

# Vasco Núñez de Balboa

---

Today, a few people get rich by starting their own company, like Bill Gates did with Microsoft. A few people become millionaires by winning the lottery. Back in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, people who wanted to get rich might have gone exploring unknown lands for gold. That is what Vasco Nunez de Balboa did. In 1501 he left Spain and crossed the Atlantic Ocean in a small sailing ship bound for the West Indies, the islands off the east coast of America.

His adventures really began in 1510 on the island called Hispaniola. After a run of bad luck ended with Balboa deep in debt, he decided to escape. According to the legend, he hid in a cask and was sneaked aboard a ship bound for Central America. When they were far out to sea Balboa suddenly appeared, as if from nowhere. He made the captain angry enough to consider throwing him overboard, but Balboa talked him out of that. He arrived with the ship in Central America.



In 1511, Balboa founded a colony at Darius. He called it Santa Maria la Antigua del Darius. He chose Darius as his location because there was less resistance from the Indians. At other locations, Balboa and his party had been met by Indians with poison darts, but the Indians at Darius were more peaceful. Balboa's treatment of the Indians may not have been nearly so peaceful. He spent his time hunting for gold and capturing Indians for slaves. His methods have been described as cruel. Sometimes he traded with the Indians, but other times he used force to get what he wanted. Some reports tell of Balboa traveling with fierce war dogs. At this time in history the whole region of America where Balboa traveled was known as "Castilla del Oro," or Castle of Gold. People from Spain and other parts of Europe sailed to America to try to get rich quick, kind of like buying lottery tickets today. They often attacked the Native Americans and robbed them of their gold.

In 1513 Balboa set out on a new adventure. He had heard tales from the Indians of a great sea just across the mountains, and he set out to see it for himself. He gathered a large group of his men, many Indian scouts, and a number of dogs, and began his adventure. Their route was to go across the Isthmus of Panama at its narrowest part, through the rainforest, and over the mountains. From the top of one of the mountains, Balboa became the first European to see what he called the South Sea, from the American side. A later explorer, Ferdinand Magellan, renamed it the Pacific Ocean because it looked so much more peaceful than the Atlantic (*Pacific* means peaceful).

The legend says that Balboa waded out into the ocean in full metal armor carrying a banner of

Spain and claimed the whole ocean and all of the lands that it touched for Spain. Look at a globe, and you will see that he had just claimed about half of the entire world, but Balboa didn't know that at the time. Balboa's adventurous nature had made him at least a few enemies along the way, and in 1519 it was to be the end of him. A rival by the name of Pedrarius DeAvila falsely accused him of being a traitor, and Balboa was beheaded for an offense that he didn't commit.

---