

“ONLY THE HALF OF WHAT I SAW”

MARCO POLO

BORN IN 1254(?) AND DIED IN 1324 IN VENICE, ITALY

Italian who was the first European to explore China

Marco Polo's father was a merchant, the job everyone in Venice wanted. One successful trip to a faraway place for rare goods could make a family permanently wealthy. In highest demand were jewels, spices, Turkish carpets, and especially silk. Silk was so precious because it was rare, made only in China by women who took the strands that silkworms produced and transformed them into gorgeous cloth.

Polo's dad was away so long on a trading trip that Marco was fifteen before they met. Having grown up with relatives after his mother died, the boy had assumed he was an orphan. When his father and uncle invited him to join their next trip, he jumped at the chance. The older Polos had promised to bring holy oil from Jerusalem to Kubla Khan, emperor of China, and do a lot of trading on the way.

The three planned to sail, but when they saw their shoddy ships—held together with coconut twine, not nails—they quickly changed their plans and set off on what was later known as the Silk Road. This ancient system of trails, thousands of miles long, was the only known route into China by land.

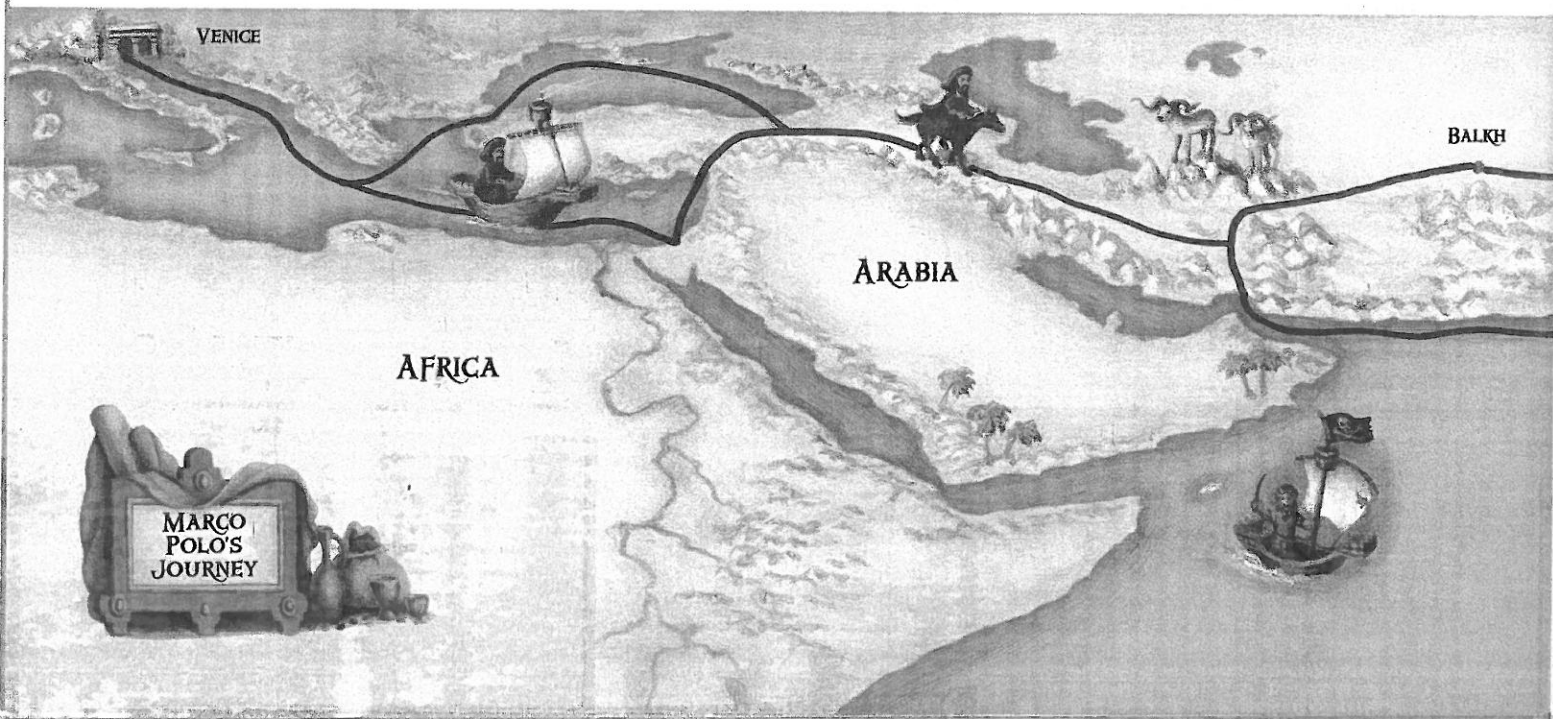
Every morning, they would leave behind their fires (made with camel poo) and take off in the chilly hour before sunrise. When all went well, the Polos could cover twenty miles a day.

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Each of those days brought an adventure. They frolicked with hundreds of wild sheep that had curly horns measuring five feet. They sipped a soup of Russian olives, Chinese cabbage, and the sliced thorax of a sheep. They visited people in a pearl-rich area who wore little except pearls, and Buddhist monasteries full of thousands of devout monks wearing scratchy sacks of blue and black. They met Mongolians who had trained themselves to go for days without eating, drinking the blood of their precious horses to keep from starving. They winced at men and women covered from head to toe with ornate tattoos, which at the time was such a painful and bloody process that it could be fatal.

Luckily, Marco kept a journal. At first he felt superior to cultures other than his own, but as the months passed, he grew more open-minded. He took a special interest in Buddhism, though he always presented himself as a devout Christian. Actually, he became expert at blending in wherever he was, like a chameleon.

The trail took the Polos through some of the most hostile places on the planet. One mountainous region was known as the "roof of the world" because the air was so thin that even birds didn't go there. They narrowly escaped bandits intent on kidnapping them and selling them as slaves. They evaded Indian pirates who would have forced them to drink seawater with tamarind until they vomited, in order to search for gems that could have been swallowed.



MARCO POLO

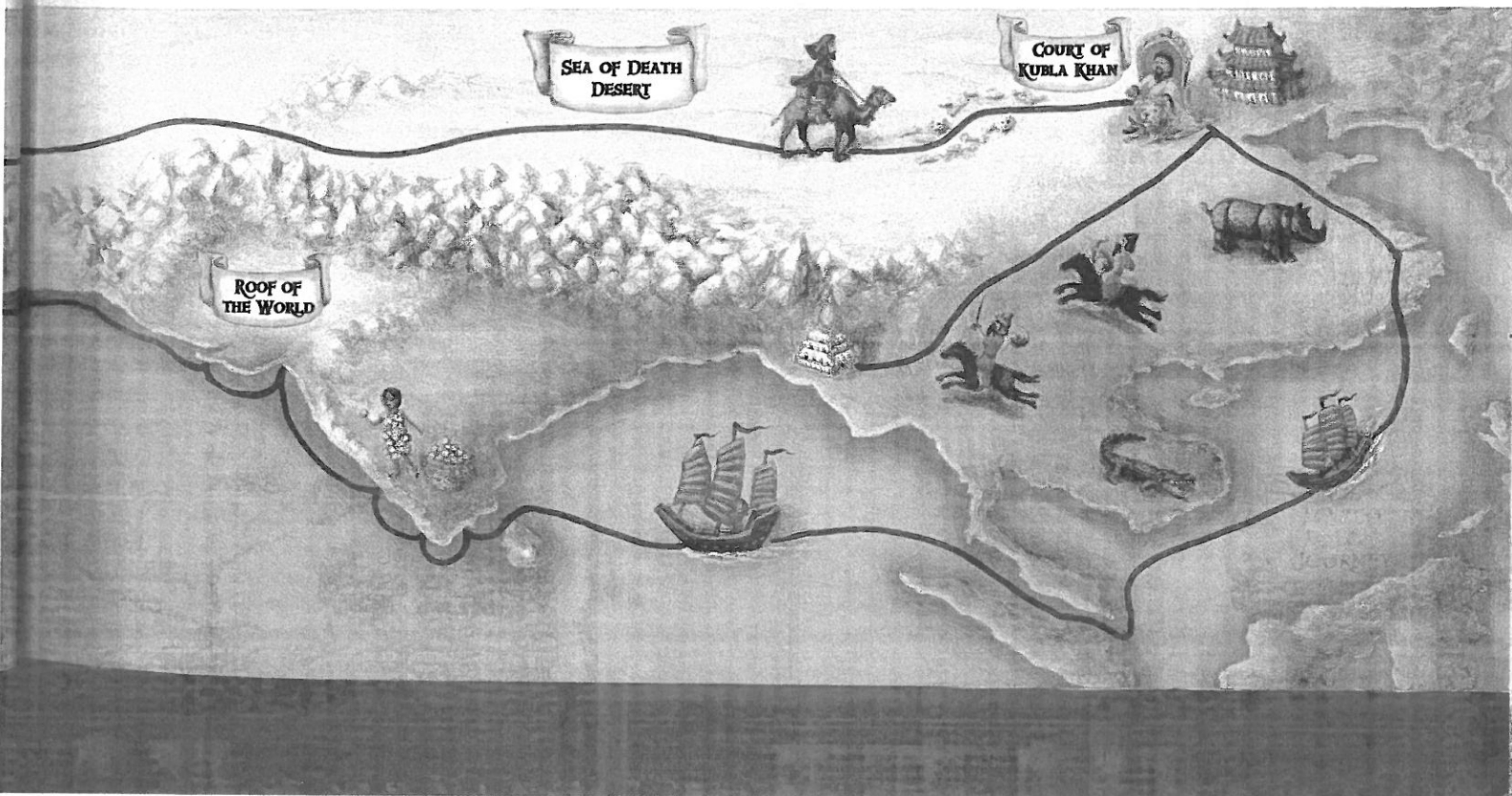
Marco did fall ill, possibly with tuberculosis. The Polos spent a year in a beautiful area now known as Afghanistan so he could recover in the clean, pure air, perhaps aided by the local opium. Marco was aghast at the nearby ruins of Balkh. Once a great metropolis, it was known as the Screaming City because it had been reduced to rubble by Genghis Khan's warriors, who had killed every inhabitant.

The last part of the journey took them across the "Sea of Death" desert. Riding at night because the days were just too hot, they followed a path marked by piles of bones—some animal, some human. The sands, notorious as the "Singing Sands," seemed to howl at them in the creepiest way.

At last, after three years and eight thousand miles, they reached their goal: China and the welcoming court of Emperor Kubla Khan. This Khan, grandson of Genghis, ruled the largest empire in the world.

Marco thought the Khan was simply over-the-top, sitting on his throne wearing robes of pure gold, a tame lion curled up at his feet. He had ten thousand white horses and about one hundred children. At his gigantic parties, complete with amusing performers of all kinds, elephants would stream in bearing gifts from his subjects.

The Polos were treated like royalty—the Khan wanted them to say good things about him when they got home. They didn't really have a choice about how to spend their time; one didn't say no to the Khan. He gave twenty-year-old Marco the job of



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traveling all over the empire to gather gossip, carrying a golden tablet that ordered everyone to treat him well. Still blending in wherever he was, Marco spoke Persian and various Mongol dialects, though he never learned Chinese.

Everything about China blew Marco away and was recorded in his journals. In Beijing, the impressive capital, thousands of carriages brought in precious raw silk every day. The city of Hangzhou, the largest in the world at that time, was lovely and well-organized, with citizens reading books and eating steamed pancakes in tiny cafés. Marco learned that those strange black burning rocks were coal, meaning he could heat water for a hot bath every day (a bizarre notion to Venetians, who rarely bathed). He saw private indoor bathrooms (unlike in Venice, where chamber pots got dumped out the window). He gasped at hideously large snakes that turned out to be crocodiles, and other creatures he claimed were unicorns, but were Asian rhinoceroses. He heard the loudest sound he'd ever heard: the blast of gunpowder, then unknown in Europe.

Fourteen years went by. The Polos begged the Khan to let them return home, but he enjoyed their company—and having them around made him feel powerful. Finally he gave them a job that allowed them to sail away: escorting a woman known as the Blue Princess to her wedding in Iran, leaving them free to continue on to Venice. The whole journey home took the Venetians three years, and only eighteen of the original crew of six hundred survived it. Dreadful things happened to them, but Marco's journals are mysteriously mute about the details.

When the Polos limped into Venice, filthy and ragged after their journey, the other Polos didn't recognize them. Then the men ripped open their robes to reveal a fortune in jewels, making for a happy reunion. When Marco started blabbing all the things he'd seen, he was nicknamed "Marco Millions" by those who thought he was telling millions of lies. He had been to places no European had seen, and some simply didn't believe his tales.

Was Marco, now forty-one, bored by his old life on land? Or was he irritated by the children taunting "Mister Marco, tell us another lie"? Perhaps, because he

didn't settle down; he commanded a boat during a war between Venice and Genoa. He was captured and spent a year in a Genoese prison. It wasn't too bad—he had a comfortable apartment, possibly even servants. He was able to send for his journals, and with the help of a fellow prisoner wrote a book about his adventures: *The Travels of Marco Polo*.

He married at forty-five; had three daughters, named Fantina, Bellela, and Moreta; and bought a palazzo in a stylish neighborhood. For the rest of his life, until he died at age sixty-nine, Marco Polo worked as a merchant and told his stories to anyone who would listen. He never left Venice again.

“I have only told the half of what I saw” was his refrain.

ONWARD

☞ Polo's trustworthiness wasn't questioned just by his fellow Venetians. Most scholars today detect some exaggerations in his book, though deem it basically true. One person who never doubted was Christopher Columbus, who had a much-thumbed, notated copy of *Travels* with him on his boat in 1492 as he looked for a sea route to places Polo described.

☞ Polo's greatest contribution to geography may have been inspiring increasingly accurate maps. He didn't draw maps himself, but by using his rough measurement of “a day's journey,” others were able to.

☞ The children's game Marco Polo, a form of tag played in water, is named for him, though no one is sure when or where the game started. One player calls out “Marco!” in an attempt to locate and tag other players, who yell back “Polo!” (Of course, if Marco himself were playing, he'd call out “Me! Me!”)