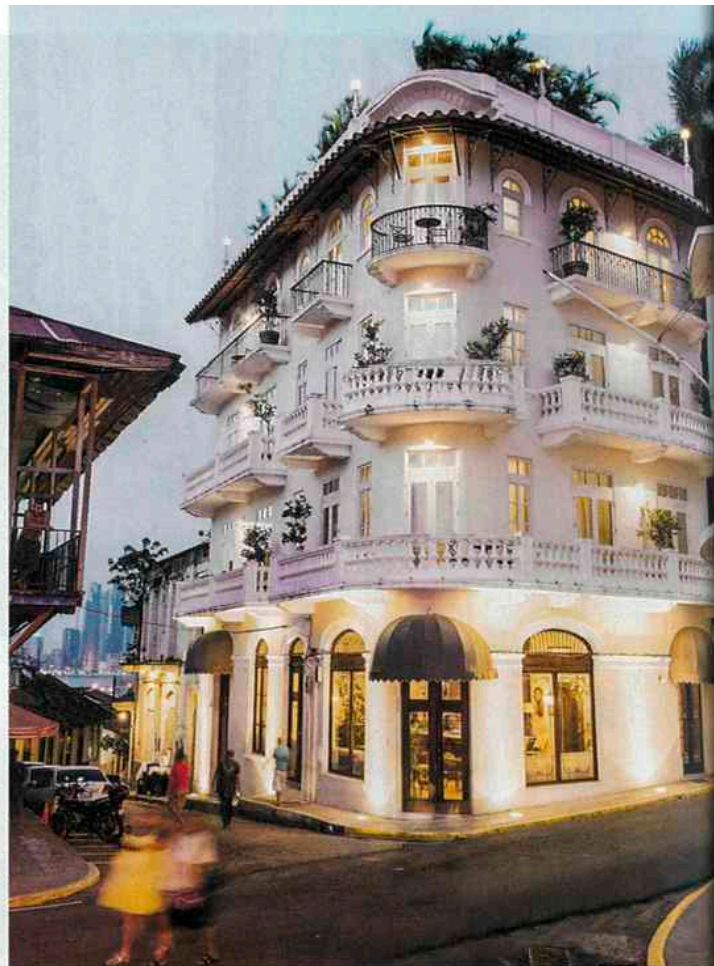
**THE HISTORIC
QUARTER OF
PANAMA CITY,
KNOWN AS
CASCO VIEJO,
IS HAVING
THAT MOMENT
I ALWAYS SEEM
TO JUST MISS.**

The Casco is happening but it hasn't quite happened. Mention Panama at any cocktail party in my fashion-barometer hometown, East Hampton, New York, and people all say the right things; they make sure you know they know it's a hot destination. But very few of them have made the five-hour trip from New York, and while *Sports Illustrated* came to shoot its 2012 Swimsuit Issue, models aren't exactly herding there yet. How long can this innocence last?

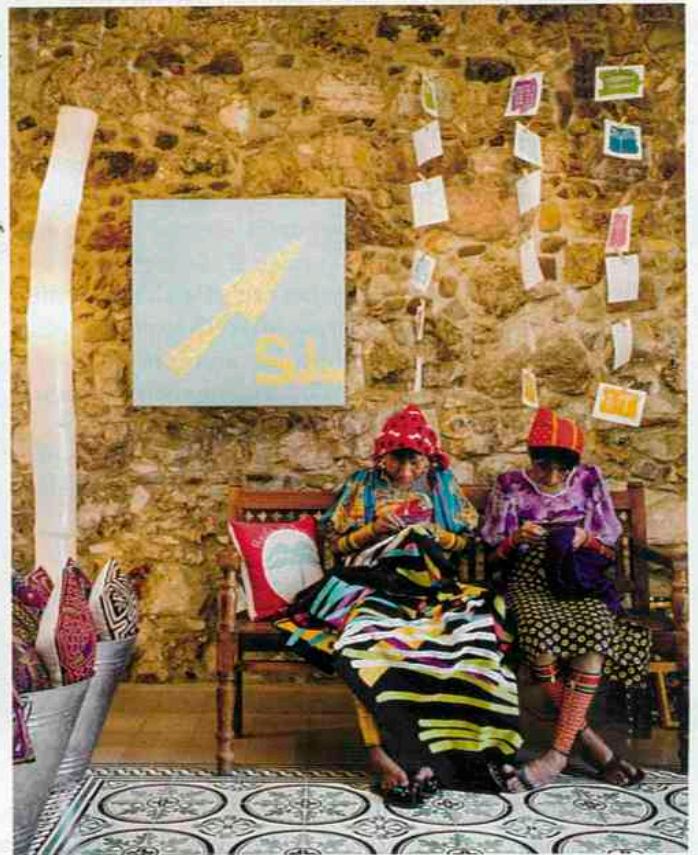
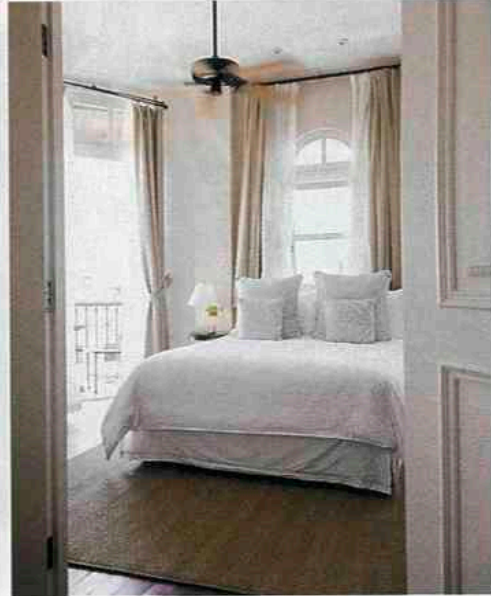
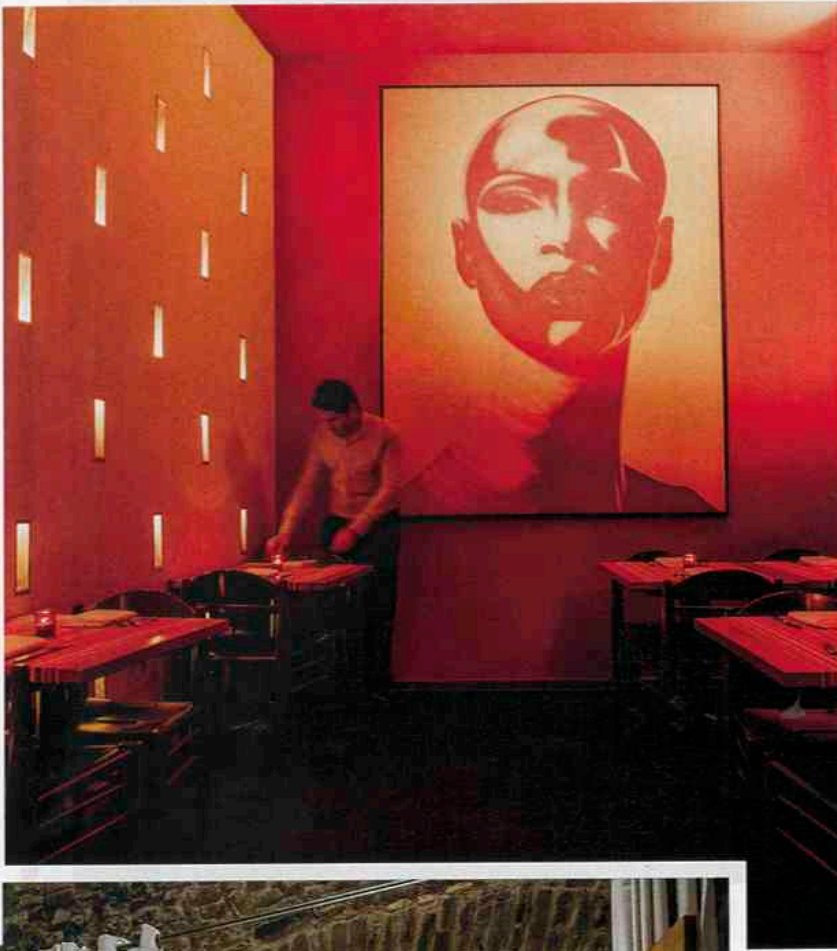
The Casco, the southwestern tip of Panama City, overlooks the Pacific entrance to the canal, where huge container ships hover like shoppers on Black Friday. It's just three avenues wide and nobody uses addresses. Architecturally encyclopedic, designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997, it could easily be the setting for the next photo series by Robert Polidori. It's erotic like Havana, moldering like New Orleans, world-weary like Cuernavaca, Mexico, and just dangerous enough, like Miami's South Beach in its early years—all of this seasoned with a dash of *The Night of the Iguana*. The booming city beyond couldn't be more different, with its Singapore skyline and Dubai aspirations (*Forbes* magazine described it a few years ago as "Monaco with bananas"). Since the handover of the canal to Panama in 1999, and even more so after 9/11,

Panama City has become a stomping ground for South Americans, a place for them to get all the Carolina Herrera and Hermès they want without being kidnapped or waiting hours to be fingerprinted in Miami passport control. In five days I never went to their part of town, but they showed up in the Casco at night to play.

The neighborhood is small, but it's quite a show. In a 15-minute walk from your hotel you can see grand old houses carefully restored as luxury condos; squatters on filthy sofas watching brand-new flat-screen TV's in abandoned buildings; the presidential palace; crumbling pastel façades held together by makeshift scaffolding; trees growing through former ballrooms; endless construction sites; and streets populated by (along with working-class Panamanians going about their day) surfers of all ages, expats of many nationalities, birders, eco-tourists, barefoot children, trust-fund brats, and street vendors napping in fetal position



Clockwise from top left:
An exterior view of the hotel
Las Clementinas; preparing
for dinner at Ego y Narciso; a
suite at Las Clementinas;
Kuna artisans embroidering
textiles at Karavan Gallery;
the penthouse suite at Casa del
Horno; developer K. C. Hardin
(top right) and his team on
the steps at Las Clementinas.





The rooftop bar at the Tántalo Hotel, with views of Panama City.

under folding tables off of which they sell Panama hats (asking price: around \$20).

“You see that woman in costume? It’s not a costume.” K. C. Hardin is pointing out a Kuna woman wrapped in the traditional bright sewn-textile panels they sell around the neighborhood as everything from ankle bracelets to sofa pillows. An American in his late thirties, Hardin used to be a heavy-duty corporate lawyer until he came to Panama on a surfing trip. After a six-year leave of absence, he finally admitted he was never going back. He’s a real estate developer now, using those sharp legal teeth to polish up the Casco while keeping it from becoming one more could-be-anywhere stop on the global fabulousness circuit.

He isn’t alone in this, and here it gets complicated: Hardin’s partner in the real estate firm Conservatorio is Ramón Arias, also a lawyer, who moved into a run-down apartment in the Casco nearly 20 years ago, when most people of his class wouldn’t even walk there. Arias hired Hildegard Vásquez, then a newly minted architect who’d come home to Panama, to renovate his family residence. “By the time I was done, I was married to him and pregnant,” Vásquez says, sitting behind her desk at Hache Uve, now the leading preservation architects in the country. Hardin got married, too, to Patrizia Pinzón, who now has a desk at Arco Properties, which markets the buildings that Conservatorio develops as well as real estate throughout the Casco. And who’s at the desk behind Pinzón? Hardin’s mother, Clara Keyes Hardin, who moved down from Santa Fe, New Mexico. It’s one big family with one big mission.

Authentic is the team’s favorite word as they slowly and strategically try to improve and preserve a living, working neighborhood, and also get us to come visit. The key, they say, is not to displace all the locals. Along with stylish hotels and apartments they’re building affordable housing, a travel agency, a bakery, restaurants, artists’ residences, a hostel, and a community center. Their hotels employ mostly neighborhood people trained by a local foundation. Pinzón and Clara Keyes Hardin don’t so much sell real estate as pick and choose ideal neighbors, putting off the house flippers and finding sympathetic young Panamanians, South Americans who want a break from glitz, and Americans and Europeans looking to reinvent themselves in a place where luxury condos cost only about \$300 per square foot. As Pinzón explains, “You want people who embrace the neighborhood as it is, not ask, ‘When will it be finished?’”

“There’s always somebody who came before you,” Vásquez says. “The moment you see that, you understand the big picture.” History, however, is a big disconnect in Panama—a country that was once as subjugated to the United States as any colony, even if it technically wasn’t one. (For most of the past century, Panamanians couldn’t even enter the Canal Zone without an American host.) “Our history is happenstance. It’s not history,” Vásquez says. “Mostly people here want new. Miami is Mecca.”

Conservatorio’s first hotel, the Canal House—a cool, dark refuge from the heat that feels like a rich man’s residence—has only three guest rooms. Daniel Craig stayed there while filming *Quantum of Solace* five years ago, went back to

England, and, without even being asked to, raved about it in the press, giving the Casco a big boost. Their second hotel, Las Clementinas, where I stayed, has six huge, high-ceilinged suites and a lot of stairs; you don't so much feel you've checked in as moved in. Neither hotel relies on the usual hip-hotel tricks; they have more of a Graham Greene atmosphere. If I'd gotten any more into it, I would have bought a bottle of seven-year Havana Club, taken a glass from the bathroom, and let the barely revolving ceiling fans hypnotize me until I passed out.

Other developers are in the game, too. Casa del Horno is a small hotel with a lot of gorgeous stonework and a Milanese sleekness. Tántalo Hotel is positioning itself as the party place, with a huge bar in the lobby and another on the roof and every room designed by a different Panamanian artist. A French hotel under construction is lurching along—nothing moves fast in Central America.

The next big opening will be Conservatorio's American Trade Hotel. The Casco's largest, at 50 rooms, the property is also its most architecturally ambitious, spanning four major historic buildings; and the most strategically located, in the neighborhood's center. It could be the equivalent of the Delano igniting South Beach. "Every great city has an iconic hotel that embodies the city," Hardin says. The concept seems like a natural: a lobby that's the crossroads of the city that's the trade crossroads of the world, a magnet for a mythical guest whom Hardin calls the Cosmo-tropico-latino. You know this smoothy. You see him in Nespresso bars all over the world, stirring his single for 20 minutes.

It's all a bit ambitious, but this earnest bunch never quits. "Everything worthwhile is Sisyphean, don't you think?" Hardin says. Panama can be a dodgy country. The team has had its share of threats. Right now they're fighting with the city over a proposed expressway around the Casco—a favorite way to kill any neighborhood. But I wouldn't bet against them.

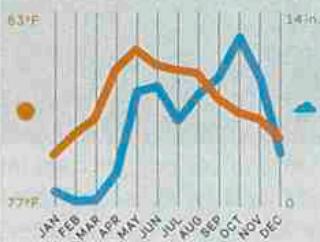
With the opening of the nearby Museum of Biodiversity, designed by Frank Gehry, and bigger and more amenity-rich hotels, people will surely be coming to the Casco in greater numbers in the next few years. The most demanding of the Four Seasons crowd may want to hold off until then, but for everybody else, this is a time that travelers will look back on wistfully. At some point the rough edges are going to be smoothed out. The disarming Panamanian custom of shaking your hand—your driver and your bellman stick out an arm, and you think they're reaching for your bag—will probably give way to more distanced, classic hotel training. The day will come when you'll have to fight for a reservation at Ego y Narciso, where you can now take all the time in the world ordering plate after plate of ceviche under the full moon. There won't always be bars like La Casona, down a dark, dead-end street in a derelict old building, where you can drop in for a mojito with a hundred other people if you're still up at 4 a.m. You can come now, or you can wait for the Assouline book. †

Stephen Drucker, a T+L contributing editor, is currently working on a book about Brooklyn, New York.



T+L Guide

Weather



Getting There

Major carriers such as Delta Air Lines and United Airlines, as well as the Panamanian carrier Copa Airlines, fly direct to Panama City from many U.S. cities.

STAY

Canal House Corner of Avda. A and Calle 5 Este; canalhousepanama.com. \$

Casa del Horno Avda. B/Calle 8 Este; casadelhorno.net. \$\$

Las Clementinas Corner of Avda. B and Calle 11 Este; lasclementinas.com. \$\$

Tántalo Hotel Calle 8 Este/Avda. B; tantalohotel.com. \$

EAT AND DRINK

DiVino Enoteca Wine bar with excellent bruschetta. Avda. A/Calle 4 Oeste; enotecadivino.com. \$\$

Ego y Narciso Plaza Bolívar/Calle 3 Este; egoynarciso.com. \$\$

Granclement An ice cream shop worth getting excited about. Avda. Central/Calle 3 Oeste; granclement.com.

La Casona Behind the Museo del Canal, Calle 5 Este/Avda. A; 507/6706-0528.

Las Clementinas Café & Bar Steaks, risottos—you cannot miss. Corner of Avda. B and Calle 11 Este; lasclementinas.com. \$\$

L'Osteria The emphasis is Italian (the pasta with seafood is architect Hildegard Vásquez's favorite). Avda. B/Calle 8 Este; casadelhorno.net. \$\$

Tántalo Kitchen Great for lunch. Try pulled pork on thick corn tortillas. Calle 8 Este/Avda. B; tantalohotel.com. \$

DO

Panama Canal The visitors' center at the Miraflores Locks (the Pacific side) is a short taxi ride from the Casco. To sail through the locks, book a "partial transit" day trip (\$160) through Ancon Expeditions (anconexpeditions.com).

SHOP

Karavan Gallery The best local artisans, with a collection of colorful Kuna-made textiles. Calle 3 Oeste/Avda. A; karavan-gallery.com.

Papiro y Yo Accessories made using recycled papers. Calle 4 Este between Avda. B and Avda. Central; papiroyyo.com.