

Isla Blanca developments

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A New Start

Originally, Isla Blanca was built as an exhibition layout of the terminus and fiddle yard type, which visited several shows between 2014 and 2018. At this point a house-move intervened, and the decision was taken to retire the layout and convert it for permanent use at home, where a dedicated space was available. Accordingly, the fiddle yard tracks were lifted and replaced with new sidings representing the local docks, reached via an old arched gateway on the station board. The harbour gained a large tipple-loader to service a cargo ship on the back-scene, which in turn has needed a twice-daily mineral train service. Other sidings were provided for general cargo. All this activity provides what is virtually a shunting layout separate from the main line, and this is emphasized by a wall separating the port from the rest of the city. As this would make operating a little difficult, the wall was built in a semi-ruined state to allow an eye to be kept on shunting moves.

Along the Line

Outside the docks, the main line passes through “The Narrows”, squeezing between the dockyard wall and the railway staff’s hostel – a small complex of foreground buildings, developed from a low-relief frontage on the original layout. Beyond this is the small station of Paseo Ciudad, only served by railcars, but whose passing loop allows light engines going to and from the depot to pass full-length trains, a feature that makes operating the terminus a lot easier. The main line then takes a sharp bend to the right and passes over the Calle del Puerto by means of an ungated level crossing. Here, protected by a flagman,



road traffic is beginning to stack up. The railway continues into the yard at Paseo San Juan passing between the goods shed and a semi-open structure where railcars are stored and maintained.

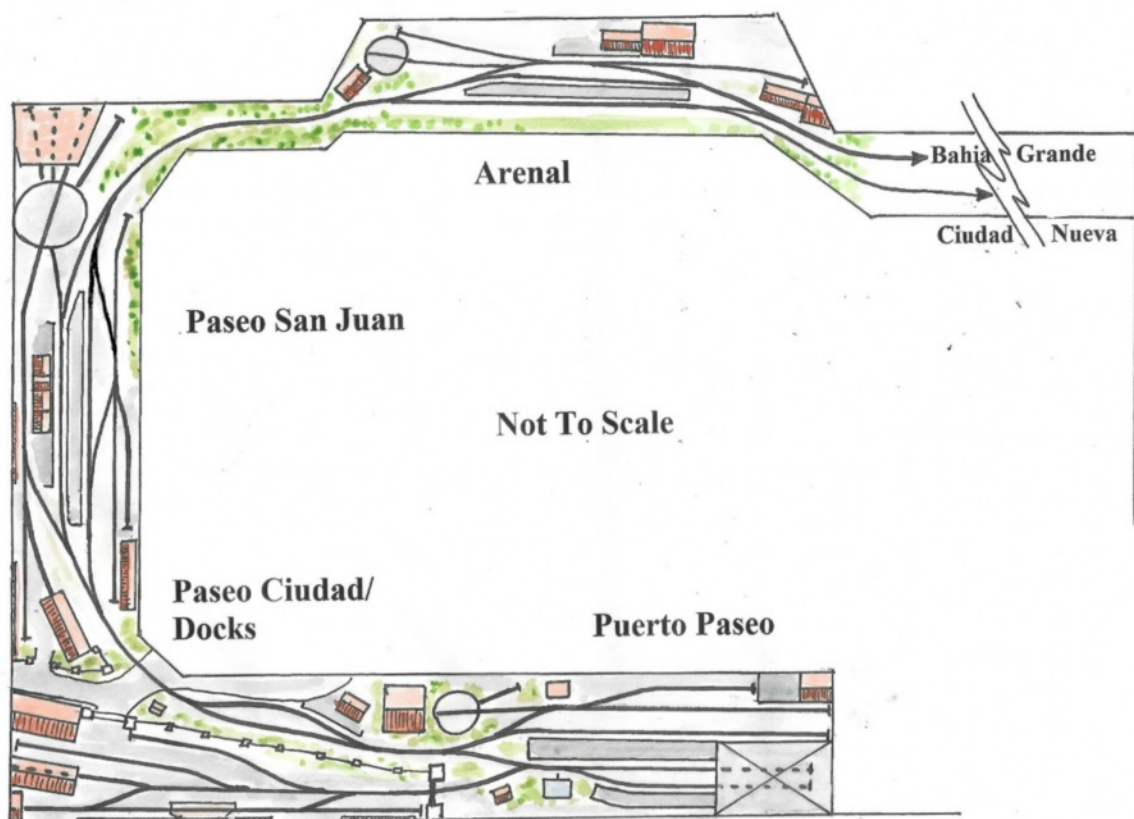
In accordance with foreign practice the station at San Juan has three running lines, two provided with platform faces, while the third line is the goods loop serving two sidings. At the rear of the site another track runs round to the rear of the station to provide access to the railcar



shed and a siding serving a rum-distillery. At the other end of the yard this back track passes the coaling stage and reaches a turntable and a semi-roundhouse (3 tracks under cover plus two in the open). Most of the new buildings have been made with Foamcore board, the exceptions being the station buildings and a two-storey company HQ building which features a first-floor balcony running the length of the frontage. These buildings have been adapted from three Tri-ang station of 1950s vintage, which have had their frontages re-arranged and stacked to provide the extra floors. The result-

ing mixture of walling material has been hidden by a wash of plaster. The unseen rear of the building is plain board, providing more material for the visible side. The station's upper floor is the upper part of a signal-box of similar provenance, which forms the railways Operating Department with a good view of the goings-on below; a couple of the department's staff can be seen in discussion, while a supervisor looks on. The bottom half of the signal-box, with some card additions, has been made into the separate block for the convenience of Hombres and Senoras. Behind all this the suburb of San Juan is represented by a collage of mainly Spanish buildings found online and spliced together, plus others of French and Venetian origin.

Work has recently started on a further extension of the layout, which is eventually intended to run around three sides of the room, to reach the station of Arenal. A short stretch of countryside is under construction, with the next station and beyond, scheduled for 2021. Arenal will feature another of the Tri-ang stations, providing an integrated style of railway architecture. It is also the town where the local railcar service ends, and there will be a turntable and a two-road shed to stable the cars overnight. A link with the past, when this was a steam shed, will be a water tower, which nowadays provides for a water-crane beside the running lines. The station is also the junction where the FC Este meets with the FC Central y Oeste which is the origin of the mineral trains to the docks as well as a freight and a passenger train. Both the Este and the FCyO have separate sidings in a staging yard situated beyond the junction.



The Timetable

As may be deduced from various hints above, the train service over the line is quite busy – probably too busy, although the presence of two railway companies does something to explain this. To service the needs of the docks more fully, the timetable was recently made to run 24 hours, although the overnight trains are limited. At its heart is the traditional “three trains a day” between Bahia and Puerto, to which is added the local railcar services to Arenal (one or two trips daily);



the FCyO’s Mail train adds one more passenger working. On the freight side there is a day and a night goods train on the Este, and an evening “parcels” from Bahia to Puerto which returns as a “post and newspapers” in the early hours. This is an opportunity to run a van belonging to the island’s third railway company, the FC Norte, which is otherwise limited to the occasional excursion or pilgrimage special, associated with a local Fiesta. (the Norte makes its connection at Bahia Grande). Meanwhile, the FCyO runs a daily freight and two mineral trains (one daytime and one at night).

Locomotives and Rolling Stock

Traditionally the Este was a small-engine line, using tender-tank locomotives, but recent developments have seen the arrival of a larger 2-6-0 tank engine, with a 2-4-2T also planned. These have the

advantage that they fit onto the small turntable at Puerto, and so are saved the time of running back to San Juan depot for turning, which is a great help to the timetable (not to mention the road traffic in the Calle del Puerto). In addition to these locomotives the Este also runs an 0-6-0 diesel (built on an old steam chassis) and a rail-motor for the carriage of stores; this is occasionally used to haul a trailer when the passenger railcar is undergoing repairs.

The CyO can muster three steam engines, and a small diesel which is used on the nightly mineral train as it can wait at Puerto while the hoppers are unloaded. The Norte has a diesel loco for their excursion trains.

This just leaves the two locomotives belonging to the Junta del Obras de Puerto (JOP), the Dock Authority, and a Postal rail-motor.

The growth of the line and the extended operating hours have called for a more rolling stock than was needed previously and 2020 has mainly been spent in building up their numbers, as a theoretical run through the timetable uncovered the need for over forty wagons and several more coaches and parcels or postal vans; the latter are run by the island’s Post Office (Correo) and accordingly carry a yellow livery. A large collection of broken or damaged OO and HO wagons was assembled, ranging from small four wheeled wagons to vintage Tri-ang Transcontinental items, mainly for their under-frames although some of the body sides were re-used with wider ends to provide quick conversions; other wagon bodies have been built from scratch. A few 7mm scale narrow gauge kits have also been used although somewhat modified.

