Age of Exploration

By the end of the 15th century many thing were changing in Europe. The population started to grow more quickly and a new class of merchants emerged. They wanted to buy and sell expensive and valuable products from Asia—like gold, jewels and silk.

In those days, people had no refrigerators to preserve their food. They dried meat and often used salt to make it last longer. To make food taste better they used spices, like pepper or cinnamon.

For centuries Europeans brought these goods on a land route from Asia over thousands of dangerous kilometres. In the 15th century the overland routes were being controlled by the Turkish Empire, which made it even more difficult for European merchants to pass through.

As a result, some European countries, like Spain and Portugal, decided to find out if there was a sea route to India. With the help of new kinds of ships that could sail faster and instruments, like the quadrant, they started the Age of Exploration.

Portuguese exploration

At the end of the 15th century the Portuguese started to explore the west coast of Africa. They set up trading posts and collected gold and silver. They were convinced that by sailing around the coast of Africa they would find a route to India.

In 1487, the Portuguese explorer Bartholomeu Dias sailed around the southern part of the continent and got as far as the east coast of Africa, but a storm made him turn back. On his return voyage, he saw a piece of land that stretched out into the sea. The Portuguese named it the Cape of Good Hope because they were hopeful of finding a passageway to India.

In 1497 Vasco Da Gama set out from Lisbon, sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and into the Indian Ocean. He reached the west coast of India in May 1498. He took some spices and gold back with him to prove that he had reached India.

Vasco da Gama’s route to Africa in 1497/98
Christopher Columbus was probably the most famous explorer of the era. He achieved fame by sailing west in search of a sea route to India. Instead of reaching India he discovered that there was an unknown mass of land in between, land that the Europeans knew nothing of.

Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy in 1451 and during his early years his father took him on various sailing trips and wanted to make a merchant out of him. Like many navigators of that time, Columbus also wanted to sail to India and the Far East. He thought that if he sailed west he would also reach the Spice Islands of Asia and India. When he went to the king of Portugal to present his plan, but it was rejected. Queen Isabella of Spain admired young and brave men like Columbus and so she gave him three ships—the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria—and a crew of 90 men.

Columbus left Spain on August 3, 1492. After two months of sailing westward, he landed on an island of the Bahamas, San Salvador, on October 12, 1492. Because he thought he had reached the islands near India he called the natives Indians. All together, Columbus made four voyages to the New World between 1492 and 1504. He explored the coasts of Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico. On his last two voyages, Columbus reached the mainland of Central and South America and travelled as far south as the mouth of the Orinoco River. After he came home from his fourth voyage, Christopher Columbus fell ill and died in 1506.
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**Other Spanish Explorers**

During the early 1500s Spanish explorers travelled across most of Central and South America. They founded colonies and brought settlers to the New World. They also made the native Indians work for them. The Spaniards brought new products to the Americas, like wheat, horses, cattle and sheep. In exchange, they grew plants that were not known in Europe, like corn and potatoes and brought them back to the Old Continent.

In 1513 the Spanish explorer Vasco de Balboa landed in Panama, the part of Central America that is very narrow. With his men, he fought his way through 50 miles of jungle and was surprised to see a new sea, the Pacific Ocean.

One of the most important Spanish conquistadors was Hernando Cortes. He conquered the Aztec empire in 1521. In 1532 and 1533 Francisco Pizarro conquered the Incas. These natives ruled an empire that expanded from Columbia to the northern parts of Argentina. The Incas had great riches, vast amounts of gold and silver. When the Spanish got there they took all of it away from the Incas.

**French and English explorers**

The French and the English concentrated their journeys on the northern part of the continent, because they thought that there also had to be a north-western route to India.

In 1497 John Cabot, an Italian who sailed for England, landed on the east coast of Canada. In 1534 Jacques Cartier sailed down the St. Lawrence River and reached the Great Lakes. He claimed this territory for the king of France.

During the 1600s the French and English began to set up colonies. The French concentrated on the St. Lawrence valley and the Great Lakes and founded towns like Montreal, or Detroit.

At the end of the century Louis Joliet and Jacques Marquette sailed down the Mississippi River. The land near the Gulf of Mexico was called Louisiana, in honour of the French king. Settlements like St. Louis or New Orleans show French origin.

The first permanent settlement in North America was founded at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. In 1610 Henry Hudson sailed around north-eastern Canada and discovered a huge body of water which he thought was the Pacific Ocean. Today it is known as Hudson Bay.
Amerigo Vespucci

Amerigo Vespucci was an Italian-born explorer who explored the mainland of America at the end of the 15th century. A German mapmaker believed that Vespucci was the first to reach the New World, so he suggested naming the new land America.

Although Vespucci was probably not one of the greatest explorers of the time, he was the first navigator who explored South America.

Magellan sails around the world

In 1519 the Portuguese sailor Ferdinand Magellan set out to find India by sailing around South America. He sailed for Spain because the Portuguese didn’t give him any money for this expedition.

Magellan had 5 ships and a crew of 240. When he reached the southern tip of South America, he got into bad, stormy weather. Two of his ships were badly damaged and couldn’t continue the journey. With three ships he sailed through a strait, that later was named after him, the Strait of Magellan.

When he reached the Pacific Ocean, he sailed for there months without any sight of land. Finally, in April of 1521 he landed on the Philippine Islands. Magellan got into a fight with native islanders and was killed there.

Only one ship could continue the voyage. It crossed the Indian Ocean and sailed around the Cape of Good Hope. With only twenty people on board it reached Spain three years after it had set out.
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Timeline

1450 Prince Henry the Navigator builds a school for sailors.
1453 The Turkish empire cuts off the land route from Asia to Europe. Search for a sea route begins.
1487 Bartholomeu Dias discovers the southern tip of Africa.
1492 Christopher Columbus lands on an island of the Bahamas.
1497 John Cabot discovers Newfoundland while he searches for a north-western passage to India.
1498 Vasco Da Gama finds a sea route to India by sailing around Africa.
1502 Amerigo Vespucci returns from his explorations of South America. A German mapmaker names the New World after him.
1513 Vasco de Balboa discovers the eastern shore of the Pacific Ocean.
1519-1522 Magellan sails around the world.
1521 Hernando Cortez defeats the Aztec empire.
1533 Francisco Pizarro defeats the Inca empire.
1534 Jacques Cartier sails down the St. Lawrence River and discovers the Great Lakes.
1577 Sir Francis Drake is the first Englishman to sail around the world.
1607 The first settlement is called Jamestown.
1610 Henry Hudson discovers Hudson Bay.
1620 The Mayflower lands with pilgrims in the New World.
1673 Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet explore the Mississippi River.

Words

cut off = block, so that nobody can pass through

discover = to find something for the first time

empire = a group of countries that are controlled by a king

mapmaker = a person who draws maps

pilgrim = a religious person who travels a long way to a holy place

sailor = someone who works on a ship

settlement = a new town that is built in a place where people have not lived before

tip = the end of something