Spotlight on Panama City: From local surf breaks to favorite food trucks and more.

Jill Lindenbaum from TAQ in conversation with KC Hardin and Ramón Arias, founders of Conservatorio (a group dedicated to the resurgence of the Casco Antiguo, Panama City’s old quarter and the heart of the city’s art and cultural revival) and architect Hildegard Vasquez, who all worked together on restoring the new Ace Hotel and cultural landmark, the American Trade Hotel.

TAQ: Tell me about visiting Panama?

KC Hardin: Panama gets under people's skin. They come thinking they are just going to see the Canal and maybe the beach, and then end up canoeing up river into indigenous villages, whale watching, caving, surfing, and then returning to the city every night for more nightlife and good dining than they imagined.

TAQ: What ‘s a great day like in the Casco for you?

KC: Walk down the street, surf, walk home for breakfast, walk to the office, walk to a show or jazz club, and walk home. Any day without getting in my car is a good one for me.

TAQ: Ah—a surfer! Where do you surf?

KC: Right off the old city wall in Casco Viejo as often as I can. We thought the wave was gone forever when the government decided to build a highway around Casco, but it came back a couple months ago, thankfully. When I have a bit more time, I go to Bocas del Toro on the Caribbean side. It's inconsistent, but when it's good, it's world class.

TAQ: What’s one of your favorite places in the Casco that people might not hear about on their own?

KC: We're all in love with a food truck called “The Fish Market” at the moment. It's hidden away in an empty lot so you’ll have to ask a local how to find it. Then, there's the Carlos Endara Photography Museum. His archives are intact in the wonderfully restored house where he lived and worked. It's a private museum, so ask the front desk of your hotel to call to see if you can get in.

TAQ: What's the perfect hour to explore the Casco?

Ramón Arias: Definitely at the end of the afternoon and in the early evening breeze. When the light and the weather are perfect, it helps you understand the neighborhood and its intricacies.

TAQ: Can you tell us a little about what's happening in and around Casco and Panama City?

Ramón: Casco is in the middle of a revitalization—“old” is becoming respected again. The restored American Trade Hotel is becoming a symbol of both the past and present, and serves as an example to a community that relishes authenticity, social commitment, and neighborhood lifestyle.

KC: If you’re lucky, once in your life you get to be a part of a neighborhood revitalization. This little corner of the city has a community that truly cares about architectural preservation, human development, and each other. It's special to be a part of it.

TAQ: What's your favorite location in the American Trade Hotel?

Hildegard Vasquez: My favorite location is the pool deck. It was an architectural feat to join this new structure with the old building and a lot went into planning the best place for experiencing Panama sun. I love the fact that you sit on top of the Casco and enjoy the view of Panama, with old and new crossing each other constantly. You feel the heat and the vibe of a country at a crossroad.

TAQ: Where do the histories of Panama and the American Trade building intersect?

Ramón: Panama City’s destiny has always been linked to the transit of trade and people. Even in pre-Columbian time it was a transit and trade zone. Soon after Christopher Columbus’s time, the Spanish started seeing the need for a passage from one ocean to another. First the “Camino de Cruces” was used, a donkey trail, then the Panama Railroad, and after 1914, the Panama Canal. The American Trade Hotel building was built on the foresight that the Canal would bring an economic boom to the city. Back then it was a skyscraper, a sign of progress and better times for the city. The plaza where it stands was rightfully called at the time “Plaza del Triunfo” (Triumph Square).

TAQ: Later the building fell into dilapidation and, I gather, was covered in graffiti.

Hildegard: The building had been a gang house for many years and was in serious disrepair. Our first instinct was to document not only the architectural state of the building but also the graffiti that had decorated the walls of Greyskull´s Castle (as the building was known by the gang City of God). We hired Johann Wolfschoon from Diablo Rosso, a local art space and creative think tank, as an art consultant. He came up with the idea of using all the graffiti photographs we had to create wallpaper to use on the main staircase, as well placing gang-related art in the library.

TAQ: What would you say this hotel stands for?

Hildegard: The hotel stands for a grand past of American interchange and growth and also for the Panama of today. When you are able to capture the beauty of the past and carry it forward into the present day with a new architecture that breaks molds and simultaneously respects its sense of place and time—it becomes special. When we were thinking about the narrative behind the American Trade Hotel, we always thought of it in terms of what we would want to experience if we knew nobody in Panama and came for a visit. The hotel is your friend´s home, which has been around since the Canal construction but has changed with time. Every corner of it holds something from one of us.

[Jake: url links for resources in graphs above]

Conservatorio

<http://www.conservatoriosa.com>

American Trade Hotel

<https://www.acehotel.com/panama>

Diablo Rosso

<http://www.diablorosso.com>

The Fish Market

<https://www.facebook.com/Fish.Market.Panama>