

The Explorers: Ibn Battuta

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Ibn Battuta (center) tk

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

During the life of Ibn Battuta, the Islamic civilization stretched from the Atlantic coast of West Africa across northern Africa, the Middle East and India to Southeast Asia. This area was known to Muslims as Dar al-Islam, or “Abode of Islam.” In addition, there were important communities of Muslims in cities and towns beyond the frontiers of Dar al-Islam. An “umma” is a community that believes Allah and his sacred law called “shari’a,” and those in the community shared beliefs, practices, moral values, and everyday manners. In the early 1300s, this community was expanding dramatically.

Education and journeys

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.

The men in Ibn Battuta's family were legal scholars and he was raised with a focus on education. His urge to travel was spurred by his interest in finding the best teachers and the best libraries; 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, the 21-year-old Ibn Battuta rode out of Tangier on a donkey on his journey to Mecca. Like the famous, young Italian traveler Marco Polo of the same time, 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."

Marriage and travel adventures

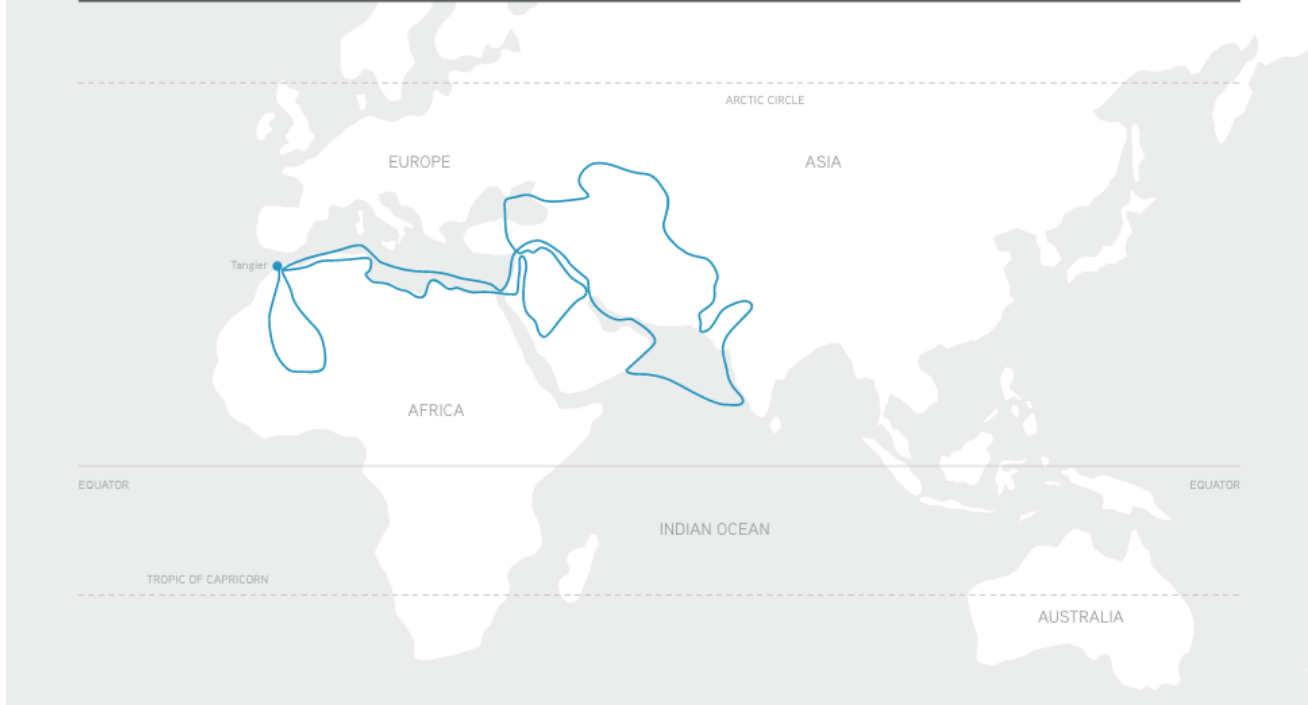
Ibn Battuta entered Mecca in mid-October 1326; it had taken him a year and four months to get there. He stayed a month, taking part in all the ritual experiences and talking with people from every Islamic land. Next, he set out for Baghdad and this is when his real globetrotting began.

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 glimpse of these activities provides 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, who appointed him a judge of Delhi. After eight years, Ibn Battuta was eager for new work and the king agreed to send him to China as India's representative. He made Ibn Battuta responsible for taking shiploads of goods to the Chinese emperor.

THE TRAVELS OF IBN BATTUTA

1325 TO 1354



Ibn Battuta was set to sail from India with a large ship holding the goods for the Chinese emperor. Everything and everybody was loaded for departure, but Ibn Battuta spent his 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, though he stopped in the Maldives, an island group about 400 miles southwest off the coast of India. There, he married four women on one island, which is 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, and although his narrative about China is just a small part of his travel adventures, the details are so sketchy and confusing that some scholars doubt he even went to China. Ibn Battuta 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."

Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo

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 is thought to have died in 1368 or 1369, but the place of his death is not known.

How does Ibn Battuta's account compare with that of fellow traveler Marco Polo? Each lived by his wits and each took joy in discovering new experiences. Both men 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 a merchant and not formally educated. He traveled to strange, unfamiliar cultures. Ibn Battuta wrote more about himself, his work, and the people he met. Marco Polo focused on reporting facts. Both men introduced people to new places through their travels, leaving behind accounts from more than 600 years ago.