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## Hernando Cortes

1485-1547

### Spanish Conquistador and Explorer Who Conquered Mexico

Hernando Cortes was born in 1485 in Medellin, Spain. His name is also spelled Hernan Cortez. His parents were Martin Cortes and Catalina Pizarro Altamarino.

A record of Cortes's youth calls him "very intelligent and clever in everything he did." He was also, according to the record, ruthless and argumentative, a "source of trouble to his parents."

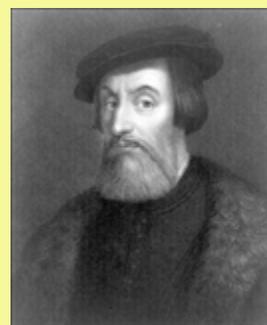
Cortes was sent away to school when he was 14. He studied law for a few years. Then, he decided he'd had enough of school. He'd heard of the triumphs of **Christopher Columbus**. He wanted to become an explorer.

[\(See picture, "Cortes, Hernando: Conquistador and Explorer."\)](#)

**VOYAGE TO THE NEW WORLD:** Cortes sailed to the **New World** in 1504, at the age of 19. He landed on the Spanish colony of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). He became a farmer and a city official.

**CUBA:** In 1511, Cortes sailed with Diego Velazquez on an expedition to Cuba. There, they conquered the local native tribes. Cortes was named mayor of the settlement city of Santiago. He lived in Cuba for several years.

Velazquez saw that Cortes was a popular mayor, but he didn't really trust him. In 1518, he offered Cortes the opportunity to take an expedition to Mexico. Then, he took back the offer. But Cortes wanted to lead the expedition. Without Velazquez's knowledge or permission, he sailed from Cuba in November 1518.



**Cortes, Hernando:  
Conquistador and  
Explorer**

(Credit: Prints &  
Photographs Division,  
Library of Congress, LC-  
USZ62-33515)



**Cortes's Ships in Harbor of Santiago, Cuba**

(Credit: The Mariners' Museum, Newport News, VA)

[\(See picture, "Cortes's Ships in Harbor of Santiago, Cuba."\)](#)

**VOYAGE TO MEXICO:** Cortes sailed with nearly 1,000 soldiers, 16 horses, and weapons on an expedition that would change Mexico forever.

Cortes sailed for the Yucatan peninsula and landed on the island of Cozumel.

He fought and conquered the local natives. Here and elsewhere, he forced the Indians to convert to Christianity. If they refused, they were killed. The natives were astonished at the Spaniards for more than their powerful army. They had brought horses with them, an animal they'd never seen before.

Cortes then traveled along the coast of Mexico, where he founded a settlement he called Vera Cruz. After landing, Cortes did an amazing thing. He burned his ships. He made it impossible for his soldiers to desert. They had to pledge to fight with him, no matter what the consequences.

**THE AZTECS:** The Indians he saw on the mainland were Aztecs. The Aztecs had formed an empire that stretched over much of Mexico. They had a highly developed civilization. They grew plenty of food, using irrigation systems, and had a system of trade and taxes.

The Aztecs could be cruel and brutal people. They conquered other tribes and enslaved people. They also practiced a religion that called for human sacrifice to their gods. Part of that religion would help Cortes as he conquered Mexico.

**CONQUERING THE AZTECS:** The Aztec religion had a legend about a god named Quetzalcoatl (ket-S AHL- kuh-WAHT-el). According to the legend, he had been banished from the empire. The legend foretold that he would return one day to reclaim his place. Quetzalcoatl was described as tall, blond, and bearded. The description fit Cortes.

When the Aztecs first saw Cortes, they reported back to their ruler, Montezuma. He thought Cortes might be Quetzalcoatl. Montezuma sent gifts to Cortes, including gold.

[\(See picture, "Cortes Meets Montezuma."\)](#)

Meanwhile, Cortes was planning to conquer the Aztec empire. He started out toward their major city, Tenochtitlan (the-nock-TEE-tlan). It was where Mexico City is today. Along the way, Cortes fought and defeated the local natives. Some of these Indians were more hostile to the Aztecs than to Cortes. They helped him in his attack on the Aztec empire.

Cortes entered the city and went to Montezuma's palace. He threatened to take Montezuma prisoner unless the Aztec leader turned the empire over to him. Montezuma agreed.

But Cortes was in trouble. Velazquez had sent an army to remove him from power. Cortes fought the Spanish army, under the command of Panfilo Narvaez, and won. He then had Narvaez's soldiers fight with him against the Aztecs. They returned to Tenochtitlan and found the Aztecs in revolt. Cortes led his men in a bloody and costly battle. He lost the fight, half his men, and most of the gold and treasure he'd gathered. Retreating to an area outside the city, he planned his next battle.



**Cortes Meets Montezuma**

(Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

He attacked Tenochtitlan again, this time conquering it and destroying most of the city. On the ruins of the ancient Aztec capital, Cortes built his capital, Mexico City. He destroyed Aztec temples and replaced them with Christian churches. The Aztecs disappeared, along with their way of life and their civilization.



**Map: Cortes's Expeditions in Mexico, 1519 and 1535**

(Credit: Favorable Impressions)

(See picture, "[Map: Cortes's Expeditions in Mexico, 1519 and 1535.](#)")

**NEW EXPEDITIONS FOR SPAIN:** The King of Spain, Charles V, named Cortes the head of the colony's government and army. Cortes sponsored expeditions to expand the territory of **New Spain**. He sent explorers to what is now Guatemala and Honduras.

Cortes himself went to Honduras when the man he had sent to explore it declared himself the independent ruler. The journey took several years, and by the time he returned to Mexico City, there was conflict among the ruling Spaniards. Cortes still had his enemies. Velazquez and others continued to plot against him, both in Spain and in the **New World**.

**RETURN TO SPAIN:** Cortes wrote a series of letters to the king to explain what he had done and to declare his loyalty. In 1528, he returned to Spain to meet with the king. He was treated as a great hero by the Spanish people.

But the king did not name him governor of New Spain. He appointed another leader, Mendoza, who outranked Cortes.

**RETURN TO NEW SPAIN AND TO EXPLORATION:** Cortes returned to New Spain and began to explore again. In 1535, he traveled to what is now Baja California. As the years went by, Cortes became old and ill. He returned to Spain, where he died in 1547. He is buried in Mexico City.

**HERNANDO CORTES'S HOME AND FAMILY:** Cortes was married twice. His first wife, named Catalina, died while he was in Mexico. His second wife was named Juana de Zuniga. Cortes had two sons, Martin and Luis.

**A FIGURE OF CONTROVERSY:** Cortes has inspired debate for 400 years. He was praised in his homeland as the man who expanded the wealth and lands of Spain. But at what cost? Cortes was a brave military leader, but his brutality led to the end of an entire civilization. The Aztecs, too, were harsh rulers capable of great cruelty, but by what right did Cortes conquer and annihilate them? People have argued about Cortes for hundreds of years, and they will certainly continue to do so.

**HIS DISCOVERY:** Despite the controversy Cortes has inspired, his conquests changed history. When he defeated the Aztecs, he brought about the Spanish control of Mexico and Central America. The history of the area changed forever with his conquest. The cultures of Mexico and the Central American countries are now a blend of the native and Spanish influences that began with Cortes.

## World Wide Web Site:

<http://www.rice.edu/armadillo/Projects/cortez.html>