Born in Genoa around 1451 Christopher Columbus left to Lisbon in 1476, to join his brother Bartolomeu who was working there as cartographer. Columbus settled as a merchant and in 1479 he married the daughter of Bartolomeu Perestrelo, a rich merchant and land owner, but also a retired explorer who had discovered the Madeira archipelago for the Portuguese crown.

In 1484 Christopher Columbus presented his proposal to reach the Indies by sailing westward to King John II of Portugal. The idea had not come to him out of the blue. Behind it lay several sources of inspiration: certainly the Portuguese voyages, but also the stories of Phoenician mariners who ventured into the waters along the African coast.

But the Portuguese king was busy with his own expansion overseas, started as far back as 1415. By 1484 the Portuguese had already reached the mouth of the Congo River. In 1487-8 they would sail around the Cape of Good Hope, and by 1497-9 they would reach India by sea.

Columbus turned to Spain. But also there he failed to impress the crown. In 1488 he tried again the Portuguese king and got a cheerful letter. He was invited to come to Lisbon and arrived in time to see Bartolomeu Dias' three caravels sail into port after their monumental voyage. They had found a passage to India around the African continent.

That was the end of any Portugal's interest in Columbus's enterprise. He had only one hope left: Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain.

In 1474 Ferdinand of Aragon had married Isabella of Castille and unified two of the most powerful kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula. And it was Spain who finally gave support to Columbus venture, after four years of negative opinions of the royal maritime advisory committee.

In 1492, following the conquest of Granada, the last Muslim center in the Iberian Peninsula, Isabella and Ferdinand granted Columbus three ships and a crew.

1st Voyage - 1492-1493

Columbus left from Palos, on the southern coast of Spain. In early September, after repairing and refitting his ships, he departed from the Canary Islands and headed west. From September 6 to October 12 Columbus' small fleet (the Niña, Pinta and Santa Maria) sailed west. On October 12 the New World was sighted at 2:00 a.m. by Rodrigo de Triana. Next morning they went ashore and claimed the land for the kings of Spain. By late October Columbus arrived at Cuba. By early December he arrived at Hispaniola. On December 25 the flagship Santa Maria sunk off Hispaniola, near today’s Cap Haitian.
Columbus unloaded his ship and built a fortified outpost, the first European settlement in the New World after the Vikings. Because it was Christmas day he called it La Navidad. In mid January 1493 Columbus left Hispaniola for Spain, leaving 39 men at La Navidad. On February the 15th he sighted Santa Maria Island in the Azores. Columbus stopped at Lisbon, Portugal, in early March.

2nd Voyage - 1493-1496

On September 1493, six months after arriving in Spain, Columbus left again to the New World, this time well equipped and supplied with 17 ships. The grand fleet of 17 ships left Cadiz to the New World in late September. In early October they raised anchors at the Canary Islands and sailed WSW. On the first days of November the island of Dominica was sighted at dawn and Guadeloupe shortly after. Soon after Columbus arrived at Hispaniola and found La Navidad destroyed. All of his 39 men were dead or missing. In December, after trying to sail west in vain, Columbus decided to found the first city in his New World on a small wooded peninsula overlooking a shallow harbor and a fresh water river. He called it Isabella. Five months later, when he arrived at Isabella after exploring the western coast, Columbus found the settlers nervous and discontent. The natives were aggressive after having been treated cruelly. Many settlers wanted to go home. On February 1495 he sent many colonists back to Spain with 500 natives to be sold as slaves. Soon after they left a hurricane struck La Isabela and destroyed three of vessels left behind. The sturdy Niña rode out the storm. The settlers built a caravel (the Santa Clara) from the wreckage and nicknamed her La India, since she was the first vessel built by Europeans in the Indies. Together with the Niña, La India sailed back to Spain in 1496 under the command of Columbus.

3rd Voyage - 1498-1500

On May 1498 Columbus departed again to the New World from Spain, this time from Sanlúcar de Barrameda, with six ships. By early June he arrived in the Canaries, in July he sailed by the Cape Verde Islands, arriving at Trinidad in the first days of August. From Trinidad he sailed to Isla de Margarita and Hispaniola. The problems in the colony were enormous and quarrels with the Spanish eventually led to Columbus being arrested. By late 1500 he arrived in Spain, demanding to be kept in chains so that the royal officials could see how he had been treated.

4th Voyage - 1502-1504

On May 1502 Columbus departed again to the New World from Cadiz, with four caravels and 140 men. By late June he arrived at Santo Domingo, Hispaniola, and then pursued west to the coast of Central America in the hopes of finding a passage to the East Indies. By July he arrived at the Mosquito Coast, in modern Nicaragua, and sailed south along the coast. In January 1503 he tried to establish a garrison at Rio Belen, in Panama, which he named Santa Maria de Belen. After being attacked by Indians he had to abandon the site, losing the caravel Gallega and a few men at the mouth of the river. Leaking badly, the Viscaina was abandoned near Portobello. The other two ships, Capitana and
Santiago de Palos, were beached and abandoned on bay called Puerto Santa Gloria, in Jamaica, and turned into houses. Columbus would stay here with 115 men and boys, for one year, waiting to be relieved. He sent two men in local canoes improved with sails and washboards to try to get help at Hispaniola. In the meantime he bartered for food with the local Taino indians. Despair and discontent erupted among the castaways and half of the men left the camp in an attempt to escape and make it to Hispaniola by canoe. As the natives increasingly refused to feed his men Columbus decided to summon the local chiefs aboard the Capitana. Having found in his German almanac that a lunar eclipse was to occur on the night of February 29 1504, he told them that his god was going to take the moon away as a sign of disapproval of their behavior. That night, as the rising moon started to disappear the natives gathered around his vessel and begged Columbus to intercede on their behalf. Columbus was finally rescued in June 1504, not before fighting a battle with the party that had deserted, trying to reach Hispaniola by canoe. In November Columbus returned to Spain, where he was to die on May 20 1506.

**Conclusion**

Wrong in his believe that the Earth was smaller, that Asia was longer, that it was possible to reach Japan sailing West, and that he had reached India, Columbus was nevertheless the actor who opened the door of the New World to Europe, and dramatically changed western history. As most things in history, depending on the point of view, the story of the discovery of the American continent can be a happy one, or a sad one.

Maps were completed with new parts of the world. New animals, plants, technologies, and foods were discovered or developed. Exotic products were brought, together with precious metals and stones, starting a stream of wealth that changed European economics for ever.

Examples of new products are: sweet potatoes, corn, pineapple, and tobacco, which one century later would save the North American colonization from failure. Hammocks were also introduced to Europeans after the discovery of America.

But the relations with the native populations were seldom good or peaceful. Isolation had kept the native Americans from most epidemics that ravaged Eurasia and Africa during the last 11,000 years or more. The exchange of diseases quickly exterminated large populations of natives. But most important, for the natives, the European conquest and colonization meant the beginning of a genocide that did not stop until the late 19th century, both in the North and Southern portions of the American continent.

The 16th century would belong to the Spanish conquerors. Seville, a small port away from the sea, was to become the most important port of an empire where the sun never set, the largest ever seen since the Roman times.

The ruins of La Navidad (located in today’s Dominican Republic) have been excavated from 1987 on by a Venezuelan team later joined by the University of Florida.

Altogether Columbus lost nine of his ships in the New World. None have ever been found.

See: Additional texts in the Readings Volume.