

HISTORYMAKERS Ibn Batuta

World Traveler

"... he who should call him the traveler of the whole body of Islam would not exceed the truth."—Muhammad Ibn Juzayy, describing Ibn Batuta

From China to Nigeria, from Russia to the Nile, and from Java to Spain, Ibn Batuta traveled to almost every corner of the known world during the early 14th century. Spurred by his unquenchable curiosity, he left his impressions of the people and places, kings and peasants, modes of dress and habits of diet that he found throughout the years and miles of his journeys.

The future world traveler was born in Tangier, Morocco, to a family that had a tradition of serving as judges in the Muslim religious courts. Ibn Batuta was meant for such a career as well and received the proper education for it. He occasionally halted his travels to undertake that role, but those stops were only infrequent and brief.

Ibn Batuta probably was blessed with several advantages that helped him successfully through his trips. His family was probably wealthy, as the great voyager needed money to support himself during almost 30 years of traveling. It is likely, too, that he had considerable charm and graciousness, since he generally met acceptance wherever he went. Most of all, Ibn Batuta must have been endlessly curious.

Ibn Batuta's first journey was not unusual for a Muslim. In 1325, at the age of 21, he undertook the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, that all Muslims are obliged to perform by their faith. He also used the occasion to add to his knowledge of Muslim theology and law. He stopped at most of the important cities of North Africa, including Alexandria, which still enjoyed its reputation as a center of learning, and Cairo, then one of the leading cities of the Muslim world. Reaching Damascus after more than a year of travel, he turned south to cross the blistering deserts of Arabia for Mecca. He returned to Morocco in late 1326.

Ibn Batuta did not stay home for long. He returned to Mecca, where he stayed for three years. After that, he traveled to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea regions. He also reached the upper Nile River and descended it to see Cairo again. He then journeyed to Turkey and crossed the Black Sea to visit one of the Mongol states that controlled part of Russia. From there he traveled briefly in parts of

Mongolia.

Next, Ibn Batuta visited Constantinople. While there, he even had an interview with the Orthodox Christian emperor of the Byzantine Empire. Ibn Batuta then turned east and crossed the Hindu Kush Mountains into the Indus River valley. For the next eight years he served as a judge to a Muslim ruler in Delhi, India. This period plunged him into serious financial difficulties, however. He was saved when that ruler sent him as head of a delegation to China. Shipwreck ended that plan, and Ibn Batuta moved along the west coast of India. Once again, he stayed and briefly became a judge until he was ready to move on again.

Ibn Batuta's ensuing stops included Ceylon, Burma, and Java. He then turned north to head for China and returned by sea to Damascus. There he heard that his father had died some 15 years earlier. The bubonic plague soon to strike Europe was ravaging Damascus at the time, and Ibn Batuta left a vivid account of the horrors of this disease. Afterward, he returned to Morocco, reaching it in 1349.

The restless traveler did not stay long, however. Within a few years, he was in Muslim Spain and then visited the Islamic kingdoms in West Africa, going as far south as modern Nigeria. Summoned by the ruler of Morocco, he finally returned to Tangier, where he remained until his death some 15 years later. Upon arriving home, his ruler ordered Ibn Juzayy to record the voyager's memories of his experiences. Though occasionally marred by incorrect chronology or exaggerated details, *The Travels of Ibn Batuta* remains a rich and valuable resource on life in many areas of the world in the early to mid-1300s.

Questions

1. **Making Inferences** What kind of character do you think Ibn Batuta had? Explain.
2. **Drawing Conclusions** What makes Ibn Batuta's journeys so important?
3. **Recognizing Facts and Details** What non-Muslim lands did Ibn Batuta visit?