

TRAVEL

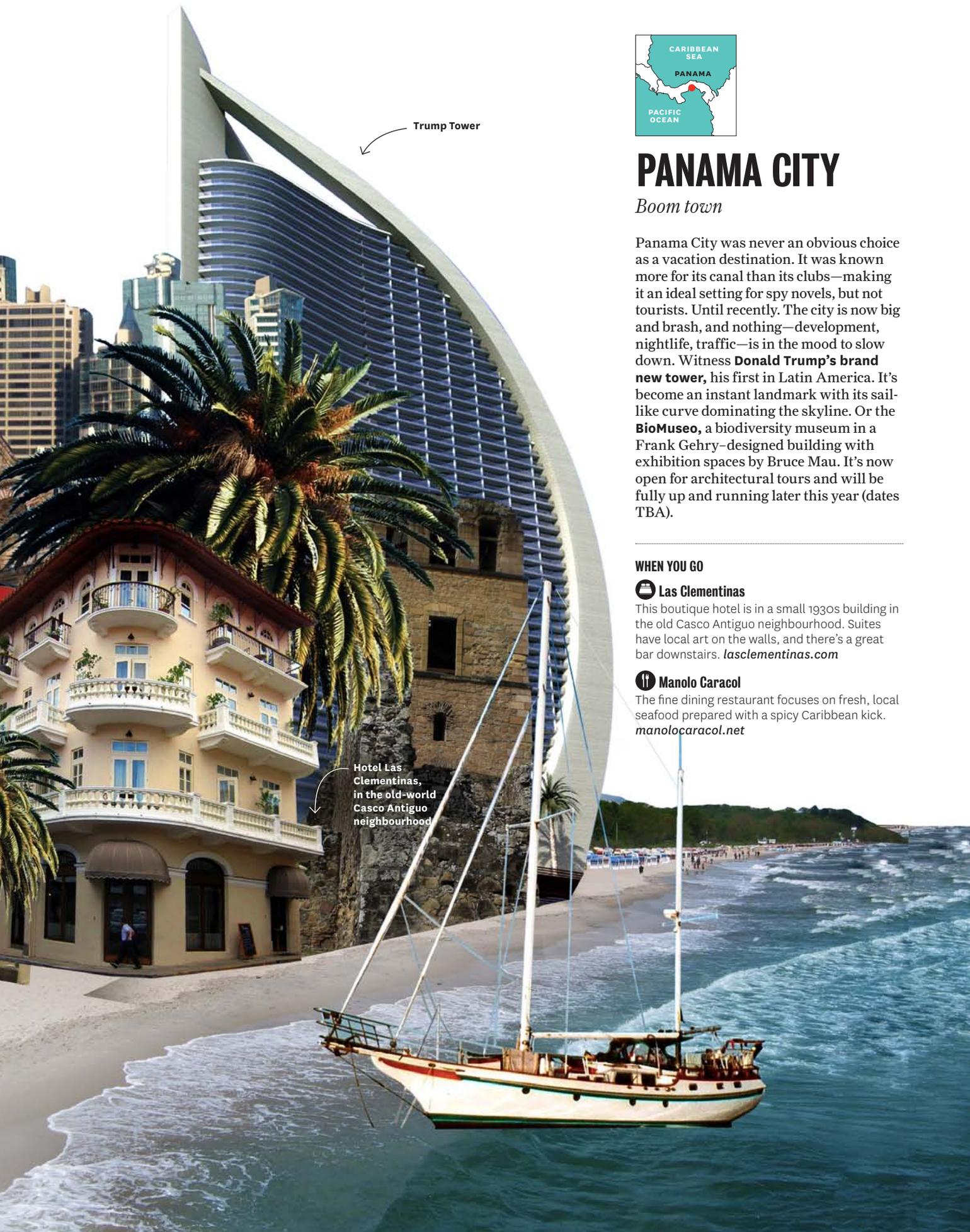
HOT HOT HEAT

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Before you book this winter's escape to Florida, consider this: warmth doesn't have to come at the expense of excitement. There are cities down south that can satisfy all of your urban desires. Here, we've picked four of the hottest (in every sense of the word) and highlighted the best of each—best restaurants, hotels, galleries—and why now is the time to go. Some of these places have beaches, it's true, but there's also a whole lot more culture than you'll get at Grandma's condo (no offence to Boca Raton—we hear they have a nice outlet mall).

The much-anticipated, Frank Gehry-designed BioMuseo





Trump Tower

Hotel Las Clementinas, in the old-world Casco Antiguo neighbourhood

PANAMA CITY

Boom town

Panama City was never an obvious choice as a vacation destination. It was known more for its canal than its clubs—making it an ideal setting for spy novels, but not tourists. Until recently. The city is now big and brash, and nothing—development, nightlife, traffic—is in the mood to slow down. Witness **Donald Trump's brand new tower**, his first in Latin America. It's become an instant landmark with its sail-like curve dominating the skyline. Or the **BioMuseo**, a biodiversity museum in a Frank Gehry-designed building with exhibition spaces by Bruce Mau. It's now open for architectural tours and will be fully up and running later this year (dates TBA).

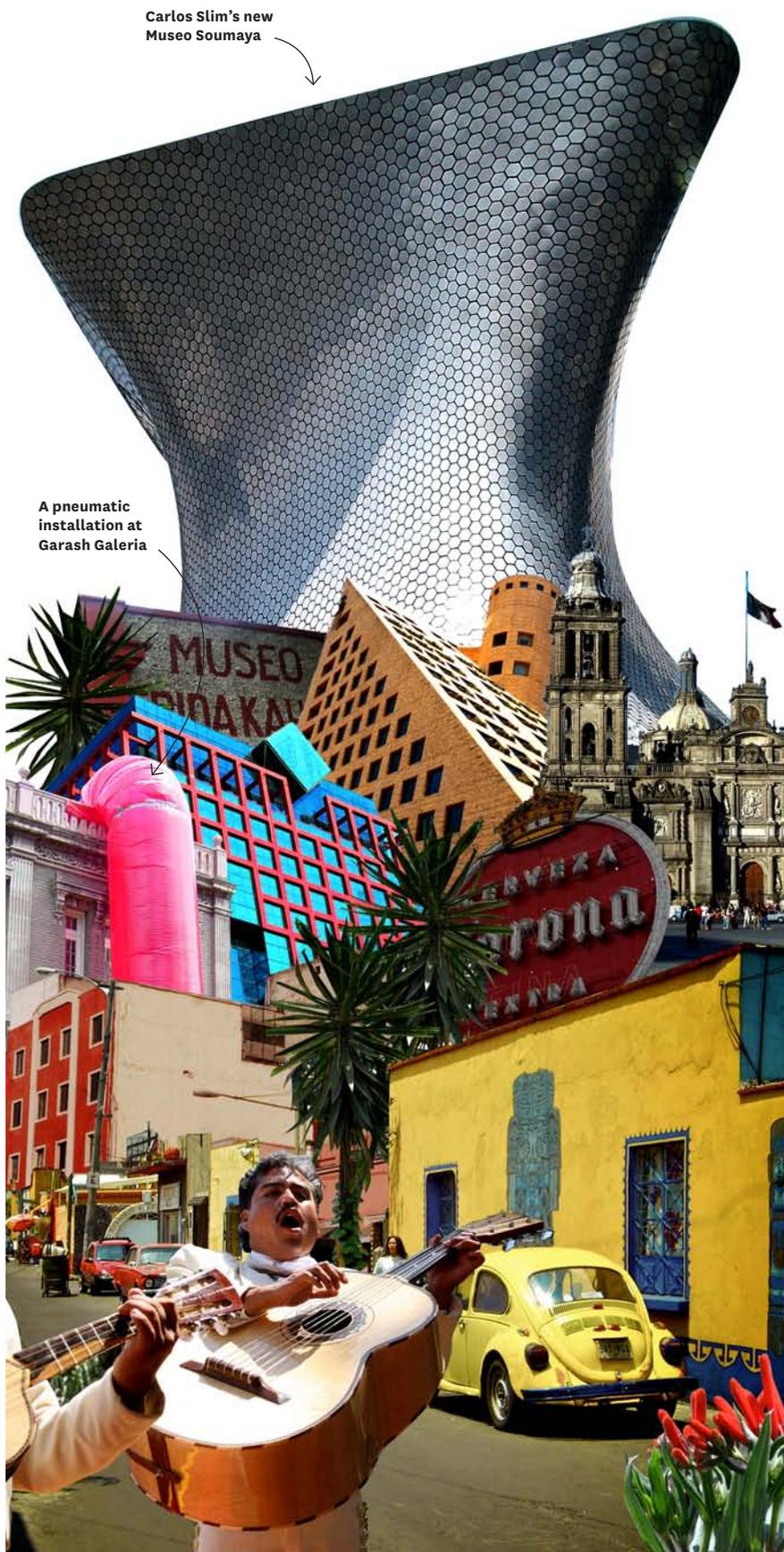
WHEN YOU GO

Las Clementinas

This boutique hotel is in a small 1930s building in the old Casco Antiguo neighbourhood. Suites have local art on the walls, and there's a great bar downstairs. lasclementinas.com

Manolo Caracol

The fine dining restaurant focuses on fresh, local seafood prepared with a spicy Caribbean kick. manolocaracol.net



Carlos Slim's new Museo Soumaya

A pneumatic installation at Garash Galeria



MEXICO CITY

Gallery central

Tourists heading to Mexico used to confine themselves to insular, all-inclusive resorts that felt suspended in a permanent '90s spring break movie. Mexico City, the crime-ridden capital, was strictly off-limits. In the last few years, however, much has changed: crime has gone down, boutique hotels have sprung up, and art galleries now line the once-sketchy streets. One of the best is **Garash Galeria**, a gallery in the hip Roma neighbourhood that exhibits large installation pieces by international and local artists. The big draw, though, is the gargantuan, just-opened **Museo Soumaya**. The silver honey-comb building houses the 66,000-piece collection of Carlos Slim (a.k.a. the richest man in the world). We're talking about works by Picasso, Dalí, Matisse and Van Gogh alongside local treasures from Diego Rivera. It also boasts the largest collection of Rodin sculptures outside of France.

WHEN YOU GO

Las Alcobas

This hotel is in the trendy Polanco Chapultepec neighbourhood, close to many of the city's best galleries. The space was designed by famed duo Yabu Pushelburg. lasalcobas.com

Pujol

Chef Enrique Olvera trained at the venerable Culinary Institute of America. Back in his hometown, he puts a new, upscale spin on traditional Mexican street food. pujol.com.mx



NEW ORLEANS

Old jazz and new art

Katrina wasn't so long ago, but it seems like ancient history to NOLA tourists. The city has made efforts to rebuild not just damaged infrastructure, but the cultural psyche as well. Restaurants have sprung up out of abandoned buildings. Local jazz—best experienced at **Frenchmen Street bars like the Spotted Cat and Snug Harbor**—continues to be a cultural touchstone. And the city is home to one of the most thriving and inventive visual art scenes in the U.S. Local art, like George Rodrigue's ubiquitous **blue dogs**, takes pride of place on restaurant walls and in city squares. And **Prospect.2**, the second iteration of the largest biennale of international contemporary art in the United States, is on through the end of January. It includes work from both Louisiana and global artists, such as Montreal's **Michel de Broin, who debuts "Majestic,"** an installation crafted from New Orleans streetlamps and fixtures that were damaged by Katrina.

Michel de Broin's streetlamp sculpture, "Majestic," at Prospect.2

Local jazz plays on Frenchmen Street

WHEN YOU GO

W New Orleans—French Quarter

A brand new, modern hotel smack in the middle of the quaint and historic French Quarter. wfrenchquarter.com

Redemption

The large, historic church was shuttered by the hurricane, but it has been restored to its former glory with a restaurant that serves excellent, upscale Creole dishes. redemption-nola.com

George Rodrigue's blue dog



The state capital building

Alamo Drafthouse cinema

South by Southwest



AUSTIN

Live music capital

If there's such a thing as the New Texas, it's Austin. The left-leaning **capital**, smack-dab in the middle of a big ol' red state, is home to a surprisingly large artistic community and a series of music and arts festivals. The biggest—because everything's still bigger in Texas—is **South by Southwest**, which is more about electro-pop and indie movies than the native honky-tonk. SXSW is growing, both in scope and in influence every year: emerging artists are still the main attraction, but nowadays artists like the Strokes and Cee Lo are drawing crowds of 20,000, and buzz-worthy indie films are debuting here instead of at Sundance (they play all year round at the **Alamo Drafthouse**, possibly the coolest commercial cinema chain in the country). Conferences, lectures and interactive exhibits have made SXSW a destination for industry professionals and all kinds of fans. It's unquestionably the city's best party—worth catching now before it jumps the shark.

WHEN YOU GO

Hotel Saint Cecilia

The hotel opened in 2008 and taps into the city's emerging identity as an offbeat, arty enclave—no two suites are alike, and the hotel rents both bikes and LPs (the rooms have turntables). hotelstcecilia.com

Congress

Austin's known for barbecue, not fine dining. But Congress opened last year and fills that gaping gastronomic void with three- or seven-course prix fixe