Captain James Cook is one of the most famous of all explorers. On three separate voyages, he mapped much of the world and claimed new territory for Britain, including Australia. He made his first voyage in 1768. He was sent to Tahiti in the Pacific Ocean to observe the transit of the planet Venus across the front of the sun.

Cook was also told to search for the Great Southern Continent, Terra Australis.

Sailing South
Cook sailed for the Pacific on the HMS Endeavour with naturalists and an astronomer. They arrived in Tahiti on April 13, 1769, and received a friendly welcome. After the scientists had observed the transit of Venus, the Endeavour sailed on to New Zealand. Cook charted the coastline of the islands but did not attempt to explore because of the fierce appearance of the native Maori.

Terra Australis
For centuries, maps showed an imaginary Terra Australis, or "southern land." People thought that Europe, Asia, and North America must be balanced by a large continent in the Southern Hemisphere. On Cook's second voyage (1772–1775), he sailed around the globe near the Antarctic Circle. He showed that, if Terra Australis existed, it was icy and uninhabited.

DID YOU KNOW?
Cook was such an expert navigator that he could tell by the swell of the sea whether or not the ship was near land.
Final Voyage

Cook's third journey aimed to find the Pacific entrance to the Northwest Passage, a route around the top of North America. He sailed to New Zealand in early 1777, then across the Pacific to Alaska and the Arctic Ocean. He then sailed back to Hawaii, which he had sighted on the voyage north. But he was killed during an argument with some natives who were trying to steal a boat. His deputy, Charles Clerke, took Cook's ship, Resolution, back to Britain.

Second Voyage

On his second voyage, Cook headed south in search of Terra Australis. In January 1774, Cook's ship Resolution reached further south than anyone before him. But icebergs prevented him reaching the coast of Antarctica. He sailed home via the South Pacific, visiting Easter Island, Tahiti, the New Hebrides, and New Caledonia.