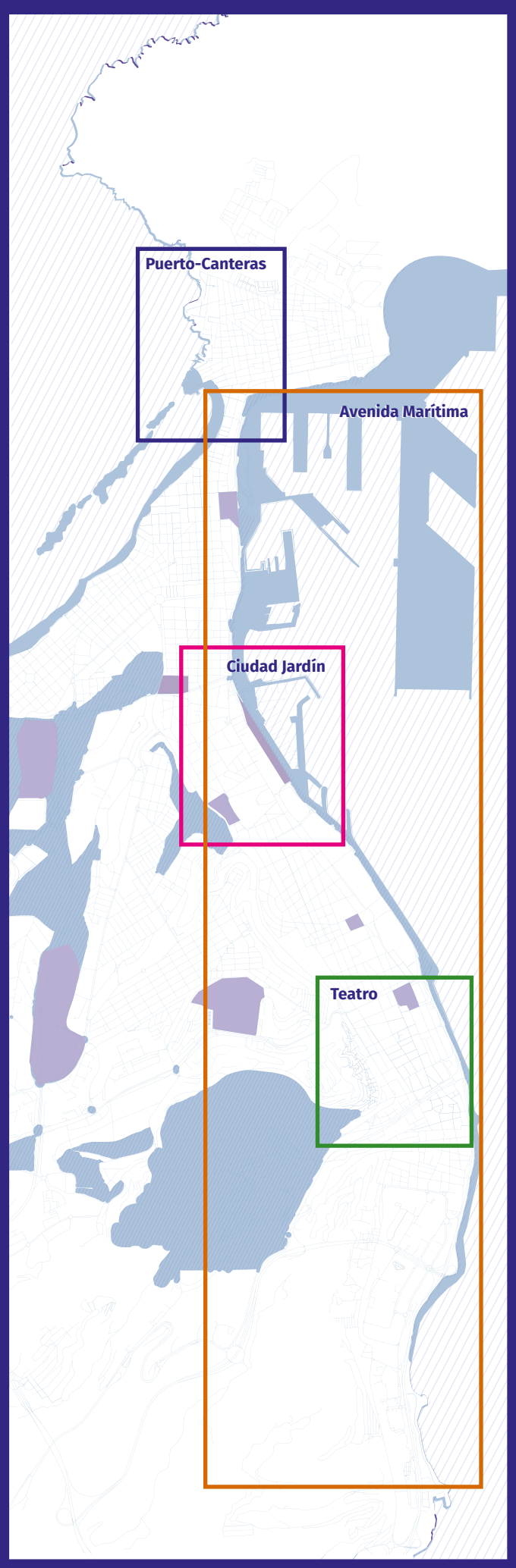






City of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

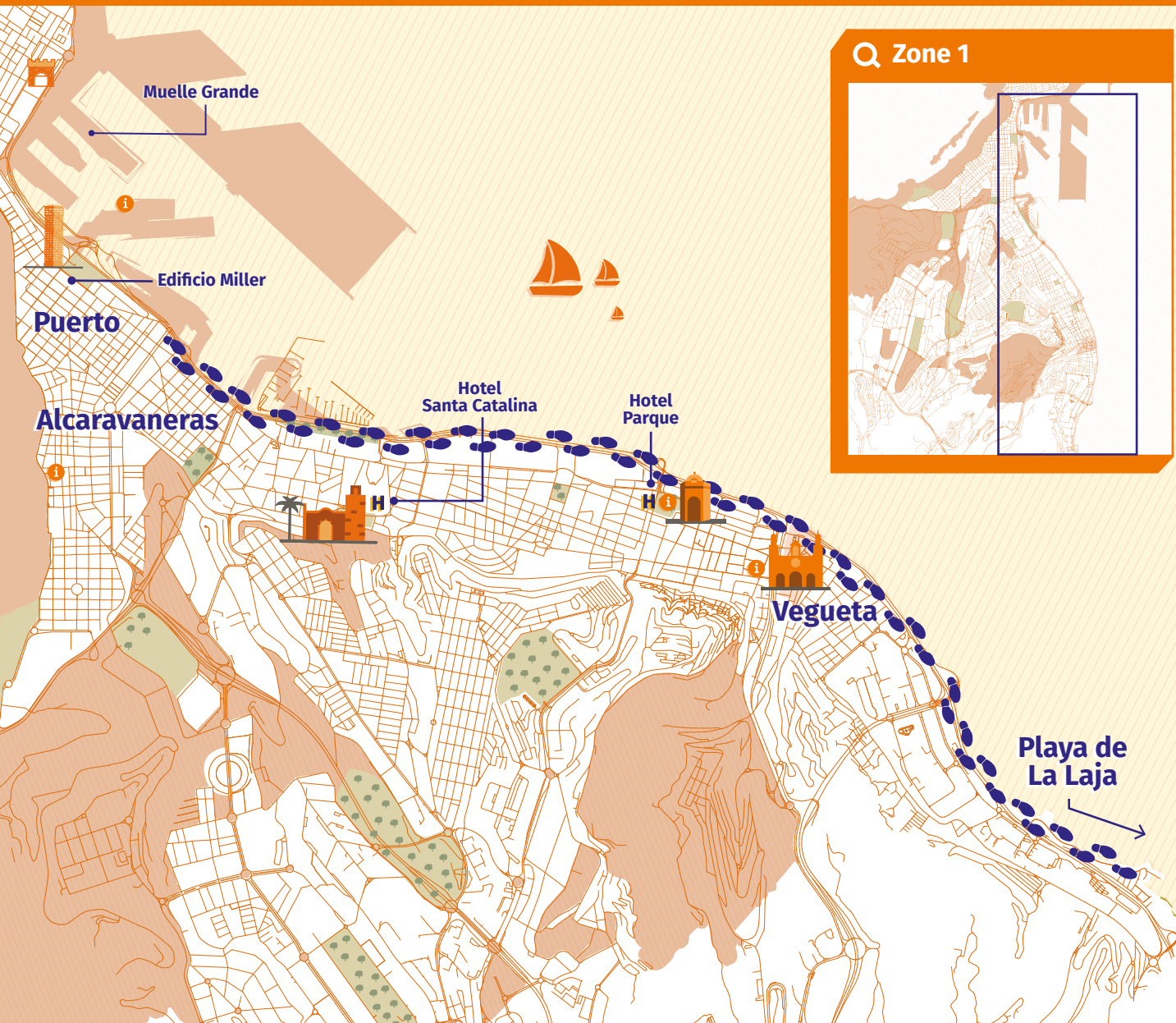


«Moby Dick was the most difficult picture I ever made. I lost so many battles during it that I began to suspect that my assistant director was plotting against me. Then I realised that it was only God. [...] The picture, like the book, is a blasphemy, so I suppose we can just lay it to God's defending Himself when He sent those awful winds and waves against us.»

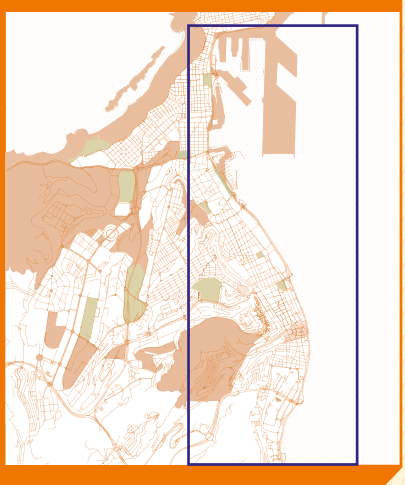
John Huston

## The four main areas of the route

### ZONE 1: AVENIDA MARÍTIMA



#### Q Zone 1



If we walk along the promenade that links the beaches of **Las Alcaravaneras** and **La Laja** and look out to sea, especially along the stretch that runs from the **Marina** to the **Vegueta** district, we can imagine the scene. On this strip of sea facing east a large part of *Moby Dick* was filmed. Shooting usually took place from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon a mile and a half to the south of the Muelle Grande, which was then the outer dock of the **Port of La Luz**. Everything we see today was then open sea, with no breakwaters of any kind.

The model of the whale Moby Dick had an underwater shackle at the bow and a seventy-metre rope fastened there and attached at the other end to the tug **Fortunate**, from the British shipping agency Miller y Cia, known as Casa Miller, founded in 1887, which was then the leading company in the Port of La Luz. José Carvallo was the tug's master. The whale raised or sank its head in the sea depending on how powerfully the tug was dragging it.

The vessel that carried John Huston, Gregory Peck and the other actors to the set every day was the yacht **Tishbite**. The crew consisted of a British captain and engineer and five Spanish crew. Queequeg's coffin, used in the epilogue, was always carried on the yacht.

As support vessels there were three Canarian *falúas* (motor barges) from Casa Miller, **the Teror**, **the Mirlo** and **the Cory**. Water jets were propelled from a distance from these *falúas* over the sperm whale, as they had been equipped with water pumps to simulate storms.

John Huston, Gregory Peck and the rest of the actors would spend the whole day on the yacht, having come from **Hotel Santa Catalina**. They had breakfast and lunch on the pleasure boat with food brought from **Hotel Parque**. Gregory Peck arrived at the makeup room every day at five in the morning to have the scar drawn running across the left side of his face. The actor Friedrich von Ledebur, who played Queequeg, arrived an hour earlier, as he had to work on the tattoos he sported all over his body. Throughout the filming Peck had a Canarian stand-in. There was also a dummy that was used in distant shots.

**Erich Lessing**. The filming was documented by the distinguished Austrian photographer Erich Lessing. In his collection of photographs, those taken on this side of the bay show the model plying the waters with members of the crew sitting on its back, John Huston at work directing the film, and the special operation required to film the moments when Peck was perched on Moby Dick's back, on a purpose-built tilting set.



#### Risk

This is where the most dangerous shot for the actor Gregory Peck was filmed. Captain Ahab's body, with one leg stuck inside the whale, dead and trapped by the actual ropes of the harpoons that were used to try to hunt down the whale, had to sink below the water for a few seconds and then re-emerge, all by moving the model with a mechanical system operated with a crank by a port worker named Sindo. Peck wanted to do the shot himself without using a stuntman. When the sequence was over, Gregory Peck thanked Sindo for his skill, telling him that his life had been in his hands.



#### Tip

In this area there was an incident involving the boy Manuel Márquez, then aged thirteen, who was hired as the ship's cabin boy, because of his age, he was accompanied during filming by his brother, who was two years older. The incident occurred on the barge on which they were filming, during one of the poker games they played during breaks. A treacherous gust of wind blew the heap of dollars into the sea. After a few seconds of surprise, Manuel's brother jumped into the sea without hesitation and salvaged the banknotes. In return, he received a tip from Gregory Peck that they would never forget.



#### The most important shot

It was also on this eastern coastline that the shot John Huston considered the most important of all was filmed. It is when we see Gregory Peck drowned, trapped in the ropes used to harpoon Moby Dick, waving his lifeless arm, as if he were signalling to the sailors that they should continue the hunt. As Huston admitted, it was an unforeseen shot, which arose through the movement of the sea and the swaying of the whale itself.



**Elder**. Another important British firm in the Port of La Luz, Elder Dempster Canary Islands, known as Casa Elder, also played a significant part in the filming. Elder's role is demonstrated by the photos preserved by their descendants. These include one of Gregory Peck with the Gran Canarian filmmaker David J. Nieves, cameraman for the NO-DO state newsreel. The NO-DO report filmed in the city of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria was broadcast on 24 January 1955. It can be seen on the Radio Televisión Española website. NO-DO is the abbreviation of the Franco regime's Noticias y Documentos Cinematográficos (Cinema News and Documents), reports with political and social news screened before films in cinemas.



**Worldwide expectation**. The NO-DO report is a sign of the expectation that the filming aroused. Another is the news of the tumult caused at Madrid's Barajas Airport by the arrival of Gregory Peck, who stopped over on 12 December 1954 before flying to the Canary Islands, accompanied by John Huston. Special reports on the filming such as the one published in 1955 in the French magazine *Paris Match* show that it was a worldwide event.



#### Heroic feat

On 31 December 1954, the cable connecting the whale to the tug came loose. The whale had drifted and was heading towards the coast. To avoid another loss, John Huston climbed through a hatch into the sperm whale after grabbing a bottle of whisky. "See you next year", he said to those outside, after giving a military salute to the crew and taking a long swim. The cable had to be passed through a hole in the belly of the whale, but now it was not just a matter of recovering the whale, but also of saving the director's life. Overcoming the big waves which lifted the model out of the water and suddenly dropped it, the cable was recovered thanks to the skill of the Irish assistant director Kevin McClory and his assistant Isidoro Martínez Ferry, a champion swimmer from Barcelona, who jumped into the sea. "Big waves were lifting the whale out of the water and then suddenly dropping it. Those men risked their lives", wrote John Huston.

### ZONE 2: PUERTO / CANTERAS



#### Q Zone 2



#### 1. 3, Poeta Agustín Millares Sall, Street

In the 1950s, the site where the **Mapfre Building** now stands was the headquarters of the **Compañía Carbonera de Las Palmas, S.A.**, whose original name in English was **Hull Blyth** workshops, access to which was via no. 13, Pescadería Street, now López Socas Street, perpendicular to Rosarito Street, which also adjoined the workshop. **Carbonera de Las Palmas** was part of Casa Miller.

This place near the Port Market, like the market itself, fronted directly onto the sea at that time. This land reclaimed from the sea is now the urban access route to the La Isleta district (the end of Eduardo Benot Street and Poeta Agustín Millares Sall Street), the Avenida Marítima, with its four lanes, the bridge called Onda Atlántica and plots belonging to the Port Authority, including the city's aquarium.

The model of the giant albino sperm whale Moby Dick, **25.6 metres long with a maximum weight of 100 tonnes**, was built by Hull Blyth's Canarian shipwrights. It was made using **wood, wire netting and rubber** on a flat-bottomed vessel they called an **alíbe (cistern) or barge**, which was used to carry water to boats anchored in the bay. The barge, belonging to Armando Torrent, was filled with water to give the construction more or less weight. The rubber used was unknown in the Canary Islands; it was introduced for the filming of *Moby Dick*.

Work began on 25 November 1954. The white sperm whale took a month to build. Between forty and fifty workers from the Canary Islands were involved, in addition to the British specialists. Other pieces were also built: **a section of the whale's back**, on a **tilting set**, mounted on another barge, on which a section of the deck of the whaling ship **Pequod** was built, including the **crow's nest**, and one of the four elongated eight-metre dory-type **whale-boats**, bowed fore-and-aft, which appear in the film, used to capture giant sperm whales in the mid-nineteenth century, when the action is set. The **articulated tail** of the whale was brought from England. Another port firm, **Varaderos Jorge**, at 38-40, Albareda Street, took part in building the sets of the *Pequod* on the barge and in assembling the pieces.

#### Canarian labour

Initially, the British production company had transferred specialists from Britain to Las Palmas de Gran Canaria to build the whale. When the standard of the Canarian shipwrights became apparent, the British specialists were sent home and the Canary Islanders built the whale.



#### Launch

A girl named María Amalia Guillén Martí was entrusted with the task of smashing the bottle of champagne against Moby Dick's head before the latter rolled into the sea for the first time. "Amalita" Guillén was the daughter of the Civil Governor of Las Palmas and provincial leader of the Francoist single party in Las Palmas between 1954 and 1956, Santiago Guillén Moreno. The launch took place on Wednesday 29 December 1954, at around three in the afternoon, and was keenly anticipated.



#### 2. La Puntilla

On the site now occupied by Plaza Eduardo Suárez Morales, where the ground floor is occupied by the **Club Victoria's** facilities, there were some distinctive houses in 1954 with balconies overhanging the sea. If we lean on the railings in the square we can imagine the cast and crew of *Moby Dick*, led by John Huston and Gregory Peck, walking down to the beach to board the vessels that took them to the filming on this side of the bay.

The production used the so-called **Millionaires' Club**, a society located on the upper floor of the **Juan Pérez Bar** (Prudencio Morales, 19), as a makeup and hairdressing room. The Juan Pérez Bar was a meeting place for crew and actors, offering rest and refreshments.

On the other hand, the **Real Club Victoria** opened its premises in the current location it still occupies at Paseo de Las Canteras, 4 on 23 December 1954. The New Year's Eve party at the club, three days later, was attended by many members of the film crew, who went straight from that party to the next day's work. During filming they worked every day, regardless of whether it was a Sunday or a public holiday.

#### 3. Pepe el Limpiabotas Park

This location was chosen because it offers the best views of the bay of **El Confital** without leaving the city centre. Two main sequences were shot in this west-facing bay: the whale-boats setting off in pursuit of the whale and the epilogue.

If we scan the sea where Roque Cabrón stands out, near the coast, we can imagine the four whale-boats in the film, with Gregory Peck, Richard Basehart, Leo Genn, Harry Andrews, Edric Connor, Seamus Kelly, Bernard Miles, Tom Clegg and Friedrich von Ledebur, accompanied by Canarian extras, along with the yacht Tishbite and other support vessels, filming the hunt for the sperm whale.

When distant shots of the boats had to be filmed, fishermen and *cambulloneros* (waterborne traders) were taken along as oarsmen. For this purpose, a recruiting session was held at **La Puntilla**. Sixty people applied and between ten and twelve were hired.

In this area the epilogue of the film was shot, with Ishmael (Richard Basehart) as the only survivor, in the middle of the ocean, clinging to the coffin built for his friend Queequeg. The shot was filmed on 27 December 1954.

Shots with the whale were also filmed on this side of the coast. In these cases, the filming operation took place both on the coast near El Confital and in the area of the former Lloret and Linares factories, in the sea in front of the **Alfredo Kraus Auditorium**, as it was the deepest for the tug. There were days when the model of the whale "slept" at anchor off El Confital. We can imagine it if we turn our gaze towards Roque Cabrón at high tide, since at those times it looks like an enormous beached sperm whale. Some nights the yacht Tishbite was moored in the area of Los Nidillos.

#### Contact lenses

With the actors and crew in the area, La Puntilla was buzzing with people coming to see what was going on. Decades later, some still remembered how impressed they were to see the coloured contact lenses that Edric Connor, an actor particularly popular with children, put in and took out. Many, who had never seen contact lenses, let alone coloured ones, were amazed.

#### Meat or fish

Erich Lessing's pictures taken in this area are notable for the large numbers of seagulls in the sky. They were needed to make the moment of the hunt more realistic, as they are the ones that warn of the presence of the whale and during the hunt they constantly fly over the scene. The point is that the British asked for beef as bait to attract the seagulls, without knowing that there were people in the neighbourhood who were keeping part of these substantial packets of meat and throwing leftover fish into the sea. The prices of meat were prohibitive for many people in those days. It is said in the neighbourhood that there was plenty of meat to eat in La Isleta thanks to *Moby Dick*.

