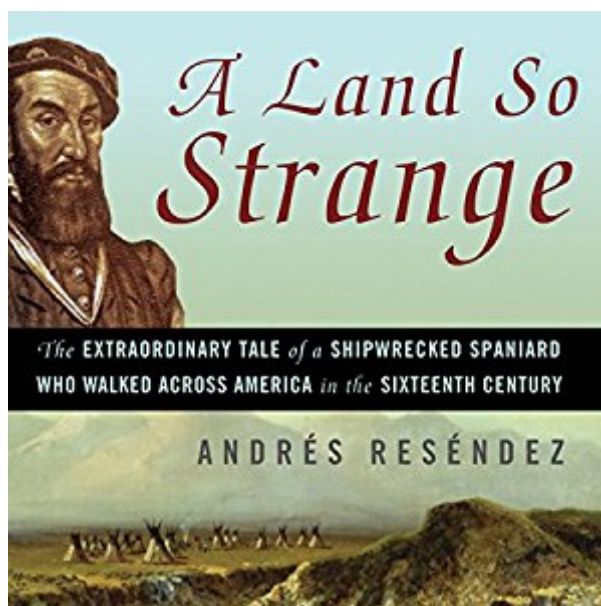


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A Land So Strange: The Epic Journey Of Cabeza De Vaca



Synopsis

In 1528, a mission set out from Spain to colonize Florida. But the expedition went horribly wrong: Delayed by a hurricane, knocked off course by a colossal error of navigation, and ultimately doomed by a disastrous decision to separate the men from their ships, the mission quickly became a desperate journey of survival. Of the 300 men who had embarked on the journey, only four survived - three Spaniards and an African slave. This tiny band endured a horrific march through Florida, a harrowing raft passage across the Louisiana coast, and years of enslavement in the American Southwest. They journeyed for almost 10 years in search of the Pacific Ocean that would guide them home, and they were forever changed by their experience. The men lived with a variety of nomadic Indians and learned several indigenous languages. They saw lands, peoples, plants, and animals that no outsider had ever seen before. In this enthralling tale of four castaways wandering in an unknown land, Andres Resendez brings to life the vast, dynamic world of North America just a few years before European settlers would transform it forever.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The primary sources for this epic tale are the official transcript of and report on the testimony of three of the survivors and Alzar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca's 1542 narrative report on his 8 year odyssey from what is now Tampa, Florida to Mexico City. Andrés Reséndez retells this story in a hugely entertaining and informative way. The book is well written and fast paced. The numerous maps, illustrations, detailed footnotes and extensive bibliography are extremely helpful. Many of the footnotes add significantly to the narrative and could have been made part of the text. Reséndez

demonstrates an easy mastery of both primary and secondary materials. His expertise enables him to set the original Narvaez expedition in context and to provide valuable background information on all the major players. Beyond the almost miraculous survival of the Royal Treasurer Cabeza de Vaca, Captains Andres Dorantes and Alonso del Castillo, and the black slave, Estebanico, the central puzzle of this survival saga is how these four sole survivors out of a force of over 300 managed to go from essentially captive slaves to shamans and revered healers. Res  ndez provides a reasonable explanation: Castillo's father was a physician from Salamanca, Spain's great university town, and that his exposure to basic medical practices and demeanour probably equipped him with sufficient knowledge to effectively deal with certain illnesses. Castillo's family heritage plus the practical extensions of what these well-travelled soldiers had seen or personally experienced - for example, the extracting of an arrow and the suturing of the wound - helps partially explain their transformation from slaves to successful shamans.

This book is Resendez's gloss on what is, in my opinion, the most amazing survival story I know of, and I've read a lot of them! It's not just amazing because three shipwrecked Spaniards and a Moorish slave (Estevan) managed to make it from the Florida panhandle to the Gulf coast of Texas to the Pacific Coast of Mexico in a staggering eight year odyssey, but because of the unique way they did it, and the consequences for the Americas and the Spanish Empire. Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions were the only survivors of the disastrous Narvaez expedition, which left Spain with 5 ships, 600 men and a license to conquer Florida in 1527 and ended up castaway on the barrier islands of South Texas in 1528. They did not see another "Christian" (European) until they ran into the advance guard of the brutal Nuno de Guzman's conquering army near the Pacific coast of Mexico, in Sinaloa, in 1536. In the interim, they went from being guests, then slaves of Indian tribes on the Texas coast, to faith healers and famous "Children of the Sun". It was a mutually beneficial, but rather bizarre, ritualistic exchange, of their services for goods, apparently orchestrated by their Indian hosts, that really what got them across the continent safe and sound. It went like this: after performing their healings in a village, its inhabitants would take them to the next village along their route where their hosts would trade them for everything owned by its occupants. They would heal the sick of this village, who would then take them on to the next one and repeat the process so that the miraculous strangers flowed northwest and goods flowed back to the southeast and everybody left happy. The repercussions of the four castaways' miraculous re-appearance were almost immediate.

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