

The following is a brief synopsis of the history of the Marshall Islands from the time of “first contact” with Spanish sailors in the 16th century up to the declaration of the Marshalls as an independent Republic in 1986 (present day status).

The Spanish

The Spanish were the first Europeans to sail into and explore the Pacific (with Magellan landing on Guam in 1521), and at least seven Spanish ships sailed through the Marshalls during the 16th century:

<u>Spanish Ship</u>	<u>Year</u>
<i>Santa Victoria</i>	1526
<i>Florida</i>	1529
<i>Santiago</i>	1543
<i>San Pedro</i>	1565
<i>San Jeronimo</i>	1566
<i>Los Reyes & Todos Santos</i>	1568

The first atolls in the Marshalls to have been visited by these early explorers were, in chronological order: Enewetak, Bikini, Wotje, Kwajalein, Ujelang, Lib, and Mejit.

The Spanish visits were brief; only minimal trade and exchange between the islanders and sailors took place. After these initial visits, the Marshalls were not to be visited again until the late 1700s.

The British

Foreign visits resumed in 1788 when two British captains, John Marshall and Thomas Gilbert, sailed into the islands aboard the ships *Scarborough* and *Charlotte* (as you will note, these two captains took the opportunity to name the two neighboring island groups after themselves!). Together, Marshall and Gilbert traded with the islanders and mapped the atolls of Arno, Majuro, Aur, Maloelap, Wotje, Erikub, and Ailuk.

Other British ships followed Marshall and Gilbert: in 1797 the *Brittania* visited Namu; in 1803 the *Rolla* visited Ailinlaplap; and in 1809 the *Elizabeth* visited Jaluit.

The Russians

Then in 1816, Captain Otto von Kotzebue visited the Marshalls aboard the *Rurik* (Kotzebue was actually a German Estonian sailing for the Russian Czar).

During his stay in the Marshalls, Kotzebue conducted the first ever ethnographic observation and documentation of the islands, visiting Wotje, Maloelap, and Aur.

Also aboard the *Rurik* were the artist Ludwig Choris and the

naturalist Adelbert von Chammisso, who produced detailed hydrographical, botanical and ethnological reports (Choris’ detailed lithographs of traditional Marshallese life are available for view at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu).

Mutineers and Missionaries

The next documented visit to the Marshalls was by an American ship, the *Globe*, aboard which a great mutiny occurred 1828. Two survivors of the mutiny lived on Mili Atoll that year and were later rescued by the U.S. Navy.

American missionaries were the next to arrive on the scene, sailing from Honolulu and landing on Ebon atoll in 1857. By the end of that century, the American missionaries (from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions- or ABCFDM) had established churches on almost every inhabited atoll.

The Germans

With an established trading base in Samoa, German traders began moving north in the 1850s and in 1859, Adolph Capelle arrived on Ebon Atoll to set up a trading post. Capelle, who was originally from Hanover, was joined by Portuguese Jose deBrum and together they built the first permanent trading post in the Marshalls.

The Marshalls were eventually declared a German protectorate in 1885 with headquarters on Jaluit Atoll.

The Japanese

In 1914, after 29 years of German protectorate status, World War I broke out. Japan took over military possession from Germany in October of that year and began establishing its own commercial ventures, with bases on Jaluit and Majuro.

In 1922, Japan was formally awarded the Marshalls as a Class "C" mandate by the League of Nations. But in 1933, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations and, in anticipation of World War II, it began militarily fortifying the atolls of Kwajalein, Wotje, Maloelap, Jaluit, and later Mili and Enewetak.

The Americans

After heavy fighting in the Marshalls (as well as other parts of the Pacific) the islands were taken over by the US. The Navy immediately governed the Marshalls and in 1947 the islands were given to the US as a UN Strategic Trust. In 1951, the Department of Interior took over the administration.

Meanwhile, from 1946 to 1954, the US conducted 67 nuclear tests in, above, and around Bikini and Enewetak atolls (the reconciliation of which remains an important issue between the Marshalls and the US today.)

In the late 1970s, while still under UN Trust status with the US, a growing desire for independence led the Marshalls to embark on an endeavor towards self-determination. This was eventually accomplished in 1986 when the country was transformed into a self-governing democracy in free association with the US: the Republic of the Marshall Islands.



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Visitor Leaflets

A Brief History of the Marshall Islands *from "first contact" to present*

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