

What was Portugal's role in the Age of Discoveries?

Portugal may be a small country, but its contributions to the world have been huge. It played a vital role during Europe's Age of Discoveries and Exploration, and many of the country's most [popular monuments](#) were built to commemorate this period. Here, we take a look at the vital part that Portugal took in Europe's exploration of the world between the 15th and 18th centuries.

The Age of Discoveries

The Age of Discoveries and Exploration is the name given to an important era in world history that took place between the 15th and 18th centuries. During this time, trade routes were developed linking Asia and Europe, the Americas were reconnoitred by Christopher Columbus, and much of Africa's coasts were explored. This period is credited as being the beginning of globalization and the onset of Europe's colonization of faraway lands.

Prince Henry the Navigator

Prince Henry the Navigator was one of the first big players in Portugal during this period. He founded a school for navigators and ship captains in Sagres, Portugal and trained a generation of ship captains, explorers and navigators. He taught his students mathematics, astronomy and map-making skills. He funded and was in charge of the first voyages to Africa, and was the driving force behind the country's first colonies on the African continent. Some historians claim that Prince Henry was the first person to play a major role during the entire Age of Discoveries, including the Atlantic Slave Trade.

Vasco da Gama

It was during the Age of Discoveries that Europe developed sea routes and trading connections with Asia. Explorer Vasco da Gama, born in Portugal's Alentejo region, was the first European to reach India by water, having developed a route around Africa. He is also credited as having a strong influence on Portugal's booming empire at that time, having opened a path for Indian [spice](#) trades to Europe. Portugal was the first country to introduce real [cinnamon](#) to Europe, after other attempts had failed.

Christopher Columbus

Over 400 years, Portugal influenced maritime navigation in many ways, including collaborations with Spain and England. Christopher Columbus was also noted as having resided in Lisbon for a few years before exploring the Americas, and it was here that he gained some of his [knowledge and training](#) on navigating the Atlantic Ocean. Columbus is credited with being the first explorer to have discovered the Americas. He was trying to find a water route to India, and felt that if he sailed West, he would eventually arrive in the East. His original goal was to sail to India and China, but instead he found land in the Americas, discovering islands in the Caribbean Sea. He claimed the land that he found for Spain and he erroneously named the people who lived in these islands “Indians”.

Ferdinand Magellan

The first voyage to navigate successfully around the entire globe (Circumnavigate) was spearheaded by a [Portuguese explorer](#), working for Spain, who was searching for a western sea route to Asia. He sailed around the southern tip of South America, in what is now known as the Straits of Magellan. His expedition then sailed across the Pacific Ocean and reached land in what is now the Philippines. Although Ferdinand Magellan died in the Philippines, his ship continued to sail without him, and made it all the way back to the Iberian Peninsula. Twenty men under the leadership of the Expedition’s navigator, Juan Sebastian Delcano returned to Spain in the expedition’s one remaining ship. He became the first European to cross the Pacific Ocean, and his voyage brought back exotic spices that were extremely valuable at that time. His expedition also shed light on a few crucial facts, such as the hitherto unsuspected vastness (how big it was) of the world.

Questions:

1. When did the Age of Discovery take place?
2. What do you think the word **reconnoitered** means?
3. What did Prince Henry the Navigator teach at his school for navigators?
4. Why was Prince Henry the Navigator so important to the age of discovery and exploration?
5. Who was Vasco da Gama, and why was he important? (what did he do?)
6. Who was Christopher Columbus, and why was he important?

7. Who was Ferdinand Magellan?
8. Why was Magellan's voyage important?
9. What was Magellan and his expedition the first to do?
10. Who was Juan Sebastian Delcano?