The Italian city-states had kept up a vigorous trade in the Mediterranean during the late Middle Ages in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the fifteenth century, new shipbuilding techniques allowed them to build ships that would travel farther, and the emerging Renaissance encouraged many different nations to explore for discovery and knowledge as well as for trade and empire. Portuguese sailors successfully explored around Africa with Prince Henry the Navigator sailing to West Africa and his captains discovering the Azores and Cape Verde Islands. In 1488, Bartholomew Diaz rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa to find a water route to the valuable spice trade in the East Indies.

In 1451, Christopher Columbus, the son of a respectable wool weaver, was born in Genoa, Italy. He was a brave man of action with a great deal of physical courage who took to the sea as did many in the Genoese port city. He was a devout Christian who steadfastly practiced his faith and drew strength from it. Columbus sailed around the Mediterranean, voyaged to West Africa, and took more distant trips to lands as far away as Iceland. In 1477, the twenty-six-year-old moved to Portugal, where he joined the Genoese community there and married. He studied maps and read about Marco Polo’s overland voyages to Asia and hit upon the idea for a voyage westward to Asia. The upstart boldly proposed the plan to Portugal’s King João, who turned him down.

Undaunted, Columbus traveled to Spain in 1485 and won an audience with Queen Isabella the following year. She was interested and referred the proposal to a navigation committee. However, the committee questioned his plan and turned down his request for funding. After a frustrating attempt to renew negotiations with Portugal, Columbus diligently refused to give up and had the courage to pitch the idea to Queen Isabella again in 1489. After being turned down a second and third time, the indefatigable Columbus finally won approval for his idea in 1492, the same year that the Spanish Crown defeated Muslim armies who held the Island of Grenada and expelled the Jews from the country. Flush with nationalism, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand led the recently-unified Spanish nation-state to compete with Portugal for empire by funding most of Columbus’s voyage. If this daring enterprise succeeded, Spain would build a trading empire in Asia and assert its power as a leading European nation.

Captain and courageous visionary Christopher Columbus had a grand and daring plan to sail to the west to trade for spices and gold in Asia. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain granted him majestic titles such as “Admiral of the Ocean Sea” and “Viceroy and Governor” of all the
the islands and lands he discovered as well as a claim to one-tenth of any treasure he found. The king and queen also paid for two of his three ships and funded most of the voyage. However, he had many obstacles to overcome—one of most significant of which was that he was a distrusted foreigner from Italy who had to persuade local Spanish sailors to brave the dangers for the glory that Columbus promised.

A local Spanish captain named Martín Alonso Pinzón had to make the pitch to sailors and persuade them that they should risk life and limb for this seemingly foolhardy adventure. When Pinzón met with prospective sailors, they thought that the “enterprise was [in] vain” and would never make landfall. One or two voyages had previously traveled beyond the Azores Islands but never discovered land. Pinzón promised they would “return prosperous and happy,” and dozens agreed to join the dangerous voyage. Many real dangers could destroy ships at the time, including storms, disease, leaky vessels, or even the shipworm that ate holes in hulls. Moreover, a lack of wind in the massive ocean could leave them stranded until they ran out of provisions. Strange islands could also mean cannibals and other lurking dangers. It took a lot of courage for them to sign up for this voyage. As they sailed across vast distances in strange waters, Columbus and his crew would have to be diligent in carrying out their duties and dedicated to the cause so that they would be unified and make it home alive.

On August 2, the fleet of three ships—the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria*—rested in their berths in the port city of Palos provisioned with water, hardtack biscuits, other foodstuffs, extra sails, rope, and planks. Meanwhile, the sailors sought out absolution for their sins and received communion at the Church of St. George. The following morning, the sailors boarded the three ships before dawn and sailed out into the broad Atlantic bound for Asia.

The *Pinta* quickly developed a problem with its rudder that could be very worrisome out on the ocean. Fortunately, Columbus was able to put in for repairs as well as purchase final additional provisions in the Canary Islands before setting out into unknown waters. The Admiral was aboard the flagship *Santa Maria* and determined the fleet’s course through a combination of using a quadrant (that estimated latitude from the height of the North Star above the horizon and its relation to the Little Dipper) and employing dead reckoning (plotting a course based upon imprecise measurements of direction, time, and speed).

With full sails billowing and an established watch functioning smoothly that gave them a routine, the sailors went about their tasks as they plunged into the Atlantic. On September 9, Columbus made the decision to keep both a real log of the distance traveled and a falsified one to relate to his crews. The reason for this was that “if the voyage were long, the people would not be frightened and dismayed.” However, Columbus and his crew were full of confidence with steady winds blowing them across the waves.

A week later, on September 16, they saw their first sargassum, or gulfweed, as they entered the area of the Atlantic known as the Sargasso Sea. The men were terribly afraid of becoming “frozen” in the seaweed which extended as far as the eye could see, and their fear did not abate even as they continued to progress westward on their journey. While they sailed through the seaweed, they were frightened to see the sails go slack as they entered a calm on September 18. The wind continued to fail as they drifted under the hot sun for several days without relief.
After four days, the discontented whispers were spreading among the crews that there were “no winds in these waters for returning to Spain.” The sailors grumbled, and their complaints reached Columbus, who diligently pressed on with confidence that the winds would return. Suddenly, the sea started heaving, perhaps from a distant hurricane. Steady winds pushed the ships westward to the men’s great relief. Columbus hyperbolically compared it to the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt.

They were not saved yet. The calms returned after only a couple of days. The mood on the ships further sank when land was supposedly sighted, but it turned out to be false. For six days, the ships slowly drifted but seemed to just float in the same spot. The sun continued to beat down on the men relentlessly. Increasingly, the frustrated men engaged in angry exchanges when tempers boiled over. Plotters exchanged sidelong glances and held brief, private conversations about mutiny. The captains of the Niña and the Pinta joined in the discontent and confronted Columbus about their situation. They must turn back, all agreed, before they perished on the wide, endless ocean. Columbus suppressed their mutinous conspiracy and warned them that even if they killed him and seized control of the fleet, they would still hang in Spain. He tried to encourage them to remain steadfast, but their morale was close to collapsing.

On October 1, a fair wind filled their sails and drove them west. For the next ten days, their spirits were lifted slightly by making 8 knots and some 180 miles a day. They were making significant progress but were nagged by the fear that they did not know where they were going. On October 10, they again confronted Columbus, who “cheered them as best he could” and tried to give them hope that their diligence would be rewarded.

The following day, signs of land appeared as they collected various pieces of flotsam atop the waves in the forms of sticks, plants, and a fashioned cane, and saw flocks of birds. That night, in the darkening skies between sunset and moonrise, a lookout called out “Land!” On the morning of October 12, all saw an island and celebrated grandly. Columbus and his captains went ashore. Natives met them, and the two groups traded. They sailed around the Caribbean for a few months, lost the Santa Maria to a reef, left men on Hispaniola to found a colony, and then sailed for Spain at sunrise on January 4, 1493.

Columbus and his crew had discovered the New World for Europeans. Seafaring was a dangerous activity even in fair weather and familiar waters. However, Columbus showed the virtue of diligence as he provided the leadership for his men to continue on their expedition into the unknown to discover a new route to Asia. They were certainly afraid and wanted to turn back several times, but Columbus was the daring Admiral who had faith in his voyage.