

from
**A LETTER TO THE TREASURER OF
SPAIN**
1493

----- *Christopher Columbus* -----

Christopher Columbus (1447–1506) was convinced he could discover the shortest, and thus the most profitable, trade route to Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic ocean. In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain agreed to finance his voyage to find out if he was right. Columbus wrote this letter to the king's treasurer, reporting his discoveries of several Caribbean islands.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : Analyzing motives

Does this letter offer historians insight into Columbus's reasons for embarking on his voyage? Be specific in your answer.

February 14, 1493

Because my undertakings have attained success, I know that it will be pleasing to you: these I have determined to relate, so that you may be made acquainted with everything done and discovered in this our voyage. On the thirty-third day after I departed from Cadiz, I came to the Indian sea, where I found many islands inhabited by men without number, of all which I took possession for our most fortunate king, with proclaiming heralds and flying standards, no one objecting.

To the first of these I gave the name of the blessed Saviour, on whose aid relying I had reached this as well as the other islands. But the Indians called it Guanahany. I also called each one of the others by a new name. For I ordered one island to be called Santa Maria of the Conception, another Fernandina, another Isabella, another Juana, and so on with the rest...

This island [Juana] is surrounded by many very safe and wide harbors, not excelled by any others that I have ever seen. Many great and salubrious rivers flow through it. There are also many very high mountains there. All these islands are very beautiful, and distinguished by various qualities; they are accessible, and full of a great variety of trees stretching up to the stars; the leaves of which I believe are never shed, for I saw them as green and flourishing as they are usually in Spain in the month of May; some of them were blossoming, some were bearing fruit, some were in other conditions; each one was thriving in its own way. The nightingale and various other birds without number were singing, in the month of November, when I was exploring them.

There are besides in the said island Juana seven or eight kinds of palm trees, which far excel ours in height and beauty, just as all the other trees, herbs, and

fruits do. There are also excellent pine trees, vast plains and meadows, a variety of birds, a variety of honey, and a variety of metals, excepting iron. In the one which was called Hispana, ...there are great and beautiful mountains, vast fields, groves, fertile plains, very suitable for planting and cultivating, and for the building of houses.

The convenience of the harbors in this island, and the remarkable number of rivers contributing to the healthfulness of man, exceed belief, unless one has seen them. The trees, pasturage, and fruits of this island differ greatly from those of Juana. This Hispana, moreover, abounds in different kinds of spices, in gold, and in metals....

All these people lack, as I said above, every kind of iron; they are also without weapons, which indeed are unknown....

They are of simple manners and trustworthy, and very liberal with everything they have, refusing no one who asks for anything they may possess, and even themselves inviting us to ask for things. They show greater love for all others than for themselves; they give valuable things for trifles, being satisfied even with a very small return, or with nothing; however, I forbade that things so small and of no value should be given to them, such as pieces of plate, dishes and glass, likewise keys and shoestraps; although if they were able to obtain these, it seemed to them like getting the most beautiful jewels in the world....

In all these islands there is no difference in the appearance of the people, nor in the manners and language, but all understand each other mutually; a fact that is very important for the end which I suppose to be earnestly desired by our most illustrious king, that is, their conversion to the holy religion of Christ, to which in truth, as far as I can perceive, they are very ready and favorably inclined....

In all these islands, as I have understood, each man is content with only one wife, except the princes or kings, who are permitted to have twenty. The women appear to work more than the men. I was not able to find out surely whether they have individual property, for I saw that one man had the duty of distributing to the others, especially refreshments, food, and things of that kind....

Truly great and wonderful is this, and not corresponding to our merits, but to the holy Christian religion, and to the piety and religion of our sovereigns, because what the human understanding could not attain, that the divine will has granted to human efforts. For God is wont to listen to his servants who love his precepts, even in impossibilities, as has happened to us on the present occasion, who have attained that which hitherto mortal men have never reached....

These things that have been done are thus briefly related. Farewell, Lisbon, the day before the ides of March.

—Christopher Columbus, admiral of the Ocean fleet

Source: Letter to Gabriel Sanchez from Christopher Columbus, 1493.
Reprinted in *A Treasury of The World's Greatest Letters*, edited by Lincoln Schuster (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), pp. 61–68.

Analysis Questions □

- 1) Do whom did Columbus write this letter? In what ways would the letter have been written differently if he were writing it to his friend? □
- 2) Why did Columbus write this letter? □
- 3) Does this letter offer insight into Columbus' reasons for embarking on his voyage? □
Give evidence from the reading to support your answer. □