

# 1493

## The Return Voyage

*The first armed conflict between natives and the Europeans \* The voyage back \* A storm in the Azores almost destroys the expedition \* The battered ships arrive in Portugal*

On January 6, after an absence of six-and-a-half weeks, the *Pinta* reappeared. (She had left the rest of the squadron in Cuban waters on November 21). Her captain, Martin Alonso Pinzón, claimed that it was never his intention to abandon the Admiral. Columbus pretended to believe him, but in his log he wrote that Pinzón had deserted the *Santa Maria* and the *Niña* "out of a spirit of

arrogance and greed." Probably because of this situation, Columbus decided to return to Spain as soon as possible.

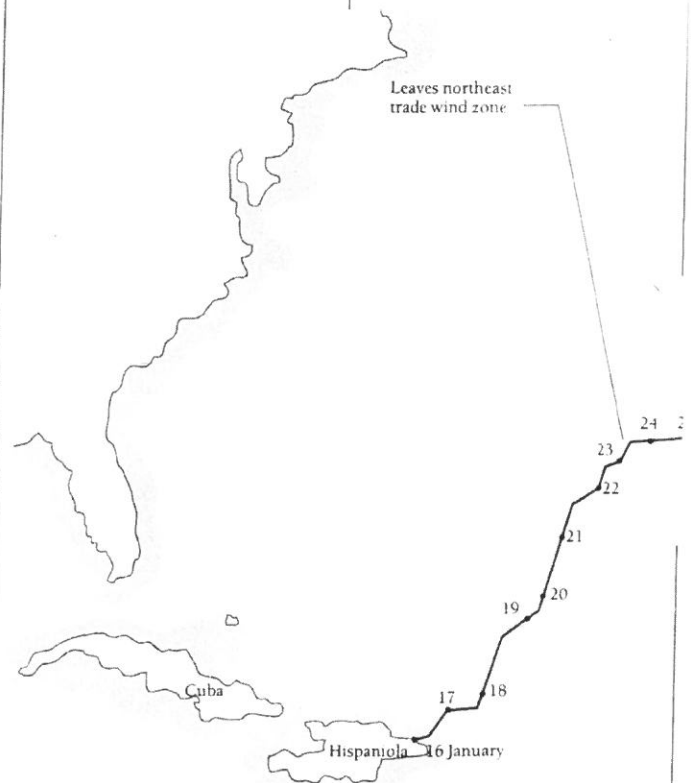
But before then, on January 13, a sinister drama took place in Samana Bay (Haiti). A native, his face painted black and his long hair enclosed in a kind of net of parrot feathers, had been seen on shore and brought aboard. Columbus, who had heard local stories of

feathers at the back of their heads." The Spaniards began to negotiate a trade, and had

the peoples of the two worlds had taken place; peace between them had lasted only a month. On being informed about what had happened, Columbus said that "on the one hand, he felt regret and on the other hand, not, because the Indians should be afraid of Christians."

On January 16, the return voyage began. He set a course of "Northeast by East" (about 56°), thinking to avoid the prevailing trade winds that had carried him to the New World. The nautical strategy was perfect. The route taken by Columbus on both legs of his first voyage remained the course followed by future generations of sailors until the Age of Sail came to a close in the 19th century.

On February 3, after observing the height of the North Star, the Admiral judged that they were on the same parallel as Cape St. Vincent in Portugal. He set an easterly course, probably with the intention of passing south of the Azores: as the



In this picture, four winds – Notus, Eurus, Africus and Aquilon – stir up the sea and torment the ships. Bad weather at the very end of his voyage nearly spelled disaster for Columbus, but his two little caravels, although small and frail by modern standards, were strong enough to survive two fearful storms.

cannibalism, was convinced that he was "one of those Caribs who eat people." Later, seven sailors went ashore with the "Carib" and met 50 of his fellow tribesmen, all armed with bows and arrows and "wearing tufts of parrot

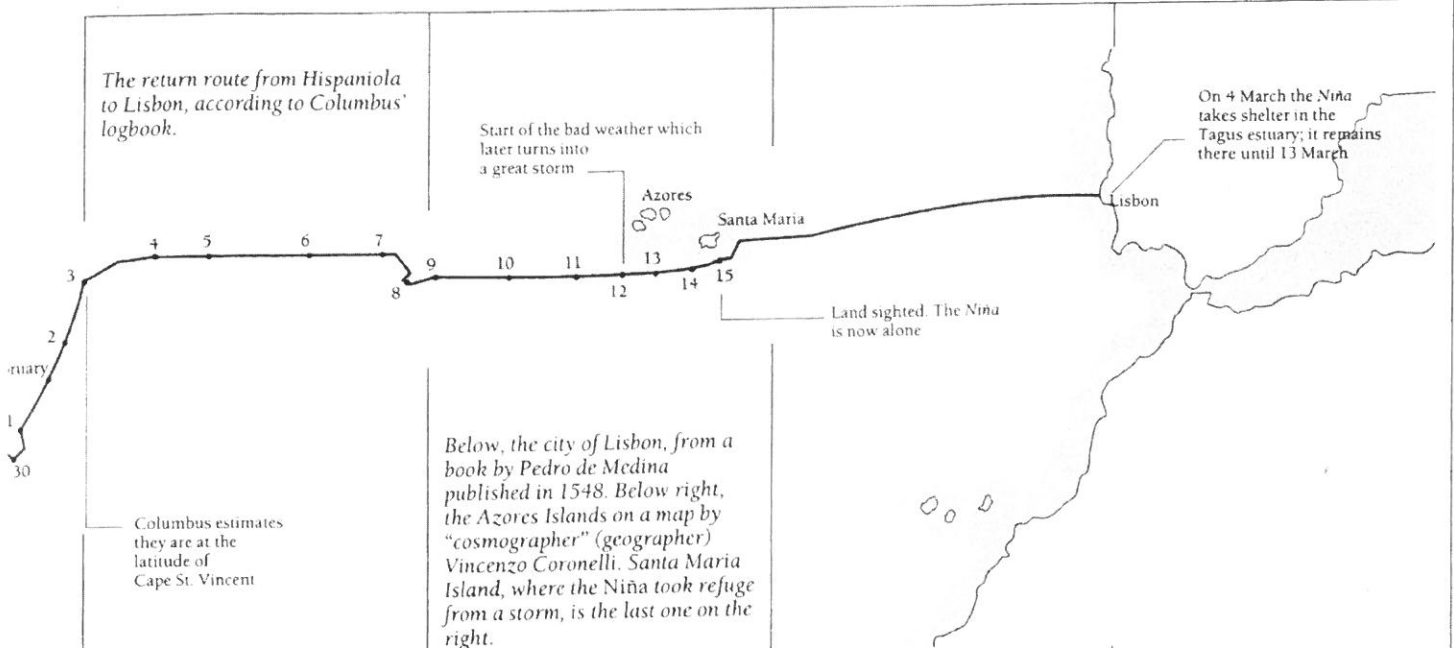
purchased two bows before an argument broke out. The natives rushed to the attack, but the sailors "inflicted a large wound on the buttocks of one Indian and wounded another in the chest with an arrow." The Caribs took flight. The first clash between

# The Return Voyage

The return route from Hispaniola to Lisbon, according to Columbus' logbook.

Start of the bad weather which later turns into a great storm

On 4 March the Niña takes shelter in the Tagus estuary; it remains there until 13 March



Below, the city of Lisbon, from a book by Pedro de Medina published in 1548. Below right, the Azores Islands on a map by "cosmographer" (geographer) Vincenzo Coronelli. Santa Maria Island, where the Niña took refuge from a storm, is the last one on the right.



commander of a Spanish expedition, he preferred to avoid these islands under Portuguese rule.

The weather cooperated until February 12, when the two ships were sailing precisely to the south of the Azores. That same day it began to get rough. By the night of February 13, Columbus wrote, he found himself in the middle of a storm. Unable to hold course with her sails reefed, the Niña "began to run before the wind, going wherever it carried her." The Pinta did the same and disappeared from sight.

It was a desperate

situation, and the crew of the Niña prepared for the worst. They threw a cask overboard; inside was a parchment telling about their discoveries, which they hoped would be found if the ships perished. They also agreed that if God delivered them from this storm, one of them would make a pilgrimage of thanks to the sanctuary of Santa Maria of Guadalupe (with a five-pound candle!), to Santa Maria of Loreto, and to the church of Santa Clara in Moguer. Three times they drew lots, taking chickpeas out of a cap, to see who would fulfill this vow. Twice

the Admiral himself was picked. In the end, it was decided they would all go to pray at the first landfall in a church dedicated to the Madonna.

After sunset on February 14, the gales began to abate and the skies began to clear from the west. The following morning they sighted land. The next three days were spent battling the winds and searching for a sheltered harbor; at last, on the morning of February 18, they dropped anchor off the island of Santa Maria in the Azores. The next morning, half of the Niña's crew went ashore to carry out their penitential vow at a nearby chapel; but they were arrested by the

island's Portuguese inhabitants, who apparently believed that the Spanish were up to no good. Columbus, still on board the Niña, was outraged by this news. Was this any way to greet the Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy of the Indies? After a couple of days of negotiations, Columbus succeeded in obtaining the release of his crew, and they resumed the last leg of their journey on February 24th.

The final miles were among the most difficult of the entire voyage. On March 4, the Niña managed to limp up the Tagus estuary and anchored a few miles from Lisbon, the capital of Portugal.

