

Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca

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Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (circa 1490 – circa 1557) was an early Spanish explorer of the New World and is remembered as a protoanthropological author. His name is spelled as *Aluar Nuñez Cabeça de Vaca*.^[1] in 16th Century documents.

Cabeza de Vaca means "head of the cow". This surname was granted to his family in the 13th century, when his ancestor aided a Christian army attacking Moors by pointing out a secret pass through the mountains by leaving a cow's head there. In the prologue to his great story relating his shipwreck and wanderings in North America, he refers to his forefather's service to the King, and regrets that his own deeds could not be as great, due to forces beyond his control.

As treasurer, and hence one of the chief officers, of the Narváez expedition, he, and eighty others, were the only survivors of the party of 600 men. Over

time, all but four of these men died in the foreign land. The remaining four were enslaved by various Native American tribes of the upper Gulf coast (including the *Hand* and the *Capoques* of Galveston Island, which the explorers termed *Malhado*, or Island of Doom) but later escaped and eventually reached Mexico City.

Travelling mostly in this small group, Cabeza de Vaca explored what are now the U.S. states of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona on foot from coastal Louisiana to Sinaloa, Mexico,

over a period of roughly six years, during which time he lived in conditions of abject poverty and, occasionally, in slavery. During his travels he developed sympathies for the indigenous population. Among the natives, he lived as a slave, passing from tribe to tribe. He eventually became a trader, which allowed him freedom from his enslavement and to travel among the tribes.



A plaque commemorating Cabeza de Vaca's discovery of Iguazu Falls

Eventually, after returning to the colonised reaches of New Spain and encountering a group of fellow Spaniards in the vicinity of modern-day Culiacán, he went on to Mexico City and returned to Europe in 1537. Cabeza de Vaca wrote about his experiences in a report for Emperor Charles V. It was later published in 1542, under the title *La Relación* (The Report). Cabeza de Vaca desired to succeed Pánfilo de Narváez (whose ineptitude had caused the deaths of most of the party) as governor of Florida and return there, but Charles V had already appointed De Soto to lead the next expedition. Cabeza de Vaca declined to travel with the expedition as second in command. His apparent reluctance to provide his countrymen with sufficient information about the uncharted territory may have been due to his jealousy over De Soto's appointment.

Instead, in 1540 he was appointed governor of Río de la Plata, in what is now Paraguay, Argentina and surroundings. As in North America, he was unusually sensitive and benevolent towards the Native peoples. He was the first European to behold the Iguazú Falls, among the most spectacular in the world. Political intrigue against him caused his arrest in Asunción and return to Spain in chains, in around 1545. He was eventually

exonerated and wrote an extensive report on South America, which bound with his earlier *La Relación* and published under the title *Comentarios* (Commentary).

Bibliography, in English

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- Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar Núñez: *Cabeza de Vaca's Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America*. Translation of *La Relacion* by Cyclone Covey. University of New Mexico Press 1983. ISBN 082630656X
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<http://www.laits.utexas.edu/rtyler/HIS350L/Texas>

External links

- Cabeza de Vaca The Journey of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca
- PBS documentary *The Conquistadors* Site with map of proposed southern route through Texas and northern Mexico.
- PBS website for Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca
- Details of Cabeza de Vaca's Trail through today's United States
- Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación* – contains hires photography of the 1555 edition of *La Relación*
- *The journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca and his companions from Florida to the Pacific, 1528-1536*, hosted by the Portal tTexas History
- *The Journey of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca*, from American Journeys.

- Cabeza de Vaca Primary Source Adventure, a lesson plan hosted by The Portal to Texas History
- *Cabeza de Vaca ; La Salle*. published 1901, hosted by the Portal to Texas History.
- Cabeza de Vaca's Florida History
- Free on line, book "Naufragios" by Álgvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca. En español (pdf)
- Cabeza de Vaca's journal
- *Naufragios de Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca*, available at Project Gutenberg. (in Spanish)
- link to movie based on his book on IMDB

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