Andrés Reséndez is Professor of History at the University of California—Davis. He is the author of Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800–1850, A Texas Patriot on Trial in Mexico: José Antonio Navarro and the Texan Santa Fe Expedition, and A Land So Strange: The Epic Journey of Cabeza de Vaca.

Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca began his incredible odyssey in Texas when he washed ashore near Galveston in November 1528. In this selection, Dr. Reséndez recounts the trials of Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions—fellow Spaniards Alonso del Castillo and Andrés Dorantes and Estebanico, an African—during their time as slaves of the coastal Indians.

After being hurled onto the beach, Cabeza de Vaca and his emaciated crew spent some time regaining their strength. They built fires and roasted some of their remaining corn. A man named Lope de Oviedo, who was evidently healthier and stronger than the others, climbed up a tree to survey the land. “He discovered that we were on an island,” Cabeza de Vaca writes,
“and he saw that the land was rutted in the way that it usually is where cattle roam, and it seemed to him for this reason that it must be land inhabited by Christians, and thus he reported it to us.” The news must have been electrifying.

The men had reached an elongated island which was only 1.5 miles wide but 15 miles long. It must have been either Galveston Island or, more likely, the island immediately to the south.

Cabeza de Vaca ordered Lope de Oviedo to explore further without straying too far. He found a trail and followed it for a little over 1 mile to a small Indian village. As the huts were abandoned, the Spaniard took a pot and filled it with mullet and started to make his way back to the beach. A small dog followed him. Once on the trail, he also noticed three Indians with bows and arrows behind him. They called out to him. The castaway managed to rejoin his group before being overtaken, and the three natives prudently stopped at a distance. But within half an hour, 100 Indian men, all fully armed, had surrounded the Spaniards. Cabeza de Vaca makes only one dry but telling observation: “Whether or not they were of great stature, our fear made them seem like giants.”

Resistance was completely out of the question. Of the forty men in Cabeza de Vaca’s contingent, not six would have been able to stand. The famished outsiders would either die on the spot or reach a compromise with the native islanders. The two Spanish leaders, Cabeza de Vaca and the Royal Inspector Alonso de Solis, decided to approach the indigenous fighters and call out to them. The Indians came forward. The two royal officials gave out bells and beads, and the Indians gave the two strangers arrows in return, which is a sign of friendship. And through gestures the Indians made the castaways understand that they would be back the next morning with food. The Spaniards must have spent a night filled with foreboding. The idea of making preparations to resist an attack must have crossed their minds.

The next day at sunrise, the Indians returned. As promised, they brought with them fish and some curious roots unknown to the foreigners—quite likely cattail roots—that were about the size of chestnuts and that the Indians dug out from under water with great difficulty. In the afternoon the natives brought some more food. They had grown so confident that this time they came accompanied by women and children. The stranded men, so strikingly different, must have been for the Indians fascinating to observe. The natives kept visiting the castaways’ camp for some days, always delivering fish and roots.

As the Spaniards regained some strength, they thought about resuming their journey to Pánuco. They dug the raft out of the sand and dragged it to the edge of the water. The weakened but resourceful men must have gathered some water and probably saved some of the roots that they had been given. When everything seemed ready, the men removed their clothes so as to keep them dry, and then waded into the cold water to push the raft off from the shore. After they leapt aboard and had traveled some distance, a huge wave hit them, and, as Cabeza de Vaca explains, “Since we went naked and the cold was very great, we dropped the oars from our hands.” The raft drifted just a little longer before another large wave overturned it. The Royal Inspector Alonso de Solis and two other men clung to the barge so tenaciously that they became trapped underwater and drowned. All of the other men were plunged into the cold and tempestuous ocean; they were half-drowned and shivering when they made it back to the beach.
The Spaniards lost all their remaining possessions in that failed attempt to leave the island. They had been shedding baggage throughout Florida and the Gulf Coast, and now the process was complete. The castaways now faced the New World quite literally naked. “It was November,” writes Cabeza de Vaca, “and the cold was very great; and we were so thin that with little difficulty our bones could be counted, and we appeared like the very image of death.”

At the time of the Florida expedition, North America was colder than it is today. From the 1300s thru the 1800s, the world experienced a prolonged period of cooling, and the evidence suggests that the years from 1527 to 1529 were especially harsh. Cabeza de Vaca had complained about the cold in the middle of the Florida summer; the winter must have been daunting indeed.

Already hypothermic from their spell in the water, the men returned to their camp, where mercifully they found some last embers to rekindle a fire. They spent the next few hours huddled and commiserating: “And thus we were beseeching our Lord for mercy and the pardon of our sins, shedding many tears, each one having pity not only for himself but for all the others whom they saw in the same state.” As their situation became more desperate, the stranded men sought strength and consolation in their religious beliefs.

When the Indians returned at sunset to bring food as usual, they were shocked to see the Christians so changed. They withdrew immediately, and Cabeza de Vaca had to run after them to try to explain what had happened. Gradually, the natives came to understand the disaster that had befallen their guests. They also saw the bodies of two of the drowned Europeans. At last, they sat down among the castaways. “And with the great grief and pity they felt on seeing us in such a state,” Cabeza de Vaca writes, “they all began to weep loudly and so sincerely that they could be heard a great distance away.” The weeping lasted for more than half an hour. “And truly,” the Royal Treasurer marvels, “to see that these men, so lacking in reason and so crude in the manner of brutes, grieved so much for us, increased in me and in others of our company even more the magnitude of our suffering and the estimation of our misfortune.”

Once the weeping ended, Cabeza de Vaca resolutely asked the islanders to take them to their homes. There was no alternative that he could see, as the stranded men would otherwise die of exposure and hunger. And the Indians seemed willing to oblige. But even in these desperate circumstances, there were some expeditioners who opposed the plan, especially those who had been to Mexico and had seen or heard about Aztec practices of human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism. “We should not even speak of it”—they had objected—“because if they took us to their houses, they would sacrifice us to their idols.”

The Indians went away to make some preparations. They returned that night, having kindled four or five great bonfires between the coast and their hamlet. They feared that without such a precaution some of the foreigners might fall unconscious and die from exposure during the short journey from the beach to the village. When everything was ready, the Indians started carrying the castaways, taking them to the first fire, “and when they saw that we had regained some strength and warmth, they carried us to the next one, so rapidly that they almost did not let our feet touch the ground.” Not all the Spaniards consented to go with the islanders. At least five men chose to stay by the beach on their own, a decision they would soon come to regret.
When Cabeza de Vaca and his companions arrived at the village, they saw that the Indians had prepared a large house with many fires inside. The dancing began barely an hour after the outsiders had arrived, and the celebration lasted all night long. “For us there was neither rejoicing nor sleep”—Cabeza de Vaca recalled—“as we were awaiting the moment when they would sacrifice us.” But the men survived through the night, and the next morning the Indians gave them more food and continued to treat them kindly, allaying their fears.

The Indians’ generosity was astonishing. They had taken food to the Europeans twice a day for some time and had gone to great lengths to transport them to their camp and give them shelter. Potentially they would have to sustain this helpless crew through the winter. For a small community of not more than a few dozen families, feeding forty additional adults would constitute a significant drain on their food supplies.

That same day Cabeza de Vaca spotted a native man carrying some European objects that had not come from his raft. The Royal Treasurer anxiously asked the native where he had procured the items. Amazingly, he responded to Cabeza de Vaca through signs that he had received these objects from other men like himself, and that this second group was farther away but also on the island.

This revelation must have caused great commotion among the stranded men. Cabeza de Vaca immediately sent two of his men to look for these other Europeans, but the scouting party did not have to travel far. The other group of castaways was already on its way to the village, having been alerted about Cabeza de Vaca’s crew by other Indians who lived on that side of the island. They turned out to be the contingent under the command of Captains Andrés Dorantes and Alonso del Castillo, which must have also included Estebanico. “Upon encountering us,” Cabeza de Vaca recalls, “they received a great fright to see us in the condition we were in.”

The reunion must have seemed to all like a miracle. They had last seen each other at the crossing of the Mississippi River and had faced so many dangers in the intervening weeks that each group must have assumed that the other had perished.

Tantalizingly, the members of the Dorantes-Castillo party were still in possession of their raft. At least some of the men would have a chance of going forward to Pánuco. The eighty men set to work immediately. They decided that the strongest among them would continue; the rest would remain on the island to recover and perhaps would attempt to reach Spanish-controlled territory by land in the spring.

But the raft was unable to support the castaways’ hopes. When they launched it a few days after their reunion, it immediately broke apart and sank to the bottom. The men were now without crafts or provisions. Moreover, winter was looming and many of the men were naked, so swimming across rivers and bays was impossible. Pánuco would have to wait until the spring.

But even without the raft, the castaways decided to send an advance party to the south. Four men would make a last-ditch effort to reach Pánuco over the winter. They must have been given clothing and provisions. Perhaps a small raft was built for them. These four men were among the strongest survivors and were all good swimmers. Unfortunately, even they were unable to reach Christian lands; all four died in the attempt.
After this disaster, the remaining Spaniards, emaciated and destitute as they were, must have come to count themselves as fortunate. At least they had washed up among friendly Indians.

The survivors of the Pánfilo de Narváez expedition were the first outsiders to have lived in the immense territories north of Mexico and to come in contact with many peoples across North America. It was an experience that neither the Spaniards nor their Amerindian hosts would forget.

At contact, both groups appeared strikingly different. The contrasts were so patent that many Europeans openly discussed whether the natives were human at all and vice versa. Two large contingents of the human species had reestablished contact after a very long time. The peoples of the New World were descended from a small group of men and women who had crossed the Bering Strait some 12,000 years ago and migrated to America, the last great land mass of the world that had remained unpopulated. Shortly after this migration episode, both worlds lost touch once again.

Over the millennia, these true pioneers of the New World explored the entire continent and multiplied until reaching some 60 or 70 million by the fifteenth century (comparable to Europe’s population at the time). They built monumental ceremonial centers, established impressive trading networks, and waged war on one another. It was a world unto itself, unconnected to and unconcerned with the rest of the planet. Recent DNA evidence confirms that all Native American lineages can ultimately be traced back to Asia, but that for thousands of years they evolved completely independently from all other humans. It was not until 1492, when Columbus reached the Caribbean, that these two huge fragments of the human family were finally reunited.

Despite their long separation, the Old and the New World had undergone remarkably parallel developments. The peoples of both worlds had domesticated plants and animals; organized themselves in chiefdoms, principalities, monarchies, and empires; and developed forms of writing and mathematics. Most early European explorers were initially drawn to the stark differences between themselves and the natives they encountered. Cabeza de Vaca and his men, unlike other explorers, had the luxury of direct and patient observation. Moreover, their lives depended on the commonalities.

The island where the two rafts had landed harbored two small indigenous groups: the Capoques and the Hans. The sheer appearance of these two groups was daunting. They were tall, not infrequently reaching 6 feet, easily towering over the Spaniards. The natives went about completely naked, and their physique was robust and flexible. They were fond of piercing one nipple, sometimes both, and inserting through the holes large reeds that could be as thick as two fingers and two and a half palms in length. They also pierced their lower lip, inserting yet another reed, although this one only half a finger in thickness. Only the women covered part of their bodies, making garments out of a tree fiber, while the maidens wore deerskins.

Cabeza de Vaca and his crew lived with one of the two bands, though he fails to mention which one. The Dorantes-Castillo contingent resided with the other. It appears that the two groups of survivors were allowed to visit each other freely at first, for relations between
Capoques and Hans were cordial. Even though they spoke mutually unintelligible languages, the two bands had no qualms about sharing their commodious island. Each group must have numbered perhaps 400 or 500 individuals.

Nothing could have prepared the castaways for the lifestyle they would have to adopt to survive. The Capoques and Hans were fully nomadic peoples. They led a roving life, seldom spending more than a few weeks in any given site. They had but few possessions and lived in simple, semi-circular tents that were easily constructed and that provided only minimal protection from the elements. Their simple dwellings, however, belied their extraordinarily sophisticated use of their environment. Their knowledge of the coastal flora and fauna was simply unmatched. They were expert foragers. The Capoques and Hans moved in seasonal, deliberate patterns meant to take advantage of specific food items in a range that was not confined to their island but also extended into the flat, low-lying coastal prairie on the mainland. Their hunting skills were formidable as well. In Cabeza de Vaca’s estimation, their hearing and eyesight were so sharp and attuned to even the slightest movement so as to rank among the best in the world.

When the two rafts made landfall in November, the Capoques and Hans must have just arrived at the island to spend the winter there. They typically subsisted on fish and roots, which were plentiful at first, but the natives knew well that things would deteriorate steadily, reaching a low point in February when the starchy tubers begin to sprout and are no longer edible.

The winter of 1528–1529 was extraordinarily harsh. The cold and a series of great storms prevented the Indians from wading into the water to dig up the roots. Fishing became extremely difficult and generally yielded nothing. The houses may have been portable, but they afforded little protection against the inclement weather. Many castaways were unable to survive. “In a short time, of us eighty men who arrived there from both ends [of the island], only fifteen remained alive.” With these few words, Cabeza de Vaca glosses over what must have been two months of unabated horror. Men must have been dying almost daily.

The miserable winter conditions may have seemed apocalyptic to the last survivors, but the natives understood this hungry spell as part of an annual cycle. As winter eased into spring, and the roots began to sprout and were no longer edible, the Capoques and Hans began making preparations to go to the mainland in search of the one food item that was available all year round: oysters. Ordinarily they subsisted on these mollusks for three or four months of the year and, as some of the survivors pointedly observed, “in fact eat nothing else.” Around April the Indians also combed the shore, “eating blackberries the entire month, during which time they do not cease to perform their areitas [feasts] and celebrations.” In the summer it was time to hunt deer and bison, though without overlooking other food sources, including spiders, lizards, snakes, and rats. In the fall the Capoques and the Hans went back to their island to catch fish and harvest the aquatic roots, recommencing the yearly cycle.

Living on the coast of Texas was not easy. The survivors of two rafts of the Narváez expedition had tried to spend the winter on their own and wound up cannibalizing each other. Yet for centuries, these coastal natives had survived and even thrived in the same environment. Even though other indigenous groups both to the south and to the north cultivated corn, the Capoques and Hans and their descendants relied solely on the bounty of the land.
What had begun as a guest-host relationship between the natives and the Spaniards eventually degenerated into a relationship between masters and slaves. The transition was gradual but unmistakable. No doubt, the castaways did not take long to outlive their initial welcome. The Capoques and Hans had been extraordinarily generous to the marooned explorers, but with the onset of winter, the strangers must have been expected to pull their own weight. The Indians were surely shocked at how useless the foreigners were. The castaways must have been laughably incapable of hunting with bows and arrows, and their fishing skills could not have been much better, as their knowledge of local traps, weirs, and edible fish was minimal. Since the strangers could not be entrusted with many occupations, they were given women's work. They had to dig for roots, carry firewood, and fetch water.

One incident in particular strained their relationship. Not all of the Spaniards had taken up residence with the Indians. Five raftsmen had chosen to spend the winter by the beach; their fear of being sacrificed and eaten by the natives must have been overpowering. It had been a grave mistake. And the very thing that they dreaded the most—cannibalism—came to pass, albeit not in the way that they had expected it. Finding themselves without any food and in great necessity, they ate one another. And as Cabeza de Vaca notes with disarming logic, “Only one remained because he was alone and had no one to eat him.”

When the Indians learned what had happened, they became very upset. “The scandal among them was such that they would have killed the men had they seen them at the start; and all of us would have been in grave danger.” Ironically, in later centuries Europeans accused the native peoples of coastal Texas of cannibalism. Little did they know that in the sixteenth century the Europeans themselves had been the cannibals, and the Indians the ones appalled by such behavior.

The castaways’ situation became even more precarious when the native islanders began dying from an “illness of the bowels,” perhaps dysentery spread by the decomposing bodies of the Europeans. About half of all the Indians on the island died. It was an astonishing calamity and a terrible foreboding of the demographic disaster that would soon engulf the entire continent due to the introduction of new pathogens to the New World. Perhaps with good reason, the strangers were held responsible. “And taking this to be very true,” Cabeza de Vaca writes, “the Indians agreed among themselves to kill those of us who remained.”

As the natives prepared to carry out their intentions, the Indian man who had come to own Cabeza de Vaca intervened. He forcefully defended the castaways by reasoning that if they had the power to cause illness among the natives, then they surely would have prevented the deaths of so many of their own kind. This Indian man, who must have been sufficiently influential to hold slaves and go against general opinion, noted that none of the foreigners did any harm or ill and concluded that the best thing to do was to let them be. Somehow his point of view carried the day, and the lives of the strangers were spared.

The men would remain on the island as slaves to the natives. Life became so harsh for the survivors that they took the habit of calling the island Malhado, the “Isle of Ill fate.” For the next six years or so the castaways’ lives revolved around unceasing work. Their chores were deceptively trivial: carrying wood, digging for roots, or fetching water. There was nothing insidious
or cruel about these activities, but they were constant as well as physically challenging and often painful. The heavy stumps chafed directly against their bare backs, and the bearers’ feet were hurt from walking over summer-hot sand and amidst fierce spiny plants. Cabeza de Vaca’s fingers bled constantly from digging roots; and he was forced to venture completely naked through thickets of cattails and other plants.

By this time, the survivors were entirely at the mercy of their masters. The native children mocked the Christians almost daily. According to Cabeza de Vaca, “Any child would give them a good hair pulling, and for them this was great fun, the greatest pleasure in the world.” That was merely juvenile humor; the adults did not hesitate to use violence to obtain compliance. The captives reported being beaten with sticks, slapped in the face, and having their thick beards jerked out. A minor omission, delay, or infraction could bring about severe punishment, even death. Cabeza de Vaca recounts how three Christians were killed “only for daring to go from one house to another . . . and another three who remained alive expected to meet the same end.” The castaways’ daily anxiety over being punished or killed must have taken a dramatic toll. None of them could depend on staying alive from one day to the next. One Spaniard who had committed no infraction at all was killed simply because one Indian woman had a dream “of I don’t know what nonsense,” the castaways recall, “because in those parts they believe in dreams and kill their own children because of dreams.”

Undoubtedly, the castaways had become slaves. Yet it is also important to note that societies like the Capoques and Hans were not “slaving societies,” in the sense that they did not actively procure and exploit slave labor. They certainly possessed slaves, which were a byproduct of their continuous warfare with neighboring groups or came about when wandering strangers like the castaways “joined” these bands to escape starvation. However, this system was a far cry from that employed by more centralized and hierarchical societies like Portugal and Spain, for instance, or other indigenous societies in the American continent. For the coastal peoples of Texas, slaves were decidedly marginal to their survival and well-being. For one thing, a slave may have represented one more pair of arms but also an additional mouth to feed. Rather than systematically procuring and exploiting slaves, they were tolerated like stray dogs and permitted to stay as long as they made themselves useful. Indeed, as the castaways would discover, some of the natives of Texas flatly refused to take them, even as slaves. But once the castaways had gained admittance, their lives depended entirely on the will of their masters. This peculiar context did not lessen the sufferings of Cabeza de Vaca and his companions. But it helps us understand why the castaways were enslaved only gradually, why they had to seek out unwilling masters who often abused them, and why during their six-year stay along the Texas coast they were able to flee from one indigenous clan to another.

The once-mighty conquistadors had endured a precipitous fall. Life as an abused slave must have been indescribably bitter for the likes of Cabeza de Vaca and Captains Dorantes and Castillo. Castillo could have enjoyed the life of a judge or a municipal officer, had he only chosen to stay in Europe. What foolish impulse had compelled him to join the Narváez expedition and forsake a lifetime of comfort and happiness? Captain Dorantes may have been more of a man of action, perhaps more accepting of reversals of fortune and violence. After all, he already bore a scar on
his face from military action. But surely he never imagined spending his last days on earth enslaved by a bizarre, naked people halfway around the world.

And what to say of the Royal Treasurer? Generations of Cabeza de Vaca had worked to further the imperial aims of Spain. His grandfather had been the famous captain who had conquered Gran Canaria. With the history of his ancestors in mind, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca must have also dreamed of great acts of conquest and bravery when the Florida expedition got underway. Yet his ambitions had been shattered in the whirlwind of a hurricane, a colossal navigational mistake, a difficult march through Florida, a harrowing raft passage, and a sordid enslavement. Surely this nobleman suffered greatly as he tried to reconcile himself to spending the balance of his life digging for roots until his fingers bled and stoically withstanding beatings at the hands of natives who would never understand what he was meant to be.

The man best able to cope psychologically with the adverse conditions was in all likelihood the African Estebanico. He was no stranger to the life of bondage, as he had already once been captured, taken away from his homeland, and sold in Europe. His sufferings certainly increased in the New World as the expedition foundered, but his social standing had changed but little. He had been Dorantes’s slave; but now his master had himself become enslaved, an odd twist of fate that probably gave Estebanico a certain unspeakable satisfaction. Although it is possible that his subordination to Dorantes and the other Spaniards persisted in some fashion, the fact that the white Europeans were also enslaved must have reduced the disparities. Indians, not Spaniards, exercised the ultimate authority now, a fact that must have complicated immensely Dorantes’s ability to enforce his authority over the African. With the passing of time, Estebanico became just another slave largely undistinguishable from his former masters.

Estebanico’s sheer survival is miraculous. All the other castaways were elite Spaniards who were likely to outlast Africans, simply because they were better nourished and their bodies had been less exposed to the ravages of punishing physical labor. Moreover, Europeans in commanding positions were able to use their authority in ways that shielded them from danger and maximized their chances of survival. And yet, Estebanico managed to outlive dozens of Spaniards who could have reasonably expected to be among the last men standing. By all accounts, he was the ultimate survivor. He had experienced the life of bondage on three different continents and had been forced to face incredible perils and adventures. Against astonishing odds, he had survived through it all.

The last remaining castaways endured as slaves on the coast of Texas for six years. By the spring of 1529, after that first brutal winter, only eighteen or so castaways remained alive. They became dispersed among the Capoques and Hans as they followed their respective masters.

Cabeza de Vaca’s experience was especially trying because all of the European and African castaways hosted by his particular band of Indians (we don’t know which of the two) died over the winter. By the spring he was the only remaining castaway within this band. In the spring Cabeza de Vaca’s masters took him to the mainland. The Royal Treasurer’s sense of loneliness and abandonment was compounded by a severe and prolonged illness that came to afflict him at this time.
It was also a time of despair. During his lengthy convalescence, Cabeza de Vaca learned that the majority of the castaways, still living on the island of Malhado with the other band, had agreed to resume their quest to Pánuco. This sizable contingent of twelve men—which included Dorantes, Castillo, and Estebanico—crossed to the mainland, not far from where Cabeza de Vaca was struggling to regain his health, and started journeying south.

The Royal Treasurer knew about his companions’ intentions through his indigenous masters. Dorantes and Castillo even tried to contact Cabeza de Vaca, but were unable to see him. In any case, he could not travel. His companions’ departure must have been a crushing blow for the Royal Treasurer.

Cabeza de Vaca had little choice but to entrust himself to the mercy of God. His religious convictions constituted his last refuge. In the summer or fall of 1529, his captors took him back to Malhado. There the Royal Treasurer found out that not all the explorers had left for Pánuco, but that two very frail castaways had stayed behind at the island. Like Cabeza de Vaca, these two men had been unable to follow the Dorantes-Castillo contingent. There must have been a great deal of comfort in this news. These two men were Lope de Oviedo, the tree climber who had first explored Malhado, and another Spaniard by the name of Jerónimo de Alaniz.

Cabeza de Vaca remained with the same band of Indians for more than a year, traveling between Malhado and the mainland. But they treated the Royal Treasurer harshly and forced him to do a great deal of work. Cabeza de Vaca resolved to flee the island and join another band that lived in a forest on the mainland. These Indians were called the Charrucos. He must have come in contact with them during his travels with the native islanders.

Thus began a new phase in Cabeza de Vaca’s life. The Charrucos were at war with other groups surrounding them. They needed a neutral broker able to trade even in the midst of hostilities, and an outsider like Cabeza de Vaca was the perfect conduit. With the encouragement of the Charrucos, the former Royal Treasurer became an itinerant merchant carving for himself an extraordinary role among the Indians of the region. We can only imagine Cabeza de Vaca’s trepidation as he ventured into new lands wholly exposed and carrying valuable wares, but the Charrucos urged him to go from one place to another to procure the things that they needed. Thus, for two years the resourceful castaway plied the trade.

Cabeza de Vaca started his remarkable trading journeys by collecting among the Charrucos objects that were coveted by the peoples of the interior. Such coastal items included pieces of sea snail shells and the hearts of the animals themselves. He also took “sea beads”—a decidedly poetic if somewhat vague description that may refer to pearls—as well as a certain kind of shell that was used in the interior to cut a fruit that resembled a bean. (The natives used this fruit in their curing ceremonies and it was therefore greatly prized.) Armed with these goods, Cabeza de Vaca then ventured through the interior for weeks at a time, covering great distances of 120 miles or more. He must have been fed along the way and allowed to wander through the territories of various peoples, apparently without conflict.

In exchange for his coastal goods, Cabeza de Vaca received hides, which were always in great demand among the Charrucos. He also brought back red ocher, “with which they smear themselves and dye their faces and hair,” as well as flints, glue, and hard canes to make arrows. “And
this occupation served me well” — Cabeza de Vaca explains — “because practicing it, I had the freedom to go wherever I wanted, and I was not constrained in any way nor enslaved, and wherever I went they treated me well and gave me food out of want for my wares, and most importantly because doing that, I was able to seek out the ways by which I would go forward.”

Only the two fellow castaways who had remained on Malhado prevented Cabeza de Vaca from attempting to set out toward Pánuco. Jerónimo de Alaniz died some time later. But Lope de Oviedo endured on the island. Thus every year Cabeza de Vaca made his way across the bay to visit Lope de Oviedo and talk him into escaping together. Cabeza de Vaca’s visits to Malhado are remarkable, for it means that his former masters no longer sought retribution for his escape, but perhaps were now more interested in gaining access to the Royal Treasurer’s wares.

Despite Cabeza de Vaca’s efforts to convince him, Lope de Oviedo was reluctant to leave the island, and kept postponing the date of their escape. He preferred to cling to his life in Malhado, however precarious and tormented, rather than risk death in unknown lands and amongst even more violent and unpredictable peoples.

After three years, however, Cabeza de Vaca finally prevailed. In the spring or summer of 1532, the two survivors made their escape toward Pánuco. Lope de Oviedo did not know how to swim, so Cabeza de Vaca had to help him get across the bay to the mainland. They must have followed the same route that the Dorantes-Castillo party had taken years earlier, painstakingly moving through a region of four rivers until they fell in with a group of Indians known as the Quevenes. These Indians conveyed startling information to the two fugitives. The Quevenes first said that farther south there were three other Christians who were still alive. Cabeza de Vaca and Lope de Oviedo then asked about all the others, and the Quevenes responded that they had all died of cold and hunger. More ominously, the Quevenes said that the Christians were treated badly in that area and remarked that some neighboring Indians had even killed three Christians for their own amusement. By way of demonstration, the Quevenes proceeded to take Lope de Oviedo and hit him with a stick and slap him, “and I did not lack my share,” Cabeza de Vaca writes, “and they threw mud balls at us, and each day placed arrows aimed at our hearts, saying that they wanted to kill us as they had killed our other companions.”

Lope de Oviedo, hard to convince in the first place, became discouraged and decided to return to the island. The Royal Treasurer tried to reassure his companion, talking to him for a long time. But he could not prevent Lope de Oviedo from going back to Malhado. His fate is unknown.

The Royal Treasurer proceeded alone with the Quevenes; there would be no turning back for him. They took Cabeza de Vaca to a lush, twisting river where various groups had gathered to eat nuts. When Cabeza de Vaca approached a dwelling where the Indians had taken him, Andrés Dorantes came out. The captain was greatly astonished to see a fellow Spaniard whom he had given up for dead so long ago. “We gave many thanks to God upon finding ourselves reunited,” Cabeza de Vaca recalls, “and this day was one of the days of greatest pleasure that we have had in our lives.” It was the fall of 1532; the two Spaniards had not seen each other for three and a half years.

Cabeza de Vaca and Dorantes then went together to see Castillo and Estebanico, who were also encamped at what they called the “river of nuts.” All four must have been able to spend some
time talking and sharing their remarkable stories of endurance. Only then did Cabeza de Vaca learn of what had happened to these fellow castaways.

After that first disastrous winter of 1528–1529, Dorantes and Castillo had led most of the survivors out of the island of Malhado in the spring. The first step had been to persuade the people of Malhado to get them across to the mainland on canoes, as many of the castaways could not swim. Somehow these men were still in possession of some objects salvaged from their raft that they used as trade goods and gifts. To get to the mainland, the outsiders had to part with a valuable cloak of sable skins that they had pilfered during the raft voyage. The cloak was deemed to be “the finest to be found anywhere in the world,” its scent was said to resemble that of “ambergris and musk, and it was so strong that it could be detected at a great distance.” The natives must have been sufficiently impressed, for they consented to letting this group of survivors go and even agreed to transport them to the other shore.

Once on the mainland, the members of the Dorantes-Castillo party had occasion to demonstrate their dogged tenacity. For weeks they walked along the shore, heading south. The terrain could hardly be more difficult: in fact, no other portion of the coast between the Mississippi River and the Rio de las Palmas is more intricately crisscrossed by water than the section they were now trying to traverse south of present-day Galveston Bay. They had to negotiate no fewer than four large rivers and at least three straits or bays. In each instance they were forced either to build makeshift rafts, repair abandoned canoes, or beg for the assistance from local Indians.

The passage took a heavy toll. Some of the men drowned along the way, while others were killed by Indians. The party dwindled from twelve to ten to six and at last to only three: Dorantes, Castillo, and Estebanico. These three survivors were forced to “join” the local Indians to save themselves from starvation. They were enslaved and reduced to following their respective masters, thus becoming separated. Still they somehow were able to keep sporadic contact with one another, and even at times to work side by side.

The reunion of these three castaways with Cabeza de Vaca in the fall of 1532 was momentous. It was a time of renewed hope and enlarged possibilities. The four men broached the subject of escape. “I told [them]”—Cabeza de Vaca recalls—“that my purpose was to go to the land of Christians and that on this path and pursuit I was embarked.” Dorantes responded that he too had been urging his two companions to flee for years, but that neither Castillo nor Estebanico had wanted to go. These last two men were at a crushing disadvantage: they did not know how to swim. The coastal environment amounted to the most extravagant prison that God could have devised for them.

Now there might be a way out. The miraculous reunion had changed the castaways’ possibilities of escape in one crucial respect: there were now two swimmers to help the nonswimmers. All four were hardy survivors well acquainted with the Indians and with the coastal environment. They hatched a plan. After a long hiatus, the foursome would resume their quest to regain Christian lands.