

SEARCH FOR THE  
CAMINO  
REAL



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A HISTORY OF SAN BLAS  
AND THE ROAD TO GET THERE

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# **Introduction:**

## **Search for the Camino Real:**

### **A History of San Blas and the Road to Get There**



This is a narrative history of an all but forgotten port town on Mexico's west coast and the old colonial road to get there. Puerto de San Blas is a sleepy, steamy tropic outpost with a long and colorful past, rooted at the westernmost end of the Camino Real, that also-forgotten first route across the North American continent. Both the port and the trail to get there spurred Spain's colonial expansion, survived the empire's collapse, and played key roles during Mexico's war of independence and chaotic adolescence as a nation.

From its first mention in accounts of Nuño Guzmán's expedition in 1529,<sup>1</sup> the Matanchen Bay-San Blas region grew in geographic and strategic importance to become the most important Pacific seaport between Guayaquil, Ecuador, and San Francisco, California, in the 1830s, a major international way station for both legal and contraband trade between an ungovernable Mexico and the rest of the world. In the 1850s, the cultural, economic, and political events roiling all along the Camino Real from San Blas to Guadalajara, especially in the mild sierra valley surrounding the city of Tepic, spawned a new regional identity, and eventually, a new political entity—the Mexican state of Nayarit. At the same time, with San Blas as a personal port and Tepic as a family corporate headquarters, an English adventurer's private commercial empire quietly evolved in the region to influence the Mexico's political and

economic life well into the twentieth century. As noted Mexican historian José María Muriá has stated, the history of Western Mexico during the second half of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth century was largely determined by the comings and goings on the road from Guadalajara to San Blas.<sup>2</sup>

The endurance and destiny of San Blas and the Camino Real through a centuries-long oscillation between strategic and economic dominance and complete abandonment to the sierra jungles and historical obscurity has always been tied to the region's geographic and environmental circumstances. Geographers point out that geography influences economic and social development through four basic channels: the conditions within the natural environment, productivity of the land, health conditions, and access to markets.<sup>3</sup> The position of San Blas since its vague Spanish inception in the 1530s on the *Mar del Sur*, along with human response to the region's resources, weather and health conditions, and the port's access to world markets, are the foundations of the historical saga of San Blas and the Nayarit region of Mexico. From its shores Spanish friars sailed to found the California missions, beginning in 1697. In the 1770s, the Nayarit coast was the distant northwestern edge of Spain's colonial empire, with Nueva Galicia a separate administrative territory and its capital at Tepic, and later at Guadalajara, less than two hundred miles away. With supplies and manpower available from there, Matanchen Bay and nearby San Blas offered the shortest direct route and the most efficient access to the Upper California coast where Spain's navy confronted the Russians and British for control of the Pacific coast of North America in the 1780s. San Blas lay in perfect position south of Cabo San Lucas on Baja California so that prevailing southeastern winds could take Spanish frigates north without having to round the cape against the wind as they would have if sailing from a port farther north, like Mazatlán or Guaymas. Those bays farther north may have had deeper harbors, but vast desert lands of scarce resources and violent Indian threats also surrounded them.



**Camino Real, 1700s, San Blas to Mexico City.**

In contrast, San Blas and Matanchen Bay sit where three eco-systems clash and coalesce, and the surrounding environment offered the Spanish a wealth of natural resources and an easily defensible topography. Coastal lowlands stretch north one hundred and forty miles toward Mazatlán and the Tropic of Cancer, an impenetrable swampland of insects, reptiles, and birdlife. The marshy region is the spawning bed of shrimp and other crustaceans that provide the lowest part of the food chain in the seawaters where the southern Pacific currents