

Resource 3: Diego Bermudez - A Boy Who Helped “Discover” America

Diego Bermudez sailed with Columbus on the Santa Maria in 1492. He was only 12 years old. Twenty other boys also sailed with Columbus. Their families were poor. Some of the boys were homeless and had to beg for food each day. They probably felt pretty lucky to get jobs on ships.

Columbus needed boys to do three jobs on the Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria.

Job 1: Older teenagers were hired because they had little fear. These boys usually climbed the ropes to arrange and change the sails. Sails had to be arranged to catch the winds that moved the ship forward.

Job 2: Some of the boys became servants for the ship’s officers. They did whatever the officers needed them to do.

Job 3: Younger boys like Diego Bermudez were hired to do work that others did not want to do. They cooked, cleaned pots, and scrubbed the decks of the ships. Most of them went around barefoot and wore the same clothes every day.

What was Diego’s most important job? He was kind of like a singing clock.

Everyone on the ships had to spend four hours per day doing “watch duty.” They had to look out for bad weather, enemy ships, and land. When ships “ran aground” they were frequently damaged badly by underwater rocks. **Pause here.** What do you think it means when a ship “ran aground?”

The Santa Maria ran aground on Christmas Eve of 1492. Native Americans tried to help free the ship, but it did not work. So, they took the Santa Maria apart one piece of wood at a time and used it to build a fort which they called La Navidad. La Navidad means Christmas in Spanish. That fort became the first Spanish settlement in North America.

There is an interesting story about the Santa Maria. The officer who was supposed to be steering the ship was really tired. So, he woke-up one of the boys on the ship and ordered him to steer the ship. Guess what! That boy also fell asleep. Then the Santa Maria ran aground. That boy could have been Diego, but we may never know because Columbus did not mention the boy’s name in his log.

Diego did make it back to Spain.

Columbus made three more trips to the “New World.” Diego did not return to America, but his brother Juan did. On Columbus’s last trip, 56 out of the 99 crew members were teenagers or younger. One of them was Christopher Columbus’ 13-year-old son Ferdinand.

So, what do we now know from history? The name of the island now called Bermuda comes from Diego’s family name. One of Diego’s relatives discovered Bermuda in 1505. “Bermudez” became “Bermuda.”

Get to know your world better. Look on a map to see where Bermuda is.

Source: We Were There Too – Young People in U.S. History by Phillip Hoose.