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The Travels of Marco Polo



The famous explorer Marco Polo was born in the year 1254 to a family of merchants. Even then, the city where he was born--Venice--was a center for commerce and trading in the Mediterranean region. Because Marco's family was wealthy, he received a good education, learning about classical authors, the theology of the Latin Church, and both French and Italian. He also developed an interest in history and geography that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

When Marco was only six years old, his father Niccolò and his uncle Maffeo left for a journey to Cathay (China). By the time they returned, he was 15. When Marco was 17, he accompanied his father and uncle on their second journey to Asia. They had an advantage over other travelers of the time: the emperor Kublai Khan had presented them with a golden tablet a foot long and three inches wide, inscribed with the words "By the strength of the eternal Heaven, holy be the Khan's name. Let him that pays him not reverence be killed." The golden tablet was like a special VIP passport, authorizing the travelers to receive horses, lodging, food and guides as they required.

They had a long and difficult odyssey, mostly on horseback, to reach China. The Polos traveled through Armenia, Persia, and Afghanistan, over the Pamir Mountains, and along the Silk Road, the main travel route for traders. Marco kept detailed journals, where he recorded his impressions of the terrain. When he first saw the great Gobi Desert, more than 500,000 square miles (805,000 km) of sand, he wrote: "This desert is reported to be so long that it would take a year to go from end to end... There is nothing at all to eat."

The Polos stopped for a year in the Mongol region, where they learned about the lives and civilization of the people there. When the Polos reached Cathay to stay with the emperor Kublai Khan, Marco impressed the ruler with his knowledge of Mongol traditions. The Polos had traveled 5600 miles (9000 km) in over three and a half years to reach Cathay.

Marco had mastered four languages by that time, and spent 17 years in the Khan's court, learning about trade, industry, and a new paper currency that was much easier to transport than heavy gold or silver. The Chinese had also invented a way of sending messages by which different horsemen passed letters on to one another like a relay race. The Polos told the Khan of their homeland, especially of the Roman church and the Pope, about whom Khan was curious.

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Kublai Khan's palaces were among the most elegant and fantastic structures in the world, with walls covered in gold and silver, a hall so large that 6,000 people could dine at the same time, and a stable of thousands of pure-white horses, whose milk the royal family drank. Every room was filled with the finest examples of Asian art, paintings, murals, and sculptures. Most surprising to Marco were the "stones that burn like logs." The Khan had found a source of fuel that nobody in Europe could have imagined. It was called coal.

In 1293, the Polos began their journey home by ship. The voyage took two years. During that time the Kublai Khan died, although his influence was still powerful and his golden tablet ensured their safety from pirates and bandits.

In 1298, Marco captained a galley-ship in a battle against Venice's rival city, Genoa, and was captured as a prisoner of war. While he was imprisoned, he met a writer from the city of Pisa who encouraged Marco to write of his travels in Asia. The resulting book, called *The Description of the World; or, The Travels of Marco Polo*, was one of the most popular books in medieval Europe and became a bestseller, even though some people thought his stories were too incredible to be true.

Marco was released from prison in 1299 and returned to Venice, where he married Donata Badoer and had three daughters. He lived in Venice until his death in 1324 at the age of 70, a tremendously old man for that time. On his deathbed, he uttered his famous last words: "I have only told the half of what I saw!"

Though many of his stories were incredible, almost unbelievable, *The Travels of Marco Polo* captured the imaginations of centuries of Europeans who had no concept of what Asian culture was like. Marco Polo was an amazing scholar who was open-minded about cultures that were completely different from his own, from uncivilized mountain tribesman to the most exalted royalty of China.

Nowadays, experts and historians are researching Marco's *Travels*. Many of the stories and places which were considered "make believe" during his life were later confirmed by 18th century explorers. Though Marco did not speak Chinese and did not discuss many aspects of Chinese culture that we might expect (for example, he does not mention the Great Wall, calligraphy, or tea), Chinese historians value his writings as a record of the battles of the 13th century.

Marco was also not respected by most geographers during his time, but later some of his information was used to make maps of the 14th century. He was the first man to create a system for measuring distance traveled by how long it took, and he was the first traveler to record the route across all of Asia, naming kingdom after kingdom. For this achievement, his work is considered the precursor to modern scientific geography.

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Answer the questions about *The Travels of Marco Polo*.

1. In what city was Marco Polo born?
 - a. Venice
 - b. Genoa
 - c. Beijing
 - d. Rome

2. Why did he receive a good education?
 - a. He was a traveling salesman
 - b. His family was wealthy
 - c. His father invented the game of polo
 - d. He trained to be a priest

3. What advantage did the Polos have while traveling?
 - a. Fast horses that could travel far
 - b. Comfortable, modern leather shoes
 - c. A golden tablet from Kublai Khan
 - d. Swift ships to make the journey

4. When Marco Polo was 17, where did he begin traveling to?
 - a. Cherchen (now called Chechnya)
 - b. Cathay (now called China)
 - c. Persia (now called Iran)
 - d. Dalmatia (now called Croatia)

5. What great desert did Marco say would take a year to cross?
 - a. The Sahara
 - b. Death Valley
 - c. Siberia
 - d. The Gobi

6. Whose court did the Polos visit?
 - a. Kublai Khan
 - b. Shere Khan
 - c. Genghis Khan
 - d. Emperor Ming

7. What new form of currency did the Polos learn about in Cathay?
 - a. Gold
 - b. Silver
 - c. Paper
 - d. Wampum

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8. Who encouraged Marco to write about his travels?
 - a. A writer he met in prison
 - b. The Emperor of China
 - c. His uncle Matteo
 - d. His wife Donata

9. What was Marco Polo's book called?
 - a. *Around the World in 80 Days*
 - b. *The Encyclopedia Britannica*
 - c. *The Travels of Marco Polo*
 - d. *The Polos Go to Asia*

10. Why did some people not believe Marco's stories?
 - a. They seemed too incredible to be true
 - b. Marco had a reputation for exaggerating
 - c. Asia was thought to be a myth
 - d. The Plague made people suspicious

11. What amazing fuel did Marco learn about in Cathay?
 - a. Gasoline
 - b. Natural gas
 - c. Oil
 - d. Coal

12. What things made Marco Polo such an amazing explorer? Circle all that are true.
 - a. He was a good scholar.
 - b. He had luxurious hair.
 - c. He was open-minded about new cultures.
 - d. He spoke Haitian fluently.
 - e. He kept careful records of geography.
 - f. He knew a lot about America.
 - g. He invented complex games.

13. If you had lived in the 1300s, do you think you would have believed Marco Polo's stories?
Why or why not?

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Answers to *The Travels of Marco Polo*

1. a
2. b
3. c
4. b
5. d
6. a
7. c
8. a
9. c
10. a
11. d
12. a, c, e

Answers to #13 and the writing prompt will vary.