Why did Columbus sail to the Caribbean? In the fifteenth century, once you left the coastline behind, you could only reliably sail east or west. Travelling north or south was fraught with navigational danger, as the clocks of the day weren’t accurate enough to allow you to navigate precisely. Travellers simply arrived at the best safe harbours (indeed, more or less the only natural harbours) that you find if you follow the trade winds west or east from their original ports of departure. So each of these destinations was an accident in relation to where those journeys had started.

As early as 1504, the French navigator Blain Paulmier de Granville claimed to have landed at a land east of the Cape of Good Hope, having been blown off course, although it was eventually shown to be Brazil, not South Africa. Other explorers made a truer course, arriving at what are now Fremantle and Perth, located at two river estuaries that offer a safe harbour and fresh water for seafarers.

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