

British Columbia's Mexican Connection

The Naval Base at San Blas 1768–1810

by Nick Doe

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¹ San Blas is in the state of Nayarit, Mexico at 21°32'N, 105°17'W, 3394 km from Victoria BC.

² The task of a *visitador-general* in Spanish dominions was to implement royal policies. They reported directly to the viceroy and were given wide-ranging powers to appoint officials, proclaim new regulations, manage financial matters, etc. They regularly visited provinces to confer with local authorities, inspect, and report on conditions, resolve problems, and direct the activities of the provincial administrators.

³ Spanish cedar was an important wood in tropical America; aromatic, strong, easily worked, resistant to dry rot and insect damage, it has now gone from many areas where it once grew. Some of the vessels built at San Blas were constructed "keel to masthead" using Spanish cedar (Antonio de Pineda).

⁴ Other trees known to have been used include the rubber tree (*Castilla elastica*), a soft lightweight wood used for construction; *mesquite* (*Prosopis juliflora*), tough and strong, used for posts and furniture; lead tree (*Leucaena glauca*), a hard heavy wood used for

MANY of the Spanish ships that visited the coast of British Columbia in the late eighteenth century sailed from the port of San Blas. Nowadays, asked to describe exactly where San Blas is, one would probably have to reach for an atlas.¹ Yet, this small and congenial Mexican town, which is as far south of Victoria as Toronto is east, was for forty years the headquarters of the Spanish navy in the north Pacific. Here, in a belated effort to maintain their claim to all the lands of the Pacific Rim, the Spanish established shipbuilding yards, warehouses, and a fortified harbour. In what the historian Warren Cook has called the flood tide of empire, Spanish ships sailed from San Blas to establish Franciscan missions in Upper California, naval bases at San Diego and Monterey, and naval outposts at Neah Bay on the Olympic Peninsula and at Nootka Sound off the west coast of Vancouver Island.

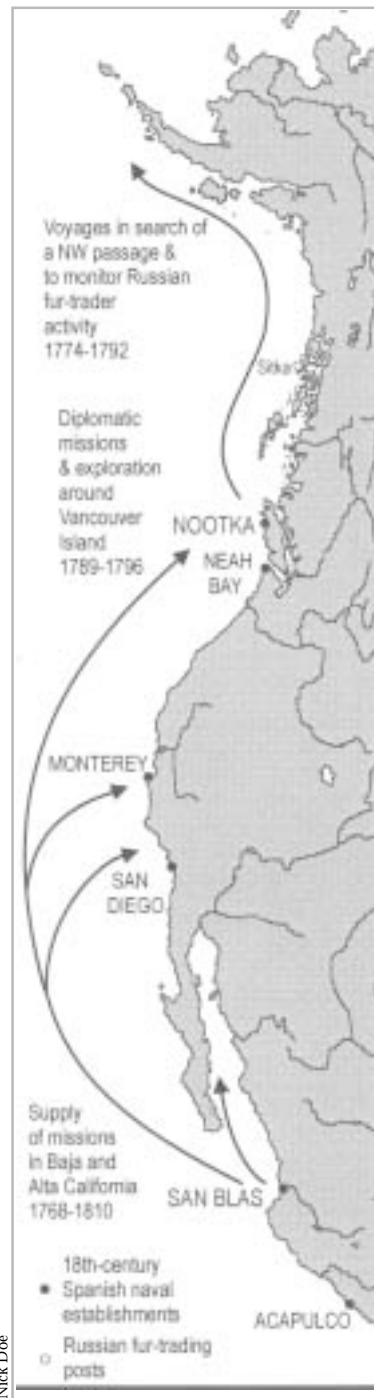
To reach San Blas from Puerto Vallarta, you drive north for about three hours on the main Mazatlán highway, and then, just north of Tepic, take the road that wanders down to the coast through green, tropical countryside. If you go in winter, the streets will be dry and dusty, and the weather pleasant, but in the summertime it often rains.

The land around San Blas is flat. As you move inland, the barrier beaches give way to mangrove swamps, followed by fresh-

water marshes and lakes, and then the alluvial plain. From the air, the land to the north looks as though it has been furrowed by the fingers of a giant's hand, leaving long, narrow lagoons running parallel to the sea.

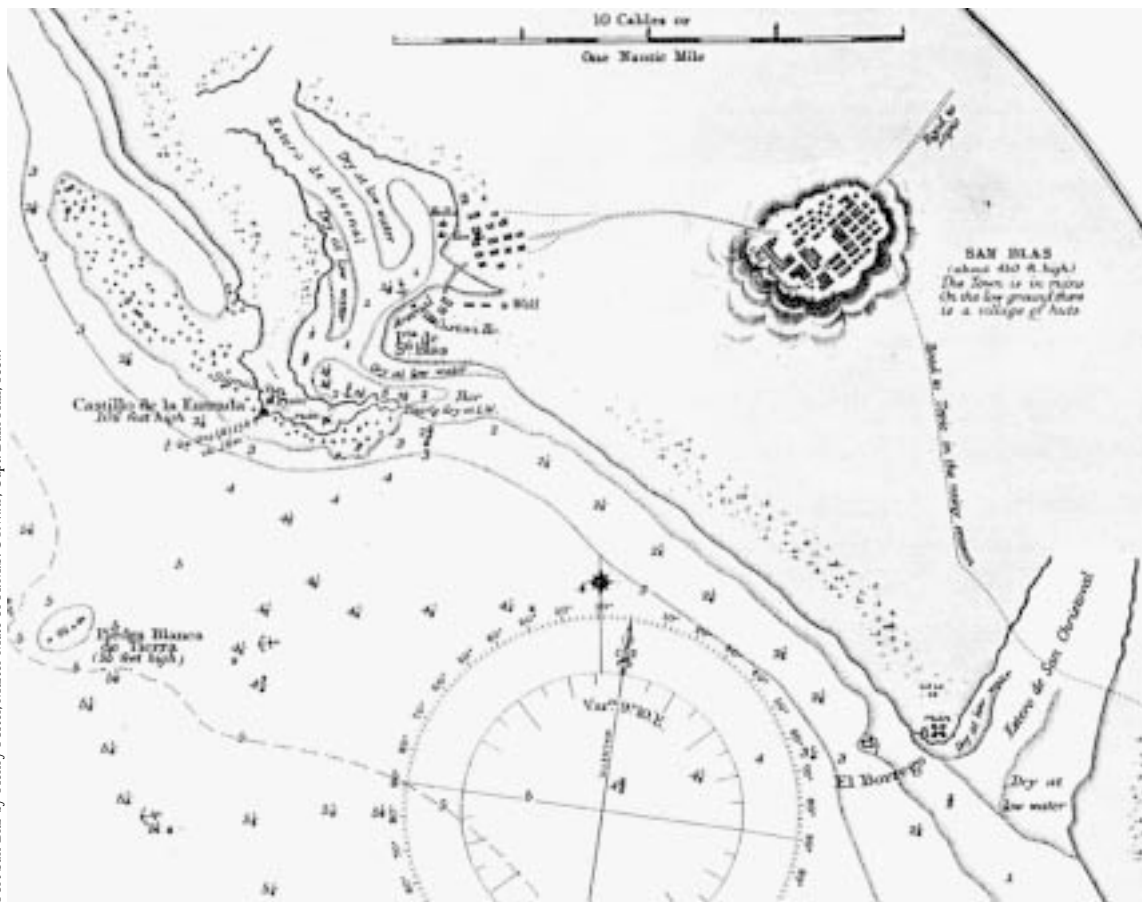
Two rivers emerge from the mangrove swamps on either side of the town: the San Cristóbal to the east, and El Pozo (formerly El Arsenal) to the west. Over the years, surrounding jungle has been cleared to make way for papaya, mango, and banana orchards, and near-by lagoons are used as shrimp ponds. But development is not rampant. Today's population, although growing, is not much greater than what it was at the height of the Spanish activities. The only buildings at the edges of the long, sandy beaches are *palapas* (a shelter made of sticks and palm fronds), where you can drink coconut juice, eat *ceviche* or grilled *pescado*, and watch Mexican families enjoying the sun.

Little is known of the early colonial history of San Blas and no structures dating from that period remain. Sometime early in the seventeenth century Franciscans founded a mission here and urged the Indians to give up their semi-nomadic hunting life style in the hills to the south and east where they were difficult to reach. Most of those that did so quickly succumbed to



Above: Map of the coast of N. America showing Spanish attempts at controlling the whole of the Pacific coast of North America using ships built and manned by the Naval Department at San Blas.

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Left: Part of a chart of San Blas made in 1822, shortly after Mexican independence. Not a lot has changed. The Spanish naval headquarters on the hill are marked “old monas(tr)y” and the hilltop town as “in ruins”.

newly introduced diseases, or fell ill as the result of trading their healthy climate for that of the hot and humid river estuaries. There are reports of pearl fishing; salt was shipped from San Blas and from Matanchén a few miles to the south; Manila galleons bound for Acapulco sometimes sheltered here from summer storms; Jesuits sailed for Baja California; and there were, no doubt, many unrecorded visits by pirate ships. There, the history of this remote and sparsely-populated settlement might have remained unremarkable were it not for events in the northernmost reaches of the Pacific Ocean.

In 1741, Bering and Chirikov reached Alaska from the Kamchatka Peninsula, and in the ensuing years, Russian fur traders, with the active encouragement of the Empress Catherine II, rapidly expanded their activities into the region. By 1760, all of the Aleutian Islands were supplying pelts of sea otters, blue foxes, and fur seals, together with walrus tusks from mainland Alaska, to the markets of China. Plans were made to push farther south, and the Spanish, who for more than a hundred years had been content to leave unexplored the vast northern territories that they claimed by virtue of having discovered the Pacific, were alarmed. In 1768, the *visitador-general*,²

José de Gálvez, responded to the crisis in “Northern California” by ordering the establishment of a new naval base to control operations there.

San Blas was chosen because of its high latitude and sheltered harbour, its copious supplies of fresh water, salt, and wood, and for its access to the agricultural produce of the interior highlands. Many of the raw materials required for shipbuilding were obtained locally. Spanish cedar (*Cedrela odorata*) was the most extensively used construction timber.³ Other trees, such as *guapinole* (*Hymenaea courbaril*) whose sap was used to make varnish, and *lignumvitae* (*Guaiacum sanctum*), whose heavy, fine-grained wood was ideal for making blocks, tackles, and bearings, were also necessary and in good supply.⁴ Indians from near-by Tequepexpan were contracted to gather pitch and tar; and vitamin-C-rich guavas, the favoured fruit for the treatment of scurvy, were gathered from the local forests.⁵

By the mid-1770s, packet boats⁶ built in the San Blas shipyards were plying regularly between the coast of Nueva Galicia and missions in Alta California,⁷ carrying essential supplies of food, tools, manufactured goods, and barrels of sweet wine for celebrating Mass. It was from here that Juan José Pérez Hernández sailed the San Blas-

machinery components; tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*) for the charcoal used in making gun-powder; *chicharrón* (*Comocladia dodonaea*), a shrub with a sap that stains, used for paints and rouge dyes; silk-cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) for silk stuffing material; and white mangrove (*Laguncularia racemosa*) for firewood. A local correspondent of the author, Manuel Lomeli, had no difficulty in identifying over 50 species of indigenous trees growing in the immediate vicinity of San Blas.

⁵ Other trees and plants used for refreshment and medicinal purposes included oranges, limes, tamarinds (candy, preserves, and seasonings), *sapodilla* (*Manilkara zapota*) (chewing gum), cacao (cocoa and chocolate), bitterbush (*Picramnia pentandra*) for treating fever, *gumbolimbo* (*Busera simaruba*) for dysentery, and *margarita* (common daisy) used as a tonic and possibly as a treatment for night sweats.

⁶ A packet boat (Sp. *paquebote*) was basically a frigate (200 tons) with stowage space in place of heavy armaments.

⁷ A late-eighteenth century list of missions in California being supplied from San Blas include: Purísima Concepción, San Antonio de Padua, Santa Bárbara, San Buena Ventura, San Carlos, Santa Clara, San Diego, San Francisco, San Gabriel Arcángel, San Juan de Capistrano, and San Luis Obispo.

⁸ A complete list of ships built at San Blas known to have visited British Columbia in the eighteenth century includes the brigantine *Activa* (213 tons), the frigates *Princesa* (189 tons) and *Santiago* (225 tons), and the schooners *Sutil* and *Mexicana* (46 tons). Another schooner, the *Santa Saturina* (32 tons), which was used in the first European exploration of the Strait of Georgia, was assembled at Nootka, probably from a kit of parts made at San Blas. It returned to San Blas in 1791 where it was used for many years for local traffic and deliveries.

⁹ Also known as *Cerro de Contaduría*, literally “hill of the counting-house (accountancy).”

¹⁰ In 1791, the staff of officers, clerks, and other employees at the base numbered 772.

¹¹ One arch of the chapel in particular has little curvature and is known as “the flat arch of San Blas.”

¹² The Spanish name for the Strait of Georgia was later given to the Rosario Strait, which separates mainland Washington from the San Juan Islands. *Nuestra Señora del Rosario* was also a seldom-used alias of the frigate *Princesa*.

¹³ The exact age of the Customs House is not known to the author. It was probably built before Mexico became independent in 1821.

Thurman 1967 has a photograph of the ruin in his book captioned “Inner Dock and Warehouse” but he makes no reference to it in his text. In the 1930s, it was being used as a coconut-oil factory.

built frigate *Santiago* north to the Queen Charlotte Islands and Nootka Sound in 1774, to become the first European to have visited the native peoples of British Columbia. It was from here that Esteban José Martínez sailed to Alaska in 1788 to meet the Russian intruders along the shores of the “Spanish lake” as the Pacific was sometimes called. And it was from here, in 1792, that the San Blas-built schooners *Sutil* and *Mexicana* set out on their historic circumnavigation of Vancouver Island, the first European vessels to do so.⁸

To reach the ruins of the old Spanish headquarters, you walk towards the bridge that crosses the San Cristóbal estuary at the entrance to the town and climb the steep, cobbled road, full of playing children, up past the town cemetery onto the flat-topped hill known as the Cerro de Basilio.⁹ The *cerro* has the peaceful air of an abandoned garden. A broad path leads past the old chapel to the ruins on the bluff where neatly-painted cannon point out over the palm trees towards the sea.

Most of the buildings on the *cerro* were built of wood and of them, nothing remains to be seen, but here on the highest point of the hill stand the massive walls of the *contaduría*. Half of this building was the administrative headquarters of the port; the other half contained shipping and receiving offices and a large warehouse, which ran the length of the building.¹⁰ It was completed in 1779. The walls are about seven metres high and were made from volcanic rock, which was quarried from the hill on which they stand. Here and there, the roots of trees and shrubs are slowly prying the walls apart and the wooden roof has long since gone. At the southern corner there is, appropriately, a full-grown Spanish cedar tree.

The cannon along the cliff edge mark the site of early clashes in the Mexican War of Independence 1810–1821. Although the *contaduría* is now sometimes called a fortress (*fuerte*), the main defences of the base were actually located below. These comprised several gunboats, a substantial garrisoned fort (*El Castillo de la Entrada*) on the site of the present lighthouse overlooking the Pozo (Arsenal) estuary, and a smaller battery at El Borrego at the mouth of the San Cristóbal. They were not much used. Pirate attacks on galleons from the Philippines had declined considerably by the time the naval base was built, and no hostile warship ever approached San Blas in colonial times.

The chapel lower down the slope was built with the same heavy stones as the *contaduría*. It is a strangely cold ruin—cold both physically and spiritually. Its wooden roof too has gone, although the narrow, grey-black stone arches, that once supported it still span the ten-metre wide nave.¹¹ After independence, the bronze bells, at least one of them cracked, were taken down to the town, where for a time they were mounted in a wooden frame only a metre or so high. It was a report of this that inspired the American poet Henry W. Longfellow’s final work: *The Bells of San Blas* (1882).

At least one of the chaplains that served here went north. Lummi Bay, near Bellingham in the state of Washington, was known to the Spanish as *Ensenada de Loera* (Loera’s Bay) and was so named in 1791 by the commandant of Nootka after his ship’s chaplain Nicolás de Loera of San Blas. The chapel too has a northern namesake; it was dedicated to *Nuestra Señora del Rosario la Marinera*, which is the name given by the Spanish to the stretch of water between Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia, now known as the Strait of Georgia.¹²

Within the chapel, there are no signs of the icons, crucifixes, and flowers that usually adorn holy places in catholic countries. Clearly the much-frequented, patched-up old church in the town square below has the affection of the townspeople, and perhaps always did. Plans for a permanent church on the hilltop were first mooted in 1772, but by 1779 only one wall had been completed and further work was held up for lack of money. The priorities were elsewhere—a much-needed hospital and a barracks for the local troops were both completed in the intervening years. Since the hilltop community was largely abandoned in the early 1800s, the active lifespan of the chapel must have been brief indeed.

The naval dockyards and its associated facilities, including some housing less prestigious than that on the hill, were down by the town’s inner harbour. If you stand in the old Customs House (*Aduana*), you cannot be far from where the carpenters, blacksmiths, coopers, rope-makers, mast-makers, and caulkers once had their workshops. Close-by, along the riverbank, there was an arsenal, surrounded by a stockade, where tools, lumber, and firearms were stored. The *Aduana* is a two-storey building with a Roman-like arcade in the Renaissance-style, probably built in the early-nineteenth century.¹³ Only its shell remains,



and because of silting, a perennial problem on the Pozo River, its wharf is now a few minutes walk from the inner harbour. Here, where many ships once went about the business of empire, flocks of pelicans perform their ever-amusing antics amidst the moored fishing fleet of the town.

Birds abound in and around San Blas—over three hundred species have been seen in a Christmas bird count, twice the number usually recorded in Victoria or Boundary Bay. In the evening that I wandered amongst the ruins on the cerro, the bushes were full of rambunctious kiskadee flycatchers, and from the depths of the woods came the startling cry of a mottled owl.

But even more abundant than birds are insects. Where else but San Blas would ladies be driven to use tequila to sooth the mosquito and *jején* (no-see-um) bites on their legs? At the end of the dry season, high-ranking Spanish naval officers and their families moved inland to the highlands around Tepic to escape the heat, humidity, contaminated water, and disease-bearing insect infestations of the summer months. Alejandro Malaspina stopped briefly at San Blas in October 1791 on his voyage around the world, and his account leaves no doubt why proposals to relocate the port were popular:

... It would be impossible to give a full idea of the really pitiful spectacle presented at that time by the seamen and other inhabitants of those parts. Pallid of face, enervated, ragged, and careless in their attire, forced to find in destructive vices the only alleviation of their woes, making in all, a singular contrast with the healthy and happy appearance of our men.... the heat was insufferable and such were the swarms of mosquitoes, and such the putrid vapors arising from the immense sheets of stagnant water scattered over the flats, that in addition to discomfort, such excursions [ashore] were dangerous.

Above from left to right: (1) The west corner of the administrative building and warehouse at San Blas, built in 1779. This was the control centre for operations in “the Californias”, a coastline stretching from Cabo San Lucas to the Aleutian Islands. (2) The chapel and graveyard, built between 1772 and 1792. The chapel was struck by lightning in 1793 and was abandoned in the early 1800s. (3) Inside the chapel. It had a timber roof, almost certainly of Spanish cedar. Most of the Spanish and Mexican explorers of the BC coast took Holy Communion here immediately before sailing north.

The decline of the naval base at San Blas after 1800 was as rapid as its ascent. Upper California became self-sufficient. The North American coast swarmed with foreign commercial vessels in uncontrollable numbers. Key naval personnel returned to Napoleon’s Europe. And the concessions made to the British at Nootka Sound, and to the Russians in Alaska, fatally weakened Spanish territorial claims in the north.

Captain William Broughton, who surveyed the Pacific northwest coast under the command of George Vancouver in the early 1790s, describes the town in 1796 as having “a very noble and picturesque appearance,” but when the trader Richard Cleveland visited the port in 1802, he was struck more by the lack of military discipline and the manifest signs of discontent and insubordination of the inhabitants. Finally, in 1810, a small band of rebels captured El Castillo from the unprotected landward side, and eleven years later, Mexico had won its War of Independence; the buildings on the hilltop were in ruins; and the short, but eventful, history of the Spanish naval base was at an end. ~

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