Christopher Columbus Biography

Part 1: How It All Came About

Christopher Columbus is famous because he found something he wasn't looking for.

In 1492, Columbus sailed across the Atlantic Ocean in search of India. What he found was something far different. He found a “New World” for Europeans. How did this come about? It all started in Italy.

Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy in 1451. His family didn’t have a lot of money, and Christopher wasn’t an only child. He didn’t have much of an education until he was much older. Instead, he went to sea. He sailed around the Mediterranean and as far north as England and Ireland. When he was 25, he was shipwrecked and found his way ashore to Portugal, where he later lived with his brother.

He met the woman who would be his wife in Portugal, too. Sadly, she died soon after their son, Diego, was born. After that, Columbus took his son to Spain.

During his travels, Columbus had heard sailors’ reports of land to the west of the Madeira and Azores Islands, which were in the Atlantic Ocean west of Portugal. He wanted to know more and got maps and books on geography. (Fortunately, he had learned Latin, the language used on most maps.) These books and maps suggested that the Far East/Asia wasn’t all that far away.

Ptolemy, the great geographer of ancient Greece, had made two giant errors: He had said that Earth was smaller around than it really was, and he had said that the landmass of Europe and Asia was larger than it really was. As a result, Columbus was convinced that Japan was only 3,000 miles west of Portugal. And 3,000 miles was a distance that ships could travel in those days.

So, Columbus decided that he wanted to get to the East by going west. He thought that if he sailed far enough west, he would eventually sail around the world enough to reach the East. Based on his calculations, Japan was only 3,000 miles away, after all. (By the way, it is over twice that distance by plane today, much more by sailing!)

Part 2: The Long First Voyage

Columbus knew of the great reputation of Portugal in exploration. Prince Henry the Navigator had been sending ships to explore Africa and the East for years. Columbus asked Portugal’s King John II for money and ships for his voyage. King John refused, so Columbus went to Spain.

At first, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella also refused. Columbus tried for seven years to get them to accept his proposal, but they kept on saying no. Finally, he told them he would move to France and ask the French king for help. The Spanish king and queen finally said yes.

Columbus spent the early months of 1492 getting ready for the voyage. His three ships--the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria--set sail from Palos, Spain, on August 3. Columbus captained the Santa Maria. The captains of the other two ships were brothers, Martin Pinzon (Pinta) and Vicente Pinzon (Nina).

The voyage across the Atlantic Ocean was long and frightening to many of the sailors aboard Columbus’s three ships. They threatened mutiny. Columbus himself was worried when they did not see land for many days. He promised his crew on October 10 that if they did not see land in the next three days, they would turn back.
On October 12, they saw land. They landed at San Salvador, in the Bahamas. They met friendly natives (the Taino people) there and then sailed on to Cuba and to Hispaniola. There, the Santa Maria was wrecked. Columbus got his men ashore and onboard the Nina. Then, they headed back to Europe.

They arrived in Lisbon, Portugal, in March 1493. Columbus met with Portugal’s King John, then traveled to Barcelona, Spain, to meet with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Each time, Columbus made the claim that he had reached islands very near Asia. He showed gold, artifacts, and even natives that he had brought back with him. Spain’s king and queen were so excited that they almost immediately gave him money and ships for another voyage.

Part 3: The Other Three Voyages

The Second Voyage
Columbus set sail on his second voyage in September 1493. He had 17 ships this time. They landed in the Lesser Antilles in November. They traveled on to Hispaniola, to Natividad, a colony founded by 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 founded another colony east of Natividad, naming it Isabela. He traveled around Cuba and Jamaica, then decided to return home again. His brother Batolome stayed behind on Hispaniola and founded Santo Domingo, the first permanent European settlement in the New World. Columbus arrived back in Spain in 1496.

The Third Voyage
Spain sent Columbus back to the New World with six ships. They arrived on the island of Trinidad in July 1498 and then traveled on to the mainland, discovering South America. Columbus sailed back to Santo Domingo and found more trouble with Spaniards left behind. A royal commissioner from Spain soon arrived, blamed Christopher and Bartolome Columbus for the trouble, and had them both arrested and put in chains and then sent home in disgrace.

The Fourth Voyage
The king and queen freed him and even gave him money and ships for a fourth voyage. This one left Spain in 1502 and sailed to the island of Martinique and then to Honduras, in Central America. After more exploring in the Caribbean, Columbus returned home to Spain, in 1504. He died two years later, still believing he had reached Asia.

Columbus never reached his goal of making it to Asia. He did do the following things:

- Proved you could make it to the East by sailing west. Ferdinand Magellan’s voyage fully proved it several years later.
- Proved you could sail to the New World and back. Columbus did it four times himself.
- Found a “New World” for Europeans that was full of vast new lands for Europeans to explore.

- Started enslaving natives in the Caribbean and Central American region. These people were friendly to him, but he enslaved them looking for riches such as gold.
Part 1: Looking for Fame

Vasco da Gama gained everlasting fame as the first European explorer to reach India. He lived in an exciting time of exploration and fulfilled the promise begun by several of his predecessors. He also realized the dream of the famed Prince Henry the Navigator.

Vasco was born at Sines, in Portugal, in 1469. He grew up the son of an important man, Estevao da Gama, and learned the life of a sailor and soldier. He played an important role in the defense of Portuguese colonies on the coast of Guinea, and this brought him recognition from many people, including the Portuguese king. Bartolomeu Dias had recently returned from his voyage around the Cape of Good Hope, and the Portuguese crown wanted more. Though he was young, Vasco was granted the honor of commanding the next great expedition, with the goal being establishing a trade route to India by sailing around the southern tip of Africa.

The goal was to bring back spices and jewels. Portugal also wanted to be considered a powerful nation. For many years, Portuguese sailors had sailed the high seas, following in the footsteps of Christopher Columbus. Portugal was one of Europe's leading countries in exploration, led for many years by Prince Henry the Navigator, a very rich man who had a passion for broadening the boundaries of the known world. Once Dias had returned, the table was set for someone else to achieve even more greatness for Portugal.

Vasco left on July 8, 1497, with a fleet of four ships and a crew of 150 men. They made their way around the tip of Africa, stopping at several ports along the way. On December 16, they sailed past the stopping point of Dias, the furthest-known area to Europeans. They also named the nearby coastline Natal (Christmas in Portuguese). It is called that to this day - a city and region in South Africa. They sailed up the eastern coast of Africa and then on to India, arriving in Calicut on May 20.

Da Gama and his men stayed several weeks, negotiating with the local ruler on terms for a trade agreement. Satisfied that he had it, da Gama left for home on October 5. He didn't exactly set any sea speed records on the way home, stopping at several ports in Arabia and Africa to set up still more trade agreements and then finally reaching Lisbon the following September. A huge reception awaited him. He was famous with both the king and the people and was given the title "Admiral of the Indian Ocean."

Part 2: Fame and Fortune

He was known in some ports he visited in later years, however, as the bringer of cruelty. He didn't like to hear "no" for an answer, and he enforced some trade decrees with violence. He returned to Calicut in 1502 and took control of the port city by force, after discovering that the men he had left behind were dead and the trading post destroyed. He returned home again as a hero and was rewarded with the riches of a few Portuguese cities to go along with his already extensive wealth.

He enjoyed several years as a famous man but was called back to duty in 1524, at the head of another expedition to India, again to "maintain order." He died not long after he arrived, apparently of natural causes.

Vasco da Gama is remembered as not only the first European explorer to arrive in India but also as one of the men responsible for making Portugal a world power in the spice trade and colonization race.
Part 1: The Story Before the Voyage

The story of Ferdinand Magellan is, in the end, a sad one. He had a great idea, a great wish. He wished to lead a voyage that sailed around the world. He started off on that voyage, but he didn't live to see the end of it.

It began slowly. He served as a junior sailor onboard ships sailing to India. He made a name for himself as an able sailor and especially on one voyage in which he saved the lives of many of his fellow sailors.

The story continues with his becoming famous at the Portuguese court. But Portugal's King Manuel was jealous of Magellan's fame and told Magellan to sail for someone else. Magellan went to Spain and won over that country's king, Charles, with his idea of a "secret strait" through South America. (A strait is a narrow body of water, almost like a river)

Magellan's idea was to sail west to get to the East. Now, Columbus had had this in mind, but he never did it. Other sailors, like Vasco da Gama didn't really want to do such a thing. But Magellan burned with the fire of doing such a great thing, so he worked for many years and finally got the money and ships he needed. He had a recent map and globe--both of which showed that the "South Sea," as Balboa called it, was only a few days' sail wide. He also knew that one sailor who had recently sailed down the eastern coast of South America had reached a wide waterway that seemed to stretch on for miles. Magellan presented all this information to Spain's King Charles. The king was happy to give him money and ships enough (five in all) for a voyage that would sail through South America all the way to the Spice Islands.

The Spice Islands were the Moluccas (in modern day Indonesia), islands rich in spices that were in great demand in Europe. Magellan hoped to sail west, reach the Southeast Asian islands, then return home, all the time still sailing west. His spirits were high as the voyage began.

Part 2: The Voyage Itself

Things went well enough on the voyage, until the mutiny. In spite of constant interference by the now insanely jealous King Manuel of Portugal, Magellan had managed to get his voyage in ship-shape and ready to sail. He had kept under control his jealous Spanish captains, who didn't like the idea of reporting for orders to a Portuguese leader. They had reached Port San Julian, far south along the eastern coast of South America. They had dropped anchor for the winter. Before he knew it, Magellan was faced with a mutiny. He put down the mutiny, leaving two of its leaders behind, and sailed on. The search for the strait was long and difficult, but they found it. The ships sailed through to the "South Sea," which Magellan named the Pacific Ocean.

Then, things got really tough. One of the ships had slipped away and headed back for Spain, taking most of the rest of the food and water with it. The mutiny was in part a reaction to Magellan's telling his sailors to eat less food every day. Now, the vast Pacific Ocean stretched on and on in all directions. Everywhere was water. Nowhere was land. The bright blue ocean stretched on for as far as anyone could see, day after day.

The food and fresh water ran out before it was over. Sailors ate anything they could find, including rats. Some sailors died. Finally, a full 98 days after leaving South America, the crews landed in Guam.

A few days later, they arrived in the Philippines. Magellan managed to make a friend of a local island chieftain, and they were talking of taking control of all the nearby islands. Another island chieftain, on the island of Mactan, was making trouble, and Magellan decided to teach him a lesson.
Part 3: The End of the Voyage

This is where Magellan’s story ends. Ferdinand Magellan had decided to try to control the Filipino peoples by converting them to Christianity. This had worked well on Cebu, but it had no effect on Mactan. Magellan, not listening to his officers, led the invasion of Mactan himself. Having converting so many other native people to his religion, Magellan now believed that he was on a mission to spread that religion everyone who had not heard it.

For this invasion, he took only 60 men. More than a thousand natives awaited on Mactan. Magellan and his men were armed with swords and covered in armor, but the armor didn't cover their legs, and the swords were no use against spears thrown from far away. Magellan was killed in a sudden charge, and his men retreated to their ships.

The voyage continued without him. One ship even made it back to Spain.

Magellan’s voyage was a great moment in the history of exploration. It was the first voyage to circle the globe. It was the first voyage to sail through the American continent and beyond. It was the first voyage to sail the width of the Pacific Ocean. It was one of a kind.
Bartolomeu Dias

Dias was the first European to lead a 1487 voyage around the Cape of Good Hope on the Southern most tip of South Africa. That is his most famous accomplishment, and the story below details that.

Purposes of the Dias expedition

Bartolomeu Dias was a Knight of the royal court, superintendent of the royal warehouses, and sailing-master of the man-of-war ship named the São Cristóvão (Saint Christopher in English). King John II of Portugal appointed him, on 10 October 1487, to head an expedition to sail around the southern tip of Africa in the hope of finding a trade route to India. Dias was also charged with searching for the lands ruled by Prester John, who was a fabled Christian priest and ruler.

The expedition

Dias’ ship São Cristóvão was piloted by Pêro de Alenquer. A second caravel ship, the São Pantaleão, was commanded by João Infante and piloted by Álvaro Martins. Dias’ brother Pêro Dias was the captain of the square-rigged support ship with João de Santiago as pilot.

The expedition sailed south along the West coast of Africa. Extra provisions were picked up on the way at the Portuguese fortress of São Jorge de Mina on the Gold Coast of West Africa. After having sailed past Angola, Dias reached the Golfo da Conceicão (Walvis Bay) by December. Having rounded the Cape of Good Hope at a considerable distance, Dias continued east and entered what he named Aguada de São Brás (Bay of Saint Blaise)—later renamed Mossel Bay—on 3 February 1488. Today this is still a city in South Africa.

Dias’s expedition reached its furthest point on 12 March 1488 when they anchored at Kwaaihoek, near the mouth of the Bushman’s River, where a padrão—large stone cross—was mounted before turning back. Dias wanted to continue sailing to India, but he was forced to turn back when his crew refused to go further.

It was only on the return voyage that he actually discovered the Cape of Good Hope, in May 1488. Dias returned to Lisbon in December of that year, after an absence of sixteen months.

The discovery of the passage around southern Africa was significant because, for the first time, Europeans realized they could trade directly with India and the other parts of Asia, bypassing the overland route through the Middle East, with its expensive middlemen. The official report of the expedition has been lost.

Bartolomeu Dias originally named the Cape of Good Hope the “Cape of Storms” (Cabo das Tormentas). It was later renamed (by King John II of Portugal) the Cape of Good Hope (Cabo da Boa Esperança) because it represented the opening of a route to the east.

Follow-up voyages

After these early attempts, the Portuguese took a decade-long break from Indian Ocean exploration. He did work alongside Vasco da Gama on a later voyage.

He was then one of the captains of the second Indian expedition, headed by Pedro Álvares Cabral. This flotilla first reached the coast of Brazil, landing there in 1500, and then continued eastwards to India. Dias died near the Cape of Good Hope that he presciently had named Cape of Storms. Four ships encountered a huge storm off the cape and were lost, including Dias’, on 29 May 1500. A shipwreck found in 2008 by the Namdeb Diamond Corporation off Namibia was at first thought to be possibly Dias’ ship;[5] however, recovered coins come from a later time, so his ship’s location has still never been discovered.
Late in 1577, Francis Drake left England with five ships, on an expedition towards Africa but the true destination was revealed to be the Pacific Ocean via the Strait of Magellan, to the dismay of some of the accompanying gentlemen and sailors. They believed the journey would not go around the world and be short, but this would be a very lengthy trip. The journey left the African coast and headed for South America, near Brazil.

Running down the Atlantic South American coast, storms, separations, dissension, and a fatal skirmish with natives made the journey very difficult. Before leaving the Atlantic, Drake lightened the expedition by disposing of two unfit ships and one English gentleman, who was tried and executed for mutiny (revolting against the leader/captain). After rallying his men and unifying his command with a remarkable speech, Drake renamed his flagship, previously the Pelican, the Golden Hind.

In September of 1578, the fleet, now three ships, sailed through the deadly Strait of Magellan with speed and ease, only to emerge into awful Pacific storms. For two months the ships were in mortal danger, unable to sail clear of the weather or to stay clear of the coast. The ships were scattered, and the smallest, the Marigold, went down with all crew aboard. The Elizabeth found herself back in the strait and turned tail for England, where she arrived safely but in disgrace. Meanwhile, the Golden Hind had been blown far to the south, where Drake discovered - perhaps - that there was open water below the South American continent.

The storms abated, and the Golden Hind was finally able to sail north along the Pacific South American coast, into the previously undisturbed private waters of King Philip of Spain. The Spanish were the only Europeans in the Pacific so far, and they were the rivals of Drake's English crew. The first stop, for food and water, was at the (now) Chilean Island of Mocha, where the rebellious residents laid a nearly disastrous ambush, having mistaken the English for their Spanish oppressors that had already been there.

After this bad beginning in the Pacific the tide turned, and for the next five and a half months Drake raided Spanish settlements at will, among them Valpariso, Lima, and Arica, and easily took Spanish ships, including the rich treasure ship "Cacafuego," leaving panic, chaos, and a confused pursuit in his wake. During this time, he captured and released a number of Europeans, whose subsequent testimony survives. The plundering of Spanish ships by Drake's English ship continued throughout the Pacific.

After stopping to make repairs at an island, Cano, off the coast of Southern Mexico and after a final raid, on the nearby (now vanished) town of Guatulco, the Golden Hind, awash with treasure, including perhaps twenty-six tons of silver, sailed out of Spanish waters in April of 1579.

Sailing first westerly and then northerly, well off the shore of North America, the leaking Golden Hind reached a northernmost position variously reported as between 48 degrees and 42 degrees north latitude, a range which includes most of Washington, all of Oregon, and a sliver of California. There, somewhere in the region he named Nova Albion, in the strangely cold and windy June of 1579, Drake found a harbor to stay in for over five weeks, repairing the Golden Hind and enjoying extensive and
peaceful contact with the natives there. Before he left he set up a monument, in the form of an engraved metal plate, which has never been found.

The crossing of the Pacific was uneventful, and landfall was made in sixty eight days, at a location which remains unclear to this day. The next months were spent puttering about in the Indonesian archipelago, making promising commercial contacts, local political alliances and trading for spices - and again entering the sight of witnesses. Difficulty in finding a route through the thousands of islands nearly ended the journey in January of 1580, when the *Golden Hind* ran hard onto a reef in apparent open water; but after several desperate days a change of wind brought a way out.

Continuing westward, the *Golden Hind* crossed the Indian Ocean without incident, rounded the Cape of Good Hope into the Atlantic, sailed up the coast of Africa, and arrived triumphantly in England in the fall of 1580, nearly three years and some 36,000 miles having passed beneath her keel.

With that, Sir Francis Drake and his crew were the first to circumnavigate the globe.
John Cabot Biography

Giovanni Caboto (Cabot’s Italian name, other spellings are used as well) was born in Genoa, Italy, probably around 1451. However, already when he was a child, or maybe a young man, he moved to Venice.

It was probably on hearing of Columbus's discovery of 'the Indies' that he decided to find a route to the west for himself. He went with his plans to England, because he incorrectly thought the spiceries were coming from northern Asia.

Like other Italian explorers, including Christopher Columbus, Cabot was commissioned by another country, and in Cabot’s case it was England. Cabot had a simple plan, to start from a northerly latitude in England where the longitudes are much closer together, and where, as a result, the voyage would be much shorter.

King Henry VII gave him a grant “full and free authority, with five ships ... and as many mariners or men as they will have in said ships, to seek out, discover, and find, whatsoever isles, countries, regions or provinces in what part of the world so ever they be, which before this time have been unknown to all Christians.”

Cabot went to Bristol, England to make the preparations for his voyage. Bristol by then was the second-largest seaport of England.

Cabot left with only one vessel, the Matthew, a small ship, but fast and able. The crew consisted of only 18 people. He departed on 20 May, 1497 (he had also made a voyage in 1496, but got no further than Iceland). He sailed to Dursey Head, Ireland, from where he sailed due west to Asia - or so he thought. He landed on the North American east coast at 24 June, 1497. His landing-place is a matter of much controversy among historians. Some believe it is the Canadian islands of Newfoundland, others say as far south as the United States near Maine.

He went ashore to take possession of the land, and explored the coast for some time, probably departing at 20 July.

Cabot is only reported to have landed once during the expedition and did not advance "beyond the shooting distance of a crossbow”. Many historians agree that no contact was made with any native people, but they found the remains of a fire, a human trail, nets and a wooden tool. The crew only appeared to have remained on land long enough to take on fresh water and to raise the banners and claim the land for the King of England, while recognising the religious authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

On the homeward travel his sailors thought they were going too far north, so Cabot sailed a more southerly course, reaching England on the 6th of August, specifically to Bristol.

Back in England, Cabot got well rewarded (a pension of 20 pounds a year), and a patent was written for a new voyage. The next year, 1498, he departed again, with 5 ships this time. Except for one of the ships, that soon after stopped in an Irish port because of distress, nothing was heard of the expedition, or of John Cabot, ever since.

John Cabot and the remaining 4 ships as well as the rest of the crew were never seen or heard from again. Historians are still trying to figure out where he mysteriously disappeared to, but we’ll probably never know the truth.

John’s son Sebastian later made a voyage to North America, looking for the northwest passage (in 1508), but his father was never found.
Juan Ponce De Leon Biography

Part 1: The Early Years

One of the sailors who sailed with Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the New World was a man named Juan Ponce De Leon. This voyage would change his life.

He decided to stay in Hispaniola (islands in the Caribbean) when Columbus returned to Europe. Ponce became very popular and was named governor of neary Puerto Rico (then called Boriquien) in 1508.

Some stories claim that Ponce heard tales of a magical water source. People called it the "Fountain of Youth" and said that drinking its water kept you young. Ponce decided that he must find this water source. This could be a myth according to historians since he never mentioned it in his journals, but it has never been proven either way - we still don’t know if this was his motivation to explore more of the New World.

For the next few years, he sailed around the New World on a voyage endorsed by Spain's King Charles V. It was March 1513. They sailed for Bimini.

They sailed for days but didn’t see the island. On March 27, he came within sight of the Florida coast. On April 2, he landed at what he named St. Augustine. This was the first Spanish settlement on the mainland of North America, and is still a city in Florida today.

Part 2: The Fountain of Youth

He had several adventures along the way, fighting fierce native tribes and discovering some hidden riches. He did not, however, find the Fountain of Youth. In need of fresh ships and crew, he returned to Boriquen.

He continued to govern the island, and he continued to hear stories of the Fountain of Youth. Finally, in 1521, he set out again. He had gained permission to settle both Bimini, which he still hoped to find, and Florida, which he thought was an island.

He failed to find Bimini again, but he did land on the Florida coast. (No one is really sure where he landed.) While he and his men were building houses for a proposed settlement, they were attacked by native tribesmen. Most likely, the natives were attempting to defend their land from these foreign invaders. Many of Ponce’s men died, but Ponce escaped, although he was injured. He boarded his ship and set sail again. He reached Cuba and entered a hospital, where died of wounds from the attack in Florida.

Juan Ponce De Leon never found the Fountain of Youth. Neither did anyone else, at least as far we know.