

# *Circumnavigator*

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On September 8, 1522, off a quay at Seville, Spain, a storm-battered, barnacle-encrusted ship called the *Victoria* breezed in and unloaded a precious cargo of cloves, plus eighteen emaciated Europeans and three Indonesians—the survivors of a long and harrowing voyage of discovery. A man with matted hair and beard, delirious from hunger and thirst, was carried off the boat. His possessions were wrapped in a Brazilian hammock. On his parchment lips was one word, which he repeated over and over: “Magellan!”

Surely this couldn’t be the very same Spanish expedition that had set off three years earlier under the command of Portuguese Captain-General Ferdinand Magellan to lay claim to the Spice Islands? The crew had beaten the odds and hung on by sheer will alone, surviving shipwreck, mutiny, ballistic storms, and attack by (sometimes) cannibalistic savages. What the single-minded survivor claimed to have achieved seemed impossible: the world’s first circumnavigation.

To Europeans, this proved once and for all that the world was, as Columbus’s voyage to the Americas and Balboa’s discovery of the “Mar del Sur” (Pacific) had inconclusively hinted, not really

flat at all. But Magellan himself by no means circumnavigated the globe, since he was slain in the Philippines halfway through the trip. Fortunately, another man, with a literary bent to boot, lived to tell the tale.

A twenty-something Italian nobleman named Antonio Pigafetta can claim the title of world's first "literary" travel writer and chronicler of mankind's greatest adventure. (The achievement, considering the state of 16th-century technology, makes even the moon landing look lame.) A member of the Order of the Knights of Rhodes, Pigafetta was listed on the expedition roster as a *sobresaliente* (supernumerary) but may have also been a planted secret agent for the Vatican, assigned for exploratory espionage. But like many aspiring artists, he sought to see the world and "gain some renown with posterity."

His libretto (little book), *The First Voyage Around the World* (1525), was written to amaze and astonish a European audience. In this case, truth was far stranger than fiction. Still, Pigafetta spiced up his narrative with magical realism embellishments—brushes with St. Elmo's Fire, men with ears longer than their bodies, women impregnated by the wind—to entertain the court circles imagining the unknown edges of the map, filled by cartographers with chubby-cheeked cherubs blowing winds, sea monsters devouring ships, and dire boldfaced warnings: "Here there be dragons."

On September 20, 1519, the Spanish armada of five black ships—the *Concepción*, *San Antonio*, *Santiago*, *Trinidad*, and *Victoria*—set off into the "Ocean Sea" with 265 men on their secret voyage of exploration, embroiled in intrigue from the get-go. After being shown the door by Portugal, Magellan instead had sucked up to Spanish King Charles. The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) had divvied up the globe into Spanish (west) and Portuguese (east) directional spheres of influence and arenas of exploration. Magellan's mission: to claim for Spain the disputed moneymaking Moluccas (Spice Islands) by going west. Did Magellan set off intending to circle the globe? At any rate, he kept the route, co-devised with a shadowy astrologer named Ruy Faleiro, secret from the crew, not even confiding in Pigafetta.

Pigafetta's book, a strange and heady brew of narration, maps, and native vocabularies, was remarkable for its ethnographic and geographical accuracy, complete with twenty-three charts

of the Moluccas and the Philippines. But what really makes the book move is its description of mingling with the locals. Meeting the Tupinamba Indians in Rio de Janeiro, Pigafetta noted their Trump-like acumen in the art of making a deal: "For one fishhook or one knife they would offer five or six chickens. . . . for the king of diamonds in a deck of playing cards such as we use in Italy, they gave me six fowls, thinking they had gotten the better of me."

Here in Brazil (as elsewhere), lusty liaisons developed between the love-starved and libertine crew and the exceedingly friendly, stark-naked native women, who swarmed aboard the ships to offer themselves in exchange for gifts. One day, while in the company of Magellan, Pigafetta witnessed a woman "spying a nail about the size of a finger, and thinking she was unobserved, she picked it up and inserted it into her private parts." Pigafetta ponders, "Did she think she was hiding it, or did she think she was adorning herself? We were unable to determine which."

After failing to find a *paso* through South America to Balboa's Sea, the armada (minus the shipwrecked *Santiago*) arrived at San Julian. Here the crew came across a "Patagonian" giant, so named because of his guanaco-hide-wrapped feet, which resembled *patagones* ("dog's paws"). He pranced about "dancing, singing, and throwing dust on his head," then pointed upward, implying that Magellan and his men must have dropped from the sky.

Later, Pigafetta describes how Magellan captured two Patagonians through a clever but nasty trick. After loading their arms with trinkets, Magellan indicated some manacles and motioned that these could be carried on their legs around their ankles. The shackles were shut tight. "When they saw that they were tricked," Pigafetta proffers, "they raged like bulls, calling loudly to Setebos (their god) to aid them." Pigafetta later pried out via linguistic tricks that Setebos (whose name Shakespeare later used in *The Tempest*) was a demon with horns on his head and hair down to his feet, who belched fire through his mouth and anus.

After a botched mutiny, led by the proud Spanish nobleman Juan de Cartagena, the armada continued its star-crossed search, winding up blind waterways leading to dead-ends. But at last they struck the strait (now Magellan's namesake) and tripped through "Tierra del Fuego" (Land of Fire), where native campfires burned eerily at night. Here the *San Antonio's* crew, convinced Magellan

was a lunatic leading them to hell through high water, rebelled and sailed back to Spain. Now in virgin waters, the strait deflowered, the other ships entered what Magellan dubbed the “Pacific” Ocean.

The Pacific was big: vaster than Magellan’s imagination, more mysterious than outer space. Little did Pigafetta know then that their trip across it would span 12,600 miles of untested terra incognita. Food and water began to run out, and Pigafetta (who remained suspiciously healthy) prattles on about their plight with obvious relish. They ate “powder of biscuit swarming with worms [which] stank strongly of rat’s urine. We drank yellow water that had been putrid for many days.” They also snacked on ox hides, sawdust, and rats, which “sold for one-half ducat apiece.” Many died of scurvy before the ships at last struck land at Guam, where they stocked up on groceries to continue onwards into the outer limits.

When they reached the Philippines, an interesting historical footnote placed itself like a starry asterisk on the edge of the sky. One day a canoe with eight natives came out from Limasawa to greet the ships. To everyone’s delight and amazement, Magellan’s Indonesian slave Enrique (acquired in 1511 in Malacca) understood their language—evidence that Enrique had been raised in the Philippines before being captured and sold into slavery in Sumatra. Was Pigafetta secretly enraged that Enrique, a servile servant (and rival linguist), came close to lifting the limelight and stealing center stage as maybe the first human to complete a full circuit of the earth?

Here also in the Philippines, Pigafetta, with a dramatic flourish, fell overboard and nearly drowned: “I was aided not, I believe, through my own merits, but through that font of charity [the Virgin].” Magellan, too, had religious matters in mind. Sidetracked in Cebu by missionary zeal (his fatal flaw), he converted local leader Humabon and his heathens to Christianity and foolishly entered a war (with only a couple boatloads of men!) against the fierce troops of Chief Lapu Lapu. Pigafetta recounts his hero’s death on the island of Mactan: “. . . immediately they rushed upon him with iron and bamboo spears, and with their cutlasses, until they killed our mirror, our light, our comfort, and our true guide.”

With their leader gone and crew dwindling, the expedition ditched the *Concepción* and sailed south to the Spice Islands, where they loaded the *Trinidad* and *Victoria* with their payload: spices.

Amid meetings with island rajahs consisting of bartering banter, Pigafetta made astute sociological observations: “The men go naked . . . but they are so jealous of their wives that they do not wish us to go ashore with our drawers exposed; for they assert that their women imagine that we are always in readiness.” Pigafetta also noted the natives’ love of betel-chewing and cockfighting, as well as men who “eat only raw human hearts with the juice of orange and lemons.” A sort of homo sapiens ceviche.

The two ships separated. The *Trinidad* headed eastward back across the Pacific, but her unseaworthiness drove her back to the Spice Islands, where her crew was captured by the Portuguese. But Pigafetta, aboard the *Victoria* (with the expedition’s new commander, Juan Sebastián del Cano), continued west, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and landed at Cape Verde, where he made a globe-spinning discovery: somehow they had misplaced a day. At Cape Verde, it was Thursday. But Pigafetta, who carefully kept track of each day, knew it was Wednesday. By sailing west they’d “returned to the same place as does the sun,” making a gain of 24 hours. In other words, in circumnavigating the world they’d also crossed the international dateline (centuries before its invention)!

After the voyage, Pigafetta, pen in hand, did the European lecture circuit in the court circles approximating Barnes and Noble readings. After searching for a publisher, querying the kings of Spain and Portugal (and even the Pope), Pigafetta finally dedicated his book to his patron, Philippe Villiers de l’Isle Adam, Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes. What befell Pigafetta after the peregrinations of his three-year postnavigation book-promo tour is unknown. He may have died in battle against the Turks, or perhaps he retired to his ancestral home in Vincenza, to live out the rest of his life in Salingeresque literary seclusion.

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