

California  
Explorers  
Series

# Sebastian Vizcaino



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# Sebastian Vizcaino 1548-1629

Sebastian Vizcaino was a California explorer who was more famous for what he named, or rather renamed, than for what he found. In truth, he didn't discover anything that Cabrillo hadn't already seen, named, and claimed sixty years earlier. But Vizcaino gave the places all new names—names we are still using today.



Sebastian was born in Spain In 1548 to a family of successful merchants. Unlike many explorers who went off to sea at a young age, Vizcaino went off to war instead. At age 30, he led a successful cavalry (horse) unit in the war against the Portuguese. When the fighting was over, Sebastian moved to New Spain (now Mexico) then to Manila, a city in the Philippines. For three years he traded Spanish silver and gold for Asian spices and goods.

By 1589, he was ready to settle down in Mexico City and start a family. But after a few years, Vizcaino was exploring again. He headed to the Sea of Cortez to try his luck at pearl fisheries. It turned out his luck with pearl harvesting was poor; he abandoned the project and returned home within a year.



In 1601 King Phillip of Spain urged the Governor of New Spain (now Mexico) to find someone to mount an expedition up the west coast of North America. The king was concerned about losing Spanish ships full of treasure to pirates-a very real problem. He wanted safe harbors for the galleons bringing him gold. The governor chose Sebastian Vizcaino. To encourage Vizcaino to accept the job, the governor offered a reward for a successful trip. Vizcaino would get his own Spanish galleon to captain.

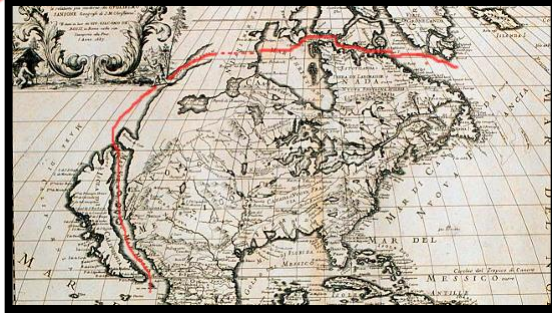
Vizcaino was supposed to map, record and chart bays, landmarks, and coastline that would be important to Spanish ships seeking safety. His job was not to attack or take over any native populations, nor was he to rename any places already named.



Vizcaíño made up his own rules however. He was determined to find a great harbor for Spanish ships-even if he had to lie. He also wanted to acquire riches. If he found the Northwest Passage connecting the Pacific and Atlantic by water, the trade route to Asia would be practically be owned by Spain. Money! Wealth! Riches! He also enjoyed ignoring the rule about not renaming anything. He renamed everything!

Vizcaíño is important to California history because we still use all the names he chose. Are any of these names familiar? San Diego, Catalina, San Clemente (Island), Santa Barbara, Point Reyes, San Pedro, Point Conception, Santa Lucia mountains, Carmel Bay and Monterey? You can thank Vizcaíño for all those California names.

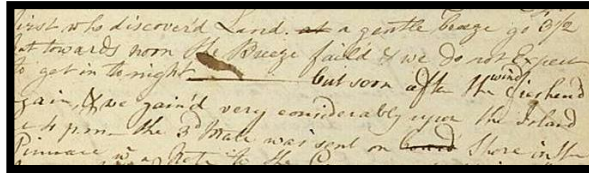




Sebastian set sail from Acapulco on May 5th, 1602 with three ships and 200 people, including his 13 year old son. The wind was against him the whole way, so it took until November to reach San Diego. He stayed ten days, visiting with local Indian tribes and eating the gifts of fresh food and fish they offered. Sixty years earlier Cabrillo had called the bay “San Miguel” but Vizcaino changed it to San Diego after Saint Didacus of Alcala and his flagship, the San Diego.

He traveled up the coast, changing names as he went. But all was not well. His men were getting sick with scurvy. They needed to stop, recover, and repair their ship. Plus Vizcaino was worried. He still hadn't found the perfect harbor the King was expecting the expedition to deliver.





On Dec. 16th, 1612 they sailed into Monterey Bay. Vizcaino wrote in his logbook that the harbor was “sheltered from all winds.” He described a safe, secure, fantasy harbor that did not actually exist. Later explorers couldn’t even find Monterey by his descriptions. He must have felt a lot of pressure to find a great harbor and gain his reward.

He knew he would not be able to travel too much further north. His men were dying and were getting too weak to fight mighty waves on the open sea. At that point, one ship turned back for home, carrying all the sick men. By the time the ship reached Acapulco, 25 men had died and only nine survived.



The other two ships headed north but were soon separated in a big storm; each was forced to return home alone. The crew got sicker. Vizcaíno was afraid to drop anchor because he feared his men did not have the strength to pull it up again.



Like explorers both before and after him, Vizcaino missed the entrance to San Francisco Bay. It was tricky to see from the ocean since the entrance was only one mile wide. From the sea, it looked like a solid wall of hills.

On Jan. 8th, 1603 Vizcaíno sheltered on shore during a storm. He met local Indians who remembered English explorer Sir Francis Drake. While Sebastian was there, he named the place Point Reyes. Soon the ship was on its way north again. The San Diego got as far north as Cape Blarico before turning back and heading for home.





With the wind at their backs and filling their sails, it was much faster sailing home. Vizcaino reached Acapulco on Feb. 21st, 1603. The expedition was considered a success, especially with Vizcaino's overly enthusiastic descriptions of Monterey. In fact, he was eager to start a colony there.



Politics changed everything however. A new governor was appointed who didn't like Vizcaino. He did not support a new Monterey colony or even a reward for the expedition. Vizcaino ended up as an ambassador to Japan instead of a captain of a Spanish galleon.

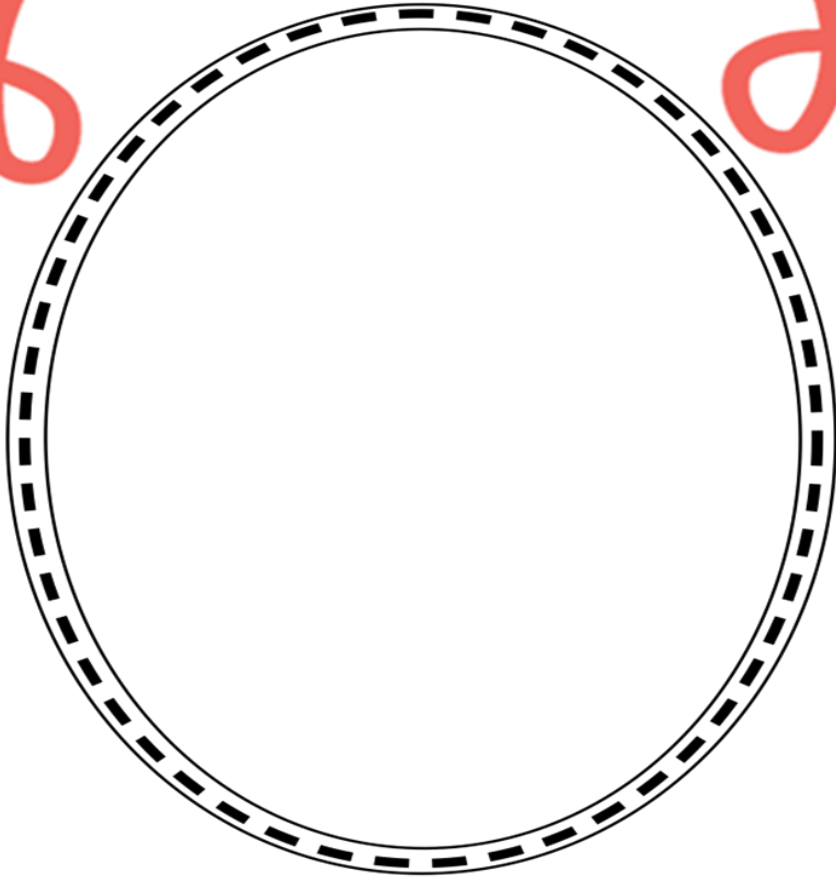


Sebastian Vizcaino retired in Spain in 1614. But the quiet life wasn't quiet for long. The king asked him to return to Acapulco and take care of a military problem with invading Dutch ships. Vizcaino successfully ambushed the Dutch and was made mayor of Acapulco. He served until 1619. He died at age 80 in Mexico City.

We remember Sebastian Vizcaino because of the names he gave to places in California and his false reports of Monterey Bay. Vizcaino also commands a place in history because he was the first person to record ecological features of the land he explored. He made detailed notes about the Monterey Cypress forest at Point Lobos. We also recognize Sebastian for his charting skills that were so accurate; his maps were still being used for another 200 years. Bold, brave, and brash, Sebastian Vizcaino left his name on California history.



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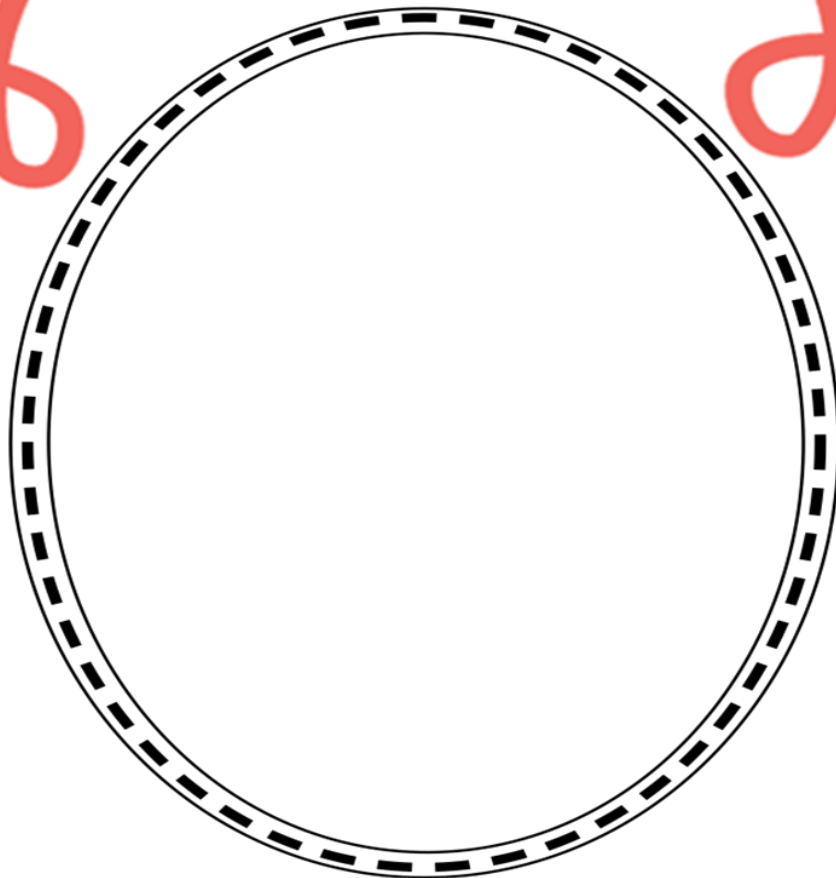
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