

Marco Polo

Marco Polo was from Venice and lived from September 15, 1254 – January 8, 1324. He was a merchant, explorer and writer who travelled throughout Asia from 1271 to 1295. These travels are recorded in a book called 'The Travels of Marco Polo'.

Marco's father and uncle, Niccolo and Matteo, had travelled the Silk Road and met Kublai Khan. They returned to Venice and met Marco for the first time. His mother had died, so they took Marco with them when they returned to the kingdom of the Great Khan, setting out in 1271. They travelled for three years along the Silk Road, having many adventures along the way.

When they reached the court of Kublai Khan in China, he was very impressed by Marco's intelligence and his ability with languages (he could speak 4). He appointed Marco as an emissary and sent him on many missions across his empire, including to present day Burma, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam as well as throughout China. He saw and experienced many things that no Westerner had ever seen. Kublai Khan supplied him with a 'Golden Passport' which guaranteed him safe passage and diplomatic immunity, so that he was able to travel safely.

Marco did this for 17 years and then, realising that Kublai Khan may soon die and his protection be removed, he asked to be released to go home. Khan agreed, provided the Polos accompany the Mongol princess Kōkōchin to Persia to be married. They travelled by ship (only 18 people survived from 600 who set out!) and then on the Silk Road through Constantinople and then onto Venice, after 24 years away!

However, Venice was at war with Genoa and Marco was soon captured and imprisoned. He shared a cell with a writer called Rustichello da Pisa. He told Rustichello the stories and together they wrote them down and published them under the title 'The Travels of Marco Polo'.

He wrote of porcelain, coal, gunpowder, paper money, and some Asian plants and exotic animals, all of which were new to Europeans. He wrote of the grandeur of the court of Khan and of many customs.

He was released in 1299, became a wealthy merchant, married, and had three children. He died in 1324 and was buried in the church of San Lorenzo in Venice.

In his lifetime, many readers did not believe Marco's stories as they were so far out of their experiences. Marco was often ridiculed and after he died, the Church changed a lot of the content and re-published it, to make the Eastern world seem much poorer and less powerful and in need of Western help. However, in the years since his death, scholars have proved that almost everything Marco Polo wrote was, in fact, true!

Though he was not the first European to reach China, Marco Polo was the first to explore some parts of Asia and to leave a written chronicle of his experience.

Answer these questions about Marco Polo

1) When did Marco Polo live?

2) Where was Marco Polo from?

3) Why was Marco Polo famous?

4) How did Marco come to begin his journey?

5) What happened when Marco reached Beijing?

6) What did Marco do for the Great Khan?

7) How did Marco and his family get to go home?

8) What happened after they had arrived home?

9) How did Marco get to create his book 'The Travels of Marco Polo'?

10) What happened to Marco when he was released?

11) What did people think of the stories in the book?

12) What has been proved since?

13) Why is Marco Polo important in European history?

