

Casco Viejo: Panama's Up-and-Coming District

Full of hidden gems, Casco Viejo is on the verge of world discovery.

From [November 2012](#) By [Stephen Drucker](#)
Appeared as "Casco Viejo Rising" in T+L Magazine

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?



Photo: Dave Lauridsen

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

The 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. The 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.

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.sa