

Secretive, confident, audacious, persistent, courageous, self-taught, and religious...these are all words used to describe Christopher Columbus by the people who knew him best. I, Rodrigo de Jerez, had the honor of being a sailor on the Santa Maria in 1492 and spent five long months traveling and exploring with Christopher Columbus. Now, as we arrive back in Spain, many thoughts are upon me. I impatiently wait to meet my family again and share my worldly experiences.

In the days after our arrival back from our voyage where we were trying to discover a westward trade route to the Indies, I gathered with family and friends and told of the courageous journey I had made with the man that Spain was now calling a hero. My family wanted to know what the captain of our ship, Christopher Columbus, was like. I described him as best as I could. I knew him to be very inquisitive, wanting to learn the "secrets of the world". Columbus knew what he wanted to find and wasn't afraid to pursue it. However, a successful journey was never guaranteed. At one point, some of my fellow sailors wanted to throw him overboard. He could be maddening at times, but then could pacify us with his grand ideas about the Indies. Very simply, he was after gold, glory, and most importantly, God. He was so confident in his exploration that he gave the Queen demanding terms about owning one-tenth of all the riches he discovered, being knighted, and being named Governor-General of the newly discovered lands. Sailing west was the way to the Indies, even when the rest of the world refused to believe him.

As the conversation with my family continued, my father wondered: "Did Columbus really set out to find the Indies?" After spending so much time aboard the ship with him, I knew this to be only part of the goal. More importantly, Columbus wanted to spread Christianity to the world. He saw himself as "an agent of God's divine plan". He knew he would encounter many new people in these foreign lands and wanted them all to be converted to his faith.

Still, other family members wondered how we knew we had found the Indies. Columbus had read many books about the Far East. He knew from the writings of Marco Polo that the beautiful lands that we had encountered had to be the Indies. We discovered foreign people with little clothing, lush islands, exotic animals, and some gold.

My young brother excitedly wondered: "What was the most amazing thing you saw?" After giving it a little thought, I knew that there were many answers to this. We experienced tropical green islands with all kinds of plants and animals. There were shells on the beaches, colorful parrots, and many things that the natives had made from the land. The natives shared darts made with fish teeth and hand-spun threads with us. The islands were beautiful just to look out over. Trees were everywhere. A couple of the places that we visited even reminded me of Spain.

The native people were very docile, inquisitive, and generous. They wore little clothing to cover their tan bodies. Sometimes they even had painting on their skin in the colors of red, black, or other natural colors. Their hair was coarse like that of a horse, but it was neatly trimmed. In their noses, some had some gold pieces. This was encouraging because we wanted to find as much treasure as possible to bring back to Spain. The natives traded what they had easily for our cheap beads and caps.

The continuous search for gold took us to many islands in the region. Most natives seemed interested to meet us and even thought we were people from heaven. This was encouraging for our mission of converting these new people to Christianity. Some even showed the sign of the cross. Once they swam out to meet our boats, we always asked about the gold. We didn't find as much as we would have liked, but there was enough to present to the King and

Queen without embarrassment. Unfortunately, parrots seemed more plentiful than gold on this trip.

My mother worriedly asked: "Do you really think this voyage was worth the danger and the cost?" Of course, everyone had an opinion on the significance of the discoveries made. There would be no reward if a risk was not taken. This journey was the first of many to come. Columbus knew he wanted to return again to these new glorious lands. He wanted to take people with him to start colonies there. After all, he was now the Governor-General of these places. The gold, jewelry, and tobacco were all items he brought back to Spain, with hopes of finding more in the future. He was excited by seeing strange animals like rattlesnakes and lizards. Crops, such as tomatoes, potatoes, and maize, would be great additions to the European diet. There were so many strange and wonderful things to find in these new lands. As proof of how magnificent these new lands were, Columbus even brought back twelve native people to give to the Queen.

My family still had many more questions about my journey with Columbus, but those questions would have to wait until the morning. I was exhausted from my travels and needed to rest. I think my family finally understood that this was an experience that was well worth the risk. There was a whole new world out there with intriguing things. Hopefully, I would be able to sail with Columbus again. This was just the start of something great for Spain.

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