

Marco

I occasionally tell my students that if I had to go back in time and live as someone else, I'd pick Francis Drake, James Cook...or Marco Polo. All had full, adventure-filled, if not unduly long, lives. I collect Marco Polo covers as part of my Historical Characters collection, and, as you can see from those shown below, they *certainly* exist. But, I digress, a little background on this most famous world traveler.

Marco Polo was born in 1254 in Venice. His father and uncle, Nicolo and Maffeo, both merchants, had already left for China before he was born. His mother died while he was still a boy. Marco was raised to be a merchant, and his resulting education was to be a great advantage to him later in life. In 1269, his father and uncle returned and soon prepared a second expedition to China, this time including Marco.

The three Polo's set off, Marco being just 17. It took them more than three years to reach Kublai Khan's summer palace in China. Along the way they had to disguise themselves as Arabs to cross Moslem territory (Christians weren't too popular at the time due to the Crusades which were still going on); they crossed the deserts and mountains of Asia. Marco almost died of a fever on the way.

The Khan valued the experience and knowledge of his guests. Marco knew four languages, and the Khan sent him on many official tours of the empire. Although Marco took detailed notes, historians cannot trace his routes exactly because of changes in place names. We do know that Marco visited China's southern and eastern provinces, Burma, Indochina, Indonesia, and Malaya. He also served as a government official of a Chinese city for three years.



Polo!

As time passed, the Polo's began to worry about returning home safely. Kublai Khan did not want to let them leave, and the Polo's were afraid that if the Khan were to die they would be at the mercy of their enemies (i.e., jealous court officials). Finally, in 1292, their opportunity came. The Khan had selected a suitable bride for his great-nephew, the Mongol ruler of Persia. He reluctantly agreed to let the Polos, as experienced sailors, escort her. That same year, the Polos, the princess, and a fleet of 14 junks sailed to Singapore, around the tip of India, and finally to Hormuz. There, they left the wedding party and headed for Constantinople and then back to Venice. They had been gone for 24 years and traveled nearly 15,000 miles. They returned with many riches, and Marco, especially, had returned with a wealth of knowledge.

But Marco's adventure's weren't over yet! Venice was at war with Genoa, and in 1296 Marco Polo was captured and spent the next couple of years in prison...which turned out to be a Godsend! His cell mate turned out to be a professional writer. When he started hearing all the great stories Marco had to tell, he wrote them down, and the resulting book, *Description of the World*, (popularly known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*) went on to become the most widely read book in Europe. It was Polo's book that was one of the main impetuses for the beginning of the Age of Exploration in the 1400s. Polo showed that anyone who could bring back spices, silks, etc. from Asia would make a fortune...but it also showed that going overland was too long, dangerous, and tentative. Thus, the explorers of the Renaissance would eventually fan out and look for the 'shortcut' to Asia. Marco was freed in 1299 and returned to Venice, where he died in c. 1324.

The greatest source of Marco Polo covers is Chinese Restaurants. I currently have 28.

