The Age of Exploration: Life on the Open Seas

A Hard Day's Work

Life was pretty difficult for a sailor in the age of exploration.

- Journeys could take years. Ships only covered about 100 miles a day.
- The pay was poor. Seamen on Columbus' journeys made less than $10 a month in today's money.
- Disobedience led to harsh punishments. Beatings and floggings were common, and матнеers were put to death.
- 18 was the minimum age for sailors, but some boys started working on ships as young as 7 or 8.
- Some men didn't join willingly. They were “impressed,” or forced into service.

Sailors consumed about 3,000 calories a day, which they got from:

- Salted beef or pork
- Biscuit or hardtack
- Ale, wine, or hard liquor
- Dried beans, peas, or rice
- Flour mixed with fat was served when meat rations ran low.
- Hardtack was infested with weevils and bugs, which sailors ate as additional food.
- A salty diet combined with a lack of fresh water led to dehydration.
- There were no fresh fruits or vegetables.
Scurvy, Seasickness, and Slime

Vitamin deficiencies gave men scurvy—and rotted teeth and gums, open sores and even mental breakdowns. It was common to lose 50 percent of a crew to scurvy, known as the “scourge of the seas.”

Explorer James Cook was a pioneer in scurvy prevention. He fed his men sauerkraut and dried vegetable soup.

If the Diet Didn’t Kill You

Sailors had just one set of clothes that were rarely washed. They thought dirt and grease provided protection from wind and rain.

Lice, rodents, and foul drinking water spread typhoid fever.

Ships could be dangerously cold—fires were only allowed in calmer weather.

The lack of fresh air below deck caused carbon monoxide poisoning. Men slept on deck in hammocks—an invention they borrowed from Mesoamerican cultures.

Ignominious Ends

Captains didn’t have it much better than their crews.

A fight over stolen boats ended Cook’s life in Hawaii.

Hudson’s crew set him adrift in what is now Hudson’s Bay. He was never heard from again.

Balboa was beheaded after feuding with his bosses.

Ponce de Leon failed to find the Fountain of Youth, but a poison arrow found him in Florida.

Magellan didn’t make it around the world with his ships. He was killed in the Philippines.

Verrazzano was killed and eaten by cannibals in the Caribbean.


A Collaboration Between History.com and Column Five
Reflection Questions

1. Describe in 2-3 sentences what life was like for a crew member during the Age of Exploration.

2. Describe the diet and nutrition of a crew member during the Age of Exploration. What foods did they eat? What were the problems with their diet?

3. What were some illnesses and diseases crew members had? List and describe at least 3.

Writing Prompt: On a separate sheet of paper, write a journal entry (1 page long) as if you are a crew member aboard a ship during the Age of Exploration. You can choose who your captain is (Da Gama, Columbus, Magellan, etc.). Describe your journey, difficulties, and hopes/goals using complete sentences.