

The Spanish Explore and Conquer the Americas

The Spanish expeditions into North America from 1512-1542 change the nature of the New World.

Cortes and Pizarro

- The expedition led by Hernando Cortes succeeded in eventually bringing the wealthy and powerful Aztec Empire (located in present-day Mexico) to an end. It was his discovery of not just a highly advanced Native American group, but of tremendous resources of gold and silver that influenced the Spanish to have more of an interest in the potential wealth of the Americas. (1519-1522)
- An expedition led by Francisco Pizarro conquered the mighty Inca Empire in present-day Peru and discovered tremendous resources of silver in what is present-day Bolivia.
- These two highly successful expeditions, along with the earlier journey of Ponce de Leon who discovered and explored present-day Florida in 1512, influence the Spanish to send another expedition to explore the North American mainland.

The Journey of Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca

After the highly successful expeditions of de Leon, Cortes, and Pizarro, a new expedition led by Panfilio de Narvaez is tasked with exploring the North American mainland. After an encounter with a hostile Native American group near present-day Tampa Bay, Florida, the survivors of the expedition— marooned after a series of storms destroys their ships— build crude boats and sail along the Gulf Coast until they are shipwrecked on Galveston Island.

Along with the handful of survivors from the ill-fated Narvaez expedition, de Vaca wanders along the Gulf Coast and into the interior of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California, before journeying through Mexico to finally find fellow Spaniards. His journey of eight years among the Native Americans and of hearing of fabulous cities of wealth launched two of the most important expeditions to ever explore the North American mainland— the journeys of DeSoto and Coronado.

A Map of the Journey of Cabeza de Vaca



DeSoto and Coronado

- From 1539-1543, two of the most consequential expeditions during this period were launched by the Spanish.
- The expedition of Hernando de Soto explored much of the American Southeast— and its leader dies just after being the first European expedition to fully explore the mighty Mississippi River Valley.
- Though his expedition discovers no gold or silver— just hostile Native Americans and an endless supply of great farmland and timber, the expedition makes its way back to Mexico.
- The expedition of Francisco Vasquez de Coronado searched for the cities of wealth that had been described to de Vaca, and in so doing, it explored much of the American Southwest— being among the first Europeans to see such marvels as the Grand Canyon, the Sky City of Acoma and the Great Plains.
- Much like de Soto's expedition, the Coronado expedition found no sources of wealth, but did find endless grasslands, some land suitable for farming and a number of hostile Native American tribes.

The Journeys of DeSoto and Coronado



After the journeys of DeSoto and Coronado, how will the Spanish regard North America, including much of the present-day United States? What will be the impact of their expeditions?