



Columbus and the Arawak Indians

When Christopher Columbus landed in the islands of the Caribbean, about 40 million people lived in North and South America. But Columbus did not know that he had discovered a new land. Indeed, he thought he had landed in India, so upon seeing the natives, he called them "Indians." Today they are known as Native Americans. One of the many tribes that lived on these islands was the Arawaks.

The Arawaks were quite different from any people that Columbus had ever seen—and indeed, Columbus and his men, arriving on the huge ship wearing their outlandish clothing, were quite unlike anything the Arawak had ever seen. But despite the language barriers, the Arawak and Columbus were able to communicate in a friendly way. Columbus learned that they could take the poison out of a root called *manioc* (MAN-ee-ock). They then ground this up and combined it with other ingredients to make bread. The Arawak also ate fish, sharks, turtles, and yams.

The Arawaks were impressed by Columbus' ships, the *Nina*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria*, on which Columbus sailed. The Arawak had never even envisioned such crafts, but they did have giant canoes that could hold up to 100 people. (There were about 40 people on the *Pinta*.) They made these canoes by chopping down huge trees and then lighting small fires in the logs. After burning out the middle, they used stone tools to scoop out the ashes. They fashioned huge oars from the limbs of the trees. The Arawak were skilled in guiding the canoes and, with many rowers, could get up good speed.

Columbus learned many things about the Arawaks. One thing that surprised him was that, like the Europeans, the Arawaks also played games for fun. The Arawaks played a game called *batey* (bah-TAY), which was a lot like soccer. It was played with rubber balls, with participants kicking the ball across a huge field. Instead of just playing for fun, the Arawaks played *batey* to settle problems without fighting. The Arawak did not have any metal items such as knives or guns.

As Columbus traveled throughout the Caribbean, he met many other Native American tribes. Some of these he treated with respect and some he took as prisoners to be brought back to Spain. Columbus made four voyages to the New World, but he died without ever knowing that he had found a land previously unknown to the Europeans. He always thought that he was just sailing around islands near what must be China or India. He never set foot on what is now the United States. Columbus was really looking for a route to the east (China) and for gold. What he found were two entirely unknown continents that contained fascinating people who had been living there for thousands of years.

By Mary Rose