



LONG-DISTANCE TRAVELERS

Not all those who wander are lost—J. R. R. TOLKIEN

Two weeks into the “Out of Eden Walk,” Paul Salopek traverses the Afar region of northeastern Ethiopia. John Stanmeyer/National Geographic

FOR THE LAST ELEVEN YEARS and counting, Paul Salopek, journalist, writer, and National Geographic Explorer, has been walking the pathways that early humans followed out of Africa and around the world—from Ethiopia to the Americas. So far, Salopek—on his “Out of Eden Walk”—has travelled about 15,000 miles, crossing Arabia, Israel and the West Bank, Jordan, Pakistan, India, Myanmar, China, and South Korea.

In 2015, eco-explorer Mario Rigby embarked on a two-year odyssey across Africa, walking and kayaking from Cape Town, South Africa, to Cairo, Egypt. Along the way, he connected with communities and “shared their stories with the world, aiming to bridge the gap between humanity.”

And, in 2021, travel writer and outdoorsman Leon McCarron traveled the 1,200-mile length of the Tigris River, chronicling the social “and environmental state of this venerable waterway (see “Bookshelf:

Wounded Tigris: A River Journey Through the Cradle of Civilization by Leon McCarron, Pegasus Books, 2023, *Natural History*, July/August, 2023).

Salopek, Rigby, and McCarron are just three of the latest travelers who have made historic, long, slow treks across foreign lands, often crossing borders in conflict. The remarkable accounts of such travelers reveal a fascinating paradox with our species. *Homo sapiens* are an intensely territorial species, and yet we are insatiable travelers. Our territoriality can be seen in the gang signs that tag contested urban blocks in American cities, or the great walls erected at territorial borders. The wars between the Greeks and Persians began as territorial disputes. Our flags mark our territories, and people are aware of those group boundaries, even if they are abstract lines on a map.

Despite our inherent territoriality, our species has developed social norms

and cultural traditions to accommodate and protect travelers. It is one of the commandments of most world religions. In the Old Testament book of Leviticus, it is written, “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself.” Similarly, the Quran says, “the righteous . . . give charity out of their cherished wealth to relatives, orphans, the poor, needy travelers, beggars, and for freeing captives.” The Hajj, the Muslim spiritual journey to the holy sites at Mecca and Medina, depends on tolerance and help for religious pilgrims, and the same support was traditional along the medieval Christian pilgrimage routes, such as the Camino de Santiago or the Via Francigena, linking northern Europe with Rome. Confucius (ca. 551 – ca. 479 BCE) said, “to have friends come from afar is happiness, is it not?” In his *Analects* he said, “When

you go out, treat everyone as if you were welcoming a great guest.” In the Americas, religious pilgrimage was an important part of Mesoamerican life, and the Maya and Aztec had traditions providing pilgrims safe passage to important sites. The magnificent city of Teotihuacán was largely abandoned after 600 CE and fell into ruins, but it was esteemed and visited by the Classic Maya, Toltecs, Mixtecs, and Aztecs.

INDIVIDUAL TRAVELERS have almost always been welcomed. The world travels of thirteenth-century Venetian merchant Marco Polo (ca.1254–1324), are well known, as is the Silk Road he followed. His journey spanned twenty-four years (1271–1295), seventeen of which were spent in China. Those of another world traveler, Ibn Battuta (1304–1368/69 or 1377), were religious, not mercantile, but were as extensive and lasted thirty years.

In 1325 CE, Ibn Battuta set out from his home in Tangiers, Morocco, to undertake the Hajj. He ended up going far beyond Arabia. In the course of his travels he covered an estimated 75,000 miles, traveling from Mecca into Iraq and Persia, India, the Indonesian archipelago, and China. He traveled to the far reaches of the medieval Islamic world and beyond. Like Marco Polo, he witnessed Asia and the Middle East during the period of the Mongol conquests (1206–1368 CE), when Genghis Khan and his successors subjugated territory from Korea to Poland. The Mongol invaders laid waste to many cities, including Baghdad—then the most important cultural center in the Islamic world. It was a time of great change and the increasing integration of all of Asia and the Mediterranean world.

Ibn Battuta was an Islamic scholar and judge, and he was able to act as an expert in Islamic law in many parts of Asia. His status as a scholar and, no doubt, his own charisma and talent as a storyteller made him welcome in palaces and courts across Asia. And he was generally well treated. The most



A camel caravan along the Silk Road in northwest China. Tatiana kashko Photo/Shutterstock

common sort of delay he faced was being asked in for tea or meals everywhere he went. Of his time in China, Ibn Battuta wrote, “The care they take of travelers among them is truly surprising; and hence their country is to travelers the best and the safest: for here a man may travel alone for nine months together, with a great quantity of wealth, without the least fear.”

Ibn Battuta did, however, experience deprivation and long trips on foot or horseback across wild and dangerous areas. He fell ill many times in his travels as he encountered a broad continent’s worth of diseases and parasites. Some illnesses killed his companions and incapacitated him for months. He was also robbed by bandits a few times and more than once was left walking along the trail alone in his underwear.

When Ibn Battuta visited China, then under the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty, he described cities with more than one million inhabitants, subdivided by districts and containing enclaves of Muslims, Christians, and Jews. These cities were the largest ever to exist at the time (see “The Invention of the City,” *Natural History*, May 2023.) Ibn Battuta witnessed the use of paper currency, something unheard-of in the Mediterranean

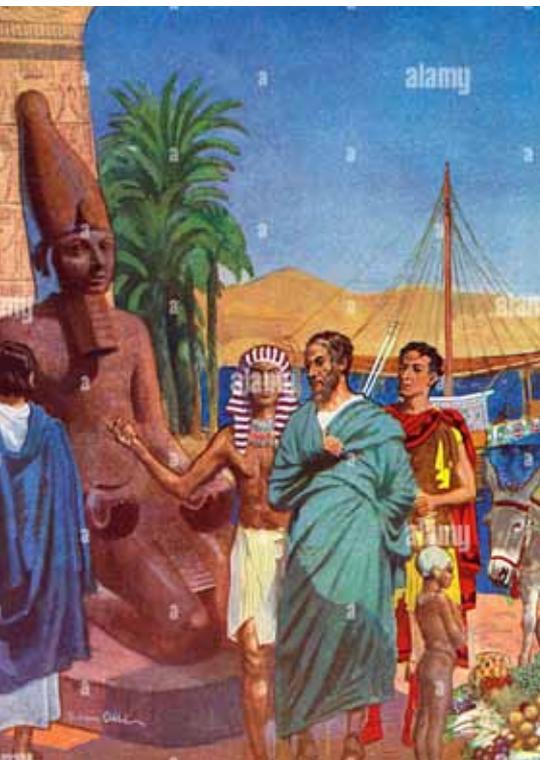
world. He wrote, “Their transactions are carried on with paper: they do not buy or sell either with the dirhem or the dinar . . . As to the paper, every piece of it is in extent about the measure of the palm of the hand, and is stamped with the King’s stamp.”

Ibn Battuta’s travels took place at the time when the bubonic plague, or Black Death, was sweeping through Eurasia. In 1348 CE, Ibn Battuta was in Damascus, in what is today Syria, and made this record of the people’s reaction to the plague that was killing thousands every day:

After the dawn prayer next morning they all went out together on foot, holding Korans in their hands, and the Emirs barefooted. The procession was joined by the entire population of the town, men and women, small and large; the Jews came with their Book of the Law and the Christians with their Gospel, all of them with their women and children. The whole concourse, weeping and supplicating and seeking the favour of God through His Books and His Prophets, made their way to the Mosque of the Footprints, and there they remained in supplication and invocation until near midday.



Ibn Battuta was well received in China where he encountered bustling urban life—as depicted by this painting by Zhang Zeduan during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE).



Herodotus visiting Aswan in Ancient Egypt. His eyewitness accounts indicate that he travelled in Egypt probably sometime after 454 BC or possibly earlier. Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo

He observed that deaths in Damascus fell to less than 2,000 per day after this display of faith, but that in Cairo during the worst of the plague many times that number were dying every day.

AS MENTIONED, Marco Polo traveled the Silk Road (see “Silk” by Aarathi Prasad, *Natural History*, May 2024). It was a network of trade routes linking East Asia and the Mediterranean and had existed for many centuries by the time of Polo and Ibn Battuta. It dated back at least to the Chinese Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). Silk fabrics, spices, perfumes, tea, gold, gems, and other luxury goods traveled the routes during Greek and Roman times. Especially around 100 BCE, Chinese explorers and envoys were annexing territory and opening trade routes north of the Himalayan mountains as far as the Hindu Kush and modern Afghanistan. These explorations were occurring not that long after Alexander the Great (356– 323 BCE) had conquered the same areas, and from then on there was a strong demand for exotic goods in both directions. The Chinese explorer and diplomat Zhang Qian (ca. 195–114 BCE), another extraordinary traveler, was important in exploring the Xinjiang area that is now far western China. He brought news back to Imperial China about the Greek and Persian states in the west.

From the western side of the Silk Road, the classical Greek scholar

Herodotus (ca. 484 – ca. 425 BCE) had also mentioned the Hindu Kush and some of these regions in *The Histories* (ca. 430 BCE). Herodotus never journeyed as far as Ibn Battuta, but was intensely curious about the fringes of the world known to the Greeks, and was always trying to learn from other travelers about Iberia, North Africa, Europe, the Nile, and especially the eastern edges of the world the Greeks knew. He was fascinated by the “Royal Road” that linked the parts of the Persian Empire. It spanned from near Herodotus’s birthplace on the Mediterranean coast of western Turkey, across Mesopotamia, to what is now southern Iran. This 1,600-mile route pieced together ancient roads and allowed the Persians (the Achaemenian Empire) to compete with the Greeks in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. Herodotus described a pony-express-like system of sending messages: “It is said that as many days as there are in the whole journey, so many are the men and horses that stand along the road, each horse and man at the interval of a day’s journey. These are stopped neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed.”

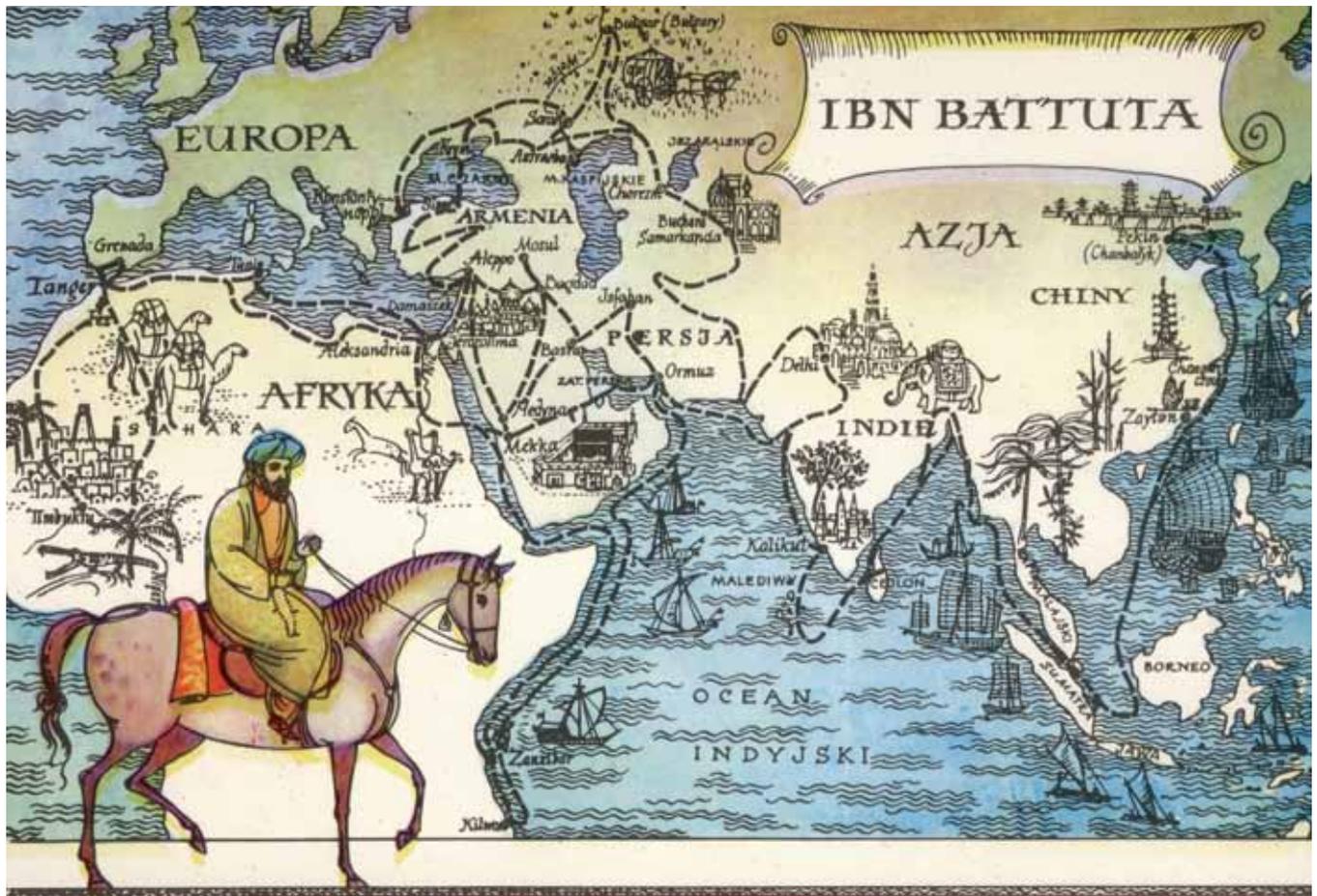


Illustration by Hanna Balicka-Fribes of Ibn Battuta on horseback with a map of his journeys in the background. INTERFOTO/Alamy Stock Photo

CULTURAL NORMS ABOUT welcoming travelers are not purely altruistic—it is in a community’s self-interest to accommodate visitors and pilgrims. The outsiders often bring valuable knowledge from surrounding areas and possibly intelligence about potential threats. They often bring trade, new ideas, and new technologies (and, not uncommon, new genes). The most welcome travelers, like Ibn Battuta or Herodotus, were good storytellers or performers who brought new tales, songs or poetry. Traveling performers have always been an attraction in sedentary societies. In the ancient Roman Empire the pantomimes (silent performers who conveyed stories through dance and gestures) were especially popular because they could be understood by anyone across the multilingual empire. Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were epic poems that began as oral

performances before they were written down, and they became the narrative antecedents of Herodotus’s *Histories*.

THE TRAVELER, if he is lucky, will eventually make it home again. Ibn Battuta returned to Morocco late in the year 1349 CE. He found that the Black Death had taken his mother and had caused great political upheaval. Never one to slight the high and mighty, Battuta wrote of the new ruler of Morocco:

His dignity made me forget the dignity of the sultan of Iraq, his beauty the beauty of the king of India, his fine qualities the noble character of the king of Yemen, his courage the courage of the king of the Turks, his clemency the clemency of the king of the Greeks, his devotion the devotion of the king of Turkistan, and his knowledge the knowledge

of the king of Java. I laid down the staff of travel in his glorious land, having assured myself after unbiased consideration that it is the best of countries, for in it fruits are plentiful, and running water and nourishing food are never exhausted.

Ibn Battuta visited the grave of his mother in his native Tangiers, but before long he became restless again. The only way of life he had known as an adult was travel, and it was not long before he was off to visit Islamic Spain in al-Andalus, and to cross the Sahara by camel caravan to see the wealthy kingdom of Mali in West Africa.

Samuel M. Wilson is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Texas, author of *The Emperor’s Giraffe and Other Stories of Cultures in Contact*, and a contributing editor to *Natural History*.