

La Peruse – Voyage of Discovery

The **La Pérouse expedition (1785–1788)** was France's ambitious answer to the voyages of Captain James Cook. Led by **Jean-François de Galaup, comte de La Pérouse**, it was a massive scientific and geographic undertaking that ended in one of the greatest maritime mysteries of the 18th century.

The Mission

Commissioned by **King Louis XVI**, who was an amateur geographer himself, the expedition was designed to:

- **Map the Pacific:** Explore the "gaps" left by Cook, particularly in the North Pacific and around East Asia.
- **Science & Trade:** The ships carried 10 scientists (botanists, astronomers, and geologists) to document new species and investigate potential fur-trading routes.
- **Political Presence:** Assert French influence in a region increasingly dominated by the British and Spanish.

The expedition consisted of two 500-tonne frigates: **La Boussole** (The Compass) and **L'Astrolabe** (The Astrolabe), carrying a total of 225 men.

The Grand Tour

Over three years, La Pérouse covered an incredible distance:

1. **The Americas:** They rounded Cape Horn, visited Chile, and then sailed north to **Alaska** and **California**, where La Pérouse became the first non-Spanish European to visit Monterey.
2. **East Asia:** They charted the coast of **Siberia**, **Korea**, and **Japan**, discovering the "La Pérouse Strait" between Sakhalin and Hokkaido.
3. **The South Pacific:** They visited Hawaii, Samoa (where 12 crew members were killed in a skirmish), and Tonga.
4. **Australia:** In January 1788, they arrived at **Botany Bay** just days after the British First Fleet. This was the last time the expedition was seen by Europeans.

The Disappearance and Discovery

La Pérouse departed Australia on March 10, 1788, intending to explore the Solomon Islands and return to France by 1789. He never arrived. For decades, his fate was unknown—a mystery so famous that legend says Louis XVI's last words on the way to the guillotine were, "*Is there any news of La Pérouse?*"

- **1826–1827:** Irish captain **Peter Dillon** found French swords and artifacts on the island of **Vanikoro** (Solomon Islands).
- **The Fate:** It was determined that both ships had struck the jagged coral reefs of Vanikoro during a cyclone.

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- **The Survivors:** Local oral histories suggested some sailors survived the initial wreck, built a small boat from the remains of the *Astrolabe*, and sailed away, only to likely vanish elsewhere at sea.

<u>Feature</u>	<u>Details</u>
Ships	<i>La Boussole</i> and <i>L'Astrolabe</i>
Last Contact	March 1788, Botany Bay (Australia)
Wreck Location	Vanikoro, Solomon Islands
Legacy	A suburb in Sydney, Australia, is named "La Perouse" in his honor.

Note: Because La Pérouse sent his journals and maps back to France via a messenger (Barthélemy de Lesseps) during a stop in Siberia, the scientific findings of the voyage were preserved and published even though the crew was lost.

The meeting between La Pérouse and the British at Botany Bay in 1788 is one of history's most surreal "small world" moments—the birth of British Australia witnessed by the peak of the French Enlightenment.

The Meeting at Botany Bay (Jan–March 1788)

When the French ships *La Boussole* and *L'Astrolabe* appeared on **January 24, 1788**, the British were stunned. Captain Arthur Phillip's First Fleet had arrived only a few days earlier and was in the process of moving to the more suitable Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour).

- **A Tense but Polite Stand-off:** The British were initially nervous that the French were there to claim the territory. However, La Pérouse was purely on a scientific mission.
- **The Swap:** Because the British were leaving Botany Bay just as the French were arriving, they barely spent time together on land. However, they exchanged "pleasantries and information."
- **The Last Mail:** Knowing his journey was far from over, La Pérouse gave his journals, charts, and letters to the British to be sent back to Europe. Because of this, his discoveries survived even though he did not.
- **The First Death:** While at Botany Bay, the expedition's chaplain and naturalist, **Father Louis Receveur**, died from wounds sustained earlier in Samoa. He was buried at Botany Bay; his grave is still a pilgrimage site today.

For nearly 40 years, the disappearance was a complete mystery. It wasn't until **1826** that Captain Peter Dillon found the first clues on the island of **Vanikoro** in the Solomon Islands.

The "Artificial Quarry" Archaeologists discovered that for decades, the local islanders had used the wrecks as a source of materials.

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Artifacts found include:

- **Navigational Tools:** A **sextant** inscribed with the name of the maker (Mercier) helped identify the *La Boussole*. Divers also found an **azimuth compass** and telescopes.
- **Military Gear:** Small bronze cannons, muskets, sword guards, and flattened musket balls.
- **Daily Life:** Silver utensils, teacups, Chinese porcelain dishes, glass beads, and even a French ship's bell.
- **The Ships:** Large anchors, iron and copper pieces, and a fleur-de-lys coat of arms decoration.

The story of **Louis XVI's final words** is one of the most enduring and poignant legends of the French Revolution. It frames the King not just as a monarch facing his end, but as a man of the Enlightenment who remained devoted to science and discovery until his final breath.

The Legend: "Is there any news of La Pérouse?"

According to historical lore, on **January 21, 1793**, as Louis XVI was being led to the guillotine at the *Place de la Révolution*, he turned to one of his guards or his valet and asked:

"A-t-on des nouvelles de Monsieur de La Pérouse ?" ("**Is there any news of Monsieur de La Pérouse?**")

The legend suggests that even with the weight of his kingdom collapsing and his own life about to end, his primary concern was the fate of the 225 men he had sent into the unknown eight years earlier.

Why the Legend Persists:

There are several reasons why this story has remained a staple of French history:

1. **The King's Passion:** Louis XVI was genuinely obsessed with geography. He had personally helped draft the expedition's instructions and map their route. He saw La Pérouse as France's answer to England's Captain Cook.
2. **The Mystery:** By 1793, the expedition had been missing for five years. The French public was gripped by "La Pérouse mania." The King had even authorized a massive search mission (led by d'Entrecasteaux) in 1791, but it had also failed to find the ships.
3. **The Contrast:** It creates a powerful image of a "Scholar King"—a man of intellect and curiosity being executed by a chaotic and violent revolution.

Whether he said it on the scaffold or merely in the days leading up to it, the sentiment was real: La Pérouse was the King's "unfinished business."