

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

By Richard Sorokin

Here's a mariner we celebrate each year. What did he really do and what did he know?

We know that Columbus knew that the earth was round and he wanted to prove it by sailing westward around the globe. Anyone standing on the shore, seeing ships disappear below the horizon knew the earth was a sphere. What sold the monarchs of Spain to invest in him was the possibility of a short cut to the Far East and the spice trade. Can you imagine your food without the spices we take for granted today. All they had was salt. For the monarchs this was a business venture.

Columbus was no fool. He must have been observing the coastal wind for a long time. What he found was that the winds from the Pacific to Spain most always blew from the west. Some how he also learned that down south, off Africa the winds mostly blew from the east. Columbus had discovered the trade winds.

Columbus set sail in 1492, with his three small square rig ships not to the west but to the south. His first target was the Canary Islands. It took two weeks. Here he loaded up his provisions and set sail due west. The trade winds pushed his ships across the ocean. The winds were so steady that the sailors began to worry. With the winds always at our backs how will we get home again? In a square rig vessel you go against the wind at great angles. It can take three or four times the time to cover the same distance. The sailors knew that they didn't have enough food or water for that kind of return trip. There was going to be a mutiny on board. Columbus promised to turn back in a few days if they still haven't sighted land.

Columbus's mistake here was that his estimate of the size of the Earth was really far off. It is much larger than he imagined. Not only did he not figure in the North and Southern Americas but he left out the giant expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Lucky for him and us the next day they saw some floating vegetation and continued on. They finally landed in or around San Salvador. He explored a few of the near by islands. He then sailed north, where he picked up the westerly trade winds and made it back home.

In all Columbus made four trips the West Indies. He always believed he had reached the Far East. How is this possible? There was no evidence of an eastern culture. He believed he was on the outer islands of the Far East why didn't sail further west on one of his three trips?

The other mystery with Columbus is that on every trip he left the Caribbean going north to get the western trades, he never saw or set foot upon the Northern or Southern Continents. It also should be noted that Columbus and his brothers who put in to slavery the natives of the islands and completely destroyed them. The natives were replaced by Africans. None of the original native survived the treatment of the Spanish.

Spain eventually did get a lot of gold from the area and became wealthy. Columbus ended his days in jail where he died. So was he a hero or what? He got a lot of the facts wrong but he did make the effort.