



VINTAGE

El Dorado & Other
Pursuits
Evan S. Connell

Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Dedication

Title Page

Epigraph

1 Various Tourists

2 The Aztec Treasure House

3 Aristokles' Atlantis

4 The Innocents' Crusade

5 Prester John

6 To the Indies

7 The Sea Must Have an Endynge

8 El Dorado

9 Seven Cities

10 GoldGoldGold

11 Philippus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus ab
Hohenheim & Co.

Bibliography

Copyright

About the Book

Evan S. Connell explores the quixotic obsession with the new, the hidden, the unattainable that burns in an individual's soul.

Each essay is an extraordinary account of passionate pursuit by legendary explorers, visionaries, and seekers compelled by a singular desire. Here we find Marco Polo, El Dorado, Paracelsus, Columbus, the thousands of children in the Innocents' Crusade, Magellan, Mary Kingsley (a Victorian naturalist, ethnologist, sailor, scholar, and guest of cannibals), and Ibn Batuta (an indefatigable explorer of the fourteenth century whose travels in the Arab world and beyond made 'the journey of Marco Polo look like a stroll around the block').

'There's no end to the list, of course,' Connell adds, 'because gradually it descends from such legendary individuals to ourselves when, as children, obsessed by that same urge, we got permission to sleep in the backyard.'

About the Author

Evan S. Connell, long recognised as one of the most important American literary voices, is the author of seventeen books, including *Mrs. Bridge*, *Mr. Bridge*, the bestselling *Son of the Morning Star*, his account of Custer's final battle at the Little Big Horn, and *Deus lo Volt!* (both available in Pimlico). He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

To Ruth and Mark Costello

EL DORADO &
OTHER PURSUITS



EVAN S. CONNELL



PIMLICO

The soul has many motions,
many gods come and go.

-D. H. Lawrence

Various Tourists

IN 1939, WHEN Richard Halliburton tried to cross the Pacific in a Chinese junk, I was a fourteen-year-old stamp collector. Never doubting that he would make it, I paid something like \$1.50 to have him deliver a commemorative envelope. It seems to me that he was supposed to initial the envelope, or hand-cancel the stamp, or otherwise authenticate each letter he was carrying. I may be wrong, it's been a while; but I clearly remember how I felt when I heard that the junk was overdue. I felt annoyed and resentful. I wanted my commemorative envelope. And when, finally, there could be no doubt that the junk was lost at sea I felt I had been swindled. I was nominally sorry for the people on the junk and I spent a little time wondering what happened, but I could not get over feeling peevish that my envelope was not going to arrive. In fact I thought there might be a chance the junk would be found and the cargo rescued. I remember being uncomfortable with this attitude, nevertheless it was so; Halliburton's life, I could not deny, meant less to me than a letter he was carrying.

Now, having had some years to reflect upon it, I find that still I am not proud of my reaction; but I have concluded also that I am no more inhuman than most. A trifle, perhaps, if you insist. But this isn't the point. The point is that when Halliburton vanished I realized for the first time that certain people do not travel the way most of us travel;

not only do they sometimes choose odd vehicles, they take dangerous and unusual trips for incomprehensible reasons.

I don't think I wondered why he wanted to cross the Pacific in a tiny boat. He did such things. He climbed the Matterhorn and swam the Hellespont and slept beside the Taj Mahal and so on. That was Richard Halliburton. It was why everybody, boys especially, knew his name. *The Royal Road to Romance* was one of our classics, along with *Kidnapped*, *White Fang*, *The Call of the Wild*, and some unforgettable epics by Zane Grey which I have forgotten. So his trip made sense; it was altogether logical that he would set out on an utterly insane voyage across the world's largest ocean in a boat designed for sailing up and down the coast.

He himself had no doubts. In a letter to his parents dated September 10, 1938, he wrote: "Dad, if I could talk to you about the junk trip, I'm sure you would lose all your hesitation over it. Never was an expedition so carefully worked out for safety measures. I've a wonderful captain and engine and engineer ..."

Two weeks later he wrote: "The name? I chose that long ago—the *Sea Dragon*. On the day of launching, the prettiest Chinese girl whom I can find will break a bottle of rice wine on the *Sea Dragon's* nose. And as the junk slides down the ways we'll beat gongs and shoot off firecrackers, in proper Chinese fashion, to drive away the demons of storm and shipwreck ... We'll leave China early in January and reach Treasure Island—God willing—the middle of March."

December 12, 1938: "I have complete faith in the captain and the engineer, and feel certain that we'll arrive without the slightest mishap—except a lot of seasickness."

January 1, 1939: "I've lost none of my enthusiasm, and none of my confidence."

In a newspaper article he described how the ship was painted:

The hull is a brilliant Chinese red, edged at the rail with bands of white and gold. The “glance” of the eyes is black. On either side of the poop a Chinese artist has painted a ferocious red and yellow dragon twenty feet long, not counting the curves! Our foresail has been dyed yellow; the mizzensail, vermilion ... On the *Sea Dragon's* stern, the central section is brilliant with a huge painting of a phoenix—the Chinese good-luck bird.

We'll be twelve aboard, all American: the captain, engineer, radioman, seven seamen including myself, a cook and a cabinboy. And because one solitary mascot would make the total thirteen, which superstitious seamen regard with horror, we're taking along *two* mascots—a pair of white Chinese kittens. This means that the *Sea Dragon* will be responsible for twelve souls and (counting the cats) thirty lives.

In late January came the shakedown cruise. He notified his parents that there were a few defects to be corrected, and that the junk sailed slowly, very deep in the water. He did not sound concerned.

Early in February the *Sea Dragon* left Hong Kong.

Two days out during a storm one of the crewmen fell down a hatch and broke an ankle. Another ruptured himself. Halliburton ordered the captain, John Welch, to return to port.

This is his account of the false start: “We turned up the coast of China, as the peak above Hongkong faded behind us, as a warm twilight came, as a huge moon rose out of the sea. The northeast monsoon, which, on nine days out of ten at this season would have been blowing a gale against us, had faded to a pleasant starboard breeze ... The *Sea Dragon*, as we wanted it to be, as we had labored hard to make it, had turned into a fantasy of a ship, a picture of a

dream-junk from some ancient Chinese painting, a poetry-ship devoid of weight and substance, gliding with bright-hued sails across a silver ocean to a magic land.”

On the second day, however, things looked less poetic. Black clouds swirled overhead. Waves began to mount. The radio aerial was ripped loose. Everything not fastened down was tossed about. The messboy lay in his bunk half dead from seasickness. The auxiliary engine was turned on but because of heavy seas it was necessary to close the hatch, with the result that fumes from the newly painted tanks and bulkheads almost suffocated everybody.

“At six o’clock on the second afternoon we caught sight of a lighthouse on the China coast. At six o’clock in the morning the same lighthouse was still in the same place. We had not gained an inch.”

Bearded, exhausted, and dejected, they sailed into Hong Kong harbor on the sixth day. The injured crew members were taken to a hospital, then another collapsed with appendicitis, and the messboy resigned, calling the trip six days of terror.

Halliburton decided to add a fin keel because the *Sea Dragon* rolled heavily. He expected to have this done and new crew members signed up by the end of the week.

Two weeks later he was still in Hong Kong, exasperated but optimistic.

“Mother and Dad: One more—one last—goodbye letter. We sail, again, in a few hours—far more seaworthy than before. The delay has been heart breaking, but worth it in added safety.... All our leaks have been plugged, and the hull tarred. Our fin-keel will keep us from rolling—so we’ll be dry, comfortable and even-keeled.... So goodbye again. I’ll radio you every few days, so you can enjoy and follow the voyage with me. Think of it as wonderful sport, and not as something hazardous and foolish.”

On March 5, 1939, he left Hong Kong.

Eight days out he radioed: 1200 MILES AT SEA ALLS WELL

On March 19 he sent word that they expected to reach Midway Island by April 5 and would not be stopping at Honolulu.

This message was heard on March 24: CAPTAIN JOHN WELCH OF THE SEADRAGON TO LINER PRESIDENT COOLIDGE SOUTHERLY GALES RAIN SQUALLS LEE RAIL UNDER WATER WET BUNKS HARDTACK BULLY BEEF HAVING WONDERFUL TIME WISH YOU WERE HERE INSTEAD OF ME

The next day Halliburton's parents were told that there had been no further radio contact. "Well," his mother said, "that's it. It's all over. It's the end."

Captain Charles Jokstad, master of the liner *President Pierce*, had inspected the *Sea Dragon* in Hong Kong at Halliburton's request. Jokstad said later, "I had the awful feeling that I would never see that young man again, and I urged him not to attempt the voyage. It is my guess that the rudder snapped off in a heavy following sea, the ship broached-to in the trough, the masts went out and she broke up—probably in minutes."

Halliburton seems to have been the last great traveler. Eventually somebody may circumnavigate the world in a canoe, but it won't be the same. Now and then an eccentric in a totally inappropriate vehicle does get across the Pacific, or the Atlantic, or survives some other formidable passage, but it reminds us more of Niagara Falls in a barrel than of that sensual urge which Anatole France called "un long désir."

A number of Victorian ladies were gripped by that urge. Isabella Bird Bishop. Marianne North. Fanny Bullock Workman. May French Sheldon. Kate Marsden. Mary Kingsley. Annie Taylor. To read of their adventures leaves one feeling incredulous and puny. To look at those nineteenth-century photographs—Isabella about to inspect a Chinese village, buttoned up to the neck and wearing a pith helmet, indomitable, serene, and dumpy, posing beside a tripod camera taller than herself—well, nobody who sees that picture is going to forget Isabella Bird Bishop. Or

Fanny Bullock Workman high in the Himalayas, standing truculently beside an ice ax thrust into the snow, stoutly displaying a placard headlined VOTES FOR WOMEN. Kate Marsden en route to Siberia, dressed in a coat big enough for the Cardiff Giant. Mary Kingsley, looking remarkably like Dr. Livingstone, being poled across the Ogowé River in a dugout.

And those prodigious adventurers whose names we know, who couldn't rest because of that long desire. Magellan. Columbus. Marco Polo. Ibn Batuta. Hsüan-tsang. Captain Cook. There's no end to the list, of course, because gradually it descends from such legendary individuals to ourselves when, as children, obsessed by that same urge, we got permission to sleep in the backyard.

The first of these compulsive tourists about whom we know anything is a Greek from Marseilles, Massilia it was then called, by name Pytheas—a geographer and astronomer of no small reputation. If we reach back further, beyond Pytheas, we find just what we should expect: footsteps growing less and less distinct, often obliterated, so that we must settle for allusion, reference, and conjecture. We have no idea what half-mad transients passed through Europe or Africa or Asia 5,000 years ago, though there must have been a good many, and each presumably had a name and various in-laws, and worried about snakes and alligators and avalanches just as explorers worry about such matters today. Still, some awful anxiety kept those anonymous travelers traveling: there was always a mountain or a river in the distance.

We do know of a few generals who predate Pytheas, because their expeditions are documented; but they went where they went for obvious reasons. Besides, they had thousands of companions. It is the singular person, inexplicably drawn from familiar comforts toward a nebulous goal, lured often enough to death—it is he, or she,

whose peregrinations can never be thoroughly understood, who is worth noticing.

In regard to Pytheas, scholars quibble about his route. And because his own account of the trip has been lost we can only reconstruct it from various sources: long-dead writers, some of whom were very nearly his contemporaries, while others depended in turn on previous authorities. That is to say, what you believe about his tremendous voyage depends on whom you've read.

This much does seem clear. He was born in Massilia not quite 400 years before Christ and was about fifty when he set out to visit the Tin Islands—the Cornish peninsula of Britain, which was thought to be a cluster of islands. Probably he was commissioned by a group of Massiliot businessmen, because in those days Carthage controlled the Straits of Gibraltar and thus controlled sea trade outside the Mediterranean. The businessmen of Massilia, being businessmen, naturally wanted a piece of whatever might be outside—all of it, if possible. They knew about those misty isles to the north and the adjacent mainland, and knew that besides tin there was amber to be found along the coasts, and somewhere in that faraway land there must be gold. So it is thought that these merchants commissioned Pytheas to explore the situation, to find out what the British savages wanted and what they might give in exchange.

It would seem, therefore, that he undertook the trip for commercial reasons. But he was essentially a student of the natural world rather than an employee of the commercial world, and when you read his report—filtered though it is through other sensibilities—you can only conclude that Pytheas, like Halliburton, left home mostly to see what he could see.

For example, he was curious about the tides, and the deep estuaries of Britain would be a wonderful place to study this phenomenon. He suspected that the moon, of all

things, had something to do with this long ebb and flow, an idea that his countrymen found hilarious. And it is too bad we don't know how he felt about being mocked, whether it pained him or exasperated him, or whether he knew how to ignore fools. What he wanted to study in addition to the tides can only be surmised; he may have wanted to map the northern constellations, examine the flowers and fish and birds and beasts, listen to primitive music, dance the jig, and get a taste of British cooking. He was that sort.

His ship—if it was typical—would have been quite seaworthy, about 400 or 500 tons and maybe 160 feet long, larger and safer than the *Santa María*.

As to the trip, if we accept the route proposed by some historians, he sailed more than 7,000 miles, which is farther than Columbus sailed. Just why Columbus should remain a bright legend while Pytheas has been forgotten by everybody except connoisseurs of the arcane is puzzling. Time, of course; Columbus is scarcely gone. But more important, nobody followed Pytheas to verify his account. The folks at home enjoying a balmy Mediterranean climate seem to have looked upon him as the fourteenth-century Venetians looked upon Marco Polo—charming fellow, marvelous dinner companion, but an outrageous liar. After all, who could imagine a land where there's no night, where the sun spins overhead like a weathercock? Or a frozen sea? Come now!

The lesson here, of course, is that you should not strain the credulity of your audience, even if what you say is true.

In any case, the book or narrative that Pytheas wrote was titled *On the Ocean* or *About the Ocean*, and it is thought that the manuscript survived for a number of centuries, crumbling to dust in a Massiliot library. Whatever happened, it's now gone, and we must depend on such estimable authors as Pliny, Diodorus, Strabo, Polybius, Timaeus, Solinus, et al. Like more recent scribes, these gentlemen had their passions and prejudices, and

sometimes rearranged things closer to the heart's desire. Consequently, you are at liberty to believe or disbelieve.

So, let's begin:

Once upon a time, one fine day, Captain Pytheas sailed westward from Massilia toward the Pillars of Hercules, which we now call the Straits of Gibraltar ...

Or, if you like, we might begin again:

One dark and stormy night Captain Pytheas started north up the Rhone along the ancient river route ...

His destination, though, is not disputed; and whether he slipped the Carthaginian blockade at Gibraltar, or whether he sailed up the Rhone and subsequently down the Loire to the Atlantic is unimportant. By whatever route, he reached the southwestern tip of England where he introduced himself to the Cornish tin miners and found them quite hospitable.

From Cornwall he must have sailed north through the Irish Sea to Scotland—going ashore at a number of points, but just where and to what extent we don't know. In the missing manuscript he evidently wrote that he walked all over Britain, because Polybius refers sarcastically to such a claim. Whether he walked, picking up information in the pubs, or merely paused here and there along the coast, he did learn that the island's shape was loosely triangular. He gave measurements, much too large, for its three sides—825, 1,650, and 2,200 miles—and announced that its corners were Belerium, Cantium, and Orca.

He considered the natives altogether primitive: “simple in their habits, far removed from the cunning and knavishness of modern men.” The country was thickly populated, he said, with many kings and other potentates and had a disagreeable climate, so we know beyond doubt that he was in England.

He may have visited Ireland. At least he saw it, because he noted its position, which enabled the Greek geographer Eratosthenes to pin Ireland to the map.

From Scotland he sailed on up to the Shetland Islands and perhaps to Thule—Ultima Thule—the end of the world. It was his account of this fearful place that provoked the bitterest arguments. Here, “at the time of the solstice, when the sun passes through the sign of the Crab, there is no night ...”

Greek and Roman scholars quarreled about whether or not Pytheas was lying; modern scholars in their wisdom quarrel not about his observations but about the location of Thule.

According to Strabo, who lifted the material from Polybius, who got it almost straight from the horse’s mouth, Thule is the northernmost of the British Islands, six days’ sail beyond the mainland, one day’s sail from the frozen sea. And around Thule is neither sea nor air, but a mixture called “sea-lung” in which both are suspended. There is a little more information about Thule, but not much. The natives “thresh their grain indoors in large barns because the climate is dull and wet. They make bread, and those who have both grain and honey brew a drink from them. Northward by the frozen zone are few animals, which all are sickly; nor do cereals flourish, except millet, though there are wild fruits, vegetables, and roots.”

The principal contenders for “Thule” are Norway and Iceland, with some attention paid to Greenland.

Norway would seem to be eliminated because, of course, it is not an island, nor does it lie to the north of England. But still, geography in those days included much guesswork. Pliny, for example, refers to Scandinavia as an island. And directions were vague because the compass had not been invented, so “north” might have meant “northeast.” And Norway does extend to the land of the midnight sun. And off the upper coast a clammy sea fog develops. And in the south are bees to furnish honey for mead drinkers. Some authorities believe Pytheas reached the vicinity of Trondheim.

As for Iceland and Greenland, it is tempting to think of a Mediterranean ship approaching North America thirteen centuries before the Vikings. Here again, "north" could have meant "northwest." Also, there are wild bees in Iceland, and at that high latitude the sea fog forms.

Anyway, after visiting Thule—or sailing close to it—Pytheas headed south, probably down the east coast of Britain, crossed the channel, and followed the European coastline "beyond the Rhine to Scythia ... as far as the river Tanais." This, too, is puzzling because Tanais is the old name for the Don—which flows nowhere near the Rhine. What he took to be the Tanais must have been the Elbe or the Vistula. If it was the Vistula he was the first Mediterranean sailor to enter the Baltic. And here he either saw or heard about, among other wonders, an island called Balcia or Basilia where amber is cast up by the spring tides—"an ejectum of the curdled sea."

Then, by land or water, he started home; and all things considered, it is both marvelous and astonishing that he saw Massilia again.

As to what became of Pytheas after his tremendous trip, nobody knows, except that he was ridiculed—which does happen to storytellers. Nor can we say just why he went on such a long and perilous voyage, nor why he felt a time had come to turn around.

The same is true of Hsüan-tsang, a scholarly Buddhist monk who set out from Liang-chou near the western end of the Great Wall during the Christian year 630. That is, Hsüan-tsang had a conscious purpose, just as the American did, and the Greek. But with him, as with them, we can sketch only what is visible. In his case, we know that he decided to visit India, the fountainhead of Buddhism, because he was troubled by imperfections and discrepancies among the sacred texts.

He is said to have been highly precocious; by the age of thirteen he could remember everything in a book after it

had been read to him once. But it is more engaging to learn that he was “rosy as the evening mists and round as the rising moon, sweet as the odor of cinnamon ...” He grew up tall and handsome, instead of fat and disgusting as we might expect, “with beautiful eyes and a good complexion” and a rather stately manner. He was twenty-eight when he started for India.

An imperial edict forbade leaving the country but he went ahead, fortified by a dream. At the beginning of the Gobi Desert his companions turned back so he continued alone, without a map or a guide, following the caravan route by bones and camel droppings.

Presently he saw a vast mirage—thousands of fur-clad soldiers with glittering lances and shining banners. They were mounted on richly caparisoned horses, sometimes at an immense distance, then close at hand, changing, dissolving. At first he thought they were robbers, but because they vanished whenever they approached he knew they must be hallucinations, so he rode on.

At the first watchtower he was showered with arrows, palpable arrows, from suspicious soldiers guarding the frontier. Such a brusque greeting, though, did not distress Hsüan-tsang; it merely convinced him that he should make friends with the garrison, which he did.

Supplied with fresh water, food, and introductions to officers at other forts, he continued his journey.

However, things did not go well. Having been warned about the soldiers at one particular fort, he left the caravan route in order to avoid them and attempted to proceed by observing his shadow. He got lost, dropped the water bag, and rode around in circles for five days. Both he and his horse were almost dead when the horse scented a pool of water. Greatly refreshed after a pause at this oasis, Hsüan-tsang climbed into the saddle once more and made it to Turfan where he encountered a new problem. The king of Turfan asked him to remain as head of the Buddhist

Church. Hsüan-tsang declined, explaining that he must visit the West "to seek interpretations of the Scriptures not yet known outside India so that the sweet dew of the expanded Law might also water the regions of the East."

Then the king said: "The Ts'ung Ling Mountains may fall down, but not my purpose."

Hsüan-tsang again declined. The king insisted. Hsüan-tsang replied that if he were not allowed to leave Turfan he would starve himself to death, and to prove he meant it he stopped eating.

So, after a while, equipped with a new water bag, food, money for expenses, various gifts, an escort of soldiers, and a letter introducing him to Yeh-hu, khan of the western Turks, Hsüan-tsang rode on.

Yeh-hu, wearing a green silk robe, greeted him respectfully. The khan's loose hair was bound with a silk ribbon ten feet long that trailed behind him, and he was surrounded by 200 officers in brocaded robes. On either side were his troops armed with lances and bows, mounted on camels and horses, so many that nobody could tell where they ended. He advised Hsüan-tsang not to go to India, saying it was very hot and the people had no manners, but the monk could not be dissuaded.

On to Samarkand, then south to Balkh where he saw a washbasin used by Buddha, one of Buddha's teeth-yellowish white, pure, and shining-and the Enlightened One's sweeping brush, its handle set with gems.

Over the snowy Hindu Kush to Bamiyan with its ten monasteries. By way of the Khyber Pass to Gandhara. Across the Indus gorges. The roads were dangerous, he said, the valleys gloomy. "Sometimes one had to cross on rope bridges, sometimes by clinging to chains." But there were memorable places to visit, such as a stupa marking the spot where Buddha pierced his body with a bamboo splinter in order to nourish an exhausted tiger with his blood. The plants around this stupa are blood red, said

Hsüan-tsang, and the earth is full of prickly spikes.

“Without asking whether we believe the tale or not, it is a piteous one.”

On to Kashmir, whose citizens he found “light and frivolous, weak and pusillanimous.”

While sailing down the Ganges he was captured by river pirates who decided to sacrifice him to Durga. Hsüan-tsang requested a period of meditation before being sacrificed in order that he might enter Nirvana with a calm and joyous mind. The pirates did not find this unreasonable, but while they sat around waiting for him to conclude his meditations a storm blew up, smashing trees and sinking boats. The terrified pirates fell at his feet begging forgiveness.

Hsüan-tsang forgave them and moved on to Benares where he met a saintly instructor. He spent a year in this city, visiting holy sites and studying the philosophy of Idealism.

Next he traveled to Bengal—“a low and humid land with plentiful grain.” Then it occurred to him that perhaps he should visit Ceylon; but upon reaching southern India he heard reports of famine and civil war, so he turned around. Having come down the east coast, he went up the west coast through the Gujerat peninsula where he admired the imported Persian carpets and heard of a country to the west called Fo-lin—probably Babylon.

He now began to think of going home, although there was no great hurry.

He accepted an invitation to visit King Kumara of Assam, and while he was there his presence was requested by the omnipotent lord of northern India, King Harsha. Kumara responded that he would sooner send his own head to Harsha’s court than his revered guest; but then, horrified by what he had said, Kumara tried to apologize by escorting the monk to Harsha’s court in extravagant style. Twenty thousand elephants were mobilized and thirty thousand boats sailed up the Ganges.

King Harsha flung himself to the ground in front of Hsüan-tsang, scattered flowers at his feet, and recited poems in his honor.

What happened next is a bit confused, but Harsha seems to have arranged a public debate lasting eighteen days, featuring the wisdom of Hsüan-tsang against all comers. Hsüan-tsang won, perhaps because Harsha did not permit any serious rebuttals. This did not go over so well with some of the contestants and it is said they plotted to kill the wandering scholar.

It was now the year 643. Rejecting all gifts, except a coat of pressed buffalo down which would protect him from the rain, Hsüan-tsang set off for the Punjab.

In 644 he again crossed the Hindu Kush and spent a month visiting the governor of Badakshan. The governor provided an escort to the high Pamir plains. "The cold is glacial," said Hsüan-tsang, "the wind is furious. Snow falls throughout spring and summer. Fruit will not grow here. Trees are few. There is a lake filled with frogs in this desolate valley; it is situated at the center of the world on a plateau of stupendous height."

Descending from the Pamir, he was attacked by thieves in the Tangitar Gorge but managed to escape with most of the manuscripts, statuary, and Buddhist relics he had collected. After that he seems to have made good time.

At Khotan he dispatched a letter to the emperor, describing his travels and much of what he had learned and asking permission to enter China. Seven months later the emperor replied: "When I heard that you who had gone to distant lands to study Buddhism and to seek for religious texts was now returning, I was delighted. I pray you come quickly ..."

Hsüan-tsang was given a magnificent official reception and then settled down at the Monastery of Extensive Happiness, to which he bequeathed twenty pony-loads of treasure including 150 tiny particles of Buddha's flesh, a

variety of icons, and 657 volumes of Scripture. It is believed that he lived peacefully ever after, on close terms with the emperor, who sometimes consulted him about the strange countries he had visited and the rulers he had met. Only one thing grieved him: while fording the Indus he had lost some manuscripts and his collection of flower seeds.

Abu Abdullah Mohammed, better known as Ibn Batuta, that relentless explorer of the Arab world, left home on the fourteenth of June, 1325. Unlike Hsüan-tsang, Ibn Batuta knew precisely where he was going: "I left Tangier, my birthplace, one Thursday, the second day of the month of God, Rajab the Unparalleled ... with the intention of making a pilgrimage to the Holy House and to the Tomb of the Prophet, on Whom be God's richest blessing and peace. I departed alone, with no companion to delight me, nor with any caravan, my inspiration arising from a limitless desire ..."

Across North Africa from Tangier to Mecca is approximately 3,000 miles, but Ibn Batuta was young—twenty-one or so. Time hardly mattered.

In Cairo he took a boat up the Nile, expecting to be ferried over the Red Sea at Aidhab, but a war was in progress so he returned to Cairo, spent a while touring Syria, and then approached the holy cities from the north.

After seeing Medina—where he touched a fragment of the palm tree under which Mohammed stood while preaching—he joined a caravan to Mecca. There he walked seven times around the cubical temple as prescribed and kissed the sacred meteorite—a ruby fallen from Heaven that had turned black because of human sin. These obligations performed, Ibn Batuta decided to take a trip. He crossed Arabia to the mouth of the Euphrates, paralleled the Tigris upstream past Baghdad into Turkey, and returned to Mecca where he spent the next three years studying the Koran.

In 1330, anxious to have a look at East Africa, he went sailing down the Red Sea. Somehow—possibly by trading—he

had acquired money enough to travel a la mode, with a clutch of wives, servants, and slaves, as well as several children of his own. The party stopped at Aden, crossed the equator and continued south to Mombasa and Kilwa, turned around and sailed through the Indian Ocean to Oman and up the Persian Gulf. Then, hungry for spiritual nourishment, Ibn Batuta made a third pilgrimage to Mecca.

Having steeped himself further in Holy Writ he was off again: slaves, wives, children and baggage. He thought it might be worthwhile to visit Sultan Mohammed ibn Tughlaq who lived in India and who was renowned for his hospitality to learned travelers.

Apparently he tried to get a ship for India but could not find anything suitable, so he set off by land in the opposite direction—first to Egypt, then up the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean, pausing at Ephesus where he bought an attractive Greek slave girl for twenty dinars.

Across the Black Sea to the Ukraine, southwest to Constantinople—a rather lengthy side excursion—and then, having remembered that India was the other way, he continued east as far as the Volga. Here, instead of angling south, he went several hundred miles up the ice-bound river, evidently planning some sort of business with the fur traders, but whatever he had in mind did not work out.

Around the top of the Caspian and Aral seas, down to Samarkand, and so to the Indus, bordering the promised land. That was in September 1333.

Having received an invitation from Sultan Tughlaq, whom he describes as “very fond of bestowing gifts and shedding blood,” Batuta led his merry band to Delhi. At this time Delhi was the largest Moslem city in the East, though sparsely populated when he arrived because the sultan had taken a dislike to the citizens and ordered most of them to move out. Those who objected, or tried to hide, were killed. Among these was a cripple who was hurled from a mangonel—a military device ordinarily used for catapulting

stones—and a blind man whom the sultan ordered to be dragged from Delhi to Dawlatabad. The blind man fell apart on the road and only one leg reached his new home.

Tughlaq liked Ibn Batuta, appointing him guardian of the mausoleum of Sultan Qutb-ad-Din at a salary of 12,000 dinars per annum, with another 12,000 for immediate expenses, an estate with an income of about the same amount, and a splendid horse.

Batuta took the job seriously. He spent eight years at Tughlaq's court, although his career and his life very nearly were cut short when he was suspected of participating in a conspiracy. Four slaves were sent to watch him, which customarily meant that the watchee was doomed. "The first day I was watched like this was a Friday," Batuta writes. "It pleased God on High to allow me to speak these words: 'God is our help and Sovereign Lord!' On that Friday I pronounced these words 33,000 times."

Miraculously restored to grace, Batuta was told by his capricious employer to lead an embassy to the emperor of China. In the summer of 1342 they started out: fifteen diplomats accompanied by women and servants, Ibn Batuta with his personal entourage—all protected by 1,000 cavalymen and a stout company of foot soldiers. But they met some rebels, there was a fight, Batuta was captured, and once again he came very near to closing the Koran permanently.

This fight disrupted the expedition so much that historians do not agree on what happened. Some say it continued on its way, others think the cavalcade retreated to Delhi where Tughlaq overhauled it and started his ambassadors off a second time with Batuta still in command. How Batuta escaped from the rebels is not clear. At any rate, Tughlaq's diplomats planned to reach China by sea, because we next hear of them in the Gulf of Cambay, then at Goa and Calicut.

What happened at Calicut also is disputed. If we believe one account, which sounds too neat, a storm blew up, sinking the boats and drowning everybody except our hero who chanced to be ashore praying in a mosque. Another account also mentions drowning, so probably there was a disastrous storm, but in addition there seems to have been a massive desertion which left Batuta by himself on the Calicut beach.

He next turns up in the Maldiv Islands, again doing very nicely. Now he is a kazi, a judge, and has married four new wives including a daughter of the vizier. You can't keep a good man down. Batuta, though, disclaims credit. Says he: "It is not difficult to get married in these islands." And here, as at Delhi, he is conscientious about his work, attempting to drive the agnostic islanders to the mosque with a whip, trying to get the Maldiv ladies to wear some clothes. At last the vizier began looking at him suspiciously so he decided the time had come to resume traveling.

He booked passage for himself and one wife to the Indian mainland, but the ship was blown off course and they landed in Ceylon. There he saw on the forehead of a white elephant "seven rubies larger than hen's eggs. And at the palace of Sultan Airi Sakarvati I saw a spoon made of precious stone as large as the palm of a hand and filled with oil of aloes. At this I marveled ..." He marveled further at Mount Sarandib, which he thought must be one of the highest peaks in the world, and said he had been able to see it nine days before the ship reached port. On a black rock of this mountain, he said, one could see the footprint of our venerable father Adam, eleven spans in length, which had been there since time immemorial.

When he left Ceylon the sultan gave him a string of jewels, but no sooner had he waved good-bye from the deck of a ship taking him to the Coromandel Coast than he was seized by pirates who took everything he owned, stripped him, and dumped him on the opposite side of the Indian

peninsula without a rupee. If his adventures had not been documented, making allowances for gaps here and there, nobody would believe the story; reading what happened to him is like reading about Sinbad.

Well, off he went again to the Maldives, ingratiated himself as usual, and presently set out for Bengal to visit a notable saint. Then to Sumatra—or perhaps Java—where an old friend from Delhi introduced him at court and where he was astonished to see dancing horses. When he left this island, whichever it was, he had been presented with a fully equipped junk. After a boring sea voyage he landed in southern China and journeyed north to Peking. The Chinese concern for travelers impressed him; he found the country safe and well regulated. But the idolatry troubled him.

He started home to the land of true believers and endured his customary afflictions—getting lost at sea, storms, etc. Safe at last in the Moslem world he could not bypass Mecca, lodestone of his existence, and for the fourth time he paid his respects to the Prophet's birthplace.

From Alexandria he got a ship to Sardinia. From there he sailed to Algeria and continued overland to Morocco, arriving in November of 1349. He had been away twenty-four years.

After a few months he became restless. There was a war going on in Spain and he thought he would like to participate, or at least see it, so he crossed the Straits of Gibraltar, barely escaped being caught by Christian soldiers, and spent a while wandering around Andalusia.

Two years later the sultan of Morocco, who wished to know more about the empires in the south, instructed him to visit the kingdom of Mali. This trip took him as far into Africa as the Niger. He was in Timbuktu for seven months, in Gao for another month. He disliked that part of Africa, partly because the blacks were infidels, but also because they did not give him suitable presents. From the ruler of Mali he got “three cakes of bread, some beef fried in oil,