

Christopher Columbus

Christopher Columbus was an Italian explorer and is famous because he found something he wasn't looking for. In 1492 he sailed across the Atlantic Ocean, hoping to find a route to India (in order to trade for spices). He made a total of four trips to the Caribbean and South America during the years 1492-1504.

Early Life

Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy in 1451. His parents were Domenico Colombo and Susanna Fontana-Rossa. He was the eldest of five children. His father was a wool weaver. He helped his father with the weaving, but he always wanted to sail the seas. Christopher Columbus died in 1506 aged 55 years old.

He didn't get to go to school very much as very few people at that time did. Genoa was a thriving seaport and Christopher learned much from sailors' talking about their voyages. As soon as he could, he went to sea. He made short fishing trips at first. Then at the age of 14 he began longer trips with merchants who traded their goods at various ports along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Between voyages he studied mapmaking and geography.

In his early 20's he sailed as a common seaman with a merchant fleet to transport goods to northern Europe. They sailed through the Strait of Gibraltar off the southern coast of Spain and into the Atlantic Ocean. He taught himself Latin because all the geography books were written in Latin. He earned money for himself by selling maps and charts.

In 1476, Columbus found himself living in Portugal. Portugal was the greatest European seafaring center of the age. Everything about this center for explorers encouraged his adventurous desire to find new and unknown lands. During his years in Portugal he mastered the art of navigation. And he read all he could from the writings of such travelers as Marco Polo, who had voyaged to strange lands as far away as Asia. Polo's story of his journey to Cathay (China) in 1275 described a land rich in spices, jewels, and silks.

He met Filipa Perestelloy Moniz and they married in Portugal. Sadly, she died soon after their son, Diego, was born in 1483. After that, Columbus took his son to Spain.

In Search of a Route to Asia

In Columbus' time there was only one known route to Asia from Europe. Travelers sailed eastward across the Mediterranean Sea. Then they traveled by caravan across ancient routes through deserts and mountains. Europeans were eager to find an easier route for their trading ships. Already Portuguese explorers were sailing south into the Atlantic. They hoped to find a way to Asia by going all the way around Africa. But the seamen were afraid to venture too far out into the unknown waters of the Atlantic. They took care to keep the African coast in their sight.

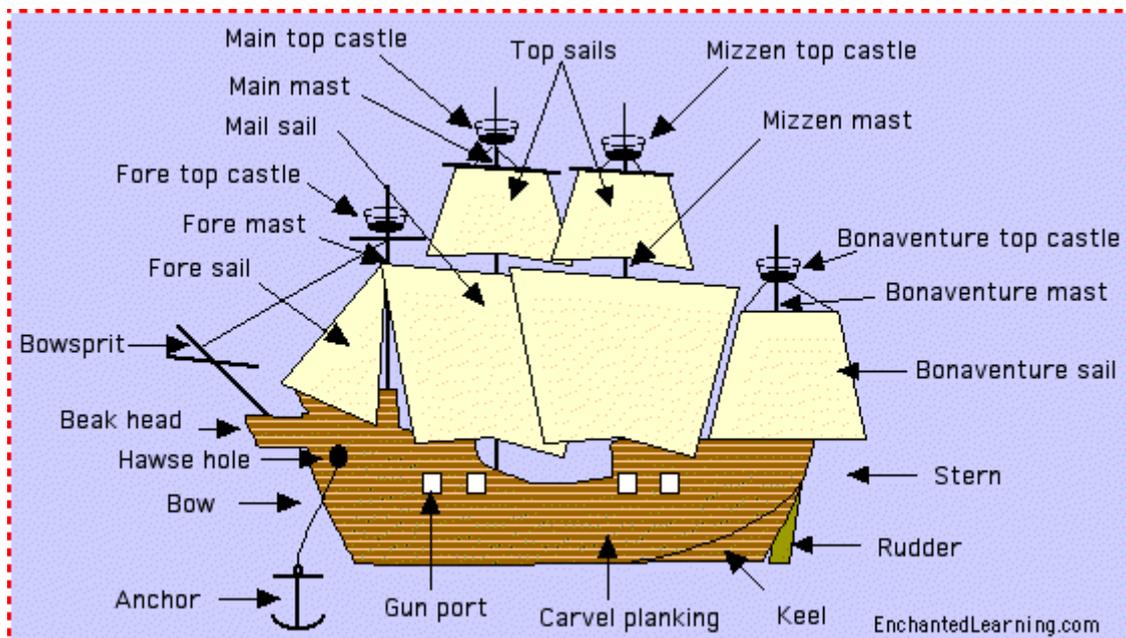
From his study of geography and from the stories of other sailors, Columbus worked out that India and eastern Asia were on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. He dreamed of finding a short way to get to the Indies by ship. He thought that if he sailed far enough west, he would eventually sail around the world enough to reach the East.

Christopher Columbus wanted to explore in search of 'Gold, God and Cathay'. By gold he meant the fortune he could make by bringing back spices and silks from foreign lands. By God he meant spreading Christianity to non-Christian countries. Columbus was a Christian and wanted to tell the story of Christ to the people he would find in the far-away lands. Cathay was an ancient name for China, and Columbus was desperate to explore the Far East. He also wanted wealth for himself and for Spain, and he wanted to be famous.

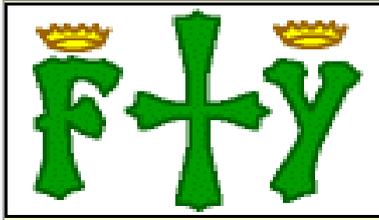
Christopher Columbus tried for many years to interest European rulers in his plan. Many people in the 15th Century thought the world was flat and if you sailed far enough you would fall off the edge. Columbus believed the world was round and he wanted to prove it by sailing to the Far East by sailing west. Some agreed that Asia lay to the west. But how far? No one knew. Columbus did not know that the continent of America blocked the way to the Far East.

Exploring by sea was very expensive and he tried for eight years to convince King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain to supply him with ships and money. They finally agreed to provide three ships for the expedition. They also promised to make him viceroy (governor) of any new lands he might acquire and pay him 10% of any riches he brought back to Spain. Columbus prepared the three ships ready to sail- the *Santa Maria* and two smaller ships, the *Pinta* and the *Nina*.

The *Santa María* was the largest of the three ships that Columbus commanded on his first voyage. *Santa María* was a carrack with three masts and had a single deck.



It wasn't easy to get the money and the ships for the exploration, but it was even harder to find a crew. Many people still believed that the earth was flat and that at some point a ship would hit a waterfall and fall off of the side of the earth. Most ships sailed along the coastline so that land could also be seen from the ship. But Columbus planned to travel away from the coast across the sea with no land in sight. This made the crew very nervous because they didn't know if they would ever return.



Captain Christopher Columbus' ensign (banner) pictured a cross and the crown-topped initials F (for King Ferdinand of Spain) and Y (for Queen Isabella of Spain).

The First Trip:

Columbus sailed for King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella of Spain. On his first trip, Columbus led the expedition with the three ships, the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria and about 90 crew members. They set sail on August 3, 1492 from Palos, Spain. Columbus kept a careful log of his voyage. Most of what we know about the voyage comes from this log. The ships stopped at the Canary Islands to make repairs and take aboard fresh food. Then the fleet headed out into the open Atlantic — the Sea of Darkness.

After sailing for 70 days they finally spotted the Caribbean islands off southeastern North America on October 11, 1492. They landed on an island they called Guanahani, but Columbus later renamed it San Salvador. They were met by the local Taino Indians, many of whom were captured by Columbus' men and later sold into slavery. Columbus thought he had made it to Asia, and called this area the Indies, and called its inhabitants Indians. Columbus had discovered what Europeans would soon call the New World of the Americas. Of course, it was not a New World to the millions of Native Americans already living there. They had been there thousands of years before the Europeans would "discover" them.



Columbus then sailed on to Cuba and to Hispaniola. There, the *Santa Maria* was shipwrecked near Haiti. This is the first recorded European shipwreck in the New World, having been grounded on the island of Haiti on Christmas Day, 1492. Columbus built some huts and planted crops on the island of Hispaniola and left 40 of his crew behind to search for gold.

Columbus and the crew of the *Nina* and *Pinta* returned to Europe. On the voyage home, he wrote a report of his discoveries. He believed he had reached Asia. Columbus wrote glowingly of its "gentle and peaceful" people, its fertile soil, its spices, and its superb harbors. He also wrote of its "great mines of gold and other metals" but this was not true as he had not found the large amounts of riches he had wanted.

Columbus and his crew arrived in Lisbon, Portugal, in March 1493. He met with Portugal's King John, and then he travelled to Barcelona, Spain, to meet with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Columbus told them that he had reached islands very near Asia.



Columbus promised to bring back even more riches, and he offered to give King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella "as much gold as they need...and as many slaves as they ask" if they would pay for another voyage. He brought them back a small amount of gold, parrots, and plants. He also brought some Indians he had kidnapped and made slaves. The Spanish king and queen were so excited that they almost immediately gave him money and ships for another voyage. The people of Spain welcomed him as a hero.

Columbus made three more trips to what became known as the New World. He brought back many new things, including gold, tobacco, pineapples, and turkeys.

The Second Voyage



On a second, larger expedition from September 25, 1493 to June 11, 1496, Columbus sailed with 17 ships and 1,200 to 1,500 men to find gold and capture Indians to be slaves. They travelled to Hispaniola and to Natividad, a colony started by the sailors who had stayed behind when the first voyage had returned home. When Columbus arrived, he found the colony empty. The Spaniards had tried to take over the area and had been killed by the natives. Columbus began another colony east of Natividad, and named it Isabela. He travelled around Cuba and Jamaica, then he decided to return home again. His brother Batolome stayed behind on Hispaniola and started the colony called Santo Domingo which was the first permanent European settlement in the New World. Columbus arrived back in Spain in 1496. He made three more voyages across the ocean. His 13-year-old son, Ferdinand went with him on the fourth voyage.

The Third Voyage

On a third expedition from May 30, 1498 to October 1500, Columbus sailed with 6 ships further south, to Trinidad and Venezuela in South America. Columbus was the first European since the Viking [Leif Ericsson](#) to set foot on the mainland of America. When Columbus sailed back to Santo Domingo he found more trouble with the Spaniards left behind. A royal commissioner from Spain soon arrived, who blamed Christopher and Bartolome Columbus for the trouble with the Indigenous people, the Indians. Columbus and his brother were arrested, put in chains and then sent back to Spain.

The Fourth Voyage

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella freed him and even gave him money and ships for a fourth voyage. This one left Spain on May 9, 1502. Columbus sailed to the island of Martinique and then to Honduras and Panama in Central America. After more exploring in the Caribbean, Columbus returned home to Spain, in 1504.

Columbus did not become rich as he had hoped. At the end of his life he only had a pension the King and Queen had given him because he was the first to reach the New World. He spent the last few months of his life in bed because of the pain of arthritis. He died two years later, still believing he had reached Asia.

Consequences of Columbus' Voyages

A major consequence of Columbus' voyages was the trading of goods between the Old World (Europe) and the New World (the Americas). Listed below are some of the goods that were traded between the continents.

| Taken from Europe to the Americas | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------|------------|------------|
| Bananas | Barley | Cabbages | Carnations |
| Chickens | Coffee | Cows | Crabgrass |
| Daffodils | Daisies | Dandelions | Horses |
| Lemons | Lettuce | Lilacs | Olives |
| Oranges | Peaches | Pears | Pigs |
| Rice | Sheep | Sugarcane | Tulips |
| Turnips | Wheat | | |

Taken from the Americas to Europe

| | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| Avocados | Beans (kidney, navy, lima) | Bell peppers | Black-eyed Susans (peas) |
| Cacao (for chocolate) | Chili peppers | Corn | Cotton |
| Marigolds | Papayas | Peanuts | Petunias |
| Pineapples | Poinsettias | Potatoes | Pumpkins |
| Quinine | Rubber | Squashes | Sunflowers |
| Sweet potatoes | Tobacco | Tomatoes | Turkeys |
| Vanilla beans | Zinnias | | |

Achievements

Sadly, Columbus never reached his goal. Columbus never found the gold and jewels he had expected. Apart from his hunt for wealth, his mission was to teach the natives about Christianity. He also thought he had a right to claim the lands the Indians inhabited for Spain. Columbus not only discovered a New World, but he led the way for other explorers.

He did, however, prove several things:

- You could get to the East by sailing west. [Ferdinand Magellan's voyage](#) proved it several years later.
- You could sail to the New World and back. Columbus did it four times himself.
- The New World was full of vast new lands for Europeans to explore.
- He discovered two new continents which were added to European maps.
- He found the best route across the ocean to the Americas. He also found the best eastern route back to Europe. His sailing routes are still used hundreds of years later.

Impacts

Unfortunately Columbus also brought things with him to the New World: European diseases that infected the native peoples he met. He also brought the first slaves back across the Atlantic to Europe. Columbus was a great explorer, but he is also remembered for his terrible treatment of the Indigenous Indian peoples.

When Columbus captured some Indigenous people to take to Spain to sell as slaves, many others did the same. Europeans who moved to live in North and South America used the land to plant huge fields of crops and they used Indian slaves to do the farm work for them. Some of the captured Indians were taken to other countries to be sold as slaves and the slave traders became very rich.

When Europeans moved to North and South America they brought many diseases with them that were new to this continent. Some of the diseases were yellow fever, malaria, measles, small pox, pneumonia and whooping cough. The Indigenous Indian people did not have any immunity to these diseases and many died. Historians believe that the small pox virus first arrived in the [New World](#) around Christmas, 1518.

It travelled quickly. One man, it was said, was to be the cause of the Mexican small pox epidemic that killed most of the Aztecs. Also, the native population's lack of immunity to the disease caused it to run rampant throughout the Americas; one-third to one-half of the entire native population died of small pox. With so many dying of the disease, the Spanish were more easily able to conquer the natives.

A sneeze. That's all it took. When the first European explorers sneezed on the natives, flu epidemics began, just like that. The highly contagious influenza strains, which the Europeans had developed immunity to, were accidentally brought to the Americas and the natives found them deadly. Without a way to sterilize clothing or dishes, the flu continued to rage in the Americas.

Early soldiers and sailors also introduced bubonic plague, typhus, chicken pox, cholera, cowpox, measles, and many other diseases to the Americas. Yellow fever and malaria also travelled, originating in Africa and finding their way to

Europeans and Native Americans by way of mosquitoes. The tropical rain forest of the Americas became perfect breeding grounds for the mosquitoes that transmitted sickness from infected individuals to healthy ones. These previously unknown diseases ran like wildfire in the Americas.

After Columbus' discovery, Europeans moved to North and South America to start new colonies. They took new crops with them such as cotton, sugar and rubber and traded these with the Indian people for goods such as corn, pepper, cocoa beans, peanuts, potatoes and tomatoes. Many of these goods were taken back to Europe to be sold.

<http://ageofex.marinersmuseum.org/index.php?type=explorer&id=12>