

# Casco Viejo is the emerging hot spot in Panama City, Panama

## American ex-pats help rebuild a once-decaying district of the capital

December 18, 2013|By Eric Vohr, Special to Tribune Newspapers

PANAMA CITY — This Central American nation is fast becoming a prime destination for winter travelers looking to trade cold and slush for sun and surf. But this country's riches are found not only in its tropical jungles and white sand beaches; one of Panama's hottest new destinations is right in the heart of the capital's historic district.

Founded in the 17th century, Panama City's colonial district of Casco Viejo once was the hub of Panamanian culture and civilization. Jutting into the Gulf of Panama on the Pacific side, the district sits on a peninsula chosen for defense against pirates. Casco later fell into neglect as the modern city center sprouted its skyscrapers across the bay.

But now Casco is experiencing a renaissance due in part to the efforts of American expatriates. U.S. influence isn't unusual here; for most of the 20th century, the United States held a corridor bisecting the country along the Panama Canal.

Casco obviously remains a work in progress, but standing side by side with its shells of dilapidated buildings are chic new coffeehouses, gourmet restaurants, boutique hotels and some of Panama's hottest clubs.

Unlike some urban-renewal projects, the Panamanians didn't just bulldoze Casco and rebuild; a small group of key visionaries, including those expats, have made it their mission to preserve Casco's history and elegance.

Among them is Matt Landau, an American who moved to Panama after graduating from the University of Richmond in 2005, fell in love with Casco and acquired Los Cuatros Tulipanes, a collection of vacation rental apartments in the center of the district. He soon connected with a group of like-minded entrepreneurs.

Today he runs both Tulipanes and a boutique hotel called Canal House, both of which drew enough notice to attract the attention of the movie crew filming 2008's "Quantum of Solace" James Bond film. The film crew rented out Tulipanes, and actor Daniel Craig took over Canal House.

"When I first arrived in Casco Viejo, it was so unusual that you couldn't not pay attention," Landau said. "It was composed of this crazy balance between historic and charming and bizarre and even slightly scary. Once I got over the personal-safety aspect (it looked more fearsome than it was), I sort of dove head first, both into the beauty and the grit of it all."

The best way to "do" Casco is to put on some comfortable shoes and explore the district's colonial-era architecture. Just down the street from Canal House is one of Panama's hottest hipster hotels, Tantalo. Known for its rooftop bar, which provides an unobstructed view of Panama City's impressive skyline, Tantalo is the epicenter of a booming Casco night life. It also offers great tapas, reflecting Panamanian and world cuisine.

Adjacent to Tantalo is one of Casco's nicest boutique hotels, Casa Sucre. This former monastery also has one

of the best coffee shops in town. Owners Rich and Alyce Sherman, both native Californians who spent 25 years in Kansas City, Mo., before moving to Panama, also are Casco pioneers. Like Landau, they have put in a lot of sweat equity to help bring the district back to life, starting with renovation of Casa Sucre in 2005.

For restaurants, my top choice is Manolo Caracol. One of the first fine-dining establishments to open here, this eclectic venue serves up fixed-price meals that are made from locally grown organic ingredients and styled by one of the most renowned chefs in Casco, Manuel Madueno.

Of course, if you just want a quick burger and some great music, stop into Mojitos Sin Mojitos. While you're there, say hello to owner and former New Yorker Eric Theise.

If you want to really get "local," drop down on to Pablo Arosemena Street and grab some deep-fried chicken and yucca from one of the many street vendors.

Past Pablo Arosemena Street and a short walk from Casco, you'll find the Mercado de Mariscos fish market, where you can wander the stalls and gaze in amazement at the bounty fishermen haul out of the sea each day. One of the specialties here is the local ceviche; they serve it in small, eat-as-you-go containers. If you're famished, the market also has some fantastic and affordable casual restaurants, so plan to have at least one dinner there.

Back in Casco, be sure to visit Esteban Huertas Promenade, one of my favorite spots to shop for souvenirs and handmade crafts. Here you can spend an afternoon strolling along Casco's sea wall under a blazing ruby-red bougainvillea canopy while shopping for jewelry and colorful traditional Indian tapestries called *molos*.

A short taxi ride from Casco takes you to Ancon Hill, where a brief and invigorating hike provides incredible views of Panama City, the Bridge of the Americas and the Panama Canal. Ancon also is a nesting place for toucans, so bring your binoculars to watch the big-billed birds.

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For a great full-day excursion, Barefoot Panama will get you out fishing on Gatun Lake, at the north end of the canal, and then cook your catch at a local bar/restaurant. Part of the journey takes you along the main canal, so be prepared to have some close encounters with some very large container ships.

Before your trip to Gatun, stop in at the Super Gourmet, owned and run by Mississippi native Blayne Ladner. He will hook you up with an amazing picnic lunch and serve it up southern Casco style.

And though Gatun Lake will give you a taste of the canal, no Panama vacation is complete without a trip to the Canal Locks at Miraflores. It's a bit crowded but well worth it. The on-site Canal Museum will give you an in-depth understanding of how the canal was built and how it works; you can even sit at the "mock helm" of a virtual container ship and take a simulated drive through the length of the canal.

With Casco as a base, you could spend an entire vacation and not leave Panama City. But most people come to Panama to experience its amazing beaches, mountains and rain forests, which rank as some of the most pristine in the world.

Still, it's nice to know your portal of entry can be as interesting as your final destination. And Casco really is that good.

### **If you go**

**Getting there:** The cheapest round-trip flights to Panama City for mid-January are about \$500 from Miami. Flights from New York and Chicago are about \$100 to \$150 more.

**Lodging:** (high end) Los Quatro Tulipanes, [loscuatrotulipanes.com](http://loscuatrotulipanes.com); (midrange) Casa Del Horno, [casadelhorno.net](http://casadelhorno.net); Casa Sucre, [casasucreboutique hotel.com](http://casasucreboutique hotel.com); The Canal House, [canalhouse panama.com](http://canalhouse panama.com); Tantalo, [tantalohotel.com](http://tantalohotel.com); (low range) Luna's Castle, [lunascastlehostel.com](http://lunascastlehostel.com).

**Dining:** (high end) Manolo Caracol, [cascoviejo.com/manolo-caracol](http://cascoviejo.com/manolo-caracol); Ego and Narciso, [facebook.com/EgoyNarciso](https://facebook.com/EgoyNarciso); (midrange) Pony Rosso, [diablorosso .com](http://diablorosso .com); La Forchetta, [facebook.com/pages/La-Forchetta/172249816138281](https://facebook.com/pages/La-Forchetta/172249816138281); (low range) Cafe Coca-Cola, [cascoviejo.com/cafe-coca-cola](http://cascoviejo.com/cafe-coca-cola); Restaurant Leon, [cascoviejo.com/restaurant-leon](http://cascoviejo.com/restaurant-leon).

**Information:** [visitpanama.com/en](http://visitpanama.com/en)