PANAMA Special Report



Casco Viejo: The Never-Ending Evolution...



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NSIDE

Panama City's Best New Restaurants... page 10

A Nature Lover Meets Her Match In Casco... page 11

The Festival Of The Golden Frog... page 12

Panama 101: Pay Under US\$2 To Get To And From Panama City's Tocumen International Airport... page 14



The Never-Ending Evolution Of Panama City's Historic Casco Viejo By Matt Chilliak

Iften regarded as the Soho of Latin America, the historic Casco Viejo neighborhood offers a different kind of city life than is found throughout the rest of Panama City, or even all of Central America.

Yet the narrow cobblestone streets, plazas, and centuries-old buildings give this town an Old World impression. The architecture is reminiscent of French-colonial New Orleans or Old Montreal, along with Spanish-colonial, neo-Renaissance, and Art Nouveau influences. This French twist owes itself to the unique French history in Panama, where French engineers tried fruitlessly to construct the Panama Canal before the project was handed to the United States. Their efforts were not in vain, however, as their impact on this old shell of a neighborhood is in large part what makes it the unique setting it is today. Panama's original peoples, the Spanish conquistadors, the French engineers, the U.S. military, and the many other groups from around the world that have arrived to Panama—all are reasons for why Casco Viejo continues to evolve.

This international mix of people with their sights set on this neighborhood has helped it adopt a cafe culture, accompanied by jazz bars, art galleries, and museums. Like much of Panama City, modern Casco Viejo is a multicultural mosaic from around the world.

If At First A Pirate Burns Your City, Try Again

Casco's beginnings arose from the ashes of its predecessor. Several kilometers east of Casco lay the ruins of Panama Viejo, the original Spanish settlement on the isthmus. In 1671, Sir Henry Morgan besieged and burned down the prosperous town, which devastated locals.

Two years after that ruinous attack, in 1673, the survivors began anew with reconstructing their city. Building materials were a bit harder to come by those days, so scraps taken from the ruined city provided material for building the new city. In the case of Iglesia La Merced, rebuilt in 1680, the church's entire facade was rebuilt with the same old stones from its former site.



The city's new location had better access to fresh water and was an advantageous spot for fortification. Most of these built-up fortifications and seawalls still stand today. But the new location couldn't escape the danger of fire. In 1737, 1756, and 1781, fires tore through Casco, badly damaging the city.



A piece of the city's original wall, still standing in Plaza Herrera

The 19th century was full of political change for Panama, as it was for much of the region. After securing its independence from Spain as part of Gran Colombia in 1821, Panama hosted the Amphictyonic Congress, organized by El Libertador, Simón Bolívar. The objective was to unite the new republics of Latin America in developing a unified policy toward Spain and to establish a common military, mutual defense pact, and supranational assembly. Years before the League of Nations or United Nations, the congress would have been the first multinational continental congress in history. However, Bolívar's ambitious goals failed to materialize, and it would be more than a century before the present-day Organization of American States formed.

Despite the failure of Bolívar's bold vision for American unification and cooperation, the congress was attended by delegates from Mexico, the United Province of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica), the Netherlands, Great Britain, and the United States. The multinational mix of delegates congressed in Panama foreshadowed Panama's future rise as a center of global trade and cooperation. At the end of the ultimately failed congress, the sly Brits did manage to eke out a trade deal. The U.S. delegate arrived late, missing out on an equal opportunity.

As predecessor to the Panama Canal, the transcontinental railway in Panama was a boom to the county, continuing to attract international attention and trade. Casco's population grew from 5,000 in 1821 to 10,000 in 1870 to 25,000 by the end of the century.

The Difference A Century Makes

In 1904, Panama had just gained its independence from Colombia the previous year when U.S. construction of the Panama Canal began. At that time, Panama City consisted of Casco and nothing more; the entire city was the neighborhood. The sprawling city that exists today was wilderness, but that would soon change.

With the completion of the canal, Panama City became a boomtown. But this boom was of little benefit to Casco. Instead, Panama's newly minted elite abandoned the neighborhood and moved to the expanded neighborhoods that make up the rest of the city today. Casco fell into decline, becoming a slum that, by the 1950s, mostly consisted of over-occupied buildings in decay.

Eight years after the devastating 1989 U.S. invasion that hit Casco and surrounding area particularly hard (Manuel Noriega's headquarters was nearby), the neighborhood's rejuvenation finally began to take root. In 1997, UNESCO World Heritage Site status was granted to Casco Viejo. At the time, an inventory of the area found that only 5% of buildings were in a good state of conservation. By 2013, about 75% of buildings were in a good state of conservation.

Recently, Casco's UNESCO World Heritage Site status was put in jeopardy by a highway built into the ocean, wrapping around the small peninsular neighborhood. Immediately, this put the heritage status in danger, with concerns about how the highway would affect Casco's historical character.

UNESCO itself noted that the highway could jeopardize the area's status. Strong opposition didn't stop the highway's construction though. The highway was built, opened, and, so far, it seems that the heritage status will remain. The views of Panama City's skyline from Casco remain spectacular (albeit with the slight distraction of the highway), and, in fact, the views from the highway as you drive on it are equally impressive.



The dispute over whether or not to build the highway, given the jeopardy that it placed on the heritage status, underlines the divergent nature of Casco. A delicate balancing act must take place in order for Casco to retain its historical relevance while the rest of the surrounding city sprints ahead into modernity.

Taking In The History

Walking around Casco's streets is one way to take in the history of the area. But simply marveling at the architecture of a building can only reveal so much.

What was going on in Panama when the building was erected? Why was it built? What occurred in the building and why is it important? These are the questions that can be answered if you go inside and explore a little.

The first up on any history buffs list has to be the Panama Canal Museum, open Tuesday through Sunday from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. for US\$2 admission (plus another US\$1 for headphones to listen to English narration of the Spanish presentations). Built in 1912 as the headquarters of the French Canal Company, transferred to the U.S. Isthmian Canal Commission, and then made into a post office, this three-story building now serves as a museum. The displays include many details about the canal: the attempts, failures, and eventual success of construction, along with the 30,000 deaths to make it so; the segregation within the U.S. controlled Canal Zone and the ensuing 1964 rebellion; the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaty, which granted Panama full sovereignty over the canal; and the canal's surrounding wildlife.

The information is so plentiful and detailed at the canal museum that it makes for a good general Panama history museum to boot.



There is a good general Panama history museum, though, next to the Plaza Independencia, open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. The documents, artifacts, and works of art are assorted into three distinct periods in Panama's history: the colonial period (1501 to 1821), the departmental period (1821 to 1903), and the republican period (1903 to present).



The Infamous Rooster of Plaza Francia

The museum of colonial religious art, open Tuesday through Saturday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., is even cheaper to enter, at only US\$1. The museum is next to the Iglesia Santo Domingo and the Flat Arch and displays some surviving 16th- and 17th-century artifacts from Panama City's original ransacked location (also worth the taxi trip to go see).

The oceanfront Plaza Francia, the original plaza of Panama City, is steeped in history, dedicated to the original French attempt to build the canal and the thousands who perished in the attempt. Statues, busts, a rooster statue, a dozen large inscribed marble plaques telling the history of the canal, the

French Embassy, the National Institute of Culture and its theater, and Las Bovedas make up the surroundings. Las Bovedas are the original vaults and dungeons of the fortification wall initially built around Casco. Restored a few decades ago, they now house a gallery, a shop, and an expensive French restaurant of the same name. A row of vendors on the walkway above La Bovedas hawk some impressive artwork, handicraft, souvenirs, and jewelry.



Throughout the country, Panama's religious buildings are extraordinary examples of architecture. In Casco, the churches are everywhere. It almost feels as if every 50 feet you walk, you pass another church.

La Catedral Metropolitana is the heart of Casco and is the main Catholic cathedral in Panama City. The church is located at the area's main plaza, Plaza Independencia (also known as Plaza Catedral), a bullfighting ring until 1887. Busts of the city's founders can be found here, as can weekend flea markets and some impressive street performances.

Built by Dominican friars immediately after the founding of Panama City's new location, Iglesia de Santo Domingo was destroyed by the fire of 1756.



School children visit the Iglesia Santo Domingo and the Flat Arch

While all of the wood material burnt to ash, the building's stone flat arch remained. The stone flat arch's durability was seen as proof of the lack of seismic activity in Panama and contributed to the case for building the canal. The ruins are undergoing reconstruction to provide a future spot for culture and art presentations.

Several other churches are worth checking out, too. Iglesia de la Merced, one of Casco's oldest buildings, at one point housed all of the city's birth and baptism records and was moved and rebuilt stone by stone from the destroyed settlement in 1680. Iglesia de San Jose is an impressive sight, with its golden altar that was saved from the original settlement, according to local legend, by a priest who painted the altar black to disguise it from the imminent pirate attack. Iglesia de la Compania de Jesus was built in 1741 but was damaged from the fire in 1781 and an earthquake in 1882.

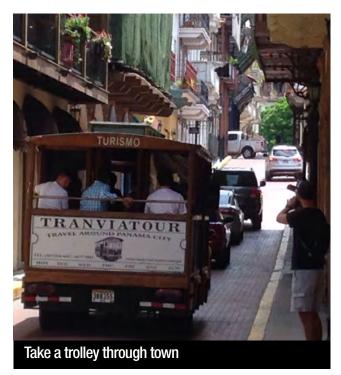
Plaza Bolívar is surrounded by many historical buildings, centered on a statue of El Libertador of Latin America. Iglesia de San Fransisco is one of the oldest and smallest churches in Casco but also one of the most decorative. Built in 1676, the fires of the 18th century did some damage, but the church underwent restoration in the late 1990s. Bolívar's 1826 Amphictyonic Congress' documents are exhibited in the nearby Palacio Bolívar, now the Foreign Ministry. Built in the early 20th century on the site of an 18th century monastery and renovated a couple of times in the last few decades, the National Theater is also located on this plaza. The ceiling frescos inside the theater were painted by well-known Panamanian artist Robert Lewis.



The Atiguo Club Union, once Noreiga's favorite hangout

Although it doesn't look like much, nothing more than an abandoned shell of a building, the Anitguo Club Union was built in 1917 and frequented by Panama's wealthy elite. The place was a favorite hangout of former Dictator Manual Noriega, who took it over during his rule in the 1980s. Predictably, the building was targeted heavily during the U.S. invasion and is now crumbling in a drastic state of disrepair. Rumors swirl that the building is going to be renovated into a luxury hotel by some deep-pocketed investors,

but not much has been done to bring this plan to fruition. Those in the know say not to hold your breath.



Casco's official office offers free guided tours of Casco on Fridays and Saturdays at 10 a.m., 10:30 a.m., and 11 a.m., leaving from Plaza Independencia.

On The Edge

El Chorillo and Santa Ana are two of Panama City's poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods, and both are on the edge of Casco's tourist safe-zone. Casco is a neighborhood in transition, but the forecast for trendy nightlife and uber-chic art galleries contends with the reality on the ground: Many of the inhabitants in and around Casco won't be visiting these places.



Rundown buildings are side by side with recent high-end renovations

Gentrification is definitely part of Casco's transition. As money flows into the real estate market and business startups in the area, many of the established residents, some who've lived here for decades, either get crowded in or pushed out. The continued development of the area needs to be sure to keep this in mind and mitigate any negative side effects on the area's residents and the hostility that might arise.



Some social programs have had much success in ensuring that Casco's newfound glory works with the local residents rather than shoving them aside. One group, the Esperanza Social Venture Club, seeks to provide educational and entrepreneurial assistance to the area's ex-gang members. The program has been widely regarded as a success in not only helping the young members' lives but also in improving general neighborhood safety. In the first four months of 2015, only one robbery occurred—an amazing statistic given the previous frequency of robberies and other crimes. The push to rehabilitate Panama's gang members has gained traction with the government as well, with an announced US\$35 million for a nationwide safe neighborhoods outreach program.



Tomas Herrera, a historic leader in Panama's path to independence

Today, Esperanza's ex-gang members offer visitors guided tours rather than picked pockets. You can see some of what used to be considered the "red zone" of Casco, including bullet-riddled buildings, ending with a cocktail at a small, makeshift, outdoor restaurant set up in an alleyway. The tours begin every Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday at 5 p.m. from the foot of the General Tomás Herrera statue in Herrera Plaza.

Plaza Herrera sits on the edge of this crawling gentrification. Walk south or west of the plaza, and tourist police, everywhere in Casco, may politely point out that you're venturing out of their territory. But, in the daytime, as long as you keep your wits about you and don't flash any wealth, you should be fine (nighttime is a different story). The luxuriously renovated American Trade Hotel is located here, along with a part of the city's original wall on the western side of the plaza. A large building is under construction, with a sign saying that it will be a high-end hotel when it opens.

Rundown Buildings Run Up Prices

Looking at some of the hollowed out building lots in Casco gives the impression that real estate must be a bargain. How could a neighborhood that is half rubble command anything but rubble-like prices?

Well, it turns out that rubble brings high demand on the real estate market these days, especially when that rubble is steeped in history and enjoys UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

Real estate prices in Casco today command some of the highest per-squaremeter prices in all of Panama City, even for the rundown fixer-uppers. For a renovated property, prices run between US\$2,500 to US\$3,500 per square meter. Pre-construction offers can be priced even higher. To compare to other high-end areas in the city, Punta Pacifica, the area's most modern neighborhood (with Trump Tower), generally sells between US\$2,000 and US\$2,500 per square meter.

If you do buy in Casco, be aware that the heritage status can be both a blessing and a curse. While the status definitely helps keep the property in high demand by making the area a tourist attraction, it also means some restrictive laws dictating what you can do with your property. Sanctions for destroying heritage assets are stiff and can even result in jail time. Also, you are given a two-year window after purchase to begin construction on empty or condemned lots. This time restriction ensures that the rejuvenation isn't held up by speculators who only intend to buy, hold, and then sell for profit without actually doing anything to their property.

Central America's Best Nightlife And Cafe Culture, Bar None

After taking in Casco's architecture, museums, and outdoor markets, why not enjoy a latte (or beer) at an outdoor patio in one of Casco's plazas,

Fundacion Calicanto

Founded in 1994, Fundación Calicanto works with Casco's most disadvantaged residents to create solutions to the problems brought by Casco's evolution. Their stated mission is to safeguard the historical and human heritage of Casco through social, educational, cultural and conservation programs and actions.

Hildegard Vasquez, president and founder of the foundation, attended college in the States and then returned to her home country of Panama to open a small firm in Casco that focused on restoring the structures of this historic district.

"Calicanto Foundation is an NGO founded when members of the community came together to save the historic Old Town of Panama City," Hildegard explains. "The group works to prevent project developers from demolishing the beautiful buildings that have shaped these streets for hundreds of years.

"However, the primary purpose of the organization is educating displaced women from the Casco to help them to find work and function in the greater society."

Hildegard works with single mothers who have no families, no education, and no support. Through the foundation, the women receive education, life skills, and job training. This program is doing great practical work on the ground, making a real difference. If you would like to know more or to help, visit their website at <u>http://fundacioncalicanto.org/en/</u> and sign up to volunteer or make a donation.

accompanied by melodies from a live harpist or Spanish guitarist? Nowhere else in Panama City, or even Central America, can you experience the quality of cafe culture as in Casco. All of the plazas are surrounded by tables of eateries and coffee houses, serving a variety of cuisines.

One of Casco's best cafes is Casa Sucre. Lattes, frappes, teas, and an extensive menu for a cafe are available here for reasonable prices (coffee and breakfast for US\$9). They're well-known for their Bloody Marys too. The atmosphere inside is cozy, with high ceilings, wide French doors, and antique décor. The place is busy on weekend mornings, often full of foreign expats and tourists.



Dodo cafe, on a corner of Plaza Francia, is a neat little place for tea, coffee, breakfast, brunch, or lunch. The tucked-away French-bistro ambiance makes this a truly unique find. The French Embassy is even across the street. The fresh salads, hearty sandwiches, and Nutella pancakes are well-priced, too.



Dodo café, on the corner of Plaza Francia

One of Casco's, if not all of Panama City's, most popular restaurant's is the Fish Market. The menu consists of fresh tuna, prawns, squid, salmon, and more, and the selection of craft beer is impressive—all for prices that aren't jacked up like at some other popular Casco eateries. Just make sure you don't end up at the actual seafood market on Avenida Balboa, where the fish smell overwhelms and the eating options are mostly just varieties of ceviche in styrofoam cups.

Another choice for fish is Aki, a new sushi restaurant with some funky art and decor. On occasion, many of the menu offerings are unavailable, owing to the growing number of customers discovering this place.



Eat some sushi in the colorfully decorated Aki restaurant

Something a little more high-end and high-priced, is the Capital Bistro, near the Avenida Balboa entrance to Casco. The Capital's rooftop view of the city skyline is a perfect way to wind-down a day exploring the area over drinks or dinner. To give an idea of the type of place this is: Having rose petals in your drink is an option here.



Capital Bistro's views are tough to beat

Casco is where the city's hip and trendy find themselves on a Friday or Saturday night, and it is home to the city's annual international film festival, along with all sorts of other events and performances.

At the entrance of Casco, just a little ways from the Capital, is a La Rana Dorada brewpub (they also have locations in El Cangrejo and Costa del Este). La Rana's craft pilsner, blanche, amber ale, and porter are all finely brewed cervezas.

One popular spot for late night drinks is Mojitos sin Mojitos, at Plaza Herrera. Placed in the abandoned ruins of a centuries-old stone building, this bar's cheap drink specials attract a large crowd, often pouring out onto the sidewalk.

Around the corner, just a few steps from Mojitos, is Villa Agustina, another abandoned old building transformed into a great dance spot. Other good dance spots include La Buat, Casa Jaguar, and Teatro Amador.

A Panama City Staycation

Living in Panama City, as in any major city, can be overwhelming. The car horns, police sirens, business traffic, and unceasing buzz of the concrete jungle makes it necessary to take periodic escapes, usually to Panama's lush interior or breezy beaches. But if you're looking for a relaxing escape from the city, Casco is just as good an option.

Walking around Casco, you could be forgiven for forgetting you're even in Panama City. The complete shift from modern and polished to historical and worn distinguishes Casco like no other part of the city.

Spend US\$50 on food or drink at the hotel Casa Nuratti (whose bar and restaurant are called Gato Negro and Gato Blanco), and you receive a promotional offer to rent one of their rooms for only an additional US\$50. The all-you-can-eat risotto on Tuesday nights for US\$15 and a couple margaritas for two should be enough to hit US\$50. A night's stay in the elegant rooms here can make for a fun date night, especially if you've had one too many drinks to drive home. Any excuse not to have to haggle with a cab late at night in Casco, when they're known for being extra stingy and try to rip off drunk patrons leaving the bars.



Similar to the deal at Casa Nuratti, a stay at Luna's Castle hostel pays for itself if you visit their downstairs bar, Relic. For the US\$8 bed in the hostel (US\$30 for a private room), you get happy hour prices on your drinks all night. For a couple, three or four drinks each covers the cost of the bed or room. Pancakes in the morning are included.

Another hotel worth checking out is Tantalo. The room prices are a little steeper, costing US\$125 and up, but the restaurant and rooftop bar are



Luna's Castle hostel offers homey common areas

highly regarded. The room prices are justified, too, in that each one was commissioned to a local Panamanian artist to do whatever they wanted. Each room is truly unique. Tuesday nights, Tantalo hosts Artes Martes, when painters, performers, musicians, dancers, and photographers come together to create and share their cutting-edge art.

Not Only For Tourists

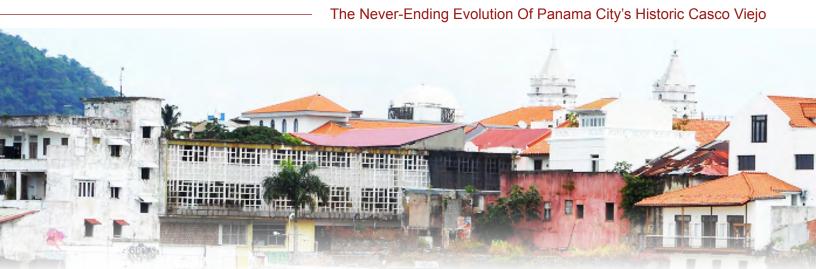
With all the historic attractions and trendy nightlife, not many foreigners who move to Panama consider locating themselves in Casco.

Sometimes, Casco is demeaned as too touristy, or too far from the tourist area (causing concerns about safety), or too expensive, or too poor, or too old, or not old enough.



These negative nancies and pessimistic petes usually have one thing in common: They don't live in Casco, but they secretly wish they could.

Housing in Casco is more expensive than most any other neighborhood in Panama City. Even condos on the oceanfront Avenida Balboa aren't as



expensive on a cost-per-square-meter basis. Want to live surrounded in history and architectural glory? You pay big for it.

As more and more people move into Casco's high-end renovations, the neighborhood's services and amenities have begun to shift to meet their needs. The Rey grocery store in Casco may be the cleanest and most organized supermarket I've ever seen in Panama. There is also a small pharmacy in Casco.

Through Casco does have several local schools and a health center, bigpicture life necessities such as internationally accredited schools and hospitals should be sought elsewhere in Panama City.



Weekend markets in the plazas are common

Fitness buffs in Casco have easy access to the Cinta Costera oceanfront trail, with its outdoor equipment and sports facilities. Alley Cat Gym and Martial Arts and Sol Yoga are two popular places for keeping fit. Open yoga classes are offered at Sol on Mondays and Wednesdays at 6 p.m. (on the rooftop when weather permits).

Shopping fanatics don't need to worry: Multiplaza, Multicentro, Albrook, and the recently opened Soho mall are just as accessible from Casco as elsewhere. In Casco itself, the shopping options are limited basically to

touristy knickknacks, street stalls, Panama hats, and hammocks, though there is a neat little vintage shop near Plaza Francia.

Avenida Central is full of shopping too; however, this is not somewhere you find Coco Chanel, Armani, or Dolce and Gabbana. The street, extending north from Casco, is busy, with everything from appliances and fruit vendors to shoe stores and electronics. And, while it is wise to keep an extra eye on your purse and leave the flashy jewelry at home, Avenida Central is generally safe in the daytime. The government has announced that it plans to spend some money to spruce up the strip, too. While it is a long way to go in sprucing up the destitute areas of El Chorillo and Santa Ana, it is a start.

Casco's Next Stage

Casco's long and storied history is about to enter its next stage. Without a crystal ball, it's hard to say what exactly this next stage will be. Likely, it will involve more cafes and restaurants, more museums and galleries, and more money and foreigners than this neighborhood has seen in some time. Hopefully, it will also involve less poverty and less violence.

Today, the foreigners who adopt Casco as their residence live side by side with its long-established Panamanian population, rich and poor, as well as with fellow-foreigners of the tourist variety. More so than anywhere else in Panama, Casco is an integration of not only different nationalities but different social classes and cultures.

About The Author

Matt Chilliak hails from Saskatoon, Canada, and has an honours degree in political studies from the University of Saskatchewan, with minors in economics and Spanish. He also holds certification from

Fine Art Bartending School. He has traveled throughout Latin America, to Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Colombia, and Panama.



Panama City's Best New Restaurants

By Joey Bonura

Usually, this space is filled with a Panamanian-inspired recipe, but, this month, we've decided to offer you something a bit different: a rundown of some of the best restaurants you can find in Panama City that have opened in the past 18 months.

Some of the places on the list are in Casco Viejo, attesting to this neighborhood's emergence as the center of Panama's culinary scene. Some others are scattered throughout the rest of the city. So, no matter where in Panama City you reside, why not indulge a little? Leave the pots and pans in the cupboard and taste some of what Panama City has to offer.

Donde José – Avenida Central and Calle 11, Casco Viejo



Donde José provides one of the most unique culinary experiences you can have in Casco Viejo, with an intimate area that fits no more than 16 people. They focus on using local Panamanian ingredients and dishes and come out with new menu items every few months.

Dainer 16 – Calle 66, San Francisco



Craving Southern soul food in Panama? Dainer 16

10

serves up dishes like chicken and waffles, pancakes, pork chops, meatloaf, and more. Just like Mamma used to make.

Edén – Calle 71, San Fransisco



Edén serves delicious Mediterranean-fusion dishes, and they have done an awesome job remodeling an old house into a restaurant for a cool atmosphere.

Jeronimo – Avenida B and Calle 10, Casco Viejo



Jeronimo is a new art gallery and bar in Casco Viejo that opened this month. Part speakeasy, part art gallery, this is truly a unique spot.

II Tula – Via Porras and Calle 50, San Francisco

The ambience of II Tula is simple but has some of



No no no no

the best real Italian food in Panama (no packaged sauces or frozen pizzas here).

Casa Jaguar – Avenida Central and Calle 12 Oueste, Casco Viejo





Casa Jaguar is a unique gastropub that just opened in Casco Viejo and is quickly becoming one of Panama City's coolest spots to go for a bite and some beers.

A Nature Lover Meets Her Match In Casco

Crystal is an animal lover, nature protector, and newbie surfer. She lives in Casco Viejo with her husband and rescued cat and works in environmental education. Her favorite things about Panama are Casco (of course), the possibility of adventure around every corner (especially if you are in a taxi), and the opportunities to explore the world with an open mind.

What's it like living in a UNESCO World Heritage Site?

I find myself walking around every day, feeling very lucky to be living in a place that is considered a "destination" for so many. And, being from the New York City area, the liveliness makes me feel at home.

What is Casco's expat community like?

Casco is full of expats from all over the world. There's a great feeling of community where you can walk down the street and know so many people. Being so far away from home, these people become your family.

Do the expats mingle much with locals?

The locals are very welcoming. My husband and I have gotten to know all of the *bien-cuidados* (local men who help park cars and watch them for a small fee) on our block, and everyone is always so friendly and helpful.

Describe Casco's cultural scene and nightlife.

Culture is in every nook and cranny of this place. You can find it in the architecture, the people, and the locales. As for nightlife, this is where Panama City comes to go out. You can find restaurants, bars, and clubs of all kinds and price ranges. Plus, there is always some art exhibit or show happening in one of the theaters.

Best cafe, restaurant, bar, pub, or club?

Dodo is a cafe with great ambiance. Super G is another with great food. Mojitos sin Mojitos is a bar that, in my opinion, makes the best burgers in Casco. I enjoy the roof terrace of the bar Gato Negro. However, there are still so many places that I need to check out.

What do you usually find yourself doing on weekends?

Admittedly. I find that I don't leave Casco very often. However, I do love to head over to the Amador Causeway for walks and to visit Punta Culebra Nature Center. It's a Smithsonianaffiliated facility where some tropical scientific research takes place and education programs are held. It's a little slice of nature-forest, ocean, and wildlife—right next to the city. You can even watch ships coming in and out of the canal because it is strategically located at the entrance of it (having once been a U.S. military defense base for the canal). They hold fun events throughout the months, and a great one coming up in August is the Festival de la Rana Dorada (Golden Frog Festival). These are always a fun time for so little money.

What are some of the changes you've noticed since first seeing Casco?

I first visited Casco over three years ago and the changes are obvious. Buildings are being renovated, and new businesses opening up.



But part of what I love about this place is that it is a great mix of locals and expats. I sure hope that that doesn't change too much more over time. Casco would lose its vibrancy.

How do you think Casco will change in the next 10 or 15 years?

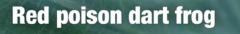
I believe buildings will continue to be renovated and the neighborhood will continue to grow outside of its current lines.

If you had one or two nights in Casco, what would be at the top of your todo list?

First, I would certainly just walk around, or even take a tour, to learn about the rich history of the place. The architecture alone is worth the walk. I'd also be sure to take the Esperanza gang tour, which is run by reformed gang members and brings you through the outskirts of Casco while telling you their history and stories. It's inspiring to realize what these guys came from and to see the positive changes they are making for themselves. The dinner that they offer at the end of the tour is quite delicious too. I would then dance the night away in one of the many clubs. And, experiencing Casco wouldn't be complete until you take a stand-up paddleboard class through the Alley Cat Fitness Foundation. The instructors are wonderful and views are spectacular.

Panama is one of the most biodiverse places on the planet, but like many ecosystems constant change means many species are on the brink of extinction. The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute's Punta Culebra Nature Centre is highlighting the plight of some of Panama's most popular natives during the Festival de la Rana Dorada (the Festival of the Golden Frog), in August. The festival features activities, events, games, and talks, and is all about "salvando un tesoro nacional" or saving a national treasure... Check out the Punta Culebra Nature Centre Facebook page for more details.

https://www.facebook.com/PuntaCulebra



La Gruta frog

Panamanian golden frog



Strawberry poison dart frog

Emerald-eyed tree frog



Panamanian golden frog

Blueberry poison dart frog

Mountain harlequin frog

Rabbs' fringe-limbed tree frog

Red eyed tree frog

Pay Under US\$2 To Get To And From Panama City's Tocumen International Airport

By Joey Bonura

Normally, a trip to Panama's Tocumen International Airport means finding a really nice friend to drive or shelling out at least US\$30 for a cab ride. But, if you want to save a ton of money, there's an alternative, and it's dirt cheap.

Here's what you have to do:

Step 1: Board The Tocumen-Corredor Sur Metro Bus



You can either board this bus on Avenida Balboa on the side of the road closest to the ocean or take the Metro or Metro Bus to the Albrook terminal and transfer to the Tocumen-Corredor Sur bus. I live in San Francisco, so I take the Cinta Costera-Panama Viejo bus to Multicentro Mall and then use the pedestrian bridge to cross the street and catch the bus at that bus stop. The cost of the Tocumen-Corredor Sur bus is US\$1.25 instead of the normal 25 cents because it uses the tollway. Do not use the Tocumen buses that do not say Corredor Sur, because these go the long way and it can add hours to your travel time.

Step 2: Get Off At The Airport Stop



The bus ride from Multicentro to the airport is approximately 30 minutes, and, if the voice recordings that announce the stops are working, you need to get off at the stop that announces "*aeropuerto*." It's the stop that has a covered walkway right in front of the airport.

Step 3: Continue On The Walkway



The walk from the start of the walkway to the airport is around seven minutes, and it's pretty straightforward.



You go through a parking lot and then after that through the entrance and follow it until the end.



The hallway ends at the entrance of the airport.

Step 4: Head Up To The Second Floor



The pedestrian entrance leads to the floor with arriving flights, so just head up to the second floor to check in for your departing flight.

14

My total travel time for walking out the door of my apartment to arriving at the doors of the airport was an hour and 15 minutes, so it's definitely longer than taking a taxi, but if you're short on cash it's worth the savings. Here is a breakdown of how long each step took, so you can better plan your trip:

2 p.m.	Arrived at the bus stop closest to
	my apartment
2:05 p.m.	Bus arrived
2:20 p.m.	Arrived to Multicentro and crossed
	the street to wait at the next bus stop
2:45 p.m.	Tocumen bus arrived
3:15 p.m.	Arrived to the airport

I would recommend leaving your house extra early if you are trying to catch a flight or even do a trial run a few days before your flight to see how long it takes.

Also, this is not a trip you want to do with large luggage (they probably won't even let you on the bus with a giant suitcase). It's best to do this for short trips when you just have a small carry-on bag or suitcase.

Now, here is how to take the Metro Bus from the Tocumen International Airport back to Panama City:

Step 1: Exit The Airport And Head To The Right

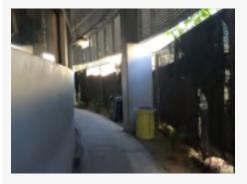


Walk to the right, toward Restaurante Selles.

Step 2: Enter The Hallway Next To The Restaurant



The airport hasn't installed signs that say this leads to the pedestrian walkway going to the main road. At first it looks like you are entering somewhere that you are not supposed to; however, this is the correct way.



Continue through the back hallway to outside and then the walkway.



Step 3: Cross The Street

Once you reach the end of the walkway, you need to cross the street to get to the bus stop with buses heading back to Panama City.

Step 4: Get On The Tocumen-Corredor Sur Bus



They do not sell Metro Bus cards at the airport, so, if you are a tourist trying to use the bus, you need to kindly ask someone if you can pay them US\$1.25 to swipe you through with their card. Wait for the Tocumen-Corredor Sur bus to arrive and do not get on any of the ones that say Via España, because it will take forever to get back to the city. Once you are on the bus, you can get dropped off anywhere on Avenida Balboa or take the bus all the way to the Albrook terminal and transfer to another bus or hop on the Metro.

Remember, using the bus is only recommended if you have small carry-on luggage. Otherwise, if you're packing heavy, pay the extra money for a taxi.

Enjoy the savings!

Joey Bonura is from Louisville, Kentucky, and moved to Panama in 2011 to finish his degree in international business. He enjoyed the



hot tropical weather and the lifestyle on offer in Panama City so much that he decided to make this his permanent residence. He has been managing our social media at Live and Invest Overseas since 2013.

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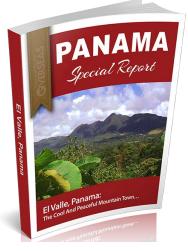
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