

Crossing the Atlantic

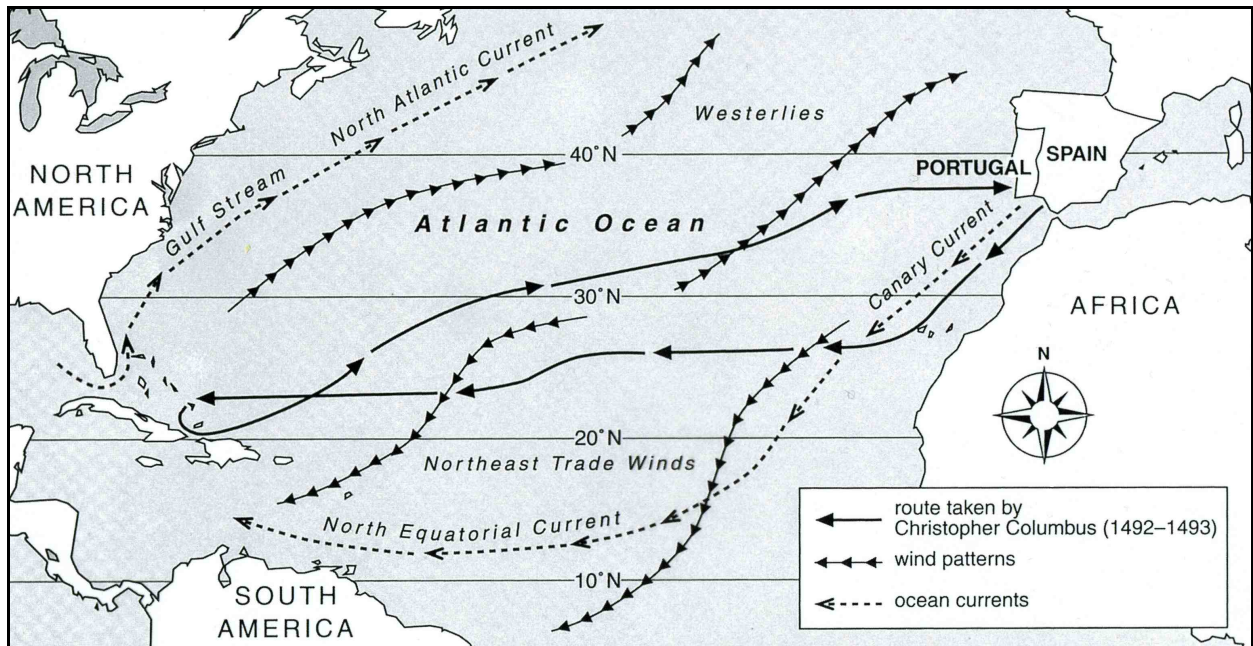
Christopher Columbus first thought about the possibility of reaching India by sailing west while working as a chart maker in Lisbon, Portugal. Columbus, an Italian navigator, had gone to Lisbon after being shipwrecked off the Portuguese coast in 1476. While in Portugal he was in constant contact with ships' pilots and navigators. These seafarers believed that islands existed west of the European continent. Columbus thought that they must be about 2,500 miles west of Europe.

Columbus's own sailing experience, and the information he had gathered from other sailors, gave him a great deal of information about wind directions and ocean currents. By using this knowledge properly, he believed he could safely reach India by sailing west.

Columbus first took his plan to King John II of Portugal in 1484. However, the king was not interested in financing it. He felt that Columbus was underestimating the distance involved. Moreover, King John was backing explorations to find a sea route to India around the tip of Africa. Disappointed, Columbus went to Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain, but they were involved with expelling Muslims from Spain.

In 1488 Columbus returned to Lisbon to petition King John again. As he did, word came that Bartolomeu Dias had successfully sailed around the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa. That ended any possible Portuguese interest in Columbus's plan. Once more, Columbus went to the Spanish royal court. Finally, in April 1492, he received word of Isabella and Ferdinand's support. At last, after eight years of presenting his plan to anyone who would listen, Columbus set sail. He headed first for the Canary Islands and from there he sailed due west.

1. What was Columbus's plan?
2. Where and when did he first get this idea?
3. What two reasons did the Portuguese have for turning down his plan?
4. At first, why were the Spanish not interested in Columbus plan?
5. Who was the first European to sail around the Cape of Good Hope?



1. What ocean currents would have helped Columbus on his journey westward?
2. What winds would have helped Columbus sail westward?
3. What ocean currents would have helped Columbus on the return trip to Europe?
4. What winds would have helped on the return trip?
5. Why would Columbus have taken the slightly northward and southward routes shown on the map, rather than sailing on a straight path?



Late 15th Century Spanish Caravel