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The great explorers have always been independent, strong-minded individuals. They are going where no one else has been before, so they have to be bold, courageous, totally self-motivated — and driven by their ideas.

It doesn’t matter whether the goal is to see what is on the other side of the hill, the ocean, the continent or even on another planet: the same determination must exist. Vasco da Gama was in the port to welcome Christopher Columbus returning from his historic voyage across the Atlantic and, looking at Columbus, da Gama will have acknowledged that they had similar qualities.

These two were different men from the 13th-century Marco Polo, who was more of a merchant than an adventurer; and they were different again from the 18th-century Captain Cook: a quieter, controlled Englishman as much interested in expanding scientific knowledge as gung-ho exploration. But there would have been a mutual respect between all these men, and they would all have recognized the bravery and achievement of those on the Apollo 7 Mission. In this case, the men knew where they were going (unlike Columbus who only had a hazy idea) but also knew that their survival depended, in the end, upon a knife-edge of computer calculations and space theory. Subsequent deaths in space missions illustrate only too graphically how dangerous it is to travel at the limits of man’s practical experience.

Of course, international travel now is very easy. We can all fly across the Atlantic or the Pacific to holiday destinations. We mix with people from different continents, people with very different habits and expectations. If we are walking in remote regions, we generally have a guide who speaks the language, understands the customs, and can introduce us gradually to the glories of the country — and advise us where to be cautious. But Bartolomeu Diaz and Magellan, Columbus and Cook had no guides. Lewis and Clark occasionally managed to enlist help from local tribes, but they still had to find routes over impassable stretches of land; and when they were expecting to find the Pacific, they suddenly had to deal with the Rocky Mountains — a very different prospect!

Quite quickly, travelling in the footsteps of these figures became commonplace. Bartolomeu Diaz sailed down the West African coast in 1488, discovering the tip of southern Africa which he called The Cape of Storms. He was superseded less than 10 years later by Vasco da Gama, who finished off the job, discovering the sea route to India. Within decades of Columbus’s great achievement, ships were plying across the Atlantic by the hundreds. And only 50 years after Magellan, Sir Francis Drake went round the globe in The Golden Hind. It took less than a generation for settlers to follow in the footsteps of Lewis and Clark, marking out the territory of the United States of America.

The challenges that remain to the contemporary explorer are different. Space is perhaps the biggest frontier. But if little of the land mass of Planet Earth remains to be discovered, the same cannot be said of the oceans. The sea covers two thirds of the Earth’s surface, and much exploration still needs to be done in its depths. And there remain other journeys requiring considerable fortitude — the high and forbidding mountains, the hot deserts of sand and rock, the icy wastes of Antarctica.

Perhaps equally important, if not quite so historic, are those less spectacular but nevertheless challenging journeys which stretch most of us to the limits of our capacity, where we can experience for ourselves different sights and ways of life beyond (what we see through) the living-room television portal. When Christopher Columbus sailed into the unknown, he took with him the Travels of Marco Polo. It clearly wasn’t enough for him to read about adventure in his armchair — he had to go and do it for himself!

Notes by Nicolas Soames
Hundreds of famous explorers scoured across the oceans, in search of undiscovered lands. During that period, entire North and South America were fully mapped, with only a few isolated areas remaining uncharted (most notably fabled Northwestern Passage between Canada and Polar Ice, and endless forest around river Amazon). The last great area of exploration was created in the second part of the 20th century with the development of space travel.