

Columbus reports on his first voyage, 1493

Introduction

On August 3, 1492, Columbus set sail from Spain to find an all-water route to Asia. On October 12, more than two months later, Columbus landed on an island in the Bahamas that he called San Salvador; the natives called it Guanahani. For nearly five months, Columbus explored the Caribbean, particularly the islands of Juana (Cuba) and Hispaniola (San Domingo), before returning to Spain. He left thirty-nine men to build a settlement called La Navidad in present-day Haiti. He also kidnapped several Native Americans (between ten and twenty-five) to take back to Spain—only eight survived and none were returned home. Columbus brought back small amounts of gold as well as native birds and plants to show the richness of the new continent he believed to be Asia.

When Columbus arrived back in Spain on March 15, 1493, he immediately wrote a letter announcing his discoveries to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, who had helped finance his trip. The Latin printing of this letter announced the existence of the American continent throughout Europe. “I discovered many islands inhabited by numerous people. I took possession of all of them for our most fortunate King by making public proclamation and unfurling his standard, no one making any resistance,” Columbus wrote. ***(For students--Consider if you saw a foreign tourist unroll a beach towel with their flag on it and spread it out on our beach... would you think you had just given up ownership of your country to them?)***

Please read Columbus’ letter to the Spanish King and Queen and answer the following questions.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document in order to answer these questions.

1. Columbus described the Natives he first encountered as “timid and full of fear.” Why did he then capture some Natives and bring them aboard his ships?
2. Imagine the thoughts of the Europeans as they first saw land in the “New World.” What do you think would have been their most immediate impression? Explain your answer.
3. Which of the items Columbus described would have been of most interest to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella? Why?
4. Why did Columbus describe the islands and their inhabitants in great detail?
5. It is said that this voyage opened the period of the “Columbian Exchange.” Why do you think that term has been attached to this period of time?