

# VOYAGE TO INDIA

Álvarez Velho

1497

In the name of God, Amen! In the year 1497, His Majesty Don Manuel,<sup>1</sup> in Portugal first of that name, sent out four ships to go in search of spices, commissioning Vasco da Gama to go as Admiral in command of this fleet, and two other captains with him, named Paulo da Gama, brother of the aforesaid Vasco da Gama, and Nicholas Coellho.

We sailed from Restello on Saturday, 8 July 1497, and thus set out on our voyage, which may God our Lord, suffer us to bring to a fortunate conclusion, in His Service, Amen.

Our first landfall was on the following Saturday, when we made the Canaries. The same night we passed to leeward of Lanzarote, and at sunrise the next morning were just off Terra Alta, where we fished for about two hours. Just at nightfall that evening we had the mouth of the Rio do Ouro opening clear. The sea ran so high during the night that Paulo da Gama and the Admiral, who were in the first and last ships of the convoy, lost sight of the main body of the fleet. As at sunrise we found we had lost sight of the flagship and all the other vessels, we laid our course for the Cape Verde islands, where we had orders to rendezvous should any such accident befall us on the voyage out.

At daybreak on the following Sunday we were in sight of Sal Island, and an hour later we sighted three ships. On boarding them we found them to be the store ship, Nicholas Coellho's ship, and a vessel commanded by Bartholomew Diaz, which was in our convoy, bound for Elmina, all of which had, like ourselves, parted company with the flagship. After re-joining them, we again went on our course; but the wind fell, so we lay becalmed until Wednesday morning at 4 AM. At 10 AM we sighted the Admiral about five leagues before us, and later in the afternoon, to our great joy, ran up alongside and spoke him and, in our great pleasure at meeting again, fired many salutes and sounded our trumpets.

The next day, being Thursday, we reached San Thiago Island, where we anchored off Santa Maria, to our great pleasure and contentment. Here we filled up with meat, water, and wood, and repaired the main yards of the ships, which were much in want of it. On Friday, 3 August, we sailed eastwards. On 18 August, whilst we were running before a south wind, the Admiral sprung his main yard; we were at the time about 200 leagues from San Thiago. For two days and a night we rode under our mizzen-yard and studding sail. On 22 August, whilst steering seawards south quarter south-west, we fell in with many birds very like herons, and at sundown we saw many lines, like flocks of birds flying landwards, drawing along towards the south south-east. On this same day we saw a whale, although, at the time, we were well eight hundred leagues out at sea.

On Friday, 27 October, being the vigil of Saints Simon and Jude, we saw many whales and some of the animals sailors call seals and sea-calves. All Saints' Day, Wednesday, 1 November, we saw many signs of land, as quantities of Sargasso weeds, such as grow upon the shore, floated past.

Two hours before daybreak on Saturday, 4 November, we found bottom in 110 fathoms, and at 9 AM we sighted land. Upon this, we all drew close together and saluted the Admiral by hoisting many pennons and flags, and firing our bombards and we all put on our holiday clothes. As we did not know the coast, we stood on and off shore during the whole day.

On Tuesday, we stood in towards the land and made a low-lying coast opening out into a great bay. The Admiral ordered Pêro d'Alenquer to go in a boat to take soundings and see if he could find a good anchorage. He found a very good one, clean and sheltered from every wind save the northeast. It lies due east and west. We named it Saint Helena Bay.

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<sup>1</sup> Manuel I, King of Portugal (1495–1521)

We anchored in this bay on the Wednesday, and lay there eight days to careen the ships, mend the sails, and fill up with wood. Five leagues to the southeast of this bay is a river which flows down from the interior. It is a stone's throw wide at the mouth and about two or three fathoms deep. Its current is somewhat strong. We named it the Santiago River.

This country is peopled by a race of dark men who live upon nothing but sea-calves, whales, and gazelle meat with a few roots of herbs. They are clothed in skins and wear some curious ivory ornaments like sheaths. Their arms are horns, hardened in the fire and fastened to elderwood stakes. They own quantities of dogs, which are very like our Portuguese ones and bark like them. The birds here are very like those of Portugal. Amongst them are Cornish choughs, Cape Pigeons, rock doves, and crested larks, with many others. The climate is healthy and pleasant; the vegetation luxuriant

The day after we had anchored, a Thursday, we went inland with the Admiral and captured one of the natives. He was a small-made man very like Sancho Mixia, and was taking honey in the sandy plain, for the bees in that country hive in the roots of the bushes. We brought him on board the flagship, and the Admiral made him sit down to table with him. He ate everything we did. Next day the Admiral dressed him out very finely, and had him set on shore again.

The day after, fourteen or fifteen natives came to the beach off which the ships were lying. The Admiral went on shore, and showed them samples of many different kinds of merchandise to find out if any of them were to be found in those parts. Amongst the samples he showed them were cinnamon, cloves, seed pearls, gold, and such like things. They did not understand in the least what he meant, but seemed like men who had never seen anything of the sort before, so the Admiral gave them some hawk's bells and tin rings. This took place on the Friday. We again tried the same plan next day. On the Sunday about forty to fifty of them came down; so we went on shore after breakfast, taking with us some trifles, with which we bought some shells they wore in their ears, which looked as if they had been silvered, and some foxes' brushes which they had fastened in sticks and used to fan their faces. I bought one of their curious sheaths for a trinket. We thought they must attach some value to copper, as they wore splinters of it in their ears.

This same day one Fernan Velloso, who had gone on shore with the Admiral, was seized with a great desire to accompany the natives to their huts and see their way of living. His prayers and entreaties became so pressing that the Admiral, seeing no other way of relieving himself from his importunity, suffered him to do so; so Fernan Velloso went away with them whilst we went back on board the flagship to supper. After the natives left us, they took a sea-calf and sat down near the foot of a hillock in a sandy place and roasted it. They shared their meal, which consisted of the flesh of the sea-calf and some roots, with Fernan Velloso, who was still with them. After eating, they told him to go back to the ships, as they would not let him remain with them any longer. He did so, and, directly he reached the beach off which the fleet was lying, began to shout lustily, whilst the natives stayed in hiding in the bush near to watch him.

We were still at table ; but when we heard his cries, the captains at once sprang up, and we with them, and got into the sailing boat to go and see what was the matter. Thereupon the blacks began to run along the beach and caught up Fernan Vellaso, just as we came up to him. When they saw we wished to take him back on board, they began hurling the assegais they were carrying at us, and wounded the Admiral and three or four men. This would not have happened if we had not been foolish enough to put ourselves in their power by going on shore without arms, because we thought them by no means war-like in their dispositions, On this we went back on board.

After careening and re-fitting our ships and filling up with wood, we sailed from Saint Helena Bay on Friday morning, 16 November, as we did not know how far we were from the Cape of Good Hope. It is true Pêro

d'Alenquer<sup>2</sup> kept telling us that we were at most only some thirty leagues to the northeast of it; but we could not be quite certain as to his accuracy as, on his voyage home, he had sailed from the Cape early one morning and had passed this place late the same night, whilst the expedition had kept well out at sea on their way out. As we could not, then, be quite sure where we were, we stood out to sea with a SSE wind, and on the following Saturday afternoon sighted the Cape of Good Hope. This day we stood out to sea, and steered in the evening on the inward tack towards land. On Sunday morning we were again up with the Cape, but could not round it because the wind was southeast, and the Cape lies northeast and southwest; so at night we again tacked out to sea, and on the Monday night again stood in towards land. At last, at noon on the Wednesday, we passed the Cape on a course close in shore with a stern wind. Quite near the Cape of Good Hope, to the south, lies a very large bay, which runs a good six leagues into the land and is just about the same width across the mouth.

On Saint Catherine's Day, Saturday afternoon, 25 November, we entered Saint Bras Bay, where we remained thirteen days to break up the store-ship and transfer her stores on board the other ships.

On the following Friday, whilst we were still in Saint Bras Bay, about ninety dark men, very like those we had met at Saint Helena Bay, came down. Some of them walked along the beach, whilst the others waited about on the hills. All or nearly all of us were at the time on board the flagship. As soon as we saw the natives, we went on shore with the boats, which we took good care were very well armed; and, when we got close in, the Admiral kept throwing them hawks' bells on to the beach, close to the edge of the waves; and they followed us, stopping to pick them up, and at last plucked up the courage to come into the water and take them out of his hand.

Their conduct greatly astonished us, for when Bartholomew Diaz was here they use to run away from him and would not take anything he offered them. On the contrary, one day when his crews were on shore watering at a spring of very good water there is here close to the edge of the sea, they kept trying to drive them off by throwing stones at them from a hillock above the spring; so he shot at them with a crossbow and killed one of them. We thought the reason why they did not run away must be that they had already heard of us from the Saint Helena Bay natives whom we had previously seen, for the distance by sea from the one place to the other is only sixty leagues. They would thus have learnt that we should do them no harm, and that we were also very free-handed with our gifts.

As there was a very large stretch of bush at the back of the beach hereabouts, the Admiral would not land here, but made us row on and land at another place which was more open. He accordingly made signs to the blacks to come along and meet us, which they did. The Admiral and his captains went on shore with an armed escort, some of whom carried cross-bows. As it was not desirable that the natives should come close up to us, the Admiral made them signs to keep away, and only allowed two or three of them to approach. He made those who came a present of hawks' bells and scarlet caps and they gave us, in return, some of the ivory bracelets they wore; for elephants, at least so we thought, are very plentiful in this country and, indeed, we often found their dung round the spring where they drank.

On Saturday, about two hundred native men and boys came down, bringing with them about twelve head of cattle, both cows and oxen, with four or five sheep. We went on shore directly they came in sight. They greeted us with a concert of four or five flutes, some taking alto and others bass, and altogether giving us a very fine performance for niggers, whom one does not expect to be finished musicians, and also danced some native dances. To return the compliment, the Admiral bade our trumpets strike up, and we danced a hornpipe in the boats, led by the Admiral himself. After this entertainment was over, we again went on shore and, for three bracelets bought a black ox, on which we made our Sunday breakfast. It was very fat, and the beef was as tasty as if it had been bred in Portugal.

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<sup>2</sup> Pêro d'Alenquer sailed with Bartolomeu Dias on the 1488 expedition to the Cape of Good Hope.

On the Sunday about 200 more natives came, bringing their wives and young children with them. The women staid on the top of a hill near the sea, whilst their husbands kept driving in cows and oxen, and then they made two camps on the shore and played and danced as they had done on the Saturday. It was their custom that the boys should stay in the bush with the arms, whilst the men came down and speak with us, only carrying some short staves and fox brushes stuck in cleft sticks, which they use to fan their faces.

Whilst we were conversing with them by signs, we saw the boys stealing towards us through the bush with the arms. On this the Admiral ordered a man, named Martin Affonso, who had once been in Manicongo,<sup>3</sup> to go and buy an ox from them for some bracelets. Directly he had given them the bracelets, they took him by the hand and led him to a spring, saying that, in payment for the bracelets, they would give us leave to water there and then at once began to drive the oxen back into the bush.

The Admiral, seeing what they were after, bade us draw together and hailed Martin Affonso to come back to us, as he thought they must be preparing to attack us. After we had come together we went back where we were before, with the whole mob following at our heels. The Admiral then sent us on shore fully armed, in our corslets, with lances, javelins, and crossbows with arrows laid, just to show them what we could do to them if we chose, though we did not want to harm them.

When they saw us coming, they began to run together in a great hurry; so orders were given for us to go back on board the boats, as the Admiral was afraid of our killing any of them by accident. As a further proof of our power, he also made us, directly we were on board, fire off two cannon which were in the stern-sheets of the boats. At the moment the natives were all seated together on the beach close to the bush, but directly heard the guns go off, they made so straight for cover that they left their skin wraps and arms behind them, and two of them had to come back again to pick them up, whilst the rest ran away to the top of a hill near, driving their cattle before them.

The country oxen are very large and much like those of our Alemtejo.<sup>4</sup> They are amazingly fat and very gentle. They are all bullocks. Some of them are harmless. The natives use the strongest of them as riding-oxen. They use saddle cloths of coarse slack cloth, very like those we see in Castille, on the top of which they put some pieces of wood shaped like the poles of a litter. When they wish to sell them, they pass a cistus stalk through their nostrils and lead them by it to market.

There is an islet in the bay three bowshots off shore, on which are many sea-calves. Some of them are as large as very large bears. They have very large teeth and are most courageous, as they came close up to our men. It is impossible to pierce them with a lance, however hard one may thrust. There is another kind, which is smaller, and a third much smaller still. The large ones roar like lions, and the smaller bleat like kids. We went over for a trip to the islet one day, and what with large and small ones saw about 3.000 of them. We used to shoot at them from our boats with our cannon. On this same island we saw some birds, about the size of ducks, which cannot fly, as they have no feathers on their flappers. They are called penguins. We killed as many of them as we pleased. Their cry sounds like the braying of an ass.

Whilst we were still in Saint Bras Bay, filling up with water, one Wednesday, we set up a cross and a stone beacon. We made the cross, which was a very lofty one, out of a spare top-yard. The very next day, just as we were sailing from the bay, we saw ten or twelve blacks throw down both cross and beacon, even before we had got clear of the roadstead....

“Vasco da Gama’s Voyage,” *The Calcutta Review* 213 (July 1898):154–162.

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<sup>3</sup> A powerful kingdom at the mouth of the Congo River

<sup>4</sup> A region near Lisbon