

# Summary: First Europeans in California

## A Search for Riches

According to historians, Spanish explorers were the first travelers from other continents to reach California. Spain sent out explorers to look for spices, gold, and other valuables. One explorer, Christopher Columbus, was looking for a new trade route to Asia in 1492 when he landed in North America. The continent was still unknown to Europeans. Spain's rulers sent conquistadors to North America to search for gold and land. The first Europeans to reach California served under conquistador Hernán Cortés. In 1533, he sent men up the Pacific coast to look for a shortcut to Asia. Instead, they found a peninsula. They thought it was an island and named it California after a popular Spanish book.

## Exploring the Coast

Spain divided California into Baja California, which is now part of Mexico, and Alta California, which became the state of California. In 1542, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo led an expedition from New Spain (Mexico) up the coast, searching for a route to Asia. He reached the area known today as San Diego. He was the first European to visit Alta California.

Spain had conquered some Pacific islands, named the Philippines after King Philip II. Spanish ships brought spices from the Philippines to New Spain and carried back silver and gold. Queen Elizabeth I of England sent Sir Francis Drake to raid the Spanish ships, since England and Spain were enemies at the time. Drake stopped for a short time in California to repair his ship and claimed the land for England. Spain ignored the claim and sent more ships.

## Barriers To Travel

Explorers sailing to California struggled against wind currents that blew from the northwest and water currents that flowed north to south. Steep cliffs and dangerous rocks along the coast also threatened ships. In 1602, Sebastián Vizcaíno led an expedition from Acapulco up the coast, looking for a safe harbor. He found and named Monterey Bay, but it turned out not to be a calm harbor. After his trip, Spanish explorers didn't return to Alta California for another 150 years, because it was difficult to reach by sea, while deserts and high mountains blocked the way by land.



### Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

**conquistador** *noun*, Spanish word for conqueror

**peninsula** *noun*, land surrounded by water on three sides

**current** *noun*, a strong flow of wind, water, or electricity



### After You Read

**REVIEW** What were European explorers looking for in North America? Underline two sentences in the first paragraph that tell what they wanted.

**REVIEW** Name two European explorers who visited California and tell what they did. Highlight the sentences that tell what the explorers did.

**REVIEW** Why did the Spanish stop exploring California after Vizcaíno's expedition? Draw a box around the sentences that give the details.