

Casco Viejo, Panama City

On the 500th anniversary of the Panamanian capital, we celebrate the artisanal shops and businesses sprouting in its old quarter
By Vanessa Gibbs Photos By Tarina Rodriguez



WORLDS AWAY FROM THE SKYSCRAPERS and shopping malls of modern Panama City, Casco Viejo, also known as Casco Antiguo, is the capital city's old quarter. The neighborhood was once ruled by gangs and littered with crumbling colonial exteriors, but in 1997 it was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's been on an upswing ever since, and a slew of artisanal, independently owned shops and businesses have settled in over the years.

"Casco Antiguo offers an authentic Panamanian experience to anyone who sets foot in it," says Gabriele Acconciagoco, general manager at Pedro Mandinga, the country's first craft rum distillery. "It's a great location in the heart of the city and its beautiful architecture plays with the modern and old spirit of the Caribbean."

Today, Casco Viejo is home to vibrant street art, unique galleries and buzzy eateries. The colonial buildings have been renovated with bright licks of paint, and the cobblestoned streets are lined with boutique shops and hip bars. We sample a few here.



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1. La Rana Dorada Casco
This craft pub features the nearby brewery's flavorful IPAs, plineros and porters that can be paired with pineapple and dorado ceviche or housemade beer-cured pizza bread. Take a seat in the airy stone and mahogany interior or grab a table on the sun-drenched patio outside.

2. Bataque Coffee House
This quaint locale boasts beans from a family-run estate in Chiriquí, as well as specialty coffee, including Elida Gesha, which set a record for the most expensive beans sold at auction in 2018. Reflecting that premium, baristas ensure each cup is delivered with complexity and expertise.

3. Pedro Mandinga
The country's first craft rum distillery creates spirits using rapadura (unrefined whole cane sugar) sourced from a

family-run farm in the Chiriquí region. Sip its award-winning silver and spiced rums or attend a distillery tour, tasting or mixology class as salsa tunes and domino games echo in the background.

4. Franklin
Named after the owner's late father, this chic boutique sells bespoke tote bags, tie and other luxury goods emblazoned with Panamanian colors and flair. Franklin's main draw are the molis, silk or cashmere scarves adorned with designs from the country's indigenous Guna tribe.

5. Ay Mi Negra
Lines are often out the door at Casco Viejo's "exotic desert bar," even with its relatively limited space and artisanal desserts being prepared on a cold stone, with topping combos such as toasted marshmallows, dulce de leche and Cinnamon Toast Crunch.