A JOURNEY ACROSS AMERICA: CALIFORNIA

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Explorers and Conquistadors

You have probably heard of Christopher Columbus—how in the year 1492 he and his crew sailed across the sea in three small ships to discover a new world. As you probably know, Columbus, though a great explorer, had made a big mistake. He thought he had landed in the “Indies”—those lands in East Asia where he hoped to find shimmering cities, exotic spices, and gold—and he never learned that he had been wrong. To his dying day, Columbus did not know that the Indies were in fact much farther away than he thought they were, and that the lands he had discovered were part of an entirely new world.

Other brave explorers followed Columbus to the lands that became known as America. King Fernando and Queen Isabel of Spain, who had paid for Columbus’ journeys over the sea, took an interest in America. Columbus had discovered some gold there, and Queen Isabel was eager for the “Indians” in those new lands to learn about Christ and the Catholic Church. So Isabel and Fernando sent other explorers and missionaries to the lands Columbus had found.

Different Spellings, Same Name

History can be confusing, sometimes because in different history texts you will find the same person called by what seem different names. For instance, Christopher Columbus is sometimes called Cristóbal Colón. Queen Isabel is sometimes Queen Isabella or Queen Ysabel. King Fernando is often called Ferdinand. Why is this?

The reason is that different languages will change the spelling of names to make them more familiar to those who speak those languages. Isabella, for instance, is the English version of the Spanish name Isabel (or Ysabel). Ferdinand is the English and German version of Fernando. Spanish speakers call Columbus Cristóbal Colón, which in Italian is Cristoforo Colombo. In this book we will mostly give names with the spellings in the languages the people who had those names spoke.
It was the Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés who made one of the greatest discoveries in America—a great, gold-rich city named Tenochtitlán. This city was the capital of the mighty Aztec empire of Mexico. After long and bloody battles, Cortés conquered Tenochtitlán and brought Mexico and all its riches under the power of the king of Spain.

It is this conquest of Mexico that begins the story we will now tell—the story of California.

The Quest to Find Cities of Gold

Cortés’ conquest of Mexico in 1521 inspired other Spanish conquistadors to search for their own cities of gold in America. Cortés himself itched for more rich conquests and began to plan new explorations. He thought that if he sailed up the western coast of Mexico, he could perhaps find a way to reach India from America. In 1532 and 1533, Cortés sent out ships to search for India.

The ships Cortés sent out in 1532 did not return. The second set of ships he sent in 1533 did not discover a route to India, but they did sail into a bay...
on the coast of what the explorers thought was a very large island. The land around the bay was rocky and barren, and no one could see any signs of a great kingdom there, or any signs of gold. However, the sailors did find pearls.

The promise of pearls was enough to convince Cortés to go himself to this newly discovered “island.” In 1535, he set sail with a group of settlers and two Franciscan priests. After a long and hard voyage, they landed at the same bay, which Cortés named Santa Cruz (“Holy Cross”). Through many hardships, Cortés worked to establish a settlement at Santa Cruz, and the Franciscans preached about Christ to the native people of the new land. Yet, Cortés himself did not remain long at Santa Cruz. He returned to Mexico and left his comrade, Francisco de Ulloa, in charge of the new colony.

Santa Cruz was the first Spanish settlement in the land that would come to be known as California. But the colony did not last long. The settlers could not farm the desert land. The natives were unfriendly, and it took a long time to sail from Mexico to Santa Cruz. The voyage, too, was filled with many dangers. In 1537, Ulloa and the colonists abandoned Santa Cruz and returned to Mexico.

The Land of the Warrior Queen

When many of us hear the name, “California,” we think of the modern state that bears that name. Originally, however, “California” was the land that today is called Baja California, which is a state in Mexico. Baja in Spanish means “lower,” so Baja California is “Lower California.” Our modern state was first called Alta California (“Upper California”) or California del Norte.
A JOURNEY ACROSS AMERICA: California

("California of the North") or *Nueva* California ("New California"). Baja California was often called "Old California."

It seems Cortés did not give the name "California" to the lands around Santa Cruz. For him and for the other Spanish conquistadors, California was only a land of legend that they had read about in a story. It was an island ruled by a beautiful, dark-skinned, and tall woman named Calafia. She was a warrior queen, and the people she ruled were all women and mighty warriors.

According to the story, Calafia lived on an island near the "terrestrial paradise"—the Garden of Eden. This island was called California. It was a wonderful place. It had much gold and was filled with griffins—strange animal creatures that were said to be part lion and part eagle. The story tells how Calafia fought with the Muslim Turks against the Christian city of Constantinople. The woman warriors of California and their griffins did much damage to the Christians; but in the end, the Turks and the Californians were conquered, and Calafia herself became a Christian.

The lands of America were very marvelous to the Spanish who settled there, and they expected to find strange countries like Calafia’s California somewhere in the New World. After all, the Spanish had thought the cities of the Aztecs very strange indeed—and very wonderful. So it was that when a Franciscan priest named Fray Marcos de Niza told of seven cities filled with gold he had seen in the far north, people easily believed him. These cities were called the "Seven Cities of Cibola."

Cortés himself believed the tale of the Seven Cities of Cibola. In 1539, he sent a sailing expedition up the western coast of Mexico to see if there was some way to reach the seven cities by sea. With three ships, Ulloa sailed to Santa Cruz and from there up the eastern coast of Baja California. Baja California is a very long peninsula. A long finger of sea (now called the Gulf of California) separates Baja California from the rest of Mexico. It is not strange that Ulloa and Cortés may have thought the peninsula was an island, for peninsulas are “almost islands.” It is not strange, either, that Ulloa might have named this long island “California” after the story of Calafia. After all, he may have thought he had found that legendary land.

But it was Ulloa who discovered that Baja California is not an island. He sailed far enough up the gulf to see the place where the peninsula joins the mainland. He did not find any woman warriors, or signs of gold, or griffins. We do not know if Ulloa was the one who named this land, but ever after, it was called California. And though Ulloa found that Baja California was a peninsula, for very many decades mapmakers continued to draw this land of mystery as an island.

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**Frayer**: a Spanish word meaning "brother" or "friar"—the title given to members of religious orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans

**Peninsula**: a piece of land that is surrounded by water on two sides. An island is surrounded by water on all sides.

**Mainland**: a continent like North America as opposed to islands that lie off the coast of the continent.

**Nueva**: noo-AY-vah

**Calafia**: cah-lah-FEE-ah

**Cibola**: see-BOH-lah
Chapter 1  The Discovery of California

Early Spanish voyages

Spanish voyage routes
- Manila galleons
- Cortex, 1535
- Ulloa, 1539
- Cabrillo, 1543
- Vuzcaino, 1602

Monterey Bay
Point Conception
Santa Catalina Island
Cape Mendocino
Guadalupe
La Paz (Santa Cruz)
Navidad
Acapulco
Monterey Bay
Point Conception
Santa Catalina Island
Cape Mendocino
Guadalupe
La Paz (Santa Cruz)
Navidad
Acapulco

0 500 miles
0 250 miles

Pacific
Ocean

Alta California

New Spain

Baja California

45°N

15°N

105°
Cabrillo Discovers
Another California

Passing from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean was very difficult for ships in the 16th and 17th centuries. Ships had to sail down the east coast of South America, pass around Cape Horn, and then sail north into the Pacific. This was a long and dangerous journey. It was often very hard to sail around Cape Horn because of high winds and heavy storms. It was not unusual for ships to be wrecked, sink, and never be seen again.

How to Number Centuries

We count time in different ways. We count from year to year (2010, 2011, 2012, etc.). We count by ten-year periods (1980 to 1990, 1990 to 2000, 2000 to 2010). These ten-year periods are called decades. We count by 100-year periods (1700 to 1800, 1800 to 1900, 1900 to 2000). These 100-year periods are called centuries.

Historians speak about centuries in different ways. For instance, the century from 1500 to 1600 is sometimes called the “fifteen-hundreds” (1500s) because all the years of the century count up from 1500. The same century, however, is also called the 16th century, because it ends with 1600. So, when we use the term 16th century, we are referring to the years between 1500 and 1600. When we speak of the fifth century, we are referring to the years between 400 and 500. We are now living in the 21st century, because we are living in the time between 2000 and 2100.

Because ocean journeys were so difficult, the kings of Spain hoped that someone would discover a water strait that cut across North America from the Atlantic to the Pacific. People were so sure that such a strait must exist that they gave it a name: the Straits of Anian. Many an adventurer set out to find the Straits of Anian only to return with no discovery—because, of course, it does not exist.

In 1542, the viceroy of New Spain (New Spain is what the Spanish called Mexico) sent a Portuguese captain with two ships to sail up the Pacific coast of Mexico to see if he could find the Straits of Anian. That captain, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, was told to search also for new sources of wealth.

Cabrillo set sail in June of 1542. His ships headed for Cortés’ Santa Cruz Bay and from there sailed round the tip of Baja California and up the Pacific coast. The coastline of the peninsula was mostly dry and barren and mountainous. As the Spaniards usually did, Cabrillo named places along the coast after saints and mysteries of the Catholic faith. The journey was long; it took the small fleet almost four months before it finally made its first, most important discovery.
It was in late September that Cabrillo and his crew came upon a great bay that was shaped like a long, bent finger pointing downwards. Because Cabrillo found this bay on the feast of San Miguel Arcángel (St. Michael the Archangel), he named it the Bahía (Bay) San Miguel. The bay was a great find, for many ships could anchor in it and be protected from the winds and dangerous waves of the ocean.

At San Miguel, Cabrillo and his men met natives who, he said, showed “signs of great fear.” Later, some of these natives shot arrows at and injured members of Cabrillo's crew who had gone ashore to fish. The next day, Cabrillo learned why the Indians were so fearful. Speaking with their hands, some Indians told him that far inland men like Cabrillo were killing Indians with crossbows, lances, and swords. Cabrillo said that the Indians at San Miguel were “comely and large. They go about covered with skins of animals.”

Cabrillo stayed in the bay he named San Miguel for about four days before he continued his voyage northward. He was now sailing along the southern coast of our state of California, and so became, probably, the first European to see it. It was autumn, and Cabrillo was so impressed by how warm the weather was that he said this land had “endless summers”—something many people say about southern California to this day. Sailing near a large island (probably Santa Catalina), Cabrillo anchored his ships in a harbor. Eight or ten Indians paddled out in a “good canoe” and traded with the white strangers.

After ten days of sailing from San Miguel Bay, Cabrillo met more California natives. They rowed out to his ships in long canoes made from planks of wood. Since the natives were friendly, Cabrillo dropped anchor and went ashore near a village he called Las Canoas (“The Canoes”), near where the city of Ventura is today. There Cabrillo declared that California belonged now to the king of Spain.

The Indians called Las Canoas Xucu, according to Cabrillo. The village was set, he said, “in a very good country, with fine plains and many groves and savannahs.” From Xucu, Cabrillo continued his voyage between the coast and three islands. In this channel, he traded for fish with Indians, who paddled out to his ships in canoes that could hold as many as 12 men. As he tried to sail around a cape, he was driven by storms to seek refuge on one of the islands. Cabrillo named this island San Miguel.

Cabrillo and his crew stayed on San Miguel for over a week, and then set sail again for the north. From the mainland, not far from San Miguel, an old Indian woman and many other Indians came out to the ships and spent two nights on board. The woman was the “ruler” of several Indian villages.
Cabrillo described the Indian villages this way: “Their houses are round and very well covered clear to the ground.” The Indian people, he said, “wear skins of many kinds of animals. They eat oak acorns and a seed the size of **maize**. It is white, and from it they make **tamales**; it is a good food.”

It was not until the feast of St. Martin (November 11) that the weather changed and a good wind blew Cabrillo’s ships north. In honor of St. Martin, Cabrillo named the mountains along this coast the **Sierra San Martín**. These mountains, he wrote, “reach to the sky, and the sea beats upon them. When sailing along near land, it seems as if the mountains would fall upon the ships. They are covered with snow to the summit.”

Six days later, Cabrillo’s fleet sailed around a point of land growing many pine trees, and into a broad harbor. Cabrillo did not go ashore at this harbor because the weather was too stormy. He tried to sail farther north but could not because of the hard weather. At last, he turned his ships to the south and arrived again at San Miguel Island. There Cabrillo died. His men changed the name of San Miguel to Juan Rodríguez Island, in honor of their dead captain. Today, we call this island San Miguel, like Cabrillo did.

After Cabrillo died, the new commander, **Bartolomé Ferrelo** explored the coast farther north, perhaps all the way to Oregon. But winter cold, violent storms, and a lack of food forced Ferrelo and his men to return to Mexico.
So ended the voyage of the Spaniards who first saw the coast and people of Alta California.

**A Pirate Comes to California**

Francis Drake was a privateer—that is, he was a pirate, though a special kind of pirate. Privateers were pirates who worked for governments rather than just themselves. Francis Drake served Queen Elizabeth I of England.

“Drake” is an old English word that means *dragon*—and Drake acted very much like a dragon. In 1577, he set forth in a ship called the *Golden Hind* and four other ships to plunder Spanish towns and ships along the coast of the Americas. In this pirating expedition, Drake not only stole a good deal of wealth from the Spanish, but he destroyed statues and holy pictures in Catholic churches and took their precious vessels of gold and silver used in Mass. Drake was not a Catholic. Like his queen, he was Protestant.

By the time he had reached the Pacific Ocean, Drake had lost three ships. With only the *Golden Hind* and another ship, Drake continued up the Pacific coast of South America and Mexico, plundering towns and seizing a treasure ship. At last, he anchored in a bay just to the north of where the city of San Francisco sits today. Landing on the shore of this bay, Drake named it New Albion—meaning, New England. He declared that the land belonged to Queen Elizabeth and England.

Drake stayed in this bay for a month. During that time, he and his men explored the lands surrounding the bay and came into contact with the native peoples living there. Then they set sail for the north. They crossed the Pacific and sailed into the Indian Ocean, rounded the *Cape of Good Hope*, and continued up the coast of Africa. In September 1580, Drake arrived back in England, where Queen Elizabeth awarded him by making him a knight. From then on, he was known as Sir Francis Drake.
On to Monterey

Pirate attacks on Spanish ships worried *Felipe* III, the king of Spain. Every year, a Spanish *galleon* sailed from Mexico, carrying treasure to the city of Manila in the far-off Philippines. On its return voyage, the ship (called the Manila Galleon) sailed south along the coast of Alta California on its way to the port of Acapulco in Mexico. King Felipe thought it was a good idea for Spain to have a settlement in Alta California to help protect the Manila Galleon from the dreaded pirates.

The king sent out two sailing expeditions to explore the coast of California and to make maps of it. Neither one of these expeditions was very successful. Then, in 1597, the king sent the Portuguese commander, *Sebastián Vizcaíno*, with a small fleet to establish a settlement. Vizcaíno landed at Cortés’ bay of Santa Cruz, which he renamed La Paz (“peace” in Spanish). Four Franciscan priests went with Vizcaíno and preached the Gospel to the Indians around La Paz. The Indians liked the Franciscans; but when some Spanish soldiers treated the Indians cruelly, they became violent. Because of the Indians’ unfriendliness, and because there was a lack of food at La Paz, Vizcaíno abandoned it.

When King Felipe heard what had happened at La Paz, he was angry with Vizcaíno. In a letter to Vizcaíno, the king said a captain should not allow his men to be cruel to the natives. He told Vizcaíno that the main reason for a

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**An Expedition Dedicated to Our Lady**

In the diary of his voyage, Vizcaíno describes the devotion of his men to the Virgin Mary: “As patroness and protector, [a statue of] Our Lady of Mount Carmel was carried. We took it on board the day of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, in procession, with all the sailors and soldiers.” Our Lady, says Vizcaíno, was given a “salute of artillery and musketry.” “This gave great pleasure to all the men on board the fleet and on the land,” he wrote.
settlement was to teach the Indians about Christ and to bring them into the Catholic Church.

Though he had been angry with Vizcaíno, King Felipe gave him a second chance. In May 1602, Vizcaíno set out from Mexico in three ships—the San Diego (Saint Didacus), the San Tomás (Saint Thomas), and the Tres Reyes (Three Kings). With Vizcaíno went three Carmelite priests and 200 sailors and soldiers. This time, Vizcaíno warned the soldiers that he would execute any man who was cruel to the Indians.

Up the Coast of Alta California

After about six months on the sea, Vizcaíno's small fleet passed into a large bay. Vizcaíno was very pleased with the bay; he thought it must be “the best to be found in all the South Sea” (as the Spanish called the Pacific Ocean). Not only did it give good protection for ships, but it had many trees, “fish of all kinds,” and “much game, such as rabbits, hares, deer, very large quail, royal ducks, thrushes, and many other birds.” On November 12, 1602, the day after landing in the bay, Vizcaíno went ashore with the priests and nearly all the men. The men built a hut, where Mass was said in honor of Saint Didacus (San Diego, in Spanish), whose feast day it was. In honor of the saint, Vizcaíno named the bay San Diego. Vizcaíno did not seem to know that this was the same bay that Cabrillo had called San Miguel.

Seven days after leaving San Diego, the fleet came upon a large island, which Vizcaíno named Santa Catalina after Saint Catherine of Alexandria. While the ships were still out at sea, “a multitude of Indians came out in canoes of cedar and pine” to meet the strange newcomers. Vizcaíno said each canoe had eight oars and carried about 14 Indians. Many Indians awaited the Spanish adventurers on the shores of the island.

The next day, Vizcaíno went ashore with one of the priests, who said Mass in a hut the sailors had built. How strange this ceremony must have seemed to the natives! “They marveled... at seeing the altar and the image of Our Jesus Christ crucified,” Vizcaíno writes. The natives were very friendly to the newcomers, giving them roasted sardines and fruit that Vizcaíno thought tasted like sweet potatoes.

Vizcaíno writes that the Indian women on Santa Catalina were pleasing to look at and modest. They and all the people wore seal skins for clothing. For food, they had acorns, and for blankets they used “some very large skins, apparently of bears, with heavy fur.” He was not so pleased with the men, however. He calls them “thieves, for anything they saw unguarded they took.”

Vizcaíno tells of an idol that he said the Indians worshiped. “It resembled a demon, having two horns, no head, a dog at its feet, and many children painted all around it.” The Indians warned Vizcaíno not to go near the idol,
but he ignored them. He approached it and made a sign of the cross and
“placed the name of Jesus” on its head. Vizcaíno told the Indians that the
name of Jesus is good but the idol came from the devil.

From Santa Catalina Island, Vizcaíno continued along up the coast. When
the ships neared the village of Las Canoas, four men and one old man in a
well-built canoe paddled out to the ships. Vizcaíno was impressed by the
old man’s ability to speak in sign language. He praised the well-constructed
canoe, saying a better one had not been built since Noah’s Ark.

Along the coast north of Point Concepción, the ships sailed beside high
mountains until they spotted a small bay and a river that flowed from high
hills. Trees grew on the banks of the river that Vizcaíno named Carmelo
(Carmel), in honor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. On December 16, 1602,

he sailed around a point covered with pine trees and into a great bay that he
called “the best port in the world.” The bay, he said, could shelter ships from
the winds. Along its banks grew many pines and oak trees. Abundant, fresh
water flowed near the shore. The soil was **fertile**, and the men found much
wild game, such as bears, rabbits, deer, quail, partridges, and ducks. Vizcaíno
wrote that “numberless Indians” lived near the bay. “They appeared to be a
gentle and peaceable people,” he said. Under a great oak tree that grew near
the shore, the Spaniards erected a hut. There, on December 17, one of the
Carmelite priests said Mass.

But this port that Vizcaíno named Monterey (after the Count of
Monterrey, who was the Spanish viceroy) could be a cold place. When the
sun rose on New Year’s Day, “the mountains were covered with snow… and
the hole from which we were taking water was frozen with more than a palm of thickness.” Cold and storms chased Vizcaíno northward up the coast until he reached a great cape, covered with pine trees (probably Cape Mendocino). For five more days, the ship continued to sail north, but the men were sick—too sick to continue. Many of them had died. So, at last, Vizcaíno turned his ship southward. A year later, he was back in Mexico.

Viceroy Monterrey was very happy with the reports Vizcaíno had brought back about Alta California. Vizcaíno wanted to start out on a new expedition to the Bay of Monterey; he wanted to establish a settlement there. He asked the King of Spain for permission to do so. But a new viceroy, a man named Juan de Mendoza, had decided that the Manila Galleon really did not need a port in Alta California. The king agreed, and Vizcaíno’s expedition was scrapped.

For another 166 years, Spain sent no new expeditions to Alta California.

Chapter 1 Review

Summary

- Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of Tenochtitlán and Mexico, sent out expeditions to find a sea route from America to the Indies. One of these expeditions discovered Baja California. In 1535, Cortés himself sailed to Baja California on the eastern coast of which he established the first Spanish Californian settlement, Santa Cruz. However, the settlement was abandoned about two years later.

- No one knows who first named the Baja California peninsula “California.” The name comes from the medieval story of Calafia, a queen of warrior women who was said to live on an island near the “terrestrial paradise”—the Garden of Eden. This island was called California.

- Francisco de Ulloa, whom Cortés in 1539 sent on an expedition to discover the Seven Cities of Cibola, discovered that Baja California is not an island but a peninsula.

- In 1542, the viceroy of New Spain sent the Portuguese captain, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, on an expedition to see if he could find the Straits of Anian and new sources of wealth for Spain. Cabrillo sailed up the western coast of Baja California and in September 1542 he entered what today is called the bay of San Diego. From this bay, Cabrillo continued up the coast of what became known as Alta California. Cabrillo’s voyage continued northward, passing Monterey Bay and the Golden Gate to a point north of Bodega Bay. After Cabrillo’s death, Bartolomé Ferrelo resumed the exploration, reaching perhaps as far north as Oregon before turning back toward Mexico.

- Sir Francis Drake, a privateer in the service of Queen Elizabeth of England, set forth on a pirating expedition against Spain in 1577. Landing at a bay just north of San Francisco Bay, he named it New Albion and claimed the lands surrounding it for Queen Elizabeth.

- Hoping to establish a settlement in Alta California, in 1602, King Felipe III sent Sebastián Vizcaíno on an expedition up the coast of California. Vizcaíno landed first at San Diego, then continued up the coast, discovering Monterey Bay. Vizcaíno’s expedition continued north, passing Point Mendocino. Following Vizcaíno’s return to Mexico, the viceroy decided that a California settlement was not needed at the time.

Chapter Checkpoint

1. What was the name of the first Spanish settlement in California, and what happened to it?
Chapter 1 Review (continued)

2. Why do we say that the year 1542 occurred in the 16th century?

3. Name two things Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo was supposed to seek on his journey up the Pacific coast of Mexico.

4. Describe the California natives that Cabrillo met on his journey. Name two details about their way of life.

5. Why was Francis Drake much like a “dragon”?

6. Why was King Felipe III angry with Sebastián Vizcaíno after his first voyage, and how was Vizcaíno’s second voyage different as a result?

7. What were the names of Vizcaíno’s three ships on his second trip from Mexico?

8. How many Indians lived on Santa Catalina, and what were they like?

9. Describe the benefits of the land near the port of Monterey.

Chapter Activities

1. The Spanish explorers and conquistadors gave new names to many areas and landforms in California. Make a list of five names mentioned in this chapter associated with a saint or mystery of the Catholic faith. Find out more about each of these saints or mysteries. How do the names New Albion, Monterey, and California reflect other things the explorers found important?

2. Do research to find out more about the way of life of the Native Americans who lived on Santa Catalina Island and in the Monterey area in the 16th century.