

How old was Marco Polo when he traveled to the Far East?

Marco Polo (1254-1324) was only in his teens when he left Venice (about 1270) with his father, Niccolò, and his uncle Maffeo, traveling an overland route to the east. The Polo brothers had made such a trip once before—in 1260 they had traveled as far as Beijing (China), but upon their return home, they learned that Niccolò's wife (Marco Polo's mother) had died. So when the pair of adventurers set out again, they took a young Marco Polo with them.

The Polos traveled from Acre, Israel, to Sivas, Turkey, then through Mosul and Baghdad in Iraq, to Ormuz, a bustling trade center on the Persian Gulf, where they intended to take a ship for the east. Seeing the ships, the travelers determined they weren't reliable transport, so they opted to continue on land, heading north to Khorasan (in Iran), through Afghanistan, and to the Pamirs—a high plateau range in central Asia. It took the Polos forty days to transverse the high-altitude range, finally reaching the garden city of Kashgar (China). From there, the Polos followed a path skirting the Taklamakan Desert and then rested before crossing the Gobi Desert, which they did in thirty days' time, covering some three hundred miles. Stopping in Tun-hwang, the center of Buddhism in China, they then followed a southeast path that would have paralleled the Great Wall. After following the Yellow River, the Polos were met by emissaries of Kublai Khan (1215-94). They continued with their guides on a forty-day trip to Xanadu (Shang-tu), three hundred miles north of Beijing, where the Great Khan, founder and ruler of the Mongol dynasty, received them and who was grandson of Genghis Khan (c. 1167-1227). It was May of 1275.

Having met the elder Polos on their previous trip, the travelers were again welcomed. Kublai Khan, who was an ardent Buddhist and a patron of the arts, took a liking to the young Marco Polo, who entered into diplomatic service for the ruler. In that capacity Marco Polo traveled to India, and he visited the Kingdom of Champa (what is now Vietnam), Thailand, Malaya, Sumatra, Sri Lanka, and India. The Polos, European courtiers who were well liked "by the Great Khan, stayed in China until 1292, finally returning home by way of Sumatra, India, and Persia, and arriving back in Venice in 1295. By this time, Marco Polo was a man in his forties, having spent most of his life to that point in the East.

How much of the adventures of Marco Polo are really true?

Modern scholars accept most of the tales as true and accurate. Only those accounts that deal with places where it is not known that Marco Polo traveled {such as Africa} are seen as legend rather than fact. Upon his return to Venice in 1295, Marco Polo took up the family occupation and worked as a merchant. Three years later, he was on board a ship that was captured by a rival Genoese ship. Thus, he was imprisoned in the port city of Genoa, where he met a writer named Rustichello, who was from the Italian city of Pisa. Polo recounted his stories to Rustichello, who wrote them down in the *Book of Ser Marco Polo*. The book was an immediate success. Readers today know the stories as *The Travels of Marco Polo*.

Review Questions

1. Name the two people who accompanied Marco Polo to China.
2. What year did Polo make his first journey to Beijing?
3. List four countries they passed through on their way to China.
4. Why did the Polos decide to travel to China by foot?
5. **Fill this in:** “Kublai Khan was a strong supporter of the _____ religion.”
6. Marco was hired by Kublai Khan to perform what important job?
7. How many years did Marco stay in China?
8. What do scholars think about the accuracy of Polo’s accounts?
9. How and when did Marco become imprisoned?
10. Who was Rusticello, and what role did he play in Marco Polo’s life?