**Marco Polo**

* **Occupation:** Explorer and Traveler
* **Born:** Venice, Italy in 1254
* **Died:** January 8, 1324 Venice, Italy
* **Best known for:** European traveler to China and the Far East

**Biography:**   
  
Marco Polo was a merchant and explorer who traveled throughout the Far East and China for much of his life. His stories were the basis for what much of Europe knew about[Ancient China](https://www.ducksters.com/history/china/ancient_china.php) for many years. He lived from 1254 to 1324.   
  
**Where did he grow up?**   
  
Marco was born in Venice, Italy in 1254. Venice was a wealthy trading city and Marco's father was a merchant.   
  
**The Silk Road**   
  
The [Silk Road](https://www.ducksters.com/history/china/silk_road.php) referred to a number of trade routes between major cities and trading posts that went all the way from Eastern Europe to Northern China. It was called the Silk Road because silk cloth was the major export from China.   
  
Not many people traveled the entire route. Trading was mostly between cities or small sections of the route and products would slowly make their way from one end to the other trading hands several times.   
  
Marco Polo's father and uncle wanted to try something different. They wanted to travel all the way to China and bring the goods directly back to Venice. They thought they could make their fortune this way. It took them nine years, but they finally made it home.   
  
**When did he first travel to China?**   
  
Marco first left for China when he was 17 years old. He traveled there with his father and uncle. His father and uncle had met the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan during their first trip to China and had told him they would return. Kublai was leader over all of China at the time.   
  
**Where did he travel?**   
  
It took Marco Polo three years to get to China. Along the way he visited many great cities and saw many sites including the holy city of Jerusalem, the mountains of the Hindu Kush, Persia, and the Gobi Desert. He met a lot of different types of people and had many adventures. 

**Living in China**   
  
Marco lived in China for many years and learned to speak the language. He traveled throughout China as a messenger and spy for [Kublai Khan](https://www.ducksters.com/biography/world_leaders/kublai_khan.php). He even traveled far to the south to where Myanmar and[Vietnam](https://www.ducksters.com/geography/country/vietnam_history_timeline.php) are today. During these visits he learned about different cultures, foods, cities, and peoples. He saw many places and things that no one from Europe had ever seen before.

Marco was fascinated by the wealth and luxury of the Chinese cities and of Kublai Khan's court. It was nothing like he had experienced in Europe. The capital city of Kinsay was large, but well organized and clean. Wide roads and huge civil engineering projects like the [Grand Canal](https://www.ducksters.com/history/china/grand_canal.php) were well beyond anything he had experienced back home. Everything from the food to the people to the animals, like orangutans and rhinos, were new and interesting.   
  
**How do we know about Marco Polo?**   
  
After twenty years of traveling, Marco, along with his father and uncle, decided to head home to Venice. They left home in 1271 and finally returned in 1295. A few years after returning home, Venice fought a war with the city of Genoa. Marco was put under arrest. While he was under arrest, Marco told detailed stories of his journeys to a writer named Rustichello who wrote them all down in a book called *The Travels of Marco Polo*.   
  
*The Travels of Marco Polo*became a very popular book. It was translated into multiple languages and read throughout Europe. After the fall of Kublai Kahn, the Ming Dynasty took over China. They were very wary of foreigners and little information about China was available. This made Marco's book even more popular. 

**Fun Facts**

* *The Travels of Marco Polo* was also called *Il Milione* or "The Million".
* The Polo's traveled home in a fleet of ships that also carried a princess who was to marry a prince in Iran. The journey was dangerous and only 117 of the 700 original travelers survived. This included the princess who made it to Iran safely.
* Some have speculated that Marco made up much of his adventures. However, scholars have checked his facts and believe many of them are likely true.
* During the time when the Mongols and Kublai Khan ruled China, merchants were able to elevate themselves in Chinese society. During other dynasties merchant were considered lowly and looked down upon as parasites on the economy.
* Marco had to travel across the great Gobi Desert to get to China. It took months to cross the desert and it was said to be haunted by spirits.