

## Orellana

### Rumors of El Dorado | Michael Wood's Diary

Early in 1541, a rumor swept Quito that beyond the mountains, there lay a land richer than Mexico, or even Peru - a land of gold. The ruler of this land was so rich that he covered himself with gold dust every day and washed it off each evening. He was "the golden man," El Dorado. The governor of Quito, Gonzalo Pizarro, was the half brother of the conqueror of Peru, Francisco Pizarro. He used his name and new-found wealth to gather and equip a powerful expedition. He had three goals: to find La Canela, the land of cinnamon, a valuable spice believed to grow beyond the Andes; to assess new lands for colonization and to find El Dorado. On March 1541, Gonzalo Pizarro marched eastward with more than 200 Spanish troops and thousands of native servants.



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### Crossing the Andes | Michael Wood's Diary

Pizarro's troubles began as soon as he entered the Andes: "Only seven leagues out of Quito we came to very rugged wooded country and great mountain ranges through which we were obliged to open up new roads, not only for the men but for the horses." The expedition had departed in the wet season, and, along with the altitude, the incessant rain made conditions doubly difficult. Beyond the peaks, they entered the equatorial cloud forest of the Andes, a drenched green world, abounding in streams and waterfalls flowing from the Amazon. Despite these obstacles, Pizarro finally reached the fertile valley of Sumaco where he encamped and provisioned his men. It was during this deceptive lull in hardship that Francisco de Orellana, a relative of the Pizarros, would embark on his own fateful career as an explorer. As Pizarro sought information on the land of cinnamon, Orellana, who had made a reputation fighting the Manca Inca, arrived at the head of 23 conquistadors.

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Although Pizarro did find cinnamon beyond the Sumaco valley, it was not the lush growth of rumor, but small trees widely scattered amid a terrible terrain incapable of supporting his men. With hunger closing in, the expedition marched on to the Coca river, Pizarro says, "through thick forest, hacking with axes and machetes, and often it was impossible to get the horses through." By early October, seven months after they had left Quito, the expedition was demoralized. Nearly all of Pizarro's 4,000 native servants were dead; and many of his men were too sick to move. Still, Pizarro was determined to prevail. Beyond the last rapids of the upper Coca, he found the river "wide, gentle and deep flowing." He ordered his men to build a boat, which could do the work of his lost porters - ferrying heavy gear, as well as the sick and wounded - while also providing some defense against hit-and-run attacks by Indian canoes.



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### The Expedition Splits | Michael Wood's Diary

On November 9, 1541, Pizarro launched the San Pedro only to realize that the sluggish pace of his "healthy" army along the banks prevented him using the speed of the current. As Christmas came, starvation set in. When his native guides next reported that a vast uninhabited region - containing no food whatsoever - lay ahead, the expedition's prospects looked dim. Orellana proposed a solution: With the boat and 60 men, he would proceed down-river in search of food. Later, Pizarro would complain that Orellana had disregarded the stipulation that he return within 12 days, "and in no case go beyond the junction of the rivers, but bring the food and give attention to nothing else." In Orellana's version - recorded by expedition diarist, Friar Gaspar de Carvajal - he says the two agreed that if Orellana did not return, Pizarro should not be concerned, and that Orellana should "do whatever he thought best."



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### Starving on the Napo | Michael Wood's Diary

On December 26, Orellana and his crew of 57 Spaniards split from Pizarro's expedition in the San Pedro. Within three days, according to Orellana, he realized that the current was too strong and that he could never get back as he had promised. Friar Carvajal writes, "We chose what seemed to us the lesser of two evils, trusting to God to get us out, to go on and follow the river. We would either die or get to see what lay along it." They were now heading eastward on one of the main tributaries of the Amazon, the Napo river. In the following days, seven men died of starvation. "We were chewing our boots and belts by now," says the diary. Then, on January 8, 1542, their luck changed. Hearing drums, Orellana landed and hesitantly went inland. When the Indians saw the white men, they ran into the jungle, but slowly returned. To the surprise of the Spaniards, who were at death's door, the natives received them kindly, offering hospitality, shelter and food.

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### Starving on the Napo | The Imarans

The Spanish made camp at the Indian village and rested there for a month, eating native food prepared by the women, and slowly recovering their health. Orellana called this place "Imara," after its people. Orellana realized that their survival would depend on their ability to talk to the native peoples, and he made an effort to learn their language, recording their speech in a notebook. "Next to God, the captain's ability to speak the languages of the natives was the thing that saved our lives," says Friar Carvajal. Touched by the kindness of the Indians, Orellana was nonetheless still thinking like a conquistador. He took possession of the village for the King of Spain and lectured the Indians on Christianity: "We told them we were Christians who worshipped a single God: not trees and stones," says Carvajal.

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### The Amazon Proper | Michael Wood's Diary

Refreshed by their stay with the Imara, Orellana and his men left on February 2, 1542. Ten days later, they came to a gigantic confluence, which he named St. Eulalia. This was the meeting of the Napo and the Marañon rivers, the beginning of the Amazon proper. Sailing along the Marañon, Orellana was greeted warmly by natives who told him that he was traveling through the lands of the Aparian tribes. They warned him that tribes further along the river were hostile. At this, Orellana gave orders to modify the San Pedro, and also to build a larger craft, the Victoria. On April 24, Orellana and his men set sail in both boats. Meanwhile, back on the Coca, Pizarro had given up on Orellana, condemning him as a traitor. Turning his back on El Dorado, Pizarro rallied his dwindling armada and made a desperate push for Quito.



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### Under Attack | Michael Wood's Diary

Orellana and his men sailed onward into hostile Machiparo territory, a densely-populated 200-mile stretch with barely a gap between settlements. Throughout their journey, they suffered violent attacks. "What hardships, what bodily suffering, what extraordinary dangers we passed through," wrote Friar Carvajal, who lost an eye in one skirmish. On May 12, 1542, they passed the frontier of the Machiparos and traveled for several hundred miles through Omagua territory. The farther they went, the greater their impression of the landscape, especially of a river fed by tributaries that were themselves far larger than anything previously imagined. "On Saturday the eve of Holy Trinity," says Orellana's diary, "we saw the mouth of another great river on the left, the water black as ink; for which reason we called it the River Negro." It was June 3, 1542.

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### Under Attack | The Machiparo and the Omagua

On May 12, 1542, Orellana passed the frontier of the Machiparo and entered the Omagua "empire." Remarkably, he describes a formal crossing place like any modern border: "At the entrance of this land," he says, "was a garrison village on an elevated spot" - a customs post of the kingdom of Omagua. From this region onward, the Spaniards saw wonderful ceramics in the villages. One place they christened "pueblo de la loza" - "china town" or "porcelaineville" - because of its fine pottery, including hundred-gallon storage jars "rivaling the best in Spain." The expedition diary also describes an organized religious cult, with shrines containing palm-leaf idols with arms and legs adorned in silver. But despite these signs of culture, Orellana launched a pre-emptive attack on the Omagua, and was forced to fight his way across their lands.

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### To the Sea | Michael Wood's Diary

On June 13, Orellana passed the mouth of another huge river, which he called the "Madeira," or "river of wood," after the immense islands of floating timber. Here his men made camp to repair the San Pedro. Badly shaken by native attacks and privation, the men nevertheless found cause for hope. For the first time on their journey, they noticed the river rising and falling with the tide. The sea was near! Orellana's hopes of survival now centered on reaching the Caribbean, 300 miles away. From there it might be possible to reach the islands of Cubagua and Margarita, near Trinidad. In August they found an island at the Amazon's mouth, where they hauled the Victoria out of the water and modified the vessel for a voyage across the open sea.



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### The Journey Home | Michael Wood's Diary

At long last, on Saturday, August 26, 1542, Orellana embarked and reached the open sea. Now, they faced a 1,200-mile journey in homemade boats. Three days after departure, bad weather and heavy seas separated the two vessels, each crew assuming the other had perished. In fact, the San Pedro, having been washed farther out to sea, rounded Trinidad, and made it to Cubagua on September 9, 1542. Relief at their survival was mixed with grief that, after all they had gone through, the other boat had been lost. But on September 11, Orellana and the Victoria limped into the port of New Cadiz. Forty-seven members of the original expedition were still alive. So ended "an experience which had been entered on unintentionally, but which turned out to be so extraordinary that it is one of the greatest things that ever happened to men."



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### The Aftermath

If Orellana's ordeal was heroic, few in Spain regarded him as a hero. In addition to disputing the usefulness of his discoveries, Gonzalo Pizarro's powerful friends raised the charge of treason. Pizarro and his army had managed to stagger back over the Andes in June 1542, 16 months after they had set out. Only 80 men were left - less than half of those who had waved Orellana goodbye. But despite his extreme bitterness towards Orellana, Pizarro soon had his own problems with mother Spain. (In October 1544, Pizarro invaded Peru, touching off a civil war that would end in his execution four years later.) Orellana led a later expedition back to the Amazon, which he was now licensed to settle and govern. The second trip failed before it began. On the coast of Brazil, one ship wrecked and others ran aground. As the survivors pumped water from the remaining vessels, Orellana searched in vain for the channel that had delivered him once before. Eventually, the expedition broke up. Most of its 400 members - including Orellana - were never seen again.

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