



# WORLD



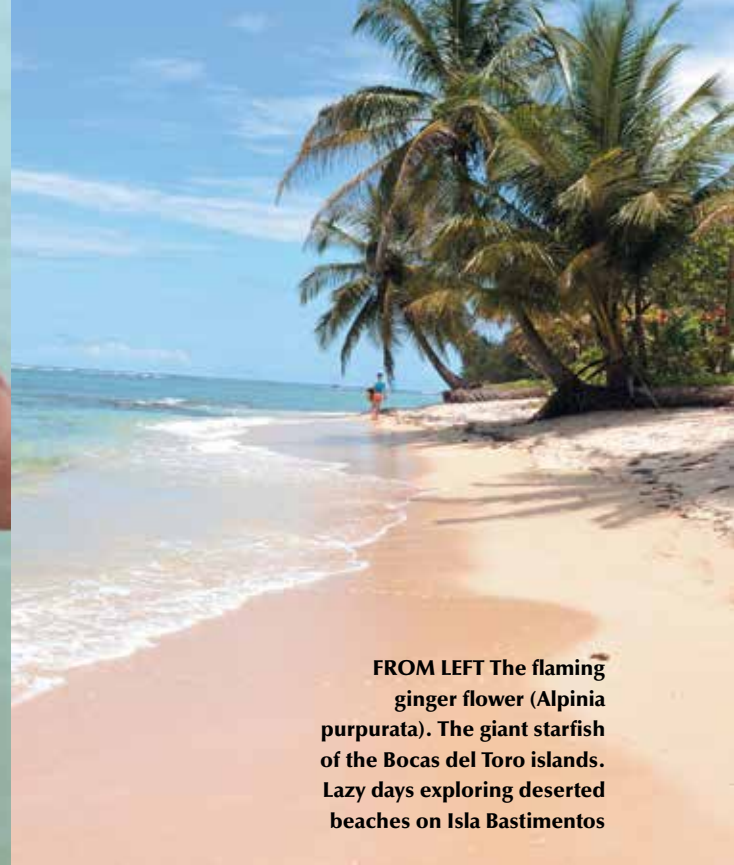
# WHERE TWO S MEET

FROM ITS REVITALISED CAPITAL CITY  
TO ITS DESERTED BEACHES, PANAMA  
INVITES EXPLORATION

text JONATHAN CANE



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT  
View from the Old City (Casco Viejo) towards the new modern  
Panama City. Frank Gehry's Bio Museum, seen from across the  
Panama Canal. Caribbean-style bungalow at El Otro Lado with  
the dense rainforest in the background. The Bocas del Toro  
islands seen from above. The gritty streets of Casco Viejo. The  
library of the American Trade Hotel Panama City



**FROM LEFT** The flaming ginger flower (*Alpinia purpurata*). The giant starfish of the Bocas del Toro islands. Lazy days exploring deserted beaches on Isla Bastimentos

**Panama feels** like the centre of the world, and in some ways it is. The meeting point of two continents, of two worlds, and the only link between two oceans. The capital, Panama City, looks like the 2019 version of Los Angeles in *Blade Runner* – like a past version of a future city.

From my room in the American Trade Hotel, in the centre of Casco Viejo (the Old City), I could see both the famous canal with Frank Gehry's new Bio Museum on the one side and the peculiar lights of the science fiction New City on the other. The Old City would remind anyone who has travelled to Colombia, of Gabriel García Márquez's most-loved city: Cartagena. There's a good reason – Cartagena and Panama City were in fact one until the geopolitics of nationalism and capitalism split them into two nations, two cities. While Colombia's Caribbean jewel has long since been renovated, repainted, restored, Panama City has only very recently hit the international trend radar. So while it's just as romantic it's very rough around the edges.

At the forefront of Casco Viejo's revitalisation is the American Trade Hotel. Occupying a 1917 department store, the exquisitely renovated establishment is now without a doubt my new favourite hotel. Its interiors are a forest of tropical nostalgia: reclaimed hardwood floors, bold equatorial prints, foliage, a refuge from the

100% humidity outside. On the nightstand a copy of the desirable travel mag *Almanac* and in the colonial-chic bathroom a travel pack of bath products by Aesop. Downstairs, Cafe Unido serves the city's hippest espresso and the lobby bar serves cocktails inspired by the menus of Panamanian sports clubs of the 1920s and 30s.

Until circa 1999 the American Trade building, abandoned and derelict, was occupied by an infamous gang who used its commanding height to control sections of the neighbourhood. As you wander the streets, eating street food, searching out a Panama hat or pursuing a shady spot at the foot of an ancient church, you'll notice that behind the romantic, peeling facades are many poor local families who actually live in Casco Viejo. The space between holiday-making and daily struggle, between glamour and hardship, is pronounced in Panama.

Outside the capital city there are a number of sandy-white Caribbean islands like the San Blas (home of the Kuna Yala tribe of severe-faced women with golden nose rings, riotously patterned clothing, and intricate and extensive arm- and leg-bands) and Bocas del Toro; as well as dramatic equatorial jungles and mountains to explore. Never an explorer myself, I headed to the tamer Bocas del Toro, an archipelago of islands an hour's flight away. As it turns out, all of Panama is an exploration of some sort: mangrove swamps, waterways swarming with

ominous jellyfish, humidity conditions that can melt an iPad, spiders, red frogs, forest gangs with pangas, rum-pickled expats on yachts, small boats, big waves. Welcome to the tropics.

Luckily there are also baby sloths eating ruby hibiscus flowers, a wide selection of rums and hammocks strung to palm trees; oh, and the Caribbean sea. I stayed on Isla Bastimentos, known for its iconic red frogs and deserted desert beaches where I befriended (i) a holidaying Argentinian air hostess with cropped hair who sat so politely on her knees in the sand that she looked like a Truffaut character, or as she said, a young Aubrey Hepburn; (ii) a Frenchman with a gentle smile; and (iii) a 20-something German with a six-pack. On walks to faraway beaches the 20-something did headstands in the sand and still had the energy to climb up the palms and collect green coconuts. Then, along with the Frenchman with the smile, he smashed them open, barehanded, so that we, who were suntanning, could drink the water and then eat the white flesh. We sought out wild orchids growing into the sea on mangled driftwood and picked up starfish. At night, drunk on rum and headstands, we went swimming to find the bioluminescence which lit us up like Barbie sparkles, or magic, or the Holy Spirit. We felt like mermen and mermaids, on our own island, in the centre of the world.

The sun sets over the infinity pool of El Otro Lado on the edge of Panama's Portobelo National Park

