



KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

IBN BATTUTA

BORN IN 1304 AND DIED IN 1368(?) IN TANGIER, MOROCCO

Muslim explorer from North Africa who traveled 75,000 miles in thirty years

The most-miles-traveled award, at least for the medieval era, goes to Ibn Battuta. A devout Sunni Muslim, he set out from Morocco at age twenty-two to make the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca, several thousand miles away—and just kept going.

His life as a religious scholar and judge in Tangier had been comfortable. Well-educated, he could pepper his conversations with poetry, Koran quotes, and references to classic Arabic literature. He dressed like a legal scholar, in a large turban and a spotless gown of fine fabric.

Battuta's travels as a poor holy man were not always so comfy. He explored much of Arabia, then India, Southeast Asia, Spain, and parts of Africa, always with the goal of finding the holiest people there. Sometimes he thought of staying to study with them, and sometimes he cried from homesickness, especially when he learned from far away of the death of his father, then a son, and then his mother. But he was too restless, too curious, to stop exploring. "Never take the same road twice" was his motto.

Unable to swim and uncomfortable around water, Battuta preferred traveling on land. He was treated generously at Christian monasteries and at way stations that took care of Muslim holy men. Sometimes he joined caravans for companionship.

LIVES OF THE EXPLORERS

Other times he was helped by kind local rulers who might give him clean clothes with coins sewed into them, as well as horses and slaves for his journey.

Battuta frowned on those who smoked hashish, drank alcohol, or neglected their prayers. He hated markets that stank of rotten fruit, too much fresh fish, and the blood of slaughtered camels flowing in the street—all common at the time. Men in bathhouses without towels around their waists bothered him, as did women whose heads weren't covered or who had male friends, all of which he considered immodest. He despised violence toward others—slaves being abused, or the practice of forcing criminals to eat human excrement.

He blended in and felt at home almost everywhere, except China. He found everything there to be foreign to him, which “distressed me so much that I stayed at home and went out only when it was necessary.”

A fan of the spiritual and physical beauty of women, Battuta married at least ten times and fathered at least five children. He rarely took the wives or children traveling with him—the women's families objected. Six of the marriages took place on the heavenly Maldiv Islands, after Battuta got over his horror at the skimpy islander outfits: “When I was a religious judge there, I tried to put an end to this practice and ordered them to wear clothes, but I met with no success.”

Death threatened Battuta at every turn. Once he was so ill with a high fever that he tied himself to his horse's saddle so he wouldn't fall. Hot winds could dry up every source of water; the price of a mouthful reached enormous sums. Deathly cold would force him to wear so many bulky layers that he had to be lifted onto his horse. In a pirate attack he lost everything except for a single pair of pants, and in a bandit attack he was wounded by arrows.

But he also met with extraordinary hospitality. Once when he was lost for days without food or drink, his feet swollen and bleeding, a stranger approached and carried Battuta on his back to shelter. He seldom went hungry. A simple meal would be bread, cheese, olives, fresh dates. He enjoyed melons, white apricots, coconuts,

IBN BATTUTA

anything sweetened with sugar or carob, and a kind of lizard with its insides replaced with turmeric.

After thirty years Battuta returned for good to Morocco, deciding it was “the best of countries,” though it was one of the few places he had never explored.

When the Sultan commanded him to record his memories, Battuta produced a vivid account. Centuries later, it reached Europe, revealing a wealth of information about large parts of the Muslim world, enlarging everyone’s horizons.

Today, if you travel to Dubai, a city on the Arabian Peninsula, you can visit the gigantic Ibn Battuta Mall, named for this most famous of Arabic explorers.

