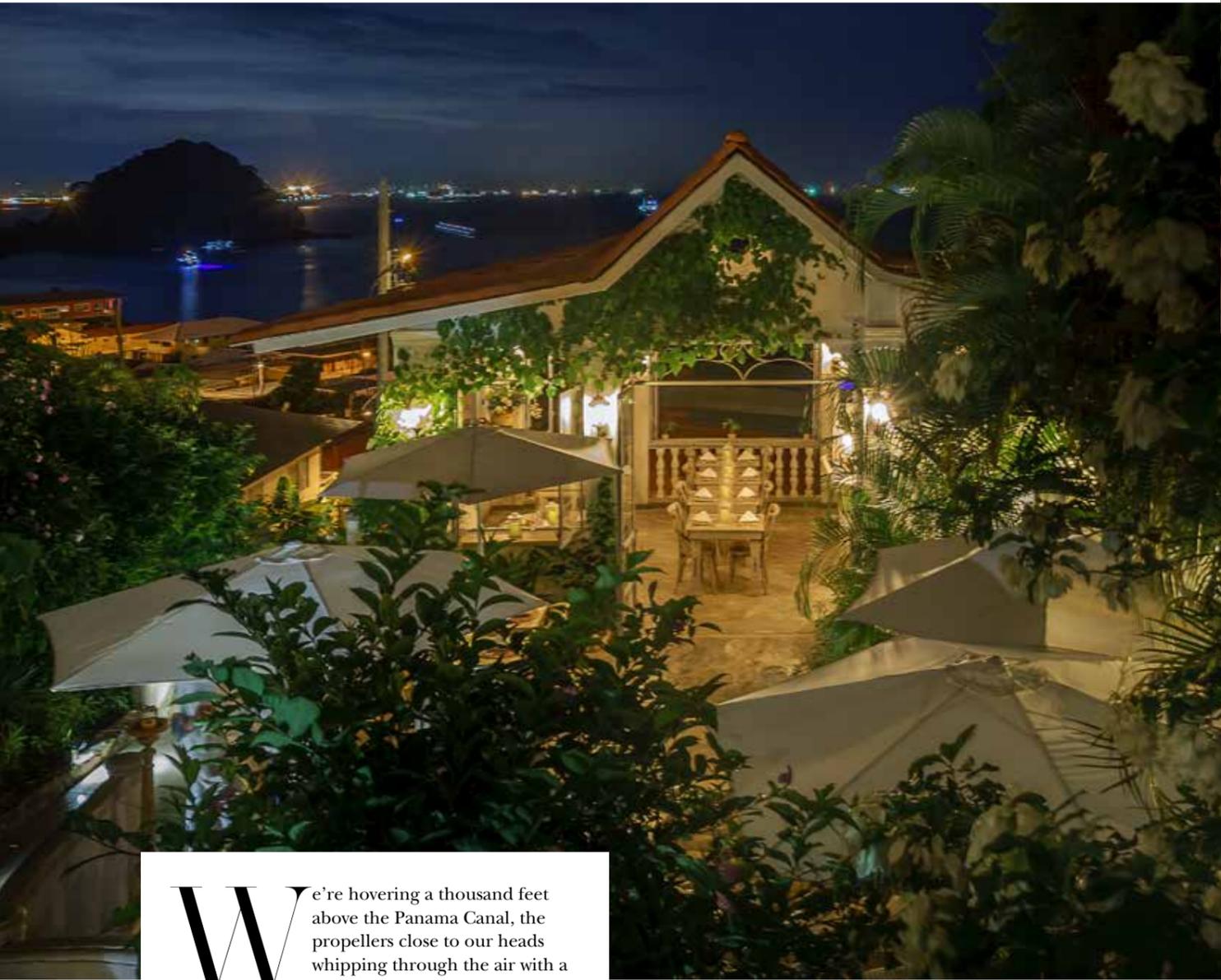


NEKUPE,
NICARAGUA

From howler monkeys and high-adrenaline pursuits to crumbling churches and winding waterways: searching for adventure-luxe in Panama and Nicaragua

WORDS: LIZZIE POOK

PRETTY GREEN



ABOVE: LA VISTA AT VILLA CAPRICHOSA, TABOGA ISLAND; BELOW: AMERICAN TRADE HOTEL, PANAMA CITY

Instagrammer's dream – a beautiful patchwork of geometric tiles, vibrant jungle prints, potted bamboo plants and contemporary artworks. Spacious rooms – which have been lovingly restored out of the Trade Company's 1917 Neoclassical headquarters – have views of the nearby church with its haunting blood red and blue stained glass windows (you'll hear the bell toll on the hour, every hour).

But it wasn't always like this. In the year 2000, the building – in its old incarnation – was commandeered by ruthless local gangsters who claimed it for its views across the whole city. It was nicknamed 'Castle Grey Skull' and the roof terrace became a dumping ground for bodies and bones. You can still run your fingers across the finely preserved graffiti on the main staircase, which speaks of gangs, guns and violence. However, two decades on, the area is embracing its dark past. From the doorstep of the hotel, you

can take part in a fascinating walking tour with former gang members from Esperanza Social Venture Club. They'll regale you with blood-

cheese and pancetta and a deliciously delicate butterfly pea soup.

The island's other claims to fame are its historic yellow fever hospital, one of the oldest churches in the western hemisphere and the 34,000 breeding pairs of brown pelicans that nest on its craggy shorelines (making it the second largest breeding site after the Galápagos Islands). But it's worth a trip for a window table at La Vista alone.

Secret history

Back on the mainland we spend our days soaking up Panama's fascinating history. The Old Quarter (Casco Viejo) – a melee of wrought iron railings fringed with palm trees and ramshackle buildings perked up with vibrant paintwork and murals – is a superb place for a culture tour. Even our hotel has a thousand stories to tell. These days the fully-restored American Trade Hotel is an



We're hovering a thousand feet above the Panama Canal, the propellers close to our heads whipping through the air with a meditative hum, the shipwrecks

below raising their limbs to the sky like half-submerged ghouls.

Our helicopter is travelling over one of the most important stretches of water in the world. Cutting across the Isthmus of Panama, the 77km-long canal connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific Ocean (making it a crucial shipping route for global trade). From our lofty viewpoint it's peppered with gleaming ships, dutifully lining up to pass through its heavy locks, and squadrons of pelicans that charge above it like boisterous fighter pilots.

I'm in one of central America's most buzzed-about destinations – packed with wildlife, culture and tropical beaches – and we're fresh from lunch at one of the most picturesque dining tables I've ever held a fork at. Perched high above the bustle and bric-a-brac buildings on the volcanic island of

Taboga – 20km off mainland Panama and the reason for our helicopter transfer – Villa Caprichosa is a bright white and cobalt blue building, flanked by lush green mango trees and gazed upon by vultures that circle lazily on the thermals above. It's also home to restaurant La Vista, the walls of which creep with python-like vines and pretty pink flowers, its windows perfectly framing views of russet red rooftops and water stretching off into the horizon – a vast swathe of shimmering silvery blue. Chef Craig Jacobs is something of a character (he likes to refer to himself as 'the nomad mercenary chef' and tells tales of his time with outlaws in the Panamanian jungle). He serves us a feast of fermented walnut bread and fresh lobster ceviche, Thai-style panang salmon with snow peas, fillet mignon with blue

ABOVE AND RIGHT: LA VISTA AT VILLA CAPRICHOSA, TABOGA ISLAND





Waking up in Panama City you can still hear the orchestra of the rainforest nearby

mighty monkey-eating Harpy eagle) the sun dapples softly through the canopy and vibrant blue morpho butterflies billow around us like smoke. We climb the steps of a vertiginous wooden viewpoint and the forest stretches around us – an ocean of wild fig and cashew trees, some of them so close we can see the fuzzy caterpillars dangling from their branches on gossamer strings. We gaze at the snail kites, turkey vultures and flame red dragonflies wheeling above us, and grin as we hear troops of howler monkeys barking and crashing through the trees. Octavia tells us of the time he came up to this viewpoint during a night safari to call to owls, only to be met by the guttural roar of a jaguar somewhere down below him. It makes me yearn for even more wilderness, more adventure, and I set my sights on one of Panama's neighbouring countries: Nicaragua.

▶ soaked tales of what these streets were once like, and how they are working these days to keep kids out of gangs. Waking up in Panama City you can still hear the orchestra of the rainforest nearby – the throaty call of exotic frogs, the high squabble of birds, the screeching of monkeys

and the string symphony of a thousand insects. Inspired, we join our naturalist guide Octavia and head off for a morning in the wild Soberanía National Park. Winding through the famous Pipeline Road (an extremely popular spot for birdwatchers who search for the elusive but

A land of volcanoes

To reach the sporting resort of Nekupe – an hour and a half south of Nicaragua's Managua – we voyage through teak forests, remote winding paths and volcanic streams presided over by tiny jewel-coloured kingfishers. But what's most



THIS PAGE: THE AMERICAN TRADE HOTEL; BELOW AND OPPOSITE: NEKUPE, NICARAGUA



flying high

An eight-night trip to Panama and Nicaragua from £6,058 per person with Black Tomato, includes three nights at The American Trade Hotel in Panama City (B&B), and five nights at Nekupe (full board), private transfers, internal flights and private tours, 020 7426 9888, blacktomato.com

magnificent about this journey is what greets us when we get there. On arrival, we're presented with our very own shiny ATV, which we use to ramble around the dense forested surroundings. By day we gleefully pootle through dragonfruit plantations, gardens of cacti and across babbling streams. At night, skunks, nightjars and Jurassic looking scorpions are illuminated in the headlights. Each room here also comes with a private butler and a balcony with unfeasibly beautiful views across sugar cane plantations to the majestic Mombacho volcano, and we make quick work of settling down with a gin and tonic as the sun pulls the blind down on the twilight sky.

As well as skeet shooting and sunrise yoga – where we're watched by the beady eyes of curious howler monkeys – we also get in tune with nature on horseback. My steed, Pinto, isn't the most cooperative of creatures, but eventually we make our peace and trot together through glassy streams, puffs of buttercup yellow butterflies and wild tangles of forest. I pull teak leaves off nearby bushes and rub them between my thumb and forefinger to make the bright red war paint that the indigenous people used to smear across their cheeks. As night falls, a roadside hawk is illuminated by the last shafts of sun, snakes slither across our path and monkeys pick their way through the trees. As the last vestiges of light ebb away, the forest erupts with the light of a thousand fireflies, lighting up the blackness like tiny constellations. This, I think, is what it's really like to be in the wild. ■

