

SHOWDOWN: 15TH CENTURY MARINERS

by John Green (adapted)

So you've probably heard of Christopher Columbus who in 1492 sailed the ocean blue and discovered America, a place that had been previously discovered only by millions of people. Still, I'd argue that Columbus has a deserved reputation in history — but was he really the greatest sailor of the 15th Century? There was also Vasco da Gama, from scrappy little Portugal, who managed to introduce Europeans to a direct route to the Indian Ocean trade network, which had been the original goal of Columbus. As you may know, Indian Ocean trade was dominated by Muslim merchants, involved ports in Africa and the Middle East and India and Indonesia and China, and most importantly for da Gama and Columbus, it made a lot of people **super rich**. So who was the greatest mariner, the best sea-faring explorer of the 15th century?

VASCO DA GAMA

Representing Portuguese exploration, we have Vasco da Gama. Portugal has a lot of coastline and it had few resources, which meant it relied upon trade in order to grow. Also, the Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal) was the only place in Europe where Muslims could be found in large numbers in the 15th century, which meant the Christian crusading spirit was quite strong there in the form of the Reconquista. And chief among these would-be crusaders was Prince Henry the Navigator, who was actually not a navigator. He was, however, a patron (financial supporter), not only of sailors themselves, but of a special Portuguese school in which nautical (sailing) knowledge was collected and new maps were made, and all kinds of awesome stuff happened. And all that knowledge gave Portuguese sailors a huge competitive advantage when it came to exploration.



Henry commissioned (hired) sailors to search for two things. **FIRST**, a path to the Indian Ocean so they could get in on the lucrative (profitable) spice trade. And **SECOND**, to find the kingdom of Prester John, a mythical Christian King who was supposed to live in Africa somewhere, so that Henry could have Prester John's help in a crusade. Da Gama was the first of Henry's mariners to make it around the southern tip of Africa and into the Indian Ocean. In 1498, he landed at **Calicut**, a major trading post on India's west coast. And when he got there, merchants asked him what he was looking for. He answered with three words: **Gold and Christians**. Which basically sums up Portugal's motivations for exploration.

So, once the Portuguese breached the Indian Ocean, they didn't create, like, huge colonies, because there were already powerful empires in the region. Instead, they were able to capture and control a number of coastal cities, creating what historians call a "**trading post empire**." They could do this thanks to their well-armed ships, which captured cities by firing cannons into city walls like real-life Angry Birds. But since the Portuguese didn't have enough people or boats to run the Indian Ocean trade, they had to rely on extortion (forcing people to pay money). So, Portuguese merchant ships would capture other ships and force them to purchase a permit to trade called a *cartaz*. And without a *cartaz*, a local merchant couldn't trade in any of the towns that Portugal controlled. To local merchants, who'd traded throughout the Indian Ocean for years in relative freedom, the Portuguese were just glorified **pirates**, extracting value from trade without adding to its efficiency or volume. So, the *cartaz* strategy sort of worked for a while, but the Portuguese never really took control of Indian Ocean trade, but they were successful enough that their neighbors, Spain, became interested in finding their own route to the Indies, and that brings us to Columbus.



CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

First, let's dispel some myths:

1. Columbus and his crew knew the earth was round. He was just wrong about the earth's size. Columbus used Ptolemy's geography and a world map based on Muslim scholarship — and ended up overestimating the size of Asia and underestimating the size of the oceans.
2. Columbus never thought he'd made it to China. He called the people he encountered "Indians" because he thought that he'd made it to the East Indies, what we know as Indonesia.
3. Columbus was not a lucky idiot. He navigated completely unknown waters mainly using a technique known as "dead reckoning," in which you figure out your position based on three pieces of information: the direction you're going, your speed, and the time, which you figure out via hourglass. With only that technology to guide you, it's not actually that easy to hit a continent, let alone small Caribbean islands!



So, Columbus's first journey (he made four, the last three of which were pretty disastrous) was tiny, and he initially landed on a small Caribbean island he called San Salvador in search, like the Portuguese, of **Gold and Christians**. He was able to convince Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain to fund his expedition by **promising riches and conversions of the natives**, hopefully to sign them up for yet another crusade. And there's another old myth that Columbus tricked Ferdinand and Isabella into paying for his trip, but in fact they'd commissioned (hired) two different sets of experts to analyze his plans, both of which agreed he was crazy. But even so, Ferdinand and Isabella footed the bill, partly because they were full of Crusading spirit after expelling the Muslims from Spain, and partly because they were **desperate to get their hands on some of that pepper richness**. Columbus, of course, **failed at finding riches** — he returned with neither spices nor gold. He did create some Christians, but in terms of goal accomplishment, Columbus was much less successful than Vasco de Gama.

But within two generations of Columbus, Spain would become **fantastically wealthy**, and for a time they were the **leading power in Europe**. Columbus's voyages also had a huge, largely negative, impact on the people the Spanish encountered in the Americas. And excitingly, once Columbus connected the Americas to Europe, we can speak for the first time of a truly world history. Except for you, Australia. So who was the greatest mariner of the 15th century? Well, as usual, **it depends on your definition of greatness**. If you value goal accomplishment over ill-advised adventure, than Vasco da Gama is certainly the winner. But the reason we remember Columbus over Vasco da Gama is that Columbus's voyages had a lasting impact on the world, even if it wasn't necessarily a positive one.

