

Morocco's Ibn Battuta: Voyager Extraordinaire

Moroccan adventurer Ibn Battuta is alleged to have traveled 120,000 kilometers or 75,000 miles in 30 years and covered what, on a modern map, would be more than 40 countries. This was a remarkable feat at a time when the greatest speeds humans could attain were astride a galloping horse. It is estimated that to achieve this at a steady pace, Battuta would have had to travel a daily distance of slightly less than 11 kilometers (seven miles) for almost 11,000 days.

Ibn Battuta was born in Tangier, Morocco into a well-established family of *qadis* (judges) on February 25, 1304. As a young man he received a future *qadi's* customary education, essentially a thorough study of religious literature and poetry (he is, in fact, the only great traveler to describe some of the places he visited in rhymed verse). His journeys began at age 21 when he left his parents to make his first *hajj*, or pilgrimage, to Mecca some 3,000 miles due east. But, unlike most Muslims who returned home after making the pilgrimage to the Holy City, Battuta became curious about the wide world and, eager to learn more about it, went on to explore several other nations and regions of the world.

Setting out eastward in 1325 – the year after Marco Polo died – Battuta's wanderings stretched from Fez to Beijing and covered Spain, Russia, Turkey, Persia, India and all the Arab lands. Because he was a theologian, poet, scholar and humanitarian, Battuta also established himself as a renowned statesman, meeting approximately 60 heads of state and serving as advisor to two dozen of them.

In the course of his first journey, Battuta traveled through Egypt, Algiers, Tunis, Palestine, Jerusalem, Aleppo, Damascus and Syria before arriving at his destination – Mecca. He entered Egypt at a time when it held a virtual monopoly on trade with Asia and enjoyed a decent administrative bureaucracy and strong economy. His stay in Cairo gave him his first taste of Muslim civilization on a grand scale. Battuta also greatly admired another Egyptian city, Alexandria. It was a busy harbor that he described as one of the five most magnificent places he ever visited.

With the completion of his first *hajj* in 1326, Battuta began a tour of Persia and Iraq, which involved a visit to the then fabled capital of Islam, Baghdad, where he found public baths that were universally unmatched. After this tour, Battuta returned to Mecca to

perform the *hajj* for a second time around 1328-1330 (in all, he made the *hajj* to Mecca seven times). At this time, he remained in the city for three years to study with great Muslim scholars, after which, around 1330-1332, he voyaged by sea down the eastern coast of Africa to modern-day Tanzania. On his return trip, he sailed to Oman and the Persian Gulf before traveling overland across central Arabia to Mecca.

From Mecca, Battuta decided to set out for India in order to seek employment with the government of the Islamic Sultanate of Delhi. But on reaching Jeddah, Mecca's nearest port, he turned down passage on a ship he considered unsafe.¹ Instead, he revisited Cairo, Palestine, Russia and Syria, thereafter arriving at Aleya (Asia Minor). He then crossed the Black Sea and after long wanderings he reached Constantinople through southern Ukraine. After this tour, Battuta finally proceeded to Delhi, venturing through Transoxiana, Khurasan and Afghanistan along the way, and reaching the Indus River around 1333-1335. In India he successfully remained in the sultan's service and patronage as *qadi* for eight years, after which the sultan appointed him as his ambassador to the court of the Mongol emperor of China.

After going through a harrowing experience of being taken prisoner and then released by a band of unfriendly Indians, Battuta finally rejoined his entourage and proceeded to Calicut, a trading port near the tip of India from which he planned to sail to China. Unfortunately, the mission ended in disaster as he was shipwrecked off the southwestern coast of India. The stranded and unemployed *ambassador*, with the typical resourcefulness of a seasoned traveler, spent the next two years moving throughout southern India, Ceylon and the nearby Maldivian Islands where he attached himself to a local Muslim potentate that appointed him as *qadi*.

In 1345 Battuta resolved to make his own journey by sea to China and visited Bengal, Burma and Sumatra before finally reaching Canton and Zaytún, the latter being the storied "Shanghai" of the 13th and 14th centuries. Despite the fact that the Muslim and Chinese empires were not on the friendliest terms, he journeyed from Zaytún to Hangchow and Peking and back without any difficulty, testimony to his diplomatic skills. Battuta traveled through China as an *ambassador*, although he actually represented no country and was

¹ "This was an act of providence," Battuta recalls, "for the ship sailed and foundered in the open sea, and very few escaped." (Source: "Ibn Battuta, Traveler from Tangier," *Saudi Aramco World* 12.7 (August/September 1961): 14-16, Web, 18 Dec. 2008.)

without credentials. In 1346-47 he returned again to Mecca via southern India, the Persian Gulf, Syria, Egypt and Damascus. He avoided Delhi on this trip because he had lost the Sultan's treasure in the shipwreck and feared retribution.

After performing the *hajj* one final time in 1348, Battuta at last made his way back to Morocco, arriving in Fez in 1349. But he did not remain sedentary for long as he was not content to spend his remaining days at home. In 1350 he made a short trip to the Muslim kingdom of Grenada on the Iberian Peninsula where he spent three years. In 1353 he took his final great journey by caravan across the Sahara to West Africa where he mistook the Niger River for the Nile. Most importantly, he visited Timbuktu, a Malian city that was considered legendary by Europeans that had never been there.

In 1354 the great traveler was called to Fez by his sultan, Sultan Abu Inan, who ordered him to dictate the accounts of his travels to a court scribe, Ibn Juzay al-Kalbi. On his final return to Morocco in 1355, Battuta adhered to the sultan's directives, resulting in the compilation of his traveling adventures, the popular *Rihla* (which translates to "The Travels"). It was completed in December 1355, three months after the scribe and traveler began working together. Strangely enough, Ibn Battuta's exploits were lost to the Western world for 300 years. It was not until the 19th century, when his *Rihla* was discovered in Algeria, that his extraordinary wanderings come to light. At this time, increased contacts with Europe resulted in the translation of the book into French, English and other European languages.

Ibn Battuta was indeed the traveler of his age. He is historically and geographically significant for several reasons. Aside from being the most traveled person of his time, he was the only medieval traveler who is known to have visited the lands of every Muslim ruler during that era. When he embarked on his travels, it was, in fact, more than 125 years before such renowned voyagers as Columbus, Vasco de Gama and Ferdinand Magellan set sail. Authorities who estimate Ibn Battuta's journeys at more than 75,000 miles say that the distance was not exceeded by anyone – including Marco Polo, Magellan or Columbus – until the age of steam.

In his travel memoir, the *Rihla*, Battuta mentions his memorable meetings with numerous people of various backgrounds and cultures, and also provides detailed descriptions of the religious, social and political conditions in Turkey, Central Asia, East and West Africa, the Maldives, the Malay Peninsula and parts of India. His documentation on

these regions is a leading source of contemporary knowledge about them and in some cases the only record.

Although the exploits of Marco Polo remain better known to western readers, Ibn Battuta far outdid him in terms of the number of places he visited and reported on, and his contribution to geography is unquestionably as great as that of any geographer. Yet, Battuta is rarely mentioned in geography books and the accounts of his travels are not easily accessible except to the specialist. The omission of reference to Ibn Battuta's achievements in geography books is not an isolated example. Many great Africans suffer the same fate – whether historians, doctors, astronomers, scientists or chemists. One may rationalize why these great Africans are ignored by the West, but the indifference of African governments, scholars and educational institutions is incomprehensible. In order to combat such disregard, efforts must be made to rediscover the contributions of Africans in fields such as science, medicine, engineering, architecture and astronomy.

There are indications, however, that scholarly prejudices against Battuta have begun to change. Today, for instance, and quite suitably, he has been honored in the field of exploration by modern scientists who have named one of the moon's craters "Ibn Battuta."

Ibn Battuta died in Morocco in 1368 or 1369 at the age of 64 or 65.

-- Philip U. Effiong

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