

The Explorers: Ibn Battuta

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Ibn Battuta (center)

Muslim legal scholar Ibn Battuta recorded an account of his travels during the first half of the fourteenth century. His book of personal accounts reveals the wide scope of the Muslim world at that time.

Ibn Battuta was born in the city of Tangier, part of modern-day Morocco, on February 25, 1304. Tangier is on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean where Africa and Europe nearly touch.

During the life of Ibn Battuta, Islamic civilization stretched from the Atlantic coast of West Africa across northern Africa, the Middle East, and India to Southeast Asia.

Ibn Battuta's urge to travel was spurred by his interest in finding the best teachers and he also wanted to make a special trip to Mecca, called the "hajj." For Muslims, the trip is a religious duty to be done at least once in life.

On June 14, 1325, 21-year-old Ibn Battuta began his journey to Mecca. Like the famous, Italian traveler Marco Polo, who had completed his travels a few years before, Ibn Battuta would write a

book introducing people to parts of the world he saw. He detailed his wanderings in "The Travels of Ibn Battuta."

A full life of travel

Ibn Battuta entered Mecca in mid-October 1326. It had taken him a year and four months to get there. He stayed a month, taking part in all the ritual experiences and talking with people from every Islamic land. Then, his real globetrotting began.

Ibn Battuta led a complete life while traveling. He studied and prayed; he worked in the legal profession; he had astonishing adventures; he married at least 10 times and left children growing up all over Afro-Eurasia. A few examples of these activities provide a good picture of his life's journey.

Upon arriving in Delhi, India, Ibn Battuta sought an official career from the Muslim king of India named Muhammad Tughluq. King Tughluq appointed him judge of Delhi. After eight years, Ibn Battuta was eager for new work and the king agreed to send him as India's representative to China. He made Ibn Battuta responsible for taking shiploads of goods to the emperor.

Ibn Battuta was set to sail from Calcutta with a large ship holding the goods for the Chinese emperor. Everything and everybody was loaded for departure, but Ibn Battuta spent the last day in the city attending Friday prayers. That evening a storm blew in, and the large ship sank.

Ibn Battuta went to China anyway. He stopped in the Maldives, an island group 400 miles southwest off the coast of India. There, he married four women on one island, the legal limit under Muslim law. As he wrote in his "Travels":

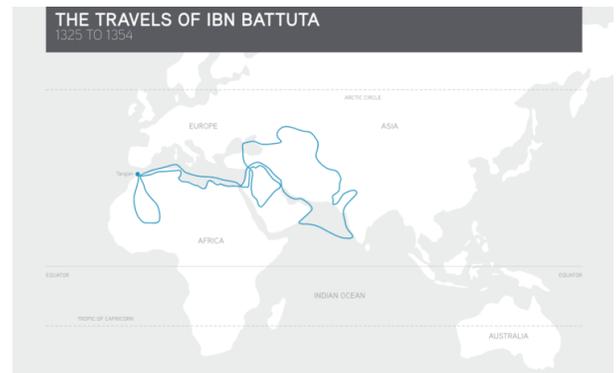
"When the ships put in, the crew (members) marry; when they intend to leave they divorce their wives. This is a kind of temporary marriage. The women of these islands never leave their country."

From there, Ibn Battuta continued on to China. Ibn Battuta's passages about China are just a small part of his whole story. The details are so sketchy and confusing that some scholars doubt that he even went to China. He wrote in "Travels":

"China was beautiful, but it did not please me. On the contrary, I was greatly troubled thinking about the way paganism (other religions) dominated this country. Whenever I went out of my lodging, I saw many blameworthy things. That disturbed me so much that I stayed indoors most of the time and only went out when necessary."

Intercontinental travels

Ibn Battuta returned home to Tangier in 1349. Both his parents had died and Ibn Battuta stayed in Tangier only a few days before leaving to visit North Africa, Spain, and West Africa.



He returned from that trip in 1354 to Fez, Morocco, where he and a scholar collaborated for two years to record his experiences. Little is known about Ibn Battuta's life after the writing of his book. He died in 1368 or 1369; the place of his death is not known.

How does Ibn Battuta's account compare with that of Marco Polo? Each lived by his wits. Each took joy in discovering new experiences. And each exercised amazing determination to complete extensive travels and return to their home country.

However, Ibn Battuta was an educated, upper-class man who traveled within a familiar Muslim culture. Polo was not formally educated. He traveled to strange, unfamiliar cultures. Ibn Battuta told more about himself, his work, and the people he met. Marco Polo focused on reporting facts.

Both left behind accounts of their intercontinental travels from more than 600 years ago.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Intercontinental travels." Select the paragraph that suggests that modern knowledge about Ibn Battuta is based primarily on his book.
- 2 Which selection from the article BEST supports the idea that Ibn Battuta was a well-respected and trusted man within Muslim society?
- (A) He studied and prayed; he worked in the legal profession; he had astonishing adventures; he married at least 10 times and left children growing up all over Afro-Eurasia.
 - (B) Upon arriving in Delhi, India, Ibn Battuta sought an official career from the Muslim king of India named Muhammad Tughluq. King Tughluq appointed him judge of Delhi. After eight years, Ibn Battuta was eager for new work and the king agreed to send him as India's representative to China.
 - (C) Ibn Battuta went to China anyway. He stopped in the Maldives, an island group 400 miles southwest off the coast of India. There, he married four women on one island, the legal limit under Muslim law.
 - (D) Each lived by his wits. Each took joy in discovering new experiences. And each exercised amazing determination to complete extensive travels and return to their home country.
- 3 What is MOST likely the reason why the author included comparisons between Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo?
- (A) to show how Marco Polo accomplished more during his travels than Ibn Battuta
 - (B) to show how Marco Polo paved the way for other explorers like Ibn Battuta
 - (C) to show how Ibn Battuta did more to contribute to history than Marco Polo
 - (D) to show how Ibn Battuta's experiences were impactful and important, just like Marco Polo's
- 4 Finish the sentence.
- The author MAINLY explains the experiences of Ibn Battuta by
- (A) comparing his traveling experiences with Marco Polo's.
 - (B) explaining the effects his travels had on history.
 - (C) providing a detailed explanation of why he wanted to travel.
 - (D) describing the places he traveled to and what he did there.