Vasco da Gama

Biography >> Explorers for Kids

Vasco da Gama

• **Occupation:** Explorer
• **Born:** 1460 in Sines, Portugal
• **Died:** December 23, 1524 in Kochi, India
• **Best known for:** The first European to sail from Europe to India around Africa

Biography:

Vasco da Gama (1460 - 1524) was a Portuguese explorer. He led the first expedition that traveled from Europe to India by sailing around Africa.

Where did Vasco da Gama grow up?

Vasco da Gama was born in a small coastal town in Portugal named Sines. His father was a knight and an explorer. He followed in his father's footsteps and soon commanded ships in the king's name.

A Trade Route to India

Spices from India were very popular in Europe, however, the only way to travel from Europe to India was over land. This was a long and expensive trip. The King of Portugal figured if he could find a way to get to India by sailing on the ocean, he would become rich trading spices in Europe.

An explorer by the name of Bartolemeu Dias had discovered the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa. It was thought that there may be a way around the Cape and to the northeast towards India. However, many were skeptical and thought that the Indian Ocean did not connect with the Atlantic Ocean.

Vasco da Gama was given a fleet of ships by the king and told to find a trade route around Africa to India. He was also told to find any other trading opportunities along the way.

The First Voyage
Vasco da Gama left on his first voyage from Lisbon, Portugal on July 8, 1497. He had 170 men and 4 ships: the Sao Gabriel, Sao Rafael, the Berrio, and a fourth ship unnamed and used for storage.

The expedition rounded the southern tip of Africa at the Cape of Good Hope on November 22. They then headed north up the coast of Africa. They stopped at trading ports along the way including Mombasa and Malindi. At Malindi they gained a local navigator who knew the direction to India. With the help of a Monsoon wind they were able to cross the Indian Ocean and arrive in Calicut, India in less than a month.

At Calicut, Vasco ran into issues when trying to trade. He had brought little of value in his ships. This made the local traders suspicious. Soon he had to leave. The voyage back was disastrous. Around half of his crew died from scurvy as the trip back took much longer. However, when he returned home, he was a hero. He had found the much needed trade route to India.

**Later Voyages**

Vasco da Gama commanded two more fleets to India. The second voyage was more of a military expedition where he captured Arab ships and tried to show the might of the Portuguese navy.

On the third voyage Vasco was to take over as Viceroy of Portuguese India. However, he died of malaria shortly after arriving.

**Fun Facts about Vasco da Gama**

- Originally Vasco's father, Estevao, was going to be given the command of the exploration fleet, but the trip was delayed for many years. Eventually, the command was given to his son Vasco instead.
- There is a crater named Vasco da Gama on the Moon.
- His fleet on the second voyage consisted of 20 armed ships.
- He had six sons and one daughter. His second son became governor of Portuguese India.
Christopher Columbus

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Columbus arriving in the Americas

- **Occupation:** Explorer
- **Born:** 1451 in Genoa, Italy
- **Died:** May 20, 1506
- **Best known for:** Discovering America

**Biography:**

Christopher Columbus is the explorer who is credited for discovering America. Of course, there were already people living in America at the time who we call [Native Americans](#). There even was a European, Leif Ericsson, who had been to the America's before. However, it was Columbus' voyage that started the exploration and colonization of the Americas.

**Before the Voyage**

Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy in 1451. He later lived in Lisbon where he worked as a trader. He learned how to make maps and navigate a ship.

**A Shortcut to China**

Columbus and his brother, Bartholomew, knew that there were great riches to be had in China and East Asia. However, traveling overland by the [Silk Road](#) was dangerous and a sea route around Africa seemed much too long. Columbus thought he could sail straight to China by crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

It would turn out that Columbus was wrong. The Earth was much larger than he thought and there was another land, the Americas, between Europe and Asia.

**Three Ships and a Long Voyage**

Columbus spent years trying to convince someone to pay for his voyage. He first tried to get King John II of Portugal to pay for his journey, but the King was not interested. Finally, he was able to convince Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of [Spain](#) to pay for the trip.
He set sail on August 12, 1492 with three ships named the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria. The voyage was long and difficult. At one point his men threatened to mutiny and wanted to turn back. Columbus promised them he would turn back in two days if they didn't find land. In his journal, however, he wrote that he had no intention of turning back.

Finding Land

On October 12, 1492 land was spotted. It was a small island in the Bahamas that Columbus would name San Salvador. He met natives there that he called Indians because he was convinced that he had landed on islands off the coast of East Asia. He also visited other islands in the Caribbean such as Cuba and Hispaniola.

![Map of Columbus' voyages](image)

The routes taken by Columbus on his four voyages

Click to see larger map

Returning home

After making his discovery, Columbus was eager to return home to Spain and claim his riches. Only the Pinta and the Nina were able to return to Spain, however, as the Santa Maria wrecked off the coast of Hispaniola. Columbus left 43 men behind on the island to start up an outpost.

Upon returning home, Columbus was treated like a hero. He presented some of the things he had found including turkeys, pineapples, and some natives he had captured. The King of Spain was pleased enough to fund future expeditions.

More Voyages

Columbus would make three more voyages to the Americas. He explored more of the Caribbean and even saw mainland America. He had some difficulties in being the local governor and was even arrested for his behavior and for mistreating some of the colonists. Columbus died on May 20, 1506. He died thinking he had discovered a shortcut to Asia across the Atlantic Ocean. He never knew what an amazing discovery he had made.

Fun Facts about Christopher Columbus

- Columbus was first buried in Spain, however his remains were later moved to Santo Domingo in the new world and then back, again, to Spain.
- Columbus brought horses to the new world on his second voyage.
- In his original calculations, he thought that Asia would be 2,400 miles from Portugal. He was way off. It is actually 10,000 miles away! Not to mention the huge continent in between.
• You can remember the date Columbus discovered America by using this rhyme "In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue".
• The sailor who was first to spot land on the voyage would receive a reward. The winner was Rodrigo de Triana who spotted land from the crow's nest of the Pinta.

Marco Polo

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![Marco Polo](image)

- **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 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](Silk_Road) 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
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. His father and uncle decided to return. They had met the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan during their first trip 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. He even traveled far to the south to where Myanmar and Vietnam 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 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.