



A holiday without trains? **Unthinkable!**

**CLASSIC TOY
TRAINS**
MAGAZINE

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▲ 1. Visitors to Aventura Mall in southern Florida can take a break from shopping to check out the 16 x 29-foot O gauge layout built by Scale Models, Arts, & Technologies. They'll enjoy the scratchbuilt drawbridge whose sections raise and lower. The MTH Santa Fe passenger train stops automatically thanks to a timing circuit.



▲ 2. Travelers on the Union Pacific train overhead strain to hear the holiday music being played and sung at the animated band shell. The craftsmen at SMARTT put their talents together to animate the array of tiny musicians and carolers.

VISIT A FLORIDA MALL WHERE O GAUGE TRAINS STAR

by Roger Carp • photos by William Zuback

THE COMMENTS were unanimous, even if they came from people whose native languages varied significantly. No matter whether the little boy came from America or the elderly man was visiting from Peru or the young mother made her home in France. They agreed that the toy train display in front of them was “amazing,” “brilliant,” and “cool.”

Some people followed up their compliments by pointing to the mountain village that delighted them. Or maybe it was the miniature amusement park that caught their attention. Perhaps it was the tiny replica of the shopping mall where they were standing.

Young and old, native and visitor, male and female agreed that the O gauge layout at Aventura Mall in south Florida was a sight not to be forgotten. “We’ll be back to see it again,” promised the father of four kids, who are now perhaps dreaming of their own layout.

Attracting new crowds

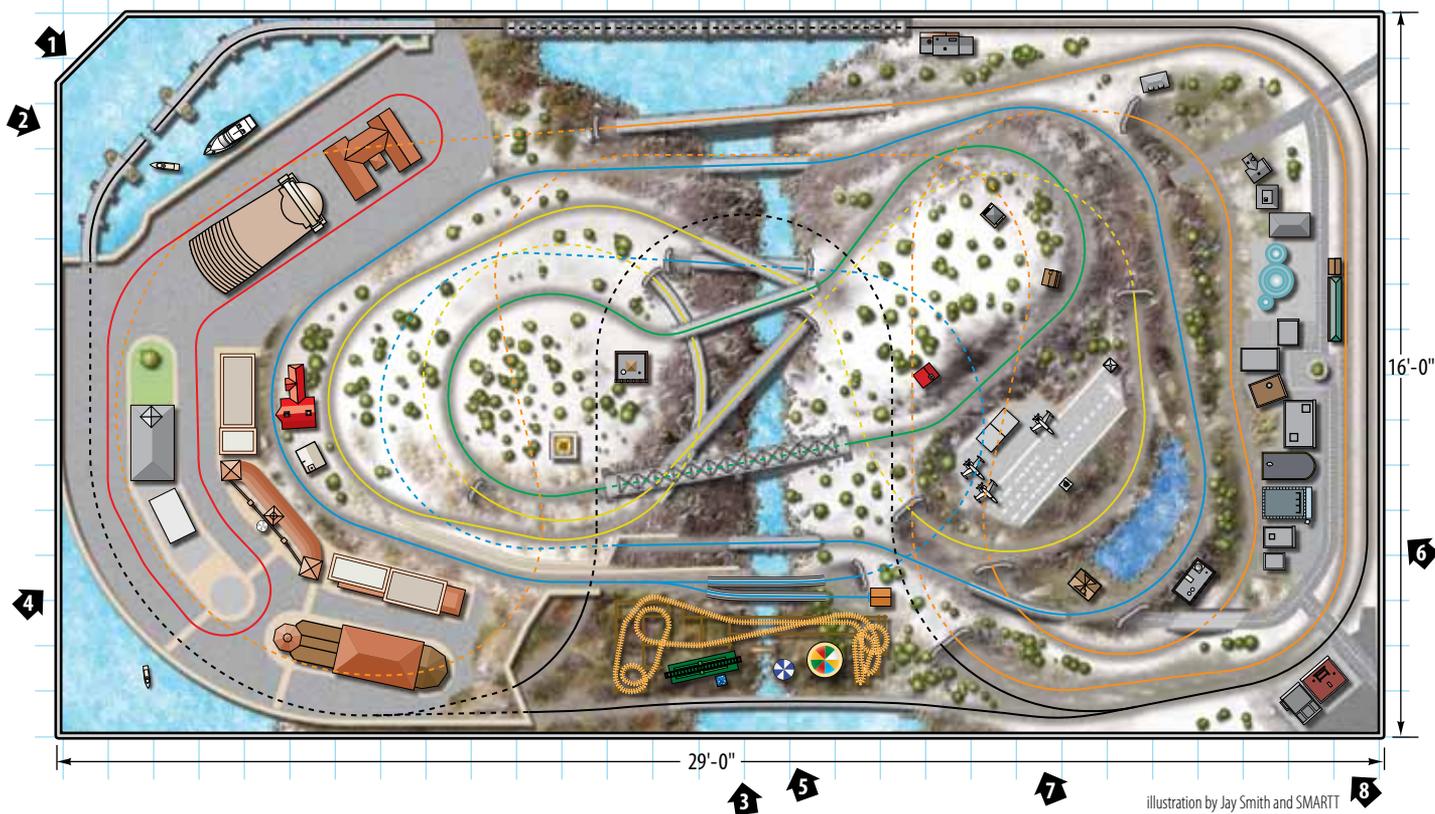
Imagine you are the manager of one of the largest and most successful shopping malls in the United States. What’s your biggest challenge? Adding new businesses? Expanding parking? Winning new customers?

Oscar Pacheco, the general manager of Aventura Mall, will tell you that all of those tasks preoccupy him. How could it be otherwise at a mall that boasts 2.4 million square feet (and growing) and such flagships as Bloomingdale’s, Macy’s, Penney’s, and Sears, along with 250 specialty stores? Opened in 1983, Aventura Mall has spurred tremendous development in the northern suburbs of Miami, not far from Fort Lauderdale.

But Oscar will also mention the need to keep visitors happy so they want to spend more time at the mall and patronize its clothing boutiques, electronics stores, restaurants, and movie theaters. An indoor playground finished in 2006 made Aventura Mall more family friendly.

However, the search for ways to lure more visitors to the mall took off in a new direction two years before Rainbow Valley opened. Jackie Soffer, whose firm, Turnberry Associates, owns Aventura Mall, borrowed an idea that department stores capitalized on years ago. She put in a toy train display during the holiday season.

The results have surpassed expectations. Not only do more shoppers linger at a part of the mall that had reported less traffic, but residents and tourists make excuses to spend time at Aventura, admiring the layout and checking out the merchandise. Even men “stuck”



▲ Whether you reside in southern Florida or are just visiting that area, make a visit to Aventura Mall a priority so you can admire the 16 x 29-foot multiple-level O gauge model railroad designed and constructed by Scale Models, Arts, & Technologies. This layout has been earning rave reviews since opening in 2004. The numbered arrows correspond to the numbers in each of the captioned photos.

LAYOUT AT A GLANCE

Name: Aventura Station
O gauge layout

Dimensions: 16 x 29 feet

Track and switches: MTH Scale
Trax

Motive power and rolling stock:
MTH Electric Trains

Controls: MTH Digital Command
System

Accessories: K-Line, Lionel, MTH
Structures: Atlas O, MTH, scratch-
built

Vehicles: Corgi, Ertl, Road
Champs

Figures: Arttista, K-Line, Life-Like

at the mall with wives and girlfriends now enjoy being there.

"It's one of the best things we've done to build up the mall," says Laura Nichols, special events manager for Aventura Mall. "We continue to lengthen the period of time the layout is up. For the first year or two, it was there from Thanksgiving to the middle of January. Now we want it at the mall well into March – it's that popular!"

Surprised? Michael Hart isn't. The owner of Scale Models, Arts, & Technologies Inc. in nearby North Miami Beach would have predicted that crowds would

flock to the layout – "everyone loves a toy train display!" That's one reason Michael was pleased when the management of Aventura Mall came calling in the summer of 2004. [CLASSIC TOY TRAINS visited with Michael and his firm in the October 2007 issue. – Editor]

Finding the right builder

Owning and managing a shopping mall involves much more than just keeping the crowds coming in to spend money. A successful mall should be both a community in itself and a beacon that draws consumers and potential residents to the part of a city where it's located.

Aventura Mall has been meeting those goals since it opened. But Jackie Soffer and her support staff know they can't slow down. And what better way to make Aventura more enjoyable and satisfying than by installing an O gauge layout?

Turnberry Associates had no plans to build themselves the layout they named Aventura Station. In search of answers, they contacted Bill Lucas, the owner of Ready-to-Roll, a full-time, full-service model railroad emporium in North Miami. The largest toy train store in the South, it features several operating layouts as well as a huge inventory.

Bill is no stranger to the layout-building aspect of the toy train hobby. His store constructed the O gauge railroad that's

located in the showroom of MTH Electric Trains in Columbia, Md. For Aventura Mall, he recommended someone else. He directed Jackie Soffer to Michael Hart and his crew, based just a few miles away.

When Michael and the managers at SMARTT listened to what the mall's owner wanted, they didn't flinch, not even when given a timetable of just a few months. For more than a decade, this firm has been designing and building layouts in every scale and gauge, including several public displays, including the Standard and O gauge layout at the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento and the HO display at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.

Experience building these projects, as well as the many miniature railroads that SMARTT had completed for private homes throughout the country, meant a layout for Aventura Mall would not tax the abilities or resources of Michael and his staff.

So, as Michael does with all his clients, he sat down with Jackie and her staff and asked questions about what the layout should achieve. They discussed its appearance and operation. Soon, matters about expenses and location were clarified.

"I doubt that I said it would be a piece of cake to get a 16 x 29-foot layout finished and installed in just three months," Michael says with a smile. "But I had no



▲ 3. On a weekday at Aventura Mall, visitors from across the United States, Canada, Europe, and Latin America stop by to admire the five-tiered O gauge layout. Typical comments from the youngsters and adults range from “fantastic” and “wonderful” to “makes me feel like a kid again” and “I wish I were small enough to ride on the trains.”

hesitation in taking on this project, especially because it would be so close to our shops.”

Practicalities

Given so little time to design and construct Aventura Station, the creative minds at SMARTT hastily warmed up their computers and grabbed their sketchpads. They knew this O gauge layout had to be special – it had to operate perfectly while entertaining thousands of people daily.

“We took care of the practical considerations,” Michael recalls, “using what we had learned from building other layouts.” To make the platform, his crew used ¾-inch-thick cabinet-grade plywood. It had to be sturdy enough to support guys walking on it.

The quality plywood served another purpose. Years of work have taught Michael and his staff that it works great as subroadbed beneath the network of track. Of course, between the wood and the rails SMARTT likes to add a layer of cork to reduce the noise.

Aventura Station uses ScaleTrax from MTH on its five main lines. Mike Wolf, founder of MTH, has established close ties with Ready-to-Roll and SMARTT. Seeing this layout as a way to introduce toy trains to visitors to the mall, he donated all the trains.

ScaleTrax, which is close to scale size for three-rail O gauge, offers a finished look that viewers really appreciate. The minimum curves on four of the five main lines are O-72; the uppermost one is O-54. Adhesives and spikes were used to secure the sections of track and the MTH switches, which are controlled by Tortoise machines.

Astounding animation

Now that you know the nuts and bolts, let’s talk about the imaginative elements of Aventura Station. This multiple-tiered layout stands out because of the many

animated features and accessories that capture the fancy of every mall visitor.

The result is a spectacular model railroad that looks great regardless of where a viewer is standing. That’s true even if he’s barely able to look at the main part at eye level (29 inches off the floor) or he’s peering down from the mall’s upper level.

Towering mountains dominate each of the ends of the rectangular layout. Visitors typically pay attention to one of those scenes on first glimpsing Aventura Station. Then they wander over to the opposite side to study the other peak. Eventually, they notice the lower portion in the



▲ 4. The replica of Aventura Mall stands as the high point of the layout for many viewers. They like seeing models of the department stores and boutiques where they’ve shopped.



▲ 5. "I had one of those when I was young," one tourist told his grandson. Not exactly, sir. This MTH New York Central Hudson runs better than the postwar Lionel model he was talking about. Those amusement park rides from Lionel and Coaster Dynamics had no equivalent back in the 1950s. Little wonder that visitors to Aventura Station love them!

center. "It's like three separate model railroads," exclaimed one man.

Good as the scenery is, let's introduce the innovative animated parts of this layout because they're the features that leave kids breathless and their elders wondering, "Just how do they do it?" The simple answer to that query – healthy doses of imagination and electricity, plus creativity and familiarity with small motors and metal and plastic parts.

Just start with the replica of Aventura Mall. There, you'll discover a band shell and hear recorded Christmas songs. A closer look reveals a choir moving to the music and tiny musicians, whose arms and bodies move as though they actually were playing their clarinets, trumpets, and drums.

Nearby, you'll see a figure dressed

like Santa Claus surrounded by dancing girls. Michael laughs and credits this animated vignette to an idea from Jackie and her family, who insist that Old Saint Nick is supposed to be a prominent member of the community.

What else happens at this model of Aventura Mall? Youngsters love the candy shop, filled with tiny gumdrops, chocolate kisses, and other treats. They watch as another figure distributes candy to the little kids jumping up and down. For musical effects, there was only one choice: "The Candy Man" from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*.

Health-conscious grown-ups

may shy away from the sugar-coated animation in this area. They prefer the model of Vigo's Gym at the other end of the layout. Gazing through the windows of that structure reveals Vigo lifting dumbbells and women performing aerobics, all to the sounds of the Village People belting out "Macho Man."

Naturally, there are more enjoyable ways to work up a sweat. Try the bob-

sledders, skaters, and hockey players on the mountain overshadowing the health club. Department 56 buildings and a modified Brawa HO operating ski-lift were used as the basis of a scene that also includes animated skiers. Even folks in Florida, where it never snows, pray for a freeze after seeing this cool area.

Another masterpiece is the small airport that's perched in the middle of this mountain.

ON THE WEB

To view another public layout built by SMARTT, the California State Railroad Museum's Standard and O gauge layout, go to ClassicToyTrains.com and click on "Train Layouts." Then click on "Layout visits."



▲ 6. Aventura Station is among the best-known public displays of MTH trains outside the firm's showroom in Columbia, Md. Did you notice Santa Claus at the white filling station? He's preparing his sleigh for a trouble-free ride on Christmas Eve.

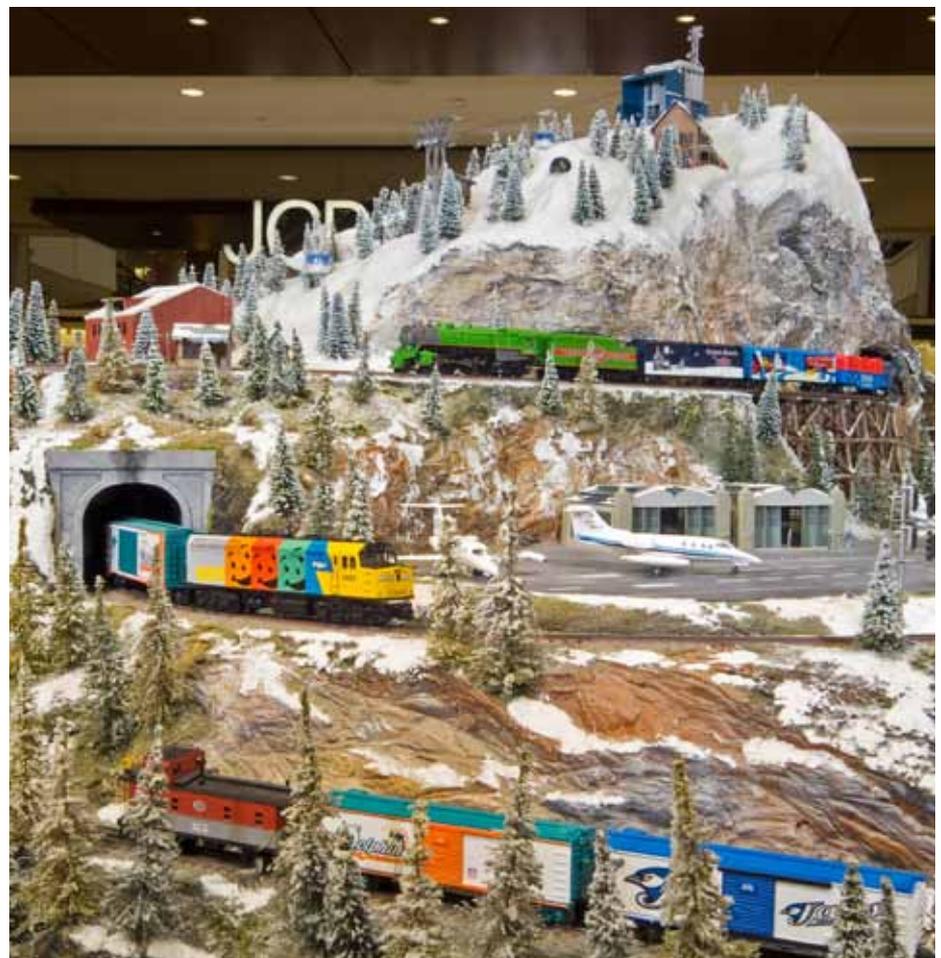
Private jets flash their navigation lights, and one taxis along the runway. Oh, and did we mention that the blue lights alongside the runway blink?

A railroad, too!

These highlights hardly exhaust the list of special visual and sound effects at Aventura Station. Every year the layout has been up, there's something new, like the water skier circling the lake near the mall. What's coming up? Mel Ivanov, a project manager at SMARTT, says with a twinkle in his eye that he might get the planes to fly.

Sometimes, because there is so much

► 7. Viewers may find the hot colors on the MTH freight cars and locomotives are melting the snow and ruining the day for the animated bobsledders and skiers. Sharpest of all is a RailKing VIA F40PH that's painted and lettered for Kool-Aid. It's rolling by the animated airport.





▲ 8. **Vigo's Gym**, designed by Raymond Potter at SMARTT, features an animated body-builder lifting barbells and women going through their aerobics routines. Not even the sight of MTH RailKing Santa Fe F3 diesels will distract them from their morning workouts.

to investigate, viewers forget the trains. We don't want to make that mistake, particularly because some of the latest additions to the MTH Premier and RailKing lines put on their Sunday best when playing to the crowds.

The day that we visited Aventura Station streamlined Union Pacific and Santa Fe passenger trains were strutting their stuff. So was a steam locomotive pulling freight cars lettered for professional sports teams that are based in Miami or practice in nearby cities.

Let the children vote for their favorite, and the hands-down winner would have been a no. 20-2604 RailKing VIA F40PH decorated in Kool-Aid colors. The sides of the powerful locomotive boast images of the grinning pitcher filled with that sweet drink.

Viewers are captured as well by some of the best accessories that have distinguished the Lionel and MTH lines in recent years. For the latter, that means the carwash and fire station whose vehicles slide in and out with lights flashing.

Lionel is represented at Aventura Station with its carnival attractions, including merry-go-rounds and a Ferris wheel. Still, the highlight of the amusement park on the near side is the roller coaster from Coaster Dynamics that the engineers at SMARTT modified and

expanded. Staring at its cars flying over and under can hypnotize you.

Before you're in a trance, let's return to the O gauge trains and the world of SMARTT animation. Pass by the eye-catching neon signs from Miller Engineering and the scratchbuilt bridges spanning the chasm between the twin peaks. Then you'll hit the launching pad where a helicopter prepares to take off. Its rotors spin, and soon it's up.

Farther along, back to the replica of Aventura Mall, a calm expanse of modeled water spreads out. On the main line closest to the perimeter of the layout a Santa Fe passenger train comes barreling along, only to slow to a stop when a drawbridge raises to permit a yacht to head out to sea, as occurs many times in the marinas near Aventura.

Regardless of how often you've watched the bridge sections split apart and tilt upward, the sight is always fascinating. A timer controls the action of the bridge and the current reaching the track. The sections lower until they're parallel to the waves in the harbor. Only then can the *Super Chief*, detouring through the South, resume its journey.

Ready to visit?

If you pick up this issue in the winter, the best advice we can give is to book a

flight to Florida and head to Aventura Mall. Bring your shopping list for those times when you aren't grabbing a snack and relaxing as you watch six trains running on the layout's five lines as well as the trolley complete with tracks recessed into the pavement.

The Digital Command System developed by MTH Electric Trains takes care of three of the main lines, and conventional control with timers and relays handles the other two. Nothing out of the ordinary for SMARTT to set this up, just as Michael and his staff used their standard techniques to design the scenery on computers and build the mountains and harbors.

Beyond reading about the layout and admiring these pictures, you would be smart (good pun, eh?) to get away and spend hours at Aventura Station so you can really see this three-rail marvel. Maybe by then it will have become a year-long spectacle. **CTT**

FOR MORE INFO.

Aventura Station is located at the JC Penney Court at Aventura Mall, 19501 Biscayne Blvd. in Aventura, Fla. The mall is open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. and Sunday, noon to 8 p.m. For more information, call 305-935-1110 or go to shopaventura.com.

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