

Christopher Columbus's Letter about the West Indies



ABOUT THE READING In the fall of 1492 Columbus explored islands in the West Indies (Caribbean). In this excerpt from a February 1493 letter, he describes what he saw on Juana (Cuba) to the secretary of the Spanish treasury.

VOCABULARY

lofty rising to a great height

innumerable too many to count

arms weapons



As you read the letter below, note the physical and human features that Columbus describes.

... I had learned from some other Indians whom I had seized, that this land was certainly an island . . . The lands are high and there are many very **lofty** mountains . . . [The islands] are all most beautiful, of a thousand different shapes, accessible, and covered with trees of a thousands kinds of such great height that they seemed to reach the skies. The nightingale was singing as well as other birds of a thousand different kinds; and that, in November . . . There are palm-trees of six or eight kinds, wonderful in their beautiful variety; but this is the case with all the other trees and fruits and grasses; trees, plants, or fruits filled us with admiration. It contains extraordinary pine groves, and very extensive plains. There is also honey, a great variety of birds, and many different kinds of fruits. In the interior there are many mines of metals and a population **innumerable** . . . They have neither iron, nor steel, nor **arms**, nor are they competent [able] to use them, not that they are not well-formed and of handsome stature [build], but because they are timid to a surprising degree.

Columbus reported that all the trees and fruits and grasses came in wonderful varieties, like the palm trees did.

Source: From *Renaissance and Reformation: 1300–1648*, edited by G.R. Elton. Macmillan, 1976.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Identify What are some physical features Columbus describes?

2. Draw Conclusions Why did Columbus say “and that, in November” in talking about “a thousand different kinds” of birds singing?

3. Elaborate Judging by what Columbus talks about in this excerpt, how do you think this island differed from his home and life in Europe? Provide examples to support your answer.
