

The First Voyage 1492-1493

With excerpts from “The Log of Columbus”

Columbus departed with his three ships, Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria from Palos, Spain on August 3, 1492.

“Friday, 3 August 1492 We set sail on this third day of August, 1492, at 8 o’clock in the morning, from the bar of Saltes. The wind is strong and variable, and he had gone 45 miles to the south by sunset. After dark, I altered the course for the Canary Islands, to the SW and south by west.”

Columbus stopped in the Canary Island for four weeks to refit the Nina and await fair winds.

“Wednesday, 5 September 1492 The ships have been loaded, and all is ready for the voyage. Tonight I shall order a special service of thanksgiving; at sunrise I will lift anchors to begin the journey westward.”

“Saturday, 15 September 1492 I sailed to the west day and night for 81 miles, or more. Early this morning I saw a marvelous meteorite fall into the seas 12 or 15 miles away to the SW. This was taken by some people to be a bad omen, but I calmed them by telling of the numerous occasions that I have witnessed such events. I have to confess that this is the closest that a falling star has ever come to my ship.”

Columbus made landfall somewhere in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492.

“Thursday, 11 October 1492 The moon, in its third quarter, rose in the east shortly before midnight. I estimate that we were making about 9 knots and had gone some 67 ½ miles between the beginning of night and 2 o’clock in the morning. Then, at two hours after midnight, the Pinta fired a cannon, my prearranged signal for the sighting of land. I now believe that the light I saw earlier was a sign from God and that it was truly the first positive indication of land. When we caught up with the Pinta, which was always running ahead because she was a swift sailer, I learned that the first man to sight land was Rodrigo de Triana, a seaman from Lepe.”

“Friday, 12 October 1492 At dawn we saw naked people, and I went ashore in the ship’s boat, armed, followed by Martin Alonso Pinzon, captain of the Pinta, and his brother, Vincente Yanez Pinzon, captain of the Nina. I unfurled the royal banner and the captains brought the flags which displayed the large green cross with the Letters F and Y at the left and right side of the cross. Over each letter was the appropriate crown of that sovereign. These flags were carried as a standard on all of the ships. After a prayer of thanksgiving, I ordered the captains of the Pinta and Nina together with Rodrigo de Escobedo (secretary of the fleet), and Rodrigo Sanchez of Segovia (comptroller of the fleet) to bear faith and witness that I was taking possession of this island for the King and Queen. I made all the necessary declarations and had these testimonies carefully written down by the secretary. In addition to those named above, the entire company of the fleet bore witness to this act. To this island I gave the name San Salvador, in honor of our Blessed Lord.”

He sailed on to Cuba in late October and November, where the Pinta and her Captain, Martin Alonso Pinzon, deserted Columbus.

“Saturday, 27 October 1492 I hauled up anchor at sunrise and departed for Cuba, which I am told is magnificent, with gold and pearls. I am now certain that Cuba is the Indian name for Japan. I made 6 knots from sunrise until 1 o’clock in the afternoon, to the SSW. I added another 21 miles before nightfall on the same course, for a total of 51 miles. Just before sunset I saw land, but it rained so hard that we had to beat about all this night.”

“Wednesday, 21 November 1492 This day Martin Alonso Pinzon sailed away with the caravel Pinta, without my will or command. It was through perfidy. I think he believes that an Indian I had placed on the Pinta could lead him to much gold, so he departed without waiting and without the excuse of bad weather, but because he wished to do so. He has done and said many other things to me.”

Columbus aboard the Santa Maria and accompanied by the Nina arrives at Hispaniola in early December. .

Friday, 21 December 1492 I have been sailing the seas for 23 years, without laying off for any time long enough to be counted, and I have seen all the East and West (as it is called in going to the north, which is England), and I have traveled through Guinea, but in all those regions

harbors as perfect as these will never be found. And it has been the case that each harbor I have come to has been better than the last one. I have considered what I have written very carefully, and I assert I have written correctly and that now this harbor surpasses all others. All the ships of the world could be contained in it, and it is so sheltered that the oldest line on the ship would hold it fast.”

Here on Christmas Eve of 1492, the Santa Maria was lost on a reef. The remains of the ship are used to build a fort, called La Navidad, and Columbus is forced to leave most of the crew of the Santa Maria there to await his return from Spain.

“Tuesday, 25 December 1492-Christmas Day Our Lord willed that at midnight, when the crew saw me lie down to rest and also saw that there was a dead calm and the sea was as in a bowl, they all lay down to sleep and left the helm to that boy. The currents carried the ship upon one of these banks. Although it was night, the sea breaking on them made so much noise that they could be heard and seen at a 3-mile distance. The ship went upon the bank so quietly that it was hardly noticeable. When the boy felt the rudder ground and heard the noise of the sea, he cried out. I jumped up instantly; no one else had yet felt that we were aground. Then the master of the ship, Juan de la Cosa, who was on watch, came out. I ordered him to rouse the crew, to launch the small boat we carry on our stern, and to take an anchor and cast it at the stern. The master and many others jumped into the small boat, and I assumed they were going to follow my orders. Instead, their only thoughts were to escape to the Nina, which was a 1 ½ miles to the windward. The crew of the Nina would not receive them, which was correct, and therefore they returned to the ship. But the boat from the Nina reached the ship before my own boat did!

When I saw that some of my own crew were fleeing and that the sea was becoming more shallow, with my ship broadside to it, I did the only thing I could. I ordered the mast cut and the ship lightened as much as possible, to see if it could be refloated. But the water became even more shallow, and the ship settled more and more to one side. Although there was little or no sea, I could not save her. Then the seams opened, though she remained in one piece.”

Wednesday, 2 January 1493I left on this Isla Espanola, which the Indians call Bohio, 39 men in the fortress, under the command of three officers, all of whom are very friendly with King Guacanagari. In command

is Diego de Arana, a native of Cordoba, whom I have given all of the powers I received from the Sovereigns, in full.”

Columbus departed aboard the Nina for Spain in early January 1493. Columbus found the Pinta a few days later, and they sailed for Spain, but were again separated by a fierce storm in the North Atlantic in February.

“Tuesday, January 8, 1492 Because of a strong east and SE wind I did not start today, but I ordered the ships supplied with wood and water and everything necessary for the voyage. Although I wanted to sail this entire coast of the Isla Espanola, which I could do maintaining my course, my captains on the caravels are brothers, that is to say, Martin Alonso Pinzon and Vincente Yanez Pinzon, and their followers are greedy and untrustworthy. They do not respect the honor I have shown them, and they have not and do not obey my commands. Rather, they have done and said many unjust things against me, and Martin Alonso left me from 22 November to 6 January, without cause or reason, but from disobedience. All this I have endured in silence, in order to finish my voyage successfully. On account of this, in order to escape such bad company, which I have to ignore, I have decided to return with the greatest possible haste and not to stop longer. Although there are many disobedient people among the crew, there are also many good men. Now is not the time to think about their punishment.”

Thursday, 14 February 1493 The wind increased last night, and the waves were frightful, coming in opposite directions. They crossed each other and trapped the ship, which could not go forward nor get out from between them, and they broke over us. I carried the mainsail very low, simply to escape somewhat from the waves. I went this way for three hours and made about 15 miles. The wind and the sea increased greatly, and seeing the great danger I began to run before the wind, letting it carry me wherever it wanted, for there was no other remedy. Then the caravel Pinta, on which was Martin Alonso, began to run also and eventually disappeared from sight, although all night long I showed lights and the Pinta responded until it was not able to do so any longer because of the force of the storm, and because she was far off from my course. I went this night to the NE by east for 40 ½ miles. After sunrise the wind became stronger and the crossing waves more terrible. I carried only a low mainsail, so that the ship might escape some of the waves breaking over her and not sink. I went like this for 6 hours and made 22 ½ miles.”

First the Nina and then the Pinta arrived back in Palos within hours of each other on March 15, 1493. Columbus was proclaimed a hero, but Pinzon died within a short time of his return to Spain.

“Friday, March 15, 1493 Yesterday after sunset I continued on my course until dawn, with a light wind; by sunrise I was off Saltes. At noon, with the tide rising, I entered the bar of Saltes until I was inside the harbor from which I had departed on August 3 of the past year. Thus, the writing is now completed, except that I intend to go by sea to Barcelona, where, I have been informed, Your Highnesses are staying. This is in order to give them a full account of my voyage, which Our Lord had permitted me to make, and for which He inspired me. His Divine Majesty does all good things, and everything is good except sin, and nothing can be imagined or planned without His consent. This voyage has miraculously proven this to be so, as can be learned from this writing, by the remarkable miracles which have occurred during the voyage for me, who has been in the court of Your Highnesses for such a long, time, with opposition and against the advice of so many of the principal persons of your household, who were all against me and treated this undertaking as a folly. I hope to Our Lord that it will be the greatest honor for Christianity, although it has been accomplished with such ease.”

