



# European Exploration: *Voyages of Discovery*

After untold millennia of settlement by Native Americans, California was visited by a series of European explorers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The explorers sailed along the California coast and occasionally landed to take on water or make repairs. The records of their voyages contain fascinating glimpses of the land and people of early California.

## Exploration Motives: Headin' West and North



No one knows for certain when the first Europeans reached the Americas, but certainly the most famous voyage of exploration was that of Christopher Columbus in the epoch-making year of 1492. Columbus sailed westward from Europe in search of a sea route to Asia, seeking access to the magnificent wealth of the Indies.

The landfall of Columbus in the islands of the Caribbean stirred great excitement throughout Europe. Subsequent voyages explored along the coasts of North and South America. At first the Europeans viewed the Americas as obstacles, masses of land that blocked their way to the Indies. But soon they discovered that the

Americas themselves contained riches of extraordinary value.



It was the search for wealth that first brought Europeans toward California. Some came looking for a sea route--called the Strait of Anián--through the Americas to Asia. Others came in pursuit of the legendary lands shrouded in the northern mysteries. A Spanish novel described one such land, very near the Terrestrial Paradise, that was home to passionate black women and wild animals in harnesses of gold. This fabled land was called the Island of California.

### The Strait of Anián

Ever since the days of Marco Polo, Europeans were fascinated with the products that came from Asia--porcelain, silk, jewels, and spices of cloves, cinnamon, and pepper. Columbus's famous voyage in 1492 was in search of a western sea route from Europe to Asia.

For more than two centuries, Europeans searched in vain for a water route to Asia through North America. Spaniards called this long-rumored route the Strait of Anián. British explorers called it the Northwest Passage. The only such passage, in fact, is through the ice-choked waters around the islands of North America above the Arctic Circle.

Several of the early European explorers to sail along the California coast came looking for the Strait of Anián. Some maps indicated where this mythical strait was hoped to be.

## The Island of California

Early in the sixteenth century, Spanish writer Garcé Rodríguez Ordóñez de Montalvo published a book called *Las Sergas de Esplandián* (The Exploits of Esplandián). One of the characters in this fantasy was Calafía, the queen of California, "more beautiful than all the rest."

Montalvo described this mythical California as an island inhabited solely by black women who lived "in the manner of Amazons."

Historians assume that Montalvo's novel was known to the Spanish explorers who first sailed along the coast of the Baja California peninsula in the early 1500s. Apparently the explorers named the peninsula "California" after the mythical island in the novel. Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of the Aztec empire, reported in 1524 that he expected to find an island of Amazons along the northwest coast of Mexico.

Montalvo's novel includes these words: "Know ye that on the right hand of the Indies there is an island called California, very near the Terrestrial Paradise and inhabited by black women without a single man among them and living in the manner of Amazons. They are robust of body, strong and passionate in heart, and of great valor. Their island is one of the most rugged in the world with bold rocks and crags. Their arms are all of gold, as is the harnesses of the wild beasts which, after taming, they ride. In all the island there is no other metal."

## First Contacts in Baja



The first Europeans to approach California came from the south. Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century sailed northward from the ports of Acapulco and Navidad along the west coast of what is today Mexico. They came in search of fabled riches and the mythical Strait of Anián. Among the most important of these early explorers were Hernán Cortés, Fortún Jiménez, and Francisco de Ulloa. They sailed along the coast of Baja (or Lower) California.

Hernán Cortés, a Spanish adventurer and conquistador, was chiefly responsible for the European discovery of the lower part of what the Spanish ultimately called "the Californias." In 1519 Cortés and about 500 Spanish soldiers arrived in Mexico. After defeating the Aztecs in 1521, he declared the conquered lands to be a colony of Spain. Between the years 1527 and 1539 Cortés sponsored many expeditions into the Pacific. Several of the expeditions were sent to search for the Strait of Anián and to discover new lands to conquer. Other expeditions were sent westward to establish Spanish trade with the Philippine Islands.

In 1533 Cortés sent an expedition northward along the west coast of Mexico. The expedition was under the command of Captain Diego de Becerra. During the course of the expedition, the pilot Fortún Jiménez led a mutiny and killed Becerra. Jiménez and the mutineers continued the voyage and landed at the Bay of La Paz on the Baja California peninsula. Shortly after landing, Jiménez and twenty of his crew were killed by the local Guaycura Indians. The two surviving members of the expedition then returned to Cortés with news of the disaster. They also reported that the waters along the peninsula contained rich beds of pearls. Although Jiménez's expedition ended in disaster, it was the first contact by Europeans with native California Indians.

## The European Discovery of Alta California

Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, at the request of the viceroy of New Spain, led an expedition in search of the Strait of Anián.



The viceroy instructed Cabrillo

to sail beyond the northern latitudes reached by Francisco de Ulloa. Cabrillo's expedition is important because it resulted in the European discovery of Alta California.

Cabrillo set sail from the port of Navidad on the west coast of New Spain on June 27, 1542. His two ships, the San Salvador and Victoria, were small and poorly made. His crew of 250 sailors and soldiers included two dozen Africans and Indians held in slavery.

For three months, the expedition slowly made its way northward. Their progress was slow because the currents along the coast flow from north to south and the prevailing winds also blow from the northwest. The expedition sailed into San Diego Bay on September 28, 1542. Cabrillo described the bay as "a closed and very good port." After dropping anchor, a small party of sailors went ashore. They were the first Europeans to visit what is today the state of California.

Sailing farther north, the expedition passed by San Pedro Bay near present-day Los Angeles and through the Santa Barbara Channel. By the middle of November, Cabrillo had reached the mouth of the Russian River. It was there that he decided to turn and head south.

Not much is known about the background or personal life of Cabrillo. No one knows for certain the place of his birth, his family lineage, or even his nationality. Most historians believe that Cabrillo was Portuguese, but others maintain that he was Spanish. We do know that at the time of his death in 1543, Cabrillo left an estate that was one of the richest in the Americas.

Cortés personally led an expedition northward from Acapulco to the peninsula of Baja California in 1535. On the shores of the Bay of La Paz, Cortés founded a base for further exploration. This colonial outpost was the first European settlement in "the Californias." The surrounding land proved to be hot, dry, and sterile; the only exploitable resources were pearls in the coastal waters. The outpost was abandoned in 1536.

Cortés sent a final voyage of exploration northward from the port of Acapulco in 1539. Commanded by Francisco de Ulloa, the expedition included three small vessels. They sailed northward along the west coast of Mexico to the head of the Gulf of California. Believing that the Baja California peninsula was an island, Ulloa searched in vain for a passage through to the open sea. The expedition then turned and sailed southward along the eastern coast of the peninsula and landed at the Bay of La Paz to take on supplies of wood and water. With great difficulty,

Ulloa then rounded the tip of the Baja peninsula and sailed northward along the outer shore. His small ships encountered fierce winds and high seas. Eventually Ulloa reached about 20 degrees north latitude before turning and heading south. Ulloa's voyage extended European knowledge of the lower regions of "the Californias" and should have proved unequivocally that Baja California was a peninsula and not an island. Nevertheless, European cartographers for the next two hundred years continued to produce maps depicting the Island of California.

## **First European Images of the Kumeyaay, Tongva, and Chumash**



The voyage of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1542 produced the earliest European descriptions of the Native people of California.

When Cabrillo's ships sailed into San Diego Bay in late September, most of the local Kumeyaay people fled. Within a few days, however, several of the Kumeyaay came on board one of the ships. The journal of the expedition reports that the Indians, using signs, indicated that "people like us were going about in the interior [inland California], bearded, clothed, and armed like those on the ships." Historians speculate that the Kumeyaay may have been describing members of the Coronado expedition that had traveled through what is now New Mexico and Arizona two years earlier.

As Cabrillo passed along Catalina Island, "many Indians came out of the grass and bushes, shouting, dancing, and making signs to come ashore." Later these hospitable Tongva people "launched a fine canoe carrying eight or ten Indians, and came out to the ships."

The Cabrillo expedition passed through Chumash territory as it entered the Santa Barbara Channel. Cabrillo wrote in his journal: "We saw an Indian town on the land next to the sea, with large houses built much like those of New Spain. Many fine canoes each with twelve or thirteen Indians came to the ships." Cabrillo named the place Pueblo de las Canoas, the Town of the Canoes.

## **The Earliest European Artifact in California?**

Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo anchored his two tiny ships in a sheltered cove on an island along the southern California coast in late November 1542. It was there that Cabrillo decided to spend the winter of 1542-1543, waiting for better

weather before continuing his search for the elusive Strait of Anián.

Relations between the wintering Europeans and the local Indian people worsened as the weeks dragged by. One of the sailors reported that "the Indians there never stopped fighting us." Following an Indian attack on a group of sailors, Cabrillo went ashore and was injured as he fell on a rocky ledge. The journal of the expedition reports: "On January 3, 1543, Juan Rodríguez, captain of these ships, departed this life from a fall...in which he broke an arm near the shoulder." Cabrillo's sailors buried their captain's body on the island.

Historians are uncertain where these events took place. Some believe that Cabrillo died and was buried on San Miguel Island in the Santa Barbara Channel. Others think his burial place is much farther south on Santa Catalina Island.

In the spring of 1901 an archaeologist discovered a stone on Santa Rosa Island, an island just to the south of San Miguel. The stone was placed in the anthropology museum at the University of California, Berkeley. Years later an anthropologist concluded that the markings on the stone said "JRC" and that the stone once marked the grave of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo. If that interpretation is correct, this carved stone is the earliest European artifact in California.

## **Bartolomé Ferrelo**



Following the death of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1543, the pilot of the expedition assumed leadership. The journal of the expedition tells us that as Cabrillo lay dying, he "left as captain the chief pilot, Bartolomé Ferrelo." Cabrillo instructed Ferrelo "not to abandon the exploration of as much as possible of all that coast."

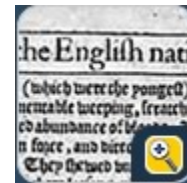
Ferrelo continued the fruitless search for the Strait of Anián. The expedition's two small ships left their winter anchorage in February 1543 and headed north. Historians are not sure how far they reached, but perhaps they got as far north as what is now Oregon. Somewhere along the way, the expedition was caught in a terrible storm. Both ships were damaged and several sailors lost their lives. Ferrelo decided to end the search. He arrived back in Navidad on April 14, 1543, nearly nine months after leaving.

## **Sir Francis Drake**



The English privateer Francis Drake sailed from England in December 1577, commissioned by Queen Elizabeth I to raid Spanish shipping and settlements in the Americas. Another incidental purpose of the voyage was to search for the Northwest Passage, known to the Spanish as the Strait of Anián.

For a year and a half, Drake had a field day loading some thirty tons of Spanish gold and silver aboard his ship the Golden Hind. But Drake's greed nearly did him in. By the time he reached the California coast in June 1579, his ship was bursting at the seams with its ill-gotten Spanish booty. Drake was forced to put in to shore and make emergency repairs.



## Drake's Encounter with the Coast Miwok



The first recorded encounter between English-speaking people and the Indians of California occurred during the visit of Francis Drake in 1579. Accounts of Drake's visit contain detailed descriptions of the houses, feathered baskets, ceremonies and language of the local Indians. Based on these accounts, anthropologists have identified them as Coast Miwok, a people whose homeland included the Point Reyes Peninsula in present-day Marin County.

The English visitors misinterpreted the actions of the Coast Miwok. The English mistakenly believed that the Miwok were turning over sovereignty to their country by placing a feathered crown on Drake's head. The Miwok also wailed and scratched their cheeks. The English misinterpreted this response as an act of worship and concluded that the Indians believed them to be gods. We now know that that these were the mourning customs of the Coast Miwok. Most likely the Indians regarded the English visitors as relatives who had returned from the dead.

## Drake's Landing

The exact location of Francis Drake's landing spot on the California coast remains a mystery. Accounts of the voyage say only that on June 17, 1579, the Golden Hind entered "a faire and good Baye." Drake and his crew remained for

thirty-six days, repairing their ship, building a small fortification, exploring the surrounding territory, interacting with the local Indians, and erecting a brass plate which claimed for England's Queen Elizabeth "this kingdome...to be knowne unto all men as Nova Albion."

Some scholars believe that Drake landed on the west shore of Bolinas Lagoon in Marin County. Archaeologists in 1973 unearthed there the remains of what they believed was Drake's long-lost fort. Other scholars maintain that Drake sailed into San Francisco Bay. They believe that Drake anchored and careened the Golden Hind in a cove at Point San Quentin near where Drake's plate of brass was found in 1936. Most scholars, however, agree that the weight of documentary and archaeological evidence points to Drake's Estero, an arm of Drake's Bay on the Point Reyes Peninsula. Members of the Drake's Navigators Guild discovered there in 1952 what they believed was Drake's encampment site.

A summary of the scholarly controversy over Drake's landing place was published in the California Historical Quarterly (Summer 1974).

## Manila Galleons



The Spanish empire stretched around the world in the sixteenth century, encompassing not only lands in the Americas but also in Asia. Manila, the capital of the Philippine Islands, became a bustling Spanish trading center for the riches of the Indies.

A regular trade flourished between Manila and the city of Acapulco on the west coast of Mexico. Manila galleons, heavy sailing ships with many decks for cargo, lumbered across the Pacific each year. The galleons were filled with Asian silks, jewels, spices, and fine china. They returned to Manila carrying cargoes of gold and silver from the mines of New Spain.

The eastbound voyage from Manila usually took six months or more. During this long and difficult voyage, the crews suffered horribly from starvation, thirst, and scurvy. They also faced the danger of raids by English privateers like Francis Drake. What was needed was a west coast port, perhaps in California, where the galleons could get fresh supplies and an escort vessel.

The captain of the Manila galleon in 1595 was Sebastián Rodríguez Cermeño, charged by the viceroy of New Spain to explore the California coast for a safe harbor. After sailing from Manila across the Pacific, Cermeño anchored his ship



the San Agustín at Drake's Bay on the Point Reyes Peninsula. There he encountered the Coast Miwok Indians and recorded his impressions in considerable detail. Soon a powerful storm blew in from the southeast, destroying Cermeño's ship. Archaeological evidence of the San Agustín has been discovered at Drake's Bay.

In 1602 Sebastián Vizcaíno led an expedition along the California coast, continuing the search for a harbor for the Manila galleons.

## **Sebastián Rodríguez Cermeño**

Cermeño was a Portuguese merchant-adventurer, known as a dependable and experienced sailor. He sailed out of Manila aboard the San Agustín on July 5, 1595, his ship filled with crates of china and other valuable cargo. Cermeño reached the California coast in early November and anchored in Drake's Bay. On November 30, powerful winds from the southeast drove the San Agustín aground and pounded it to pieces in a few hours. Soon the beach was littered with cargo, provisions, and shattered timbers.

To the consternation of his crew, Cermeño insisted on continuing his exploration of the coast in a small open boat. The local Coast Miwok people outfitted the sailors with a supply of acorns. Thus the expedition continued. Cermeño described accurately many points along the California coast before returning to the port of Navidad in late January 1596.

## **Cermeño's Encounter with the Coast Miwok**

In the Archives of Seville are several records of the voyage of Sebastián Rodríguez Cermeño to California in 1595. Cermeño's own account was translated by historian Henry R. Wagner and published in the California Historical Society Quarterly, 3:12-15 (April 1924).

The following portion contains Cermeño's description of his encounter with the Coast Miwok people at Drake's Bay on the Point Reyes Peninsula in Marin County:

" [The Indians here] are well set up and robust with long hair, and go entirely naked, only the women wearing skirts of grass and deerskins.... Having anchored in this bay on the 6th, shortly an Indian, one of those living on the beach, came out in a small boat made of grass which looks like the bulrushes of the lake of Mexico. The Indian was seated in the middle of this, and he had in his hand an oar with two blades with which he rowed with great swiftness. He came alongside the ship, where he remained a good while, talking his language without anyone understanding what he was saying. Being addressed with kind words, he came closer to the ship, and there we gave him things such as pieces of silk and

cotton and other trifles which the ship carried, and with which he returned to shore very contented. The next day, the 7th, four other Indians came out to the ship in the same kind of boats. They came aboard and did the same as the first one."

## Sebastián Vizcaíno



Sebastián Vizcaíno led the last in a long series of Spanish expeditions to explore the California coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His specific mission was to find a safe harbor for the Manila galleons. If Vizcaíno succeeded, he was promised the future command of a galleon.

Vizcaíno's voyage of 1602 set off from Acapulco and headed north. He explored the coast of California, renaming many places that had been described by earlier Spanish explorers. On December 16 he entered a bay that he renamed for the viceroy of New Spain, the Count of Monterey. The bay had been visited seven years earlier--and described more accurately--by Sebastián Rodríguez Cermeño. Vizcaíno reported that the bay was a safe harbor "sheltered from all winds," a claim that was fraudulent. Monterey Bay, in fact, is open the sea and includes no proper harbor.

After nearly a year, Vizcaíno returned to Acapulco. The viceroy, pleased that a fine new port would bear his name, awarded Vizcaíno the command of the next Manila galleon. Unfortunately for Vizcaíno, a new viceroy soon arrived in New Spain. The new viceroy doubted Vizcaíno's veracity and revoked the award of the galleon.

## Vizcaíno's Account of the Ohlone

Sebastián Vizcaíno wrote a letter to the King of Spain on May 23, 1602, reporting on his voyage of exploration along the California coast. In the following excerpt, Vizcaíno describes the Ohlone Indians whom he encountered around the shores of Monterey Bay:

" [This region] is thickly settled with people whom I found to be of gentle disposition, peaceable and docile, and who can be brought readily within the fold of the holy gospel and into subjection to the crown of Your Majesty. Their food consists of seeds which they have in abundance and variety and of the flesh of game, such as deer which are larger than cows, and bear.... The Indians are of

good stature and fair complexion, the women being somewhat less in size than the men and of pleasing countenance. The clothing of the people of the coast consists of the skins of the sea-wolves abounding there, which they tan and dress better than is done in Castile; they possess also, in great quantity, flax like that of Castile, hemp and cotton, from which they make fishing-lines and nets for rabbits and hares. They have vessels of pine-wood very well made, in which they go to sea with fourteen paddle-men on each side, with great dexterity--even in very stormy weather...."