

The ships that discovered America



To commemorate the Quincentennial of the discovery of America, Spain built replicas of the caravels Santa María, Pinta and Niña.

The research, construction and navigation of the discovery vessels was sponsored by the Spanish National Fifth Centennial Commission, and carried out by the State Fifth Centennial Company, in collaboration with the Spanish Navy through the Institute of Naval History and Culture, and the participation of diverse Spanish organizations, businesses and institutions.

The vessels that discovered a New World stepped pine masts and Scotch pine was cut for their Quincentennial reproductions. Due to the nature of the materials used aboard these vessels (sails of woven vegetable fibers, usually hemp, heavy blocks and sheaves, huge forged steel anchors with wooden shanks, etc.) all maneuvers were



Luis Alberto Toro.

Columbus' cabin, with portraits of King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofía.



Two prows, two eras.

slow and heavy, demanding considerable experience and strength from their crew.

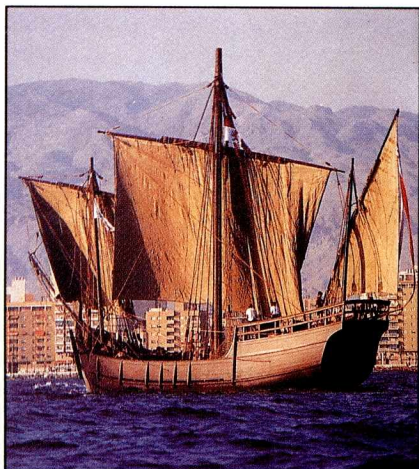
As a result, 500 years after the discovery of America, the Spanish Navy assigned a flotilla commander, three ship's captains and ten petty officers to man the replicas.

The civilian crew—all volunteers—were selected after a rigorous medical examination, a personal interview with the commanding officer, and tests of physical strength and navigational knowledge.

Everyday life on-board 15th and 16th century ships included no creature comforts. The crew slept on straw mats laid out on deck. Of the close to one hundred men in Columbus' first expedition, only the admiral had a very soberly decorated cabin, called "the roundhouse." It had a bed, a table, a monk's chair, two folding chairs and two chests.

The crossing

The Quincentennial ships began their European voyage on August 3, 1990, setting sail from the same port, Palos



The Pinta abreast of Almería.

de la Frontera, as Christopher Columbus and the Pinzón brothers.

They went first to Almería, then to Torrevieja, Alicante, Palma de Mallorca, Huelva, San Sebastián de la Gomera, Rota, Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Sevilla, Rota, Cádiz, Rota, Benalmádena, Málaga, Alicante, Barcelona, and finally, arrived at Tarragona on December 17.

They resumed the voyage in 1991, stopping in the ports of Valencia, Cartagena, Barcelona, Palamós, Marseilles, Cannes, Genoa, Cartagena, Rota, Sesimbra, Bayona la Real, Vigo, Santander, Gijón, La Coruña and Lisbon. This voyage ended at Christine Island (Huelva), after covering 9500 miles, 6175 under sail and the rest under tow by a Spanish Naval escort vessel assigned to them for the entire voyage.

During the 103 days they were on exhibit in European ports, they received 2 million visitors.

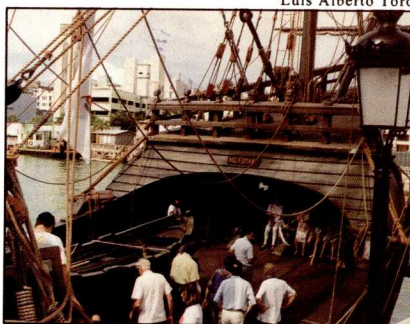
The ships in Puerto Rico

The three vessels began their crossing from the port of Palos, on October 13, 1991, following the same route that Columbus took from August to October, 1492.

Arriving in San Juan on December 20, they entered past El Morro fort, escorted by private and official ships, to the thunder of a 21-gun salute.

Flotilla commander Santiago Bolívar remarked that, like Columbus, he found the Pinta fastest, the Santa María slowest and the Niña the most sea-kindly, quickest to come about and sail closest to the wind.

Luis Alberto Toro.



Inside a caravel.

He remarked that there were no difficulties during the voyage and that the 89 crew members in the three ships sailed confidently, without the fear of being lost at sea faced by Columbus' crew. He added that the Atlantic crossing increased his admiration for those who sailed the seas in similar ships during the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries.

After visiting other ports in Puerto Rico, the ships headed for the Virgin



El Nuevo Día.

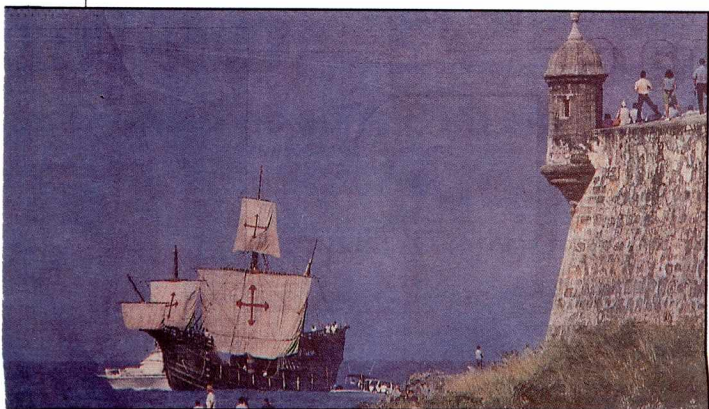
The caravels entering the bay of San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Islands to shoot a film about Columbus, co-produced by Spain and the United States.

Later, they sailed to Santo Domingo, the Bahamas, Florida and several American ports before returning to Spain.

In spite of their apparent simplicity, a visit to the ships that discovered America was well worth standing in long lines under a blazing sun ☼

Marybel Toro Gayol
Managing Editor.



El Nuevo Día.

The Santa María, escorted by modern ships and El Morro fort.



A crowded visit.