

Letter from Christopher Columbus

Christopher Columbus



OVERVIEW

After sailing from Spain with his little fleet of three ships, Christopher Columbus arrived in the Bahamas in October 1492. Thinking he had found "the Indies," he called the inhabitants there "Indians." He visited several of the Caribbean islands, set up trading posts, and sailed for home. When Columbus stopped in Lisbon in March 1493, he wrote to one of his patrons, Lord Raphael Sanchez, describing what he had seen.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- How does Columbus describe the Native Americans he encounters?
 - Although Columbus forbids trading with the native people, at the end of this passage he explains that he has acquired cotton, gold, and other goods. How do you think he procured these goods?
-

Knowing that it will afford you pleasure to learn that I have brought my Undertaking to a successful termination, I have decided upon writing you this letter to acquaint you with all the events which have occurred in my voyage, and the discoveries which have resulted from it. Thirty-three days after my departure from [Gomera] I reached the Indian Sea, where I discovered many islands, thickly peopled, of which I took possession without resistance in the name of our most illustrious monarch, by public proclamation and with unfurled banners. To the first of these islands, which is called by the Indians Guanahani, I gave the name of the blessed Savior (San Salvador), relying upon whose protection I had reached this as well as the other islands; to each of these I also gave a name, ordering that one should be called Santa Maria de la Concepcion, another Fernandina, the third Isabella, the fourth Juana [Cuba], and so with all the rest. . . .

As soon as we arrived at that, which as I have said was named Juana, I proceeded along its coast a short distance westward and found it to be so large and apparently without termination that I could not suppose it to be an island, but the continental province of Cathay. Seeing, however, no towns or populous places on the seacoast, but only a few detached houses and cottages, with whose inhabitants I was unable to communicate because they fled as soon as they saw us, I went further on, thinking that in my progress I should certainly find some city or village.

. . . In the meantime I had learned from some Indians whom I had seized that that country was certainly an island, and therefore I sailed toward the east, coasting to the distance of 322 miles, which brought us to the extremity of it; from this point I saw lying eastward another island, 54 miles distant from

Juana, to which I gave the name of Española [Hispaniola]. I went thither and steered my course eastward as I had done at Juana, even to the distance of 564 miles along the north coast. . . .

In that island also, which I have before said we named Española, there are mountains of very great size and beauty, vast plains, groves, and very fruitful fields, admirably adapted for tillage, pasture, and habitation. The convenience and excellence of the harbors in this island and the abundance of the rivers, so indispensable to the health of man, surpass anything that would be believed by one who had not seen it. The trees, herbage, and fruits of Española are very different from those of Juana, and, moreover, it abounds in various kinds of spices, gold, and other metals.

None of the inhabitants . . . are possessed of any iron, neither have they weapons, being unacquainted with and indeed incompetent to use them, not from any deformity of body (for they are well formed) but because they are timid and full of fear. . . . This timidity did not arise from any loss or injury that they had received from us; for, on the contrary, I gave to all I approached whatever articles I had about me, such as cloth and many other things, taking nothing of theirs in return; but they are naturally timid and fearful.

As soon, however, as they see that they are safe and have laid aside all fear, they are very simple and honest and exceedingly liberal with all they have; none of them refusing anything he may possess when he is asked for it, but, on the contrary, inviting us to ask them. They exhibit great love toward all others in preference to themselves. They also give objects of great value for trifles, and content themselves with very little or nothing in return. I, however, forbade that these trifles and articles of no value (such as pieces of dishes, plates, and glass, keys, and leather straps) should be given to them, although if they could obtain them, they imagined themselves to be possessed of the most beautiful trinkets in the world. . . . Thus they bartered, like idiots, cotton and gold for fragments of bows, glasses, bottles, and jars, which I forbade as being unjust, and myself gave them many beautiful and acceptable articles which I had brought with me, taking nothing from them in return. I did this in order that I might the more easily conciliate them, that they might be led to become Christians and be inclined to entertain a regard for the King and Queen, our Princes, and all Spaniards, and that I might induce them to take an interest in seeking out and collecting and delivering to us such things as they possessed in abundance, but which we greatly needed. . . .

. . . I said before that I went 322 miles in a direct line from west to east, along the coast of the island of Juana, judging by which voyage, and the length of the passage, I can assert that it is larger than England and Scotland united; for independent of the said 322 miles there are in the western part of the island two provinces which I did not visit; one of these is called by the Indians Anam, and its inhabitants are born with tails. . . .

But the extent of Española is greater than all Spain from Catalonia to Fontarabia, which is easily proved, because one of its four sides which I myself

coasted in a direct line, from west to east, measures 540 miles. This island is to be regarded with special interest and not to be slighted; for although as I have said I took possession of all these islands in the name of our invincible King, and the government of them is unreservedly committed to His Said Majesty, yet there was one large town in Española of which especially I took possession, situated in a remarkably favorable spot and in every way convenient for the purposes of gain and commerce. To this town I gave the name of Navidad del Señor, and ordered a fortress to be built there, which must by this time be completed, in which I left as many men as I thought necessary, with all sorts of arms and enough provisions for more than a year. . . .

As far as I have learned, every man throughout these islands is united to but one wife, with the exception of the kings and princes, who are allowed to have twenty. The women seem to work more than the men. I could not clearly understand whether the people possess any private property, for I observed that one man had the charge of distributing various things to the rest, but especially meat and provisions and the like. I did not find, as some of us had expected, any cannibals among them, but, on the contrary, men of great deference and kindness. Neither are they black, like the Ethiopians; their hair is smooth and straight, for they do not dwell where the rays of the sun strike most vividly and the sun has intense power there, the distance from the equinoctial line being, it appears, but six-and-twenty degrees. On the tops of the mountains the cold is very great, but the effect of this upon the Indians is lessened by their being accustomed to the climate and by their frequently indulging in the use of very hot meats and drinks. . . .

Finally, to compress into few words the entire summary of my voyage and speedy return and of the advantages derivable therefrom, I promise, that with a little assistance afforded me by our most invincible sovereigns, I will procure them as much gold as they need, as great a quantity of spices, of cotton, and of mastic (which is only found in Chios), and as many men for the service of the navy as Their Majesties may require. I promise also rhubarb and other sorts of drugs, which I am persuaded the men whom I have left in the aforesaid fortress have found already and will continue to find; for I myself have tarried nowhere longer than I was compelled to do by the winds, except in the city of Navidad, while I provided for the building of the fortress and took the necessary precautions for the perfect security of the men I left there. . . .

Therefore, let the King and Queen, our Princes, and their most happy kingdoms, and all the other provinces of Christendom render thanks to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has granted us so great a victory and such prosperity. Let processions be made and sacred feasts be held and the temples be adorned with festive boughs. Let Christ rejoice on earth, as He rejoices in heaven in the prospect of the salvation of the souls of so many nations hitherto lost. Let us also rejoice, as well on account of the exaltation of our faith as on account of the increase of our temporal prosperity, of which not only Spain but all Christendom will be partakers.