

Marco Polo

Born: 1254, Venice, Italy

Died: January 8, 1324



Marco Polo was a Venetian trader and explorer who travelled extensively through Central Asia and China. Marco recorded his adventures in a book called *The Travels of Marco Polo*. He is one of the most famous explorers of all time.

Marco's mother died soon after childbirth, so Marco was raised by his aunt and uncle. They were a wealthy family with a successful trading business. His father and uncle were merchant traders with a keen interest in Asian goods. After the death of his aunt in 1271, at the age of 15, Marco travelled to China with his father and uncle, Niccolo and Maffeo Polo. They followed the Silk Road, a merchant trail connecting Europe and Asia. The Polo's travelled through India, Iran, Afghanistan and the Gobi desert, finally reaching China after four years.

The Polo's arrived in China in 1275 to the court of Kublai Khan, the Mongol leader whose grandfather, Genghis Khan, had conquered Northeast Asia, united the nomadic tribes and formed the largest empire in history. His court was opulent and progressive.

Marco was introduced to Emperor Kublai Khan by his father. Khan liked Marco and employed him as an envoy to explore the Mongol kingdom and report back what he observed. Marco spent the next 17 years in the Mongol Kingdom, where he worked in the Emperor's courts and travelled to places Europeans had never seen before. He travelled extensively throughout China, Vietnam, Burma, Tibet and Sumatra.

On his return to Europe in 1292, Marco was asked by Khan to escort a Mongol princess to Persia where she was to marry a Persian king. The Polo's escorted the princess by the sea with a flotilla of 14 ships and 600 courtiers and sailors. By the time they reached Persia, only 18 people remained alive.

The Polo's finally arrived in Venice in 1295, three years after departing China with much of their collected wealth stolen along the way. On their return to Venice, Marco, Niccolo and Maffeo struggled to fit back into Venetian society. Their travels had changed them and their extensive time away caused them to forget much of their native language. Family and friends did not recognise the trio and their tall tales were not believed.



In 1298 Marco joined the army and fought against the state of Genoa. He was soon captured and imprisoned. While in prison Marco told stories of his extensive travels to a prisoner called Rustichello who was already a known author of romance novels. Rustichello wrote Marco's travels down and a book was published. The book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, was a huge success and made Marco famous. It was published in French, Italian and Latin. Stories and claims within the books were so wild and foreign that many believed them make-believe, but Marco stood by his claims.

Polo was released from prison in 1299. He returned to Venice and married. For the next 25 years, Polo remained in Venice running the family business and raising two daughters. He died at the age of 70 in his home in Venice on January 8, 1324. Up until his death, many of the stories Marco described in his book were considered fiction as Europeans struggled to acknowledge such an advanced and opulent society could exist in Asia.

It was only in the centuries following his death that travellers and academics verified Marco's stories. *The Travels of Marco Polo* was hugely influential to subsequent explorers who followed in Marco's footsteps, including Christopher Columbus, who carried a copy of the book on his journey to the Orient.