

# PANAMA

## *Special Report*



**Casco Viejo:**  
A Historical Treasure Trove  
Best Explored On Foot

# PANAMA

## *Special Report*

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# *Casco Viejo—A Historical Treasure Trove Best Explored On Foot*

BY SOPHIA TITLEY

**T**he tiny finger of land that pokes out from Panama City's southeastern corner and into the Pacific Ocean is San Felipe—better known to most as Casco Viejo, Casco Antiguo, or, simply, Casco.

This is Panama City's historic district, full of centuries-old cathedrals, buildings with crumbling pastel façades, and narrow, cobblestoned streets. It is—by all accounts—the capital's most lovely neighborhood.

Casco is laid out in grid format like a classic European city. Every few blocks, you'll find a tree-lined plaza or





It boasts boutiques and art galleries, funky cafés and rooftop bars, and a huge range of dining options, from white tablecloth to street food on plastic tables... Some have called it the Soho of Latin America because of this eclectic mix.

Casco also has a slightly gritty side... While restoration has nipped and tucked many of its buildings, there are still pockets of dilapidation here and there. The decaying buildings and graffitied walls give the place an exciting edge and attract artists and bohemian types.

Vibrant cultural events take place in Casco constantly. On a given day, you might encounter an impromptu street concert or pop-up artisan market... Shows are regularly on at Anita Villalaz Theatre... Gastronomic events like “Diner en Blanc” take place against the backdrop of ancient ruins...

the spire of a cathedral, all of which casts an Old World charm over the place.

At only four avenues wide, the neighborhood is small and compact; a tiny treasure trove of historical structures best explored on foot. But despite all the visual reminders of the past, it's also constantly evolving...





A pickup baseball game might be taking place on one of its beaches... A photography exhibition could be on around the corner... In a city where you can struggle to find something to do, Casco is surprisingly active. You only need to walk its streets to find out what's going on.

## Born From The Ashes

Casco Viejo (Spanish for “old quarter”) was quite literally born from the ashes... The original Panama City, now known as Panama Viejo, was founded on Aug. 15, 1519, but its existence was short-lived. It suffered a vicious pirate attack carried out by Henry Morgan just 152 years later and was burnt to the ground.

Antonio Fernández de Córdoba, a Spanish nobleman, initiated the construction of a new city in 1672. It would be built on a peninsula with a defensive system walls for better protection against future attacks... On Jan. 21, 1673, Casco Viejo was founded.

Today, many of the buildings you find in Casco Viejo are Panama City's first. They stand as testaments to the various phases of history that Panama passed through, with Spanish-colonial, French, Caribbean, and even Art Deco influences...

At one point, Casco was one of the richest and most densely populated neighborhoods in the Americas, but it fell into a state of disrepair by the 1950s. Poor families squatted in the crumbling colonial buildings and the neighborhood was a veritable slum.



Restoration efforts began in the early 90s, and by 1997, Casco was granted UNESCO World Heritage status. Today, you have beautifully restored historical buildings that house museums, boutiques, and trendy restaurants next to ruins, accentuating the historical feel of the place.





## Geography And Climate

Casco Viejo is a neighborhood in Panama City—Panama’s capital. It sits on a narrow peninsula that juts out into the Bay of Panama, affording it views of the Pacific Ocean, Amador Causeway and far-off islands, and the mouth of the Panama Canal.

Its climate is typical of the tropics: warm and humid year-round, with little temperature variation... Average highs for the year are about 93°F, while lows are about 68°F.

Seasons are limited in their range, too. Dry season is from January to April and wet is from May to December. Although you’ll get around 75 inches of rainfall a year here, you’re unlikely to suffer from any major weather disturbances, like a hurricane.

## Getting Here

To get to Casco Viejo from abroad, you’ll need to arrive to Panama City first. Luckily, this is the Hub of the Americas, and Tocumen International Airport is well-connected. It enjoys direct connections to Miami, Toronto, Boston, Denver, Los Angeles, and several other major North American cities.

You can also arrive to Panama City by sea. Princess Cruises, for instance, offers travel packages that leave from both U.S. coasts and even travel across the Panama Canal.

Once you get to Panama City, the most comfortable way of getting around is in a private car, whether you own, rent, or take a taxi or uber. The drive from Tocumen to Casco Viejo takes about 40 minutes, although this can be longer during heavy traffic.



If you prefer to use public transportation, your options are the metro or the bus... Casco Viejo doesn't have its own metro stop, but the closest station—5 de Mayo—is only a 20-minute walk away.

Within Casco itself, you won't need anything but your own two feet to get around. The neighborhood is compact and walking from one side to the other takes under 15 minutes.

## Things To See And Do In Casco...

### Explore Its History

Casco Viejo is full of buildings of historical significance... Architecture buffs will enjoy the mix of Spanish, French, and American styles, and exploring the plazas, government buildings, cathedrals, and other monuments is the best way to take in the ambiance. Here are just a few of Casco's main sights...

Starting at the southeastern tip of the peninsula, Plaza de Francia is where you find the French Embassy, the National Institute of Culture, and Anita Villalaz Theatre... In its center is an obelisk topped with a rooster as well as the busts of several of the canal's early engineers. Behind these are Las Bóvedas—12 slabs of marble that outline the canal's history and pay homage to the 22,000 people that lost their lives during its construction.

From Plaza de Francia you can access Paseo Esteban Huertas, a walkway similar to Havana's Malecón,



albeit slightly smaller. This is where you'll get the best views in the city, including the mouth of the canal, the Bridge of the Americas, Amador Causeway, the Bay of Panama, and skyscrapers of Costa del Este. You'll often see couples strolling hand in hand or posing for photos here. It's a good place to peruse for knickknacks and handicrafts or just take in a bit of ocean breeze.





Where the promenade deposits you is a short walk to Santo Domingo Convent and Church—one of Casco’s most important ruins. Although rebuilt, it’s one of the few remains from Panama Viejo and dates to the 1570s. Much of the interest around it has to do with El Arco Chato—the flat arch. This 50-foot, completely level archway stood for decades, proving Panama was seismically sound enough to build the canal. It collapsed in 2003 but has since been rebuilt.

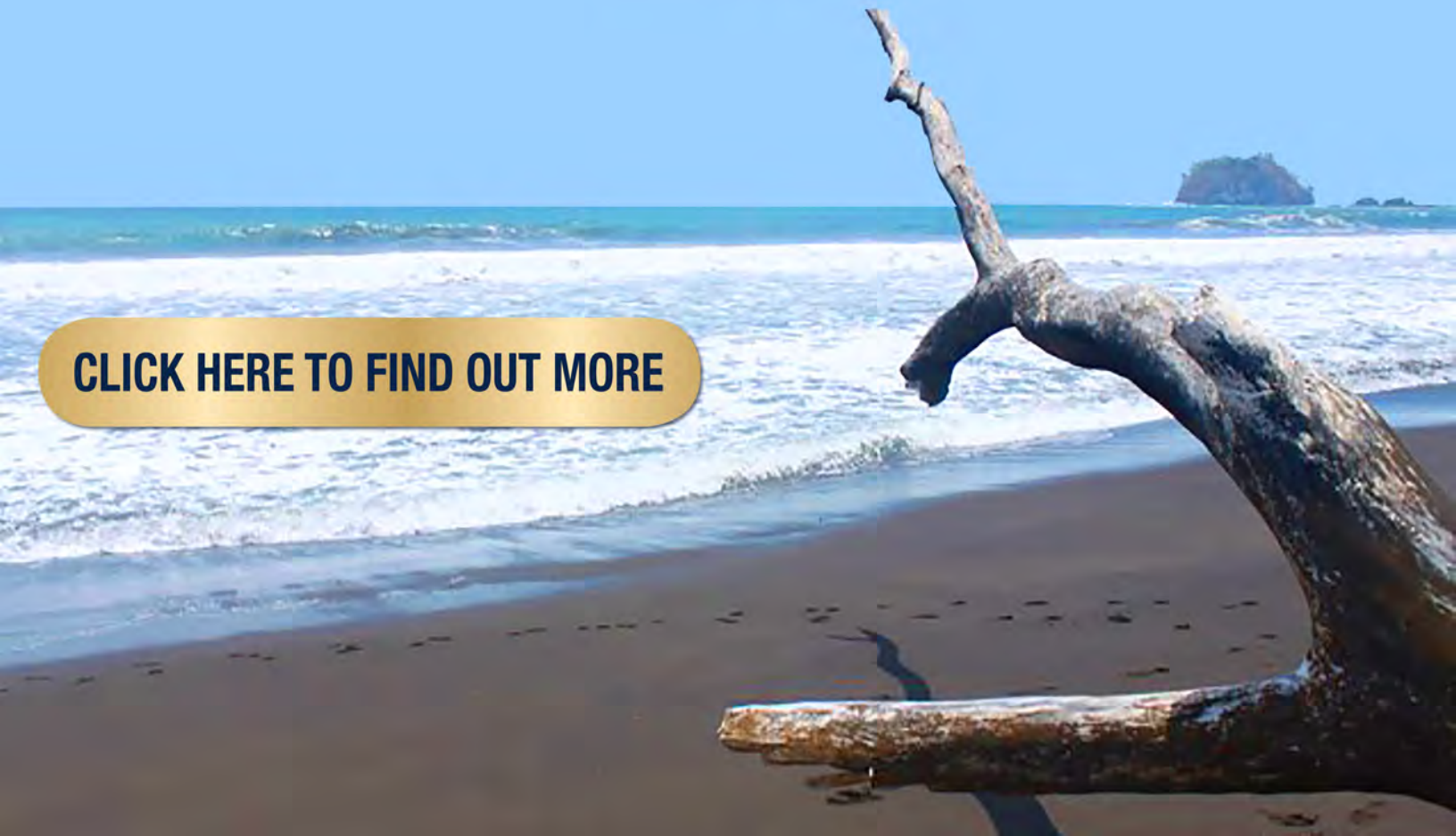
Plaza de la Independencia is the heart of Casco Viejo... It was from here that Panama declared its independence from Spain in 1821 and Colombia in 1903. Nowadays, it offers shaded benches for people watching, French architecture, busts of Panama’s founding fathers, and a raised gazebo in its center.

Situated in Plaza de la Independencia’s southeastern corner in an interesting building that dates to 1874 is the Panama Canal Museum. It outlines the canal’s development and its transfer from French to American to Panamanian hands.

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Toward the northeast of the peninsula is Plaza Bolívar, which features a statue of Simon Bolívar with an Andean condor perched on his shoulder. He is commemorated here because, in 1826, he organized a meeting in a schoolroom opposite the park. Plaza Bolívar also features Iglesia San Francisco de Asís, one of Casco's most striking churches because of its massive bell tower. The plaza is lined with cafés and restaurants with patio-style dining.

To the west is Iglesia de la Merced, noteworthy because

it's made from stones recovered from Panama Viejo and dates to 1680. It has two massive bell towers that sound every 15 minutes.

Just a few minutes south of the church is Plaza Herrera, located on the western edge of Casco... The space it occupies used to be used for bullfighting, and it features a statue of its namesake, Tomás de Herrera, in its center. It's flanked by colonial buildings in various states of repair as well as hotels and up-and-coming bars and restaurants.



CC BY 2.0 Brian Gratwicke

Although not particularly impressive on the outside, Iglesia de San José contains the Altar de Oro (golden altar). It's the one item of value that survived Henry Morgan's raid in 1671. Legend has it that a local priest painted the altar black to disguise it and moved it to its current location once the coast was clear.

### Dine, Drink, Or Shop

Casco Viejo is where Panama City residents go when they want a night on the town. Its trendy eateries and bars, with carefully curated ambiances and international menus, are places to see and be seen... If you're after fine dining and drinking, Casco has a huge range of options for you.

It also has options for those interested in more humble, classically Panamanian dining experiences, including *fondas* (roadside restaurants that serve no-frills local dishes), food markets, and sidewalk vendors. Here's a sampling of what's available for a day of indulgence in Casco Viejo...



Rum lovers need to go to Pedro Mandinga Rum Bar—the country's first craft rum distillery, located in Casco Viejo. Their rums are made from hand-harvested sugarcane grown on a family farm in Chiriquí. You can taste it in one of their signature cocktails while listening to salsa and playing dominos.

For fine dining with a Caribbean flair, head to Restaurante Tomillo. The restaurant is situated in the ruins of an old



railroad warehouse and part of a monastery, emphasizing Casco's romantic, historical ambiance. The menu, created by a celebrated Panamanian chef, emphasizes local produce.

Tomillo also boasts a romantic rooftop bar where you can have a cocktail before or after dinner... Rooftop bars are ubiquitous in the Casco area: Capital Bistro, Casa Casco, Tantalo, Lazotea, and Gatto Blanco are just a few other options where you can take in the breeze, marvel at the skyline, and toast from on high.

After a long day of exploring, you'll inevitably be hot, tired, and in need of a quick pick-me-up. Ice cream is always the best way to reenergize, and Casco is full of excellent *gelaterias*, *paleterías*, and parlors. Granclement Gourmet Ice Creams and Sorbets—a gelato shop with a huge assortment of flavors—is a popular choice... But you could also go local and try *raspao*—Panama's

answer to the snow cone. Mobile *raspao* stands are found on any corner in Casco (especially around Paseo Esteban Huertas). Vendors hand shave massive blocks of ice to order and flavor it with various fruit syrups and sweetened condensed milk...





Image courtesy of Fonda Lo Que Hay Facebook page



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Fonda Lo Que Hay is an interesting way to get a dose of local culture. This restaurant is a modern take on the *fonda*, featuring Panamanian comfort food with gourmet twists; things like tuna tartare on fried yucca or deep-fried oyster sandwiches. The menu is always changing here (“lo que hay” loosely translates to “what there is now”), but the food is always excellent.

You could also pay a visit to the fish market—the blue-and-white building on the edge of Casco. Yellow fin tuna, shrimp, red snapper, mahi mahi, octopus, and many more types of freshly caught fish are sold inexpensively here. Choose any fish and have them cook it for you or sample some ceviche—a cheap and cheerful delicacy in Panama. Check out the [Flavors of Panama](#) section for more information.



Image courtesy of Fonda Lo Que Hay Facebook page



Panama produces excellent coffee. It's most famous for its geisha variety, which is some of the most expensive coffee in the world (a single pound of geisha beans was sold for US\$803 in 2018). Outside of Boquete where it's grown, the best place to try geisha coffee is in Casco Viejo. Several cafés serve it, but Bajareque Coffee House, on Casco's eastern edge, comes recommended.

Aside from eating and drinking, the other type of consuming you can do in Casco is shopping... There is a mixture of stores here, including everything from high-fashion boutiques and art galleries to craft markets and souvenir shops selling knickknacks. The quintessential tourist purchase is a Panama hat, and Victor's Panama Hats is the place to buy them.

#### Entertainment And Recreation

Most of Panama City's cultural events are hosted in Casco Viejo. On any given day, you attend a gallery opening, watch a parade, listen to a concert, or stumble upon an impromptu event on the streets.



Casco plays a role in some of Panama's most important festivals, from carnival to independence-month celebrations. There's almost always something going on here... The best way to find out about events is to simply wander the streets.



One place where you're guaranteed to come across the arts is Anita Villalaz Theatre. Previously a court, the building has been used as a place for performances since 1996. Here you can see plays, concerts, and folklore performances or attend seminars, workshops, and conferences.

In terms of recreation, there are several yoga and pilates studios in Casco as well as Ally Cat Fitness Foundation—a small gym that specializes in boxing, MMA, muay thai, and other types of combat-based exercise. As Casco is on the water, you can also paddle-board or kayak for recreation here. Some days, locals play baseball on Casco's beaches, which is always fun to watch.







## Casco's Expat Community

Expats are attracted to Casco Viejo by the beauty, culture, entertainment options, and history... Not many places in the world offer the chance to live within a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The area is home to a small population of expats, mostly from Canada, the United States, Australia, Spain, Colombia, and Venezuela. It's the social center for all of Panama City's expats, too, so you'd encounter other foreigners on a daily basis here.

Casco-based expats live in the areas of the neighborhood that have been restored, but there are still many pockets of dilapidation here, too. You'd also live alongside Casco's resident locals, many of whom live in poverty-like conditions.

## International Schools

Panama is a good place to raise children. The family is deeply valued in Panamanian society, and Panama City is full of family-friendly activities. Living here, your children would experience a linguistic and cultural immersion that would ideally make them more open-minded people down the line... The benefit of living in Casco specifically is that it's small and still very neighborhood-like.

Panama's education standards aren't as high as North America's, but the best schools in the country are all found in Panama City. Some of the highest-rated private schools are Balboa Academy, the Boston School International (which follows the U.S. curriculum), the Oxford International School, International School of Panama, Lycée Français Paul Guaguin (a French school), and Deutsche Schule Panama Nikolaus Kopernikus (a German school) to name a few...





These are all a short drive outside of Casco Viejo. The only international school actually within Casco's limits is The Casco School, which is for early years and primary education only.

## Disabled Access

Casco's streets, which are narrow and potholed, are generally not wheelchair friendly. Its houses weren't built with wheelchair access in mind either. Heavy modification would be necessary to make them navigable for a differently abled person. Some of the more modern hotels are a little better, offering elevators and wheelchair-accessible rooms.

## LGBT Living

World Pride Panama was celebrated for a month this year, and the rainbow flag was raised in all ten of Panama's provinces for the first time. Casco Viejo played a role in the celebrations; it was one of the sites of this year's Gay Pride Parade.

These are promising signs of societal respect for diversity and social integration... Now Panamanian law needs to catch up. Same-sex marriage isn't currently legal here, and same-sex couples aren't allowed to adopt children...

That said, as an LGBT person living in Casco, you're unlikely to experience problems or be excluded from society... In fact, Casco is probably the best place in



Panama to be “out,” as it’s one of the most open-minded and contemporary neighborhoods in the country.

## The Cost Of Casco Living

Casco expats pay top dollar for their slice of historical significance. This is Panama’s top neighborhood for tourism, so everything from rent to meals at restaurants to goods and services is more expensive here.

Rent is always going to be the big-ticket item in this part of town. Where the average two-bedroom apartment rental in most parts of Panama City costs US\$1,050 a month, the cost in Casco Viejo is as much as US\$1,800 a month. Many of Casco’s restaurants qualify as fine dining; this is reflected not only in the quality of the food but in the prices, too. An average meal for two at a high-end restaurant, including an appetizer, drinks, two mains, and dessert, can come to between US\$60 and US\$70.

Grocery shopping options are limited to a few “mini supers” (or convenience stores) and one small El Rey supermarket. You can probably meet all your day-to-day shopping needs without leaving Casco, but you’ll have much better options and more price variety if you venture into greater Panama City...

For a full breakdown on the cost of living in Casco, [go here](#).

## Speaking Spanglish

English is widely spoken in Panama and especially in Casco Viejo—the epicenter of its tourism industry. Even with zero knowledge of Spanish, you won’t have problems being understood in Casco’s restaurants, cafés, stores, and so on.

If making meaningful connections with locals is important to you, though, you should learn some Spanish. Casco Antiguo Spanish School comes highly recommended and offers free weekly activities, like salsa nights, sunset bike rides, and happy hours.

The longer you spend in Panama, the more your ears will attune to the local Spanish dialect... You’ll soon realize many words (especially slang) are borrowed from English because of the long history of U.S. influence here.



### Examples Of Panamanian Spanglish:

- *Fren* = friend
- *Chilin* = to hang out
- *‘Tá cool* = something is cool



- *Focop* = to mess something up
- *Guachimán* = a watchman

3. Private, for-profit facilities are modern hospitals with state-of-the-art technology and frontline medications. These are the reasons why the medical tourism industry is booming in Panama.

## Casco's Inconveniences

Casco is extremely charming, but it has its downsides... It's sidled up next to a rough neighborhood, and if you stumble a few blocks in the wrong direction, you could find yourself in slum-like surroundings.

With all the unknowing tourists that wander its streets and the fact that there are always people outside late at night here, petty thievery is common in Casco. If you aren't careful, you can have your bag snatched or be pickpocketed fairly easily.

Another potential source of disappointment is the congestion, both of cars and of people. Traffic builds up on Casco's narrow, one-way streets, and getting from one side of the neighborhood to the other in a car can be painfully slow.

Casco is also congested with people. As Panama's second-biggest attraction after the canal, it draws lots of tourists in. It's Panama City's party neighborhood, so tolerating night revelers and the noise they make would simply be part of life here.

## Health Care

Panama's health care system is three-tiered:

1. Public hospitals are for the uninsured or those not paying into social security because they are unemployed. Though care is inexpensive (US\$2 to be admitted to the emergency room by ambulance), it isn't up to the standards of the States or Canada.
2. Social-security institutions are for those employed in Panama and paying into the Caja de Seguro Social (CSS)—a combination of social security and health care. You'll receive monthly stubs that prove you're employed and paid up, allowing you to receive care at a CSS facility.

Panama has two JCI-accredited hospitals: Punta Pacifica Hospital (affiliated with and managed by Johns Hopkins Medicine International) and Clínica Hospital San Fernando. Both are less than 20 minutes driving from Casco Viejo. Centro Médico Paitilla is also highly rated but less expensive than the former two options and about 10 minutes from Casco.

Care in Panama is affordable, even when paying out of pocket. A general doctor's visit costs about US\$30 (or between US\$50 and US\$85 to see a specialist), follow-ups are free, and labs and tests are an additional US\$20 to US\$30. A teeth cleaning at a high-end dentist's office costs about US\$50, though this price can vary greatly depending on location and reputation.

## Getting Panamanian Residency

Americans and Canadians can come to Panama visa-free for 180 days. When checking in for a flight to Panama, airlines often require proof that you'll be leaving the country within the 180 days (i.e., an onward or return flight, a bus ticket out of the country, etc.).

If you want to make your status more permanent, Panama is one of the easiest countries in the world to gain residency. For any of its visa programs, you'll need to provide a valid passport, criminal background check, and health certificate. You'll also need to hire a lawyer; get in touch with Live and Invest Overseas' preferred Panama lawyer [here](#).

The *pensionado* visa is one of the most popular visa options among retirees. It requires you to be over 18 and receive a pension of at least US\$1,000 a month. With it, you'll enjoy discounts on things like public transportation, entertainment (movie and concert tickets, for instance), hospital bills, and so on as well as special benefits under the law.

The "Friendly Nations" or Specific Countries visa is also extremely popular and grants permanent residency to



nationals of 50 different countries (including the States and Canada). It grants you a work permit while the *pensionado* visa does not.

For more information on Panama's residency schemes, [go here](#).

## Casco's Rental And Property Markets

Casco's real estate is highly coveted... Historical homes are full of character and charm. Their value endures because their appeal isn't something that can be replicated. People pay top dollar for a piece of Casco property.





You can expect to pay much more here per square meter (between US\$3,500 and US\$5,000) than you would in most other parts of the city where US\$2,050 per square meter is the norm.

Most of the inventory consists of two-story apartments in restored buildings. Family homes are extremely difficult to come by, although there are a handful in the neighborhood. The average one-bedroom apartment in Casco starts at about US\$300,000; for two or more bedrooms, this can go up to and over US\$1,000,000.

The same goes for the rental market... For a two-bedroom apartment, you can pay as much as US\$1,800 a month. This doesn't include any of the high-end amenities that you typically get with a Panama City apartment, like pools, elevators, and above-ground parking lots, either.

## Where Is Casco Headed?

Property prices in Casco have increased exponentially in the past decade... The best opportunity for an expat in Casco might be in its real estate.



Homes with historical appeal, like stone walls, balconies with French doors, and internal courtyards, are most in demand. Their supply is shrinking and will

eventually run out... Meanwhile, what can be built new in Casco is restricted, and only buildings built after 1940 can be demolished.

Competition for a stake in Casco's real estate market is high. As the area continues to gentrify (even to the detriment of the area's resident locals) and attract international attention, competition is going up. Local real estate agents say that 60% of current sales are from foreign buyers, mostly from Europe and North America.

They also say that prices, while high, are still negotiable at this point... It may be the perfect moment to make an investment in Panama's most charming neighborhood.

## Is Casco Viejo For You?

Casco is the meeting point for much of Panama City—an attractive place where people go to enjoy themselves. It's sought out by tourists from around the world... If the prospect of living in the thick of all that action sounds unappealing, Casco probably isn't for you.

If action is what you're after or you can at least accept it as part of life here, what you'll get in exchange is history and beautiful architecture, funky cafés and restaurants, and a vibrant cultural scene, all situated next to the sea... 🌸

## About The Author

For Sophia Titley, home is a subjective concept. She was born in Singapore but grew up in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia... and has since lived in Canada, Spain, Colombia, and, most recently, Panama. She studied political science and Spanish at the University of British Columbia, and in her free time enjoys trying new recipes, playing soccer, and salsa dancing.



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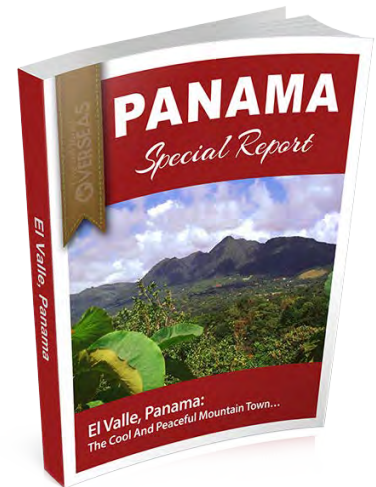
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- The Special Retirement Report **“El Valle de Anton, the World’s Top Retirement Haven”** (a US\$9.95 value)—To get you started on your Grand Tour of Panama, this special report features the little mountain town of El Valle de Anton, conveniently located 30 to 45 minutes from the beach and about two hours outside Panama City... so you can regularly enjoy the best of the city, without its heat and humidity...



- The Special Retirement Report on **El Cangrejo, Panama City** (a US\$9.95 value) To continue your Grand Tour of Panama, this special report features the metropolitan neighborhood of El Cangrejo. Central, eclectic, welcoming, and affordable, El Cangrejo is a popular relocation choice among young entrepreneurial expats and retirees who want a neighborhood with character and countless amenities—banks, hospitals, restaurants, casinos, and nightclubs—all within walking distance. This report provides all the essential information for establishing yourself in this trendy and very expat-friendly neighborhood, one of our favorite in all Panama City...

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Certainly, you'll find the best services in Panama City, but some smaller towns also offer good public and private hospital and clinic options. This report shows you where, beyond the capital, you can find them...plus it also details your top in-country health insurance options (including policies that could provide all the coverage you need for as little as US\$50 per month...

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