

The Bela

Open a map! Can you see Belém? It's a port in southern Portugal, at the mouth of the Tagus. That's where I was built, by agile carpenters. They made me as I am. What's my name? Now, that's a good question! When I was about to set out to sea, the crowds on the shore saw me and shouted: "Cara bela!" In Portuguese, that means "She's beautiful!" Allow me to introduce myself. I'm the Bela, the "Caravela dos descobrimentos" – the caravel of discovery. The first in a long line. We're fêted everywhere, brave and determined. We made the World. When did I get my first taste of brine? It must have been in the 1430s or 1440s. What's a decade to me now?

Before setting sail, I took a long look at the sky. All I could see was the sky, as if it had been put there to guide me. The Pole star was my star. The entire sky turned around that star, like horses in harness going round a pole or the eternal celestial chariot.

You've seen me before on fine engravings. Barely seventy tons – it's nothing really – but what agility in coming round! I had a royal wardrobe, a tapered bottom, high shoulders, a forecastle, a quarterdeck and, of course, masts fit for a princess. Three masts for three sails – two square sails and one lateen. The square sails, which stretched the full width of the hull, caught the tail wind so well that I felt as if I had wings. The lateen, a long vertical triangle, could practically make me turn on the spot, so that I could face in any direction in the twinkling of an eye. My slim, light hull could take me into shallow water, so I could sail close to land, practically touching the coast.

I was scared of going west – scared that the sea would suddenly stop and that I would fall into a bottomless abyss and be lost forever, before I'd even discovered the World. When I was very young, of course, I thought the Earth was flat. Don't laugh – it's easy to be wise after the event!

People also said that, the further south I went, the hotter the water would become, and that I would end up in boiling water that curdled like milk. But I, the caravel of discovery, set off to face the unknown.

As you can imagine, the southward voyage seemed very long to me. I saw Madeira, the Fortune Islands, Cape Noun, Cape Bojador and many other places.

In those early days, we sailed by dead reckoning. A magnetised needle placed over a compass card gave us the magnetic north, and we could find the true north by looking for the Pole star. A watch glass filled with fine sand told us the time, and we could calculate our speed using a log that trailed behind the ship.

Why was I sent so far from Bélem to face the unknown? It was to find the answer to a question that had obsessed people for more than a thousand years: does Africa go on for ever or does it end somewhere?

Then, one day, my mast cast no shadow! A sailor could walk round it with his head in the sunshine all the time. It was amazing! I'd entered the tropics!

Then I saw Cape Verde. Why was it called that? Because, after miles and miles of desert, we suddenly saw tall trees on the coast. At last, some greenery after all that yellow. Cape Verde means "green cape" in Portuguese, by the way.

Each evening, the Pole star was a little lower over the horizon. One night, it disappeared altogether. Things went all quiet on deck. The awestruck sailors saw a new sky stretching overhead. An unknown sky without a Pole star! Nobody had expected that. It was indeed a voyage of discovery.

I was sailing deeper and deeper into the new hemisphere when a terrible storm made me lose my bearings.

Then one morning, after thirteen days, the wind stopped. It was a miracle! I'd reached the much hoped-for cape, and we decided to call it the "Cape of Good Hope".

This meant that Africa did stop somewhere, and I'd reached that place. I was quite pleased with myself, because I'd opened a sea route to the East. Don't you see? This meant we could sail round Africa and reach India by sea! I'd made the age-old dream come true.

Each time I returned to Bélem to see my sister caravels, we would spend wonderful nights telling each other of our exploits. Everywhere we went, we drew the outline of the land. We made maps. We were making the World. One evening, I learnt that the earth was round. I was so happy! I was no longer terror-struck. At last, I would be able to wet sail westwards. I began to prepare.

For me, the story is beautiful, yet sad. Come closer and listen to my tale. We were four inseparable sisters. The three others – the Pinta, the Niña and the Santa Maria – became famous, to say the least!

Here's how things happened. A few days before the start of the voyage, the captain noticed that my hull was damaged. The workers set about repairing it, but my sisters left before the job was finished. When their sails disappeared over the horizon, my sail was at half-mast by the quayside. When my hull had been repaired, I set sail, but, by the time I reached the new land on the other side of the Atlantic, the three others had already discovered America. There was not a single chronicler to meet me and note my time of arrival. Poor Bela,

forgotten by history. But there was no time for shedding tears – I had so many seas to sail, and so many lands to discover.

They sent me further and further each time, but I always came back. I rode out the storms, avoided the skiffs and angled my way through every ill wind. I felt unsinkable, indestructible, eternal. I feared nothing.

One time, though, I really thought I'd touched the bottom. It was down at the southern end of America. Twenty-seven days and twenty-seven nights of hell! I sailed like a toy boat between two mountains of ice. How I held my breath to squeeze through! If I'd been hit by just one block of ice, that would have been the end of the Bela.

Tierra del Fuego. Land of fire...and of cold.

Then suddenly, one morning, when I was harassed and so tired I could have sunk, there it was! The immensity of it! The last cape and the gateway to freedom. We called it the "Cape of Desire".

Just like Africa, America ended somewhere too, and I'd sailed round to the other side. There, there was a new ocean – proof that America was not India.

Now, while I don't like being shaken and jolted, I hate staying still. The sun was blazing and the sea was like a millpond. There wasn't as much as a ripple on the water! That's why we called it the "Pacific Ocean".

I thought the Atlantic was huge. In fact, it was really small compared to this ocean. That's when I realised that the World was made for us, the caravels. This Earth, about which I was learning more and more, was full of seas!

The sailors living inside me sometimes behaved like assassins of the worst kind. From the bridge – my bridge – the cannon spat out their cannonballs, shaking my structure. I hated their song of death. The water around me was red with the blood of the unfortunate people who'd seen me arrive from the sea. They tried to defend themselves with their flimsy arrows, which scarcely managed to pierce my light canvas. Despite myself, I had brought terror, and the sight of my sails was a harbinger of death. I was ashamed at having transported those brigands. Voyages of discovery...to discover the cruelty of men.

Back to Bélem, and then for the big voyage, my triumph. I set off westwards from Bélem, and returned three years later from the east.

I'd sailed round the world. It's definitely round.

Denis Guedj

