

Vasco Núñez de Balboa was born in 1475 in Jerez de los Caballeros, Spain. Very little is known about his early life. He was from a noble but poor family in the region of Galacia, Spain. When he was in his 20s, Balboa began his life as an explorer in the New World.

### **Voyage to the New World**

In 1501, Balboa left Spain and sailed to the New World aboard a ship captained by Rodrigo de Bastidas. At that time, the discoveries of Christopher Columbus were well known in Spain. Many explorers crossed the Atlantic Ocean, hoping to find gold and other riches. These explorers were known as *conquistadors*, which is the Spanish word for “conquerors.” Conquistadors did not want to settle the land or become part of the native population. Instead, they were determined to conquer the land and the people. They wanted to claim new land for their king, Ferdinand, and to gain personal wealth from the riches they hoped to find. Balboa, along with Captain Bastidas and the crew, first explored the coastal regions of what are now Columbia and Panama. Like Columbus, they wanted to find gold. However, they also were in search of a water route to the East Indies, where they could trade for spices and silk.

Balboa and the crew sailed on to the Spanish settlement on the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Balboa decided to remain on the island and become a farmer. Unfortunately, he was unable to find success. In 1510, his farm failed, and Balboa ended up in debt.

In order to escape his creditors—the people he owed money to—Balboa stowed away on a ship, hiding himself in a barrel. The boat was sailing for the Spanish colony of San Sebastian (now Panama), under the charge of Martin Fernandez de Enciso. When Enciso’s crew discovered Balboa, Balboa pled for his life and finally persuaded Enciso to make him a crewman.

On the way to San Sebastian, they came upon the ship of explorer Francisco Pizarro. Pizarro told them that San Sebastian had been destroyed. Enciso continued on to the colony and found that Pizarro had told the truth. The settlement had been burned to the ground. Balboa told Enciso that on his earlier voyage he had seen another nearby settlement called Darién. The crew headed in that direction.



In this illustration, Balboa is shown discovering the Pacific Ocean and claiming it for Spain in 1513.

**Santa Maria**

Enciso, Balboa, and the rest of the crew landed in what was then called Darién. In 1510, the Spanish changed the name to Santa Maria de la Antigua del Darién (often just called Santa Maria). There, the Spanish explorers captured and enslaved the native people. As captain, Enciso was in charge of the colony, but the colonists soon grew angry with his leadership and forced him to sail back to Spain. Balboa then seized control, naming himself the head of the colony. His power was later reinforced when King Ferdinand sent word that Balboa was now the official governor of Santa Maria.

As governor, Balboa continued Enciso's practice of using the local Indian tribes to suit his own needs and frequently tortured or enslaved native peoples. However, he also tried a new strategy of forming alliances with certain tribes. He hoped they would trust him and inform the Spanish about gold in the area. The Indians told him of an area to the south that was full of gold and riches. The Indians also told him of a huge body of water nearby. Hoping to find gold and a water route to the East Indies, Balboa planned his next exploration.

**The Path to the Pacific**

Balboa put together a force of 1,200 men—200 Spaniards and 1,000 natives. On September 1, 1513, they left Santa Maria and sailed for the area known as Acla, on the isthmus of Panama. Although Balboa did not know it, this isthmus was the narrowest piece of land between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Balboa and his men began their long, difficult trek through a dense tropical forest in air that was hot and humid. Balboa and the Spaniards wore heavy metal armor. It is hard to imagine how hot and tiring their journey must have been. In addition to the heat, Balboa and his men also dealt with many encounters with native peoples. At times, the Spanish were friendly, but not always. They were always hoping for information about gold, and sometimes they would use force and violence to obtain information from local Indians.

After 26 days of travel, Balboa and his men reached the end of the jungle and came to a mountain range. The men climbed to the top of the range, and upon reaching the highest point, they sighted the Pacific Ocean. On September 27, 1513, Balboa became the first European to view the Pacific Ocean. He called it *Mar del Sur*, meaning "South Sea." He claimed it, and all the surrounding land, for Spain. Nearby, he found pearls, which he collected to take to King Ferdinand.

**The Return Journey**

Balboa and his men began their return journey to Santa Maria. Once again, they marched through the jungle, finally reaching Santa Maria on January 18, 1514.

At first, Balboa was treated like a hero. However, King Ferdinand had sent a new ruler to Santa Maria, Pedro Avias de Avila, who was called Pedrarias. The two men did not get along. Pedrarias was jealous of Balboa and watched him closely.

Although their relationship was not good, Pedrarias allowed Balboa to continue to explore the region. Balboa began new expeditions. He built ships and then had them transported in pieces through the jungle to the Pacific. There, he assembled the ships and explored the nearby islands. However, the relationship between Balboa and Pedrarias remained less than friendly. In 1518, when Balboa returned from an expedition to Santa Maria, Pedrarias had him arrested and tried for treason, or not being loyal to his country. Even though he claimed he was innocent, Balboa was executed in January 1519.

Balboa is remembered as the first European to see what we now call the Pacific Ocean. Balboa was brave and determined and used many methods to advance his explorations. At times, he was ruthless and violent in his search for new lands and riches. Still, his sighting of the Pacific Ocean was important, because it helped increase knowledge of the world's geography.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. What area did Balboa see first on his journey to the New World?
  - A. the coasts of modern-day Columbia and Panama
  - B. the island of Hispaniola
  - C. the settlement of Santa Maria
  - D. the Pacific Ocean
  
2. Why did Balboa and his men trek across the isthmus?
  - A. to find native tribes and convert them to Christianity
  - B. to find the vast body of water described by the native tribes
  - C. to look for pearls
  - D. to find lost Spanish explorers
  
3. Which statement best summarizes the relationship between Balboa and Pedrarias?
  - A. The two men shared mutual respect and trust.
  - B. Pedrarias did not allow Balboa to do any exploring.
  - C. Pedrarias did not trust Balboa but still let him explore.
  - D. Pedrarias hated Balboa and had him sent back to Spain.
  
4. Describe the ways that Balboa treated the native people he encountered on his expeditions. Why do you think he acted differently to the various groups? Provide details and evidence to support your answer.