



Sugar Cane Railways in Cuba, 2003

Courtesy Ray Walter (text) and Claus Kleinhapl (photos)

The sugar cane railways have rapidly disappeared in this Caribbean island country, about 140 kms south of the US state of Florida, with MINAZ (Ministria Industrial Azucar--Sugar in Spanish) announcing that they would shut down all narrow gauge lines by 2004 and all steam by 2005.



Of course nothing is certain in Cuba, and the tourist industry potential will likely mean the retention of at least one steam-operated line, but many mills have already (2003) closed and production is down because of low world sugar prices. Most of the sugar produced in Cuba has normally gone to Russia and China but their purchases have been down in recent years.

Mill and Locomotive Organisation

All of the mills are numbered, starting with Mill 101, Abraham Lincoln, located in the west of the island. Mill numbers get higher as you work your way to the east, ending with Mill 641, Rafael Rayes, near the city of Santiago de Cuba, the former Cuban capital.

MINAZ also numbers the locomotives, starting at 1101, and going in nine bands based on tractive effort to 1910. Thus, in theory, a loco in the 13xx band is more powerful than a loco in the 12xx band. As well, within each band the numbers were originally assigned from the west to the east, so that loco 1140 was located at a mill to the west of loco 1190. However, this system broke down as locomotives were transferred from one mill to another. Many, but not all, narrow gauge locomotives carry the letter E (estrecha) in front of the running number.



Almost all of the steam locomotives working in Cuba today are of American origin. Most are Baldwin (BLW), but others are from the American Locomotive Company, HK Porter, Cooks, Rogers and Vulcan. There are also a couple of locos from German makers Henschel and Borsig. There were a very few locos from England but none were working in 2003.

All the sugar mills follow American practice in their railway running methods. American ownership of Cuban sugar mills reached its peak in 1933 but by the time Castro came to power in 1959 all mills were owned by Cubans and became the property of the state (MINAZ). On many locomotives you can see the MINAZ symbol and the letters CAI (Complejo Agro Industrial).

Cuba's main national railroads were already dieselised by 1959. Many of the diesels were Russian built, although some were American or Canadian and others arrived from Canada and Mexico in 2002. Steam locomotives lasted so long at the sugar mills because the Zafrá (harvest) only lasts four to five months, foreign exchange was not available for new equipment, and the Americans imposed their embargo.

Operation

The narrow gauge railways of Cuba are in three gauges: 2 ft 3 1/2 in, 2 ft 6 in, and 3 ft. There used to be a larger number of 3 ft lines, especially in the east of the island, but many were closed or standard gauged in the 1960s and 1970s.

MINAZ is a central organisation that controls all the mills but each mill has its own characteristics and mill bosses are allowed to allocate their own motive power. Thus each mill has a 'family' appearance to its equipment and operation. Many of the narrow gauge locos are the original ones built 75-100 years ago for the mills where they are still working. Locomotives and other equipment, engine houses and shops often have that 'run down' look that modellers like about narrow gauge. However, this is 'real railroading' and the run down look results from the lack of foreign exchange and other resources. The Cubans have had to make do with what they have and are very innovative keeping everything running.



Although more tourists are visiting the mills to view and ride on the trains, their main purpose is to haul sugar cane from the 'acopio' (loading point) to the mill. Thus many of the locos are thrashed about with full loads; there is lots of slipping and sliding, and hand sanding to get the trains moving, and a lot of black smoke from the low grade of oil burned. It all makes for a great



show and seeing the ‘real’ thing is such a different experience compared to a tourist railway. Railfans can often ride on the tenders or even drive the locos when away from the mill area.



Modelling



The first two photos show Cuba Libre, Ray and Claus’ On30 portable display layout which is based on contemporary narrow gauge sugar cane lines in Cuba. Locomotives have an American appearance, buildings and scenery are more tropical. The cane wagons are scratchbuilt using

resin side and end castings on flat car underframes.

The last photo shows a permanent display layout, built by Lazaro Garcia Driggs and located in the Havana Club Museum, La Havana.

Acknowledgments:

The text is adapted, with permission, from Ray Walter’s ‘Narrow Gauge in Cuba’ notes for the Sixth Australian Narrow Gauge Convention, Sydney 2003. Photographs were taken by Claus Kleinhapl during their railfan trip to Cuba in February/March 2003.

The best way to visit the Cuban sugar lines is with a tour group specialising in this area. *I went with ‘Steam in Paradise’, a UK group which has been doing these tours for twelve years and know the places to go.* [Ray Walter]

The best time for railfans is during the ZAFRA or sugar cane harvest during the winter months, roughly the end of December to April. It is mostly dry and not too hot at this time of year. The level of steam activity depends on sugar production at the time of your visit.

You can see plenty of US cars from the 40s and 50s still being used today and the architecture is a lovely Spanish colonial type. The music is great, however the food is a bit bland. Cuba has great beaches, good fishing, scuba diving and lots to do when the trains aren't running. 2004 may be the last year for narrow gauge steam in Cuba, so don't delay if you want to soak up the smells, sights and sounds of the 'real thing'.

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