AN AGE OF ADVENTURE

INTRODUCTION

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela
Do you think that long-distance travel is a modern invention? Do you suppose that everyone stayed home until airlines started circling the globe?
If so, think again. By the early 1300s, Afro-Eurasia (Northern Africa, Europe, and Asia) had become a world zone. And it was in motion. People were traveling everywhere, usually in groups — by foot, donkey, horse, camel, and boat. Merchants moved goods; kings, sultans, and popes moved armies. Diplomats and envoys carried messages; missionaries sought souls. Pilgrims and scholars searched for enlightenment. People looked for work, and whole groups of people migrated for varying reasons. Captains, caravan leaders, and travel guides helped keep the hordes of people moving.

Long-distance travel became easier in the late 1200s and early 1300s. There were three reasons for this. First, nomads of Central Asia (the Mongols and their Turkish-speaking allies) conquered Russia, China, and most of the Middle East. The Mongols created the largest territorial empire the world had ever seen. Their rulers imposed strict order. They brought security to the trade routes along the Silk Roads. Second, an Islamic empire swept across North Africa, the Middle East, Persia, and Southeast Asia. Islamic rule was stable. And it provided a common civilization for travelers. Third, improvements in sailing technologies increased sea travel in the Indian Ocean.

Great numbers of travelers moved across Afro-Eurasia. But considering the numbers of travelers, very few individuals left written accounts of their journeys.

Fortunately, two extraordinary travelers did. Marco Polo, of Venice, Italy, and Ibn Battuta, of Tangier, Morocco, left fascinating records of their journeys. They each told their stories to other people from memory, and perhaps some written notes. The others copied down their accounts. Later, they were published as books. Copies have survived through the centuries. A third traveler, Zheng He, from Yunnan, China, is remembered because he served powerful Chinese emperors. He left brief accounts of his voyages carved into granite. Additionally, two men who sailed with him left longer memoirs.

These three adventurers all traveled within a 162-year time period. Marco Polo started his journey in 1271. Ibn Battuta started his travels in 1325, just after Polo died. Zheng He made his seven voyages starting in 1403, 37 years after Ibn Battuta died. The extent of these three journeys is hard to imagine. Even in today’s age of jet travel few people see as much of the world as they did.

Marco Polo spent 24 years away from home. For most of the time he was traveling. Ibn Battuta spent 29 years away. During his time away he visited the lands of more than 40 modern countries. He covered a staggering 73,000 miles (117,000 kilometers). Zheng He was away about 14 years. His travel, however, was spaced over three decades. Zheng He sailed his way around the Indian Ocean and even reached the eastern coast of Africa.

### Adventurer comparison chart

Use this chart to help compare the three adventurers. Name some of the places they visited and some of the reasons they traveled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years of travel</th>
<th>Age while traveling</th>
<th>Route</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marco Polo</td>
<td>1271–1295</td>
<td>17–41</td>
<td>Traveling to China and back to Italy</td>
<td>Traveling to China and back to Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibn Battuta</td>
<td>1325–1354</td>
<td>21–50</td>
<td>Traveling to Africa and back to Morocco</td>
<td>Traveling to Africa and back to Morocco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zheng He</td>
<td>1405–1433</td>
<td>34–62</td>
<td>Traveling to Asia</td>
<td>Traveling to Asia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Year Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italy (Europe)</td>
<td>1271–1295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco (Africa)</td>
<td>1325–1354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China (Asia)</td>
<td>1405–1433</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THREE ADVENTURERS IN AFRO-EURASIA
1271 TO 1433

Ibn Battuta
Marco Polo
Zheng He
Image credits

A drawing of Marco Polo
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A monument to Zheng He at the Stadthuys Museum in Malaysia,
photograph by Hassan Saeed

A 1605 painting of a young holy man
© Stapleton Collection/CORBIS

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