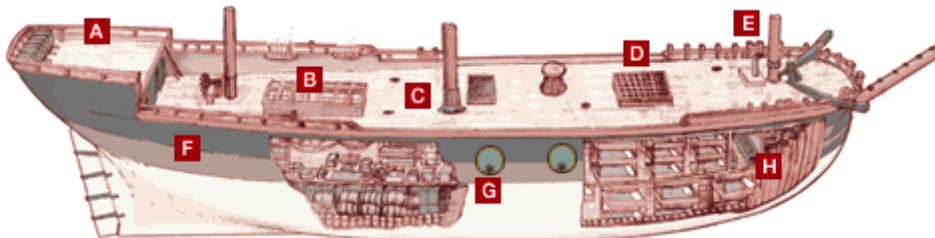


The journey by sea

If the many diaries kept are to be believed, as many as nine out of 10 captains were incompetent and the promised travel time of 30 days was rarely met. In spite of this, and the unavoidable crowding of travel by sea, 15,000 people took this route in 1849 and investors for the journey were easy to find. Total per-person documented costs ranged from under \$600 to over \$1,200.



Changes made to ships

Given the tremendous profits to be made by transporting people to California, entrepreneurs set about converting all types of ships into charter ships. Large and slow-travelling cargo ships like the one below were patched up, given rudimentary make-overs and set to sea. Here are some of the modifications made.

A Deckhouses and galleys were enlarged.

B The size of the aft hatch was increased.

C Circular openings were cut in the deck to improve ventilation.

D The size of the fore hatch was increased.

E Ventilators were added (sometimes)

F Companionways for access from decks to dim, stuffy between-deck quarters.

G Draft vents, which could be closed in heavy weather, were installed on both sides of the bow.

H Tiers of narrow bunks were installed in cargo space. Because there was little planned-for free space, during foul weather people were forced to return to their bunks.

Making money on charter ships

30 cabin berths could be sold at \$350 each on a typical converted cargo ship. Seventy below-deck bunks could be sold at \$250 each. The total charter would gross \$30,000, three times the normal gross. Revenue was \$28,000, not counting revenue from freight.

Supplies might include:

Salt pork, salt beef, ham, hard bread, salt, 40 pounds of butter and cheese, tea, sugar and spices.

Problems with supplies:

■ Salt meat often went bad.

■ Wine turned to vinegar.

- Bottles of fruit juice blew up.
- Candles melted near the equator.
- Rats ate cheese.
- Butter and lard went rancid.
- Weevils got into flour, rice and hard bread.

Many ships
went as far out
as the
Sandwich
Islands (now
Hawaii) before
finding the
wind currents
needed to get
them to
California.

There were ship shortages from Panama to San Francisco until 1851.

Crossing the Isthmus

It was 75 miles
up the Chagres
River, then 25
miles by mule
to Panama
City.



Diseases common to the Panama route

- Yellow fever
- Malaria
- Dysentery
- Cholera - an epidemic in Panama City killed many as they waited.

Diseases common to the Cape Horn route

- Scurvy - due to lack of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Cholera

The tip of Cape Horn

Winds were frigid and fierce. Ships were often pulled far south toward the Antarctic.

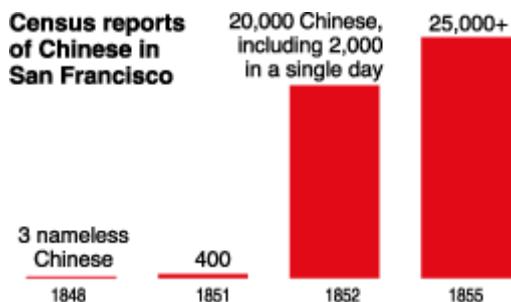
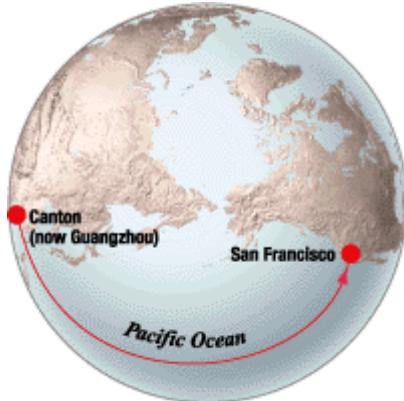
The Strait of Magellan

An experienced captain could shave weeks off the journey if he was familiar enough with the strait to avoid cross currents, riptides, sudden storms, craggy cliffs and reefs.

The route from China

Most Chinese crossed the ocean in small boats, or junks, packed with bunks, without light or ventilation. The cost of the four to eight week voyage by steamer from Canton to San Francisco was \$50.

Many ships came with goods: dried fruit, candied ginger, lumber, brocaded silks, houses shipped in pieces.



Sources: "The Great American Gold Rush" by Rhoda Blumberg, "The Gold Rush" by Liza Ketchum, "The California Gold Rush," published by American Heritage, "The California Gold Rush" by Elizabeth Van Steenwyk, "Hunting for Gold" by William Downie, "Sea Routes to the Gold Fields" by Oscar Lewis, "If You Traveled West in a Covered Wagon" by Ellen Levine, "The East Indiamen" by Russell Miller, Steve and Eric Chrissman of the National Nautical Heritage Society

Graphics: Sean McDade