

# Christopher Columbus

We are what we are, and we are where we are because of an enormous accumulation of ideas and enterprise by a great number of people. An idea to be profitable has to be the cause of actions that will change the way the world is progressing, to provoke a paradigm shift from what and where we are to something different and positive. Sometimes it takes centuries to appreciate their impact.

Some years ago one of the leading magazines conducted a research on the 100 most influential people in the last 3000 years. A person that was also included near the top was Christopher Columbus. He changed the world forever. Navigation and shipbuilding, geography, history, politics, philosophy, botany and many other disciplines were affected by the fact that we finally had proof that the earth was a sphere and a safe place to live and that there was not a chasm and disaster beyond the horizon.

We know of Columbus and how he decided to “seek the east by navigating to the west”. What is not clear to most people is:

1. How Columbus convinced himself that he was right,
2. What a skilled navigator he had become prior to his voyage of discovery, and
3. Most important, the feedback from his first voyage.

In this essay I will consider only his first voyage. He went four times to what became known as the Americas.

Although there is some controversy we know that Columbus was born in Genoa in the year 1451. In those times Genoa was a very important port (still is), the centre of commerce with the east, and outposts of Genoese merchants were situated all over the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It was there that goods and spices and silks arriving as far as from China and India were delivered by the Arab intermediaries to the ships of Genoa and Venice and transported to the coast of Italy and distributed to Europe. A colossal traffic of goods and a lot of people were sharing and taking part in the benefits of the enterprise.

Columbus family were merchants, mainly involved in the traffic of wool. Columbus grew up in Genoa and certainly was exposed to ships and seamen from his youth. It was only natural for a healthy, ambitious young man to look at the sea and the ships that were crossing it as a rewarding and adventurous way of life. Columbus travelled a lot in the Mediterranean Sea. His longest trip in the Mediterranean was a voyage to Chio a small island on the coast of Turkey, which was considered property of Genoese merchants. The year was 1474. Columbus was already 23 and looking forward to different directions.

In the summer of 1476 Columbus sailed from Genoa with a small flotilla of ships, five in all with destination London. This was a commercial expedition aiming to open a new market for Genoa. To Columbus must have been particularly exciting the fact that for the first time he was going to sail past the Strait of Gibraltar and into the Atlantic Ocean, an infinite sea so full of unknown. The flotilla indeed passed the Strait of Gibraltar and into

the Atlantic but in proximity of the cape of Saint Vincent, the south west corner of Portugal, they were met by a fleet of French buccaneers and in the ensuing scuffle three of the five ships from Genoa were burned and pillaged, while two took refuge in the port of Cadiz. The French too lost four ships.

Lagos is a village of fishermen close to Cape Saint Vincent and with their boats they rescued the unfortunate Genoese seamen from the sea. Columbus was one of them. The day was August 13, 1476, and is considered an important day in the future life of Columbus. Lagos is Portugal and from there he proceeded to Lisbon where in time the remaining ships arrived. Lagos has an important place in the history of sea navigation and discovery. It is between Lagos and Cape St. Vincent that Henry The Navigator, a Portuguese Prince, organized a school for pilots and cartographers and it is from there that his ships sailed the Southern Ocean searching for a passage around the unknown continent of Africa.

In those times, what was known was that south of Egypt, Libya and Mauritania, there was only sand and more sand. Nothing could live there and it was considered the end of the habitable land. Sending ships to circumnavigate this enormous desert and to find a way to India was the aim of these expeditions. There were very sound commercial reasons for this adventure. The Turks had invaded Anatolia, present day Turkey, and were expanding as far as Constantinople and Lebanon. While Arabs were good merchants to deal with, the Turks were considered enemy of Christianity and anyhow no ship was safely allowed in the territories that had been occupied by their armies. This is the main reason why the search of a new way was of great importance. The great moment arrived in 1445, when Dionysus Diaz sailed south past Cape Verde and Senegal and to his surprise discovered immense forests and great rivers and a great number of black people. This was magnificent news and it buried forever all the misconception of the past. Mainly that life was impossible in the southern hemisphere. Through the years to come the Portuguese sailors continued the quest for a passage to India and the discovery of the black continent.

Columbus with the remaining ships reached London, and from there sailed to Bristol. Bristol with its high tides, the abundance of fish arriving from the north and so many other things new for the young sailor. Columbus embarks on a ship directed to Galway in Ireland, and from there he sails in a convoy of ships directed to Iceland. Columbus was the perfect sailor, always prepared to learn, winds, currents, people, tales of the sea. Here we were in the land of the Viking folklore. The Vikings had travelled to Greenland and colonized it. They were supposed to have even proceeded further to the west and sighted other lands. So England, Ireland, Island, Greenland, more and more land to the west. While in Ireland he was exposed to this warm current that made Ireland a warmer place than Milan in Italy. Columbus was learning. Certainly if you kept going you would in the end arrive to China and Japan, the fabulous land of plenty described by Marco Polo.

Columbus returned to Lisbon and Portugal became his place of residence. Many Genoese were living there and there were constant contact and opportunities. Columbus was also interested in geography and cartography and Lisbon was the place where to be. He travelled to the Azores, a group of islands discovered by the Portuguese in 1427, about

1500 kilometres from Lisbon and more or less on the same parallel. Again lands, islands to the west. He learned a lot from the Azores.

First of all the currents were blowing prevalently from the west. Sailing against those currents would have been impossible. Again the Azores had their tales, the current had brought to the beaches bamboos unknown to Europeans, and pieces of timber that had the markings of the work of man. The story goes on to tell us that even the bodies of two men of a different race were found on the beach. Columbus did not miss anything.

In 1479 Columbus marries Felipe Moniz Perestrello, a Portuguese lady that although not rich was coming from a good family. The father had been a sailor and Governor of Porto Santo, an island close to Madeira. A very important post in view of the importance of the islands in the voyages of discovery that Henry the Navigator was organizing. By then Columbus was certainly a Captain, and we know that he sailed to the Canary Islands and to Madeira more than once.

After his marriage Porto Santo became a very familiar place to Columbus. He even lived there for a period. His father in law had lived there and had been a navigator himself, all his charts were still there. In 1400 nautical charts were scarce and very precious, it is known that pilots and captains were keeping their information to themselves, knowledge was an advantage not to be shared. Again these islands were speaking to Columbus: another bridge, another pointing to places beyond the horizon. Columbus could see the sunset from Porto Santo and knew that in Genoa the sun had set down already two hours before. Perhaps four, five hours towards the west there were people for whom the sun was still high in the sky. Again tales of past navigators who had sighted land beyond the horizon, and flotsam from other distant lands seemed to point over the horizon. In that period we know that Columbus sailed further south. He was working for Portuguese interests and he travelled as far south as New Guinea and as Sao Jorge da Mina, which is where the coast of Africa starts to bend towards the east.

On the return he passed close to the Islands of Cape Verde.

Columbus the navigator, the navigator for excellence, was learning more and more about the Atlantic Ocean. He had been to Portugal, Ireland, Island, Azores, Madeira, Cape Verde, and La Mina. A very large tract of the Atlantic, from 64 degrees north to 5 degrees north. All was pointing to the possibility of finding a way to China and Japan. He knew that the currents and winds were favourable for travelling west from the Canaries. He also knew that a return trip could only be made by navigating at much higher latitudes, the latitudes of the Azores and Lisbon.

By then Columbus was a Captain. He had enough money, a wife and a son. He was also well known in the commercial world of Lisbon. It is then that Columbus had the certainty of being right in finding “the east, by navigating to the west”. By then it was accepted that the earth was a sphere, what was not known was the dimension and the circumference and therefore the distance to travel to China.

It was 1483 and for about ten years Columbus tried to convince first the King of Portugal and then the kings of Spain to give him ships and support. Rejection and more rejection. Two reasons convinced Isabella of Spain to provide ships to Columbus: the Turkish Empire was blockading the eastern Mediterranean Sea, and the Portuguese sailor Bartholomew Diaz in 1487 doubled the Cape of Good Hope for the first time, thus opening an alternative way to India and to the east. This was great news and it had taken almost a century of navigation and effort for the Portuguese to discover and chart the outline of Africa. It was important for Spain to find a different route in competition with the Portuguese. Therefore all the conditions that Columbus had requested, titles, money and recognitions were readily accepted. Three very small ships were readied for this trip, without knowing that this would become the most important voyage in our history and that the world to follow would be a different world for all of us. All three ships were shorter than 30 meters, the Santa Maria had a crew of 44 men, the Pinta 25 men, and the Nina 20 men!!

Columbus sailed from Palos on August 3, 1492. From there he went to the Canary Islands, and proceeded to the west until he sighted land on the 12 October 1492. What follows is history and is well known. The route chosen by Columbus was sailing north until on the latitude of Lisbon and as he had suspected he found favourable winds and current to the voyage home. This is short of miraculous!! He was perfectly right and this route towards the Antilles and back became the accepted standard for centuries. Columbus travelled four times to the Antilles.

It is said that the Viking discovered what became known as America before Columbus, and that Phoenician navigators went to South America. Even if they did it is not of great importance as they never came back to tell other people enabling them to follow. We know how Columbus' discovery inflamed the whole world. Columbus discovered an enormous continent not only for Europeans, but also for Moslems, Chinese, and Indians.

What followed was simply astonishing.