



*A contemporary portrait  
of Columbus.*

# EMULATING COLUMBUS

*Robert F. Marx*



*The Nina II under sail with some of the crew members sitting on the bowsprit.*

One man above all others stood out among the legion of historical figures marched through the classrooms of my childhood by uninspired teachers. Christopher Columbus, Admiral of the Ocean Seas, discoverer of the New World, commanded my otherwise lagging attention with his intrepid feats of seamanship and exploration.

As I grew older I learned more about him and his times. I read his journals, discovering what a complex man he was. No cardboard hero but a courageous, flawed character, plagued by overweening ambition and bad timing. Columbus fascinated me but I never dreamed I'd follow in the wake of the Genoese mariner who sailed west for the Golden Land of Zipango and ended up not in fabled Japan but among the palm-fringed islands of the Caribbean.

My involvement with Columbus began in 1962. I'd been living in Spain for two years, poring over countless faded manuscripts in the Archives of the Indies, in Seville, researching Spanish shipping in the New World. A good friend, the late Dr John Goggin, an archaeologist from the University of Florida, also was working in Seville, studying old Spanish pottery. One day Goggin heard a rumour that workmen had excavated a large earthenware jar from the crypt of an abandoned Carthusian monastery outside Seville. Inside it were human bones. Labourers from a nearby pottery works had come across the jar while extracting clay from beneath the crypt's foundations. I was excited at the news. Although many claim that the explorer's bones were shipped to Santo Domingo for burial in the cathedral, there is no evidence and my own research led me to believe that Columbus had been buried in that particular monastery.

Dr Goggin and I drove at once to the site. We found an excited crowd gathered around the clay container which bore a Latin inscription stating that Columbus' bones were indeed within. I began to photograph the find, whereupon the mayor of Seville and a bevy of government officials who had arrived soon after us ordered a policeman to confiscate my film. Goggin requested a bone sample for carbon dating and spectroanalysis testing. Officials refused and urged us to forget the whole matter. The mayor pointed out that there was

already an impressive monument to Columbus in Seville Cathedral which claimed to contain the explorer's remains.

The jar disappeared. Months later, we learned that the bones had been turned over to the University of Seville's medical school where, in a bizarre snafu, they were mixed with other bones studied by medical students and burned at the end of the school year. Shortly after this a man named Carlos Etayo called me. He told me he was building a replica of the caravel *Nina*, the smallest of the three ships Columbus used on his first voyage



of discovery, and planned to sail it across the Atlantic, duplicating Columbus' voyage.

He offered me the position of pilot-navigator. What an opportunity! I didn't hesitate and convinced Etayo we should make the voyage under the same conditions Columbus and his men had, five centuries earlier. This meant wearing the same type of clothing, eating the same victuals and even limiting ourselves to the same navigational instruments — fifteenth century quadrants and astrolabes, a compass and a chart showing Zipango (Japan) as the next body of land west of the Canaries. Unlike Thor Heyerdahl and others who have sailed replicas, we carried no lifesaving equipment or radio.

My first sight of the *Nina II* was a shock. There are no surviving paintings or models of any of Columbus' ships but

*Playing chess for recreation, as did the men who sailed with Columbus.*

other sources have provided valuable data about their size and design. None of that information tallied with the vessel I saw lying at anchor in Pasajes, a small port in northern Spain. Most historians agree that the original *Nina* was somewhere between 22 and 30 metres in length and of about 60 tonnes. Etayo's *Nina* was a scaled-down version, 13 metres long and of about 15 tonnes. If nothing else she was solid, built by hand from the keel up by skilled craftsmen using the same kinds of tools that had made the original.

Once the ship was completed we spent months procuring hundreds of authentic or replica items for the voyage — everything from small cannon to pig-skin parchment for keeping our log. Six Spaniards and a Frenchman joined the crew. Our first sea trial was a sobering experience. The little *Nina* couldn't sail a straight line; she reeled and staggered like a drunken sailor. To make things worse, the mizen-mast, improperly stepped in the quarter-deck instead of the keel, came crashing down on the deck. A gale sprang up without warning and we were in danger of being dashed

to pieces on nearby rocks until we manned the sweeps and managed to make it safely to port.

The chief culprit was the rudder. We enlarged it and the ship hewed to a straight line. Weeks of trying to master sailing with a lateen sail were weeks of frustration. Experts said our mainmast was too far aft for a lateen rig and since Columbus had chiefly relied on a square sail for his ocean crossing, we followed suit.

Emulating Columbus, we planned to embark from Palos on Spain's southern coast. We anticipated an uneventful three-day sail from the shipyard in Pasajes to Palos. It turned into a 23-day voyage, arduous and tedious by turns. When there was sufficient wind, the *Nina* performed well, sometimes making a healthy six knots. Most of the time we were becalmed in fogs so thick we could barely see thirty metres ahead and were in constant danger of collision with passing boats. Our drinking water, which

was stored in large old wine casks, turned sour after a few days. In addition, the ship's biscuit, our staple, which was baked from a fifteenth century recipe and guaranteed to last for one year, had turned so mouldy it looked like leftovers from Columbus' stores.

We finally reached Palos looking as if we had been at sea for months: bearded, flea-ridden (thanks to our mascot cat) and sorely in need of baths and fresh clothing. We were treated like national heroes in Palos, where we spent several weeks procuring supplies including new casks for water and fresh biscuit. Finally, all was ready and we sailed down the river leading from Palos to the open sea, escorted by a flotilla of boats and with planes zooming overhead. The rich measured tones of Gregorian chant floated after us, sung by Franciscan friars from the cliff-top La Rabida monastery, where Columbus had lived before sailing and where we, too, had been guests.

On the sixth day out, by which time we had expected to reach Gomera in the Canaries, we were in a dead calm. As we watched a school of porpoises frolicking

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*Testing the small cannon  
carried on the Nina II.*



around our idly drifting hull, we ate our noon meal of rice and beans. With shocking suddenness, a gust of wind coming right off the African desert struck the *Nina*. The heat was intense. It was as if a colossal oven door had been opened. Within seconds the wind was at hurricane force. The sky blackened and huge seas curled around our frail craft. The ship heeled over, the tips of her masts almost dipping into the frothing water. Bowls, cups, pots and people smashed against the lee gunwale.

The sails had been set during the calm so as to catch the merest whisper of breeze. We realised that if they were not immediately lowered or cut away, the *Nina* would capsize. Jose, agile as a cat, saved the day. Grabbing a knife he scrambled out on the almost horizontal mainmast and slashed the lines holding the mainsail. The little ship righted herself as the tremendous pressure trapped in the sails was released. We ran under a small storm sail while the gale blew for thirty seemingly interminable hours. The ship took a tremendous beating and leaked so badly that one of our two pumps had to be manned almost continuously.

The projected six-day leg took a month, and my dead-reckoning was off a bit as well. We landed at the island of Grand Canary instead of Gomera, some 120 kilometres away. Fortunately, there is nothing to beat Spanish hospitality. Our stay in Las Palmas was as filled with cordiality as the time we had spent at Palos. Somehow, between banquets and receptions, we managed to make the necessary repairs and stow fresh stores for the ocean crossing, which had already attracted notice worldwide. Columbus, sailing into the unknown, had traversed the allegedly monster-filled Atlantic in 33 days. I cautiously estimated it would take us forty days and added a reserve supply of victuals and water for an additional thirty.

As we cast off to the cheers of thousands of spectators thronging the docks and the loud farewell of the local band, we had no way of knowing that it would be some 97 days before we saw land again — the island of San Salvador in the

Bahamas. The first fortnight was like a replay of the initial leg of the voyage. Day after day we were becalmed. When the wind did blow it was usually from the wrong direction. Our chief worry



*The same nautical chart that Columbus used — showing Zipango as the western landfall — accompanied the new explorers.*

almost from the outset was the dwindling supply of food and water. By the end of the first week almost half the water had seeped out of the new but faulty barrels. Not surprisingly, the fresh fruits and vegetables stored in the hot, damp hold went bad. And our third batch of guaranteed-to-last-forever ship's biscuit, baked in Las Palmas, promptly turned a bilious green.

Even though we ploughed along at an agonisingly slow pace, this was not a leisurely cruise. There was no time to loaf. Unless we hit a dead calm, the sensitive sails needed constant attention. Whenever the breeze stiffened, the bonnet on the big mainsail had to be taken in, only to be let out again when the wind fell off. We discovered the *Nina* could sail no closer than seventy degrees into the wind. The helmsman had a fiendish job. He had to stand bent

over for hours on end in the cabin which was less than 1.5 metres high. In strong winds it sometimes took four men to wrestle with the bucking tiller.

The fifteenth day out of Grand Canary, it seemed our luck had changed. We picked up the strong prevailing northeasterly winds and breathed a collective sigh of relief. It was premature, however, since the following morning the first of many gales struck us. Seasoned mariners such as those who sailed with Columbus might have sensed it coming. With no barometer on board, our first warning was a sudden blast of wind which struck the mainsail with such force that it cracked in several places and was wrenched loose from its step on the keelson so that we almost capsized for the second, but not last, time.

The storm raged for two miserable and exhausting days before abating. Then we were back in the northeasters, clipping along making an average 160 kilometres a day. We estimated speed by dropping a chip of wood off the bow and counting the seconds until it passed the stern. I shot the noonday sun and the North Star with a primitive quadrant or an astrolabe to determine our position. It took determination, as the motion of the vessel pitched me around.

A week of good weather was eclipsed by a storm which buffeted us for five days. We later learned it had grown into a hurricane before reaching the Caribbean. We rode it out, never sure whether we were going to sink or survive. However, with only a small storm canvas up to maintain steerage in the tumultuous seas, we averaged an amazing ten knots and sped towards the New World like a torpedo.

Then disaster struck: the tiller shaft broke off the rudder head. We hastily improvised a sea anchor out of a rowing bench and canvas to prevent the valiant little ship from swamping. It took two days after the storm to repair the rudder before we could resume our course. We became such good hands at weathering gales that soon the damage to the ship and to our morale was minimal.

As bad as the squalls and gales were, we dreaded even more the doldrums which usually followed. One calm lasted 22 tortured days during which we lay on the blistering deck growing thirstier, gloomier and more quarrelsome by the hour. Midway through the voyage, the water was so foul we could no longer drink it but had to resort to small amounts of sea water or sea water mixed with wine — the only item we had in abundance. The food supply was dangerously low. We soon had only one meal a day — usually rice and beans supplemented with seaweed and strips of sun-dried shark meat. Following the voyage, a US Office of Naval Research



*Loading up with fresh provisions before setting sail from Las Palmas.*

study of our project determined that the seaweed, rich in vitamin C, had kept us from getting scurvy, the dreaded disease which afflicted so many ancient mariners.

After covering some 6800 kilometres from the Canaries, we finally made landfall at San Salvador in the Bahamas on Christmas Day. A calypso band and a welcome feast awaited us. Most of the crew had shed between fifteen and twenty kilogrammes on the crossing and after imprudently wolfing down delicacies we had dreamed of while on short rations, we became predictably sick. But our nausea, aches and pains vanished when word reached the island that the Spanish government planned to knight us.

Was the voyage worth the tribulations? Yes, even though I came to the conclusion that we landed on the wrong island. Several days before we reached San Salvador, I noticed that both wind and currents were pushing us dangerously close to the Turks and Caicos Islands, north of Haiti, and I seriously considered ending our long voyage there. But since historians generally agreed that San Salvador was Columbus' landing place, we had pressed on.

Within hours of landing, I had misgivings. The detailed description Columbus wrote in his logbook of what he saw as he approached land bore little resemblance to San Salvador. He wrote, for instance, of 'a harbour large enough for all the ships of Christendom, the entrance to which is very narrow,' but San Salvador has no place which could be considered a harbour and it lies by itself, although Columbus wrote of seeing 'so many islands that I could not decide to which I should go first.'

I later mentioned this to an historian at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, who chuckled and said he had come to the same conclusion when he participated in a 1957 expedition, led by inventor-explorer Edwin Link, which determined that the Genoese explorer had first set foot in the New World in 1492 on South Caicos. Scholars I spoke to in Spain scoffed at this theory. I continued to wonder and, when I had time to investigate on my own in 1985, I both flew over and cruised through the eastern Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands. One by one I discounted all but South Caicos as Columbus' landfall. After five centuries, the history books should be corrected — a small correction, perhaps, but an interesting one.

Although we may have landed at the wrong island, we accomplished our chief goal which was to gain knowledge of how ancient mariners were able to sail and navigate such small vessels across vast expanses of uncharted seas. We also learned a lot about how they must have lived and survived such extended periods out of sight of land. If the lessons were a little rough for us, they were well worth it. My life has been one adventure after another but none can compare with following in Columbus' wake in the little *Nina II*.

