

Thursday, May 20, 1992 O&E

(S,F-9C,R-11A,P,G-13A,W,G-18A)15C

We've all got a lot to learn from Marco Polo

"Traversing Kerman and Khurasan, they went on to Balkh and Badakshan and ascended the upper Oxus through Wakhan to the plateau of the Pamir. Crossing the Pamir, the travelers descended upon Kashgar, Yarkand and Khotan."

THAT IS the Encyclopedia Britannica's description of Marco Polo's route across Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet to Cathay, a travel story told this week on NBC-TV's 10-hour mini-series, *Marco Polo*.

Persia is now Iran. Cathay is China. Could you still go on to Balkh and Badakshan, and ascend the upper Oxus to Wakhan, or are all those places — ancient names for cities no longer on the map?

Everything I know about Marco Polo was learned, long ago, in school: "He explored the silk route to Cathay."

Geography was a pretty dull word in those days, but it was very exciting this week as I spread books and maps across the floor, trying to follow that 13th century expedition across the deserts and mountains to China.

LIKE YOUNG Marco Polo, I have a lot to learn about the world.

Our atlases put North America firmly in the center of the world map, so Polo's exotic destinations are shown in two parts: half on the eastern side of the map, half on the western side. (Do Chinese maps put Asia in the middle and divide North America in two?) Many of those unfamiliar place names are still on the map, thriving cities that I have never seen or heard of. Others are places that I or my friends have seen with our own eyes, a subject much talked about this week.

Lynne Weir of Birmingham was trekking out of "Khotan," now Khotan in Kashmir, when guides pointed to a barren mountain pass and said, "That was the silk route to China."

Jewel Cooke of Farmington, just back from an African safari, is scheduled to visit Venice this summer. Many of you have been to Venice. I have not, nor did I realize until I checked under "V" in the encyclopedia, what an important role Venice



Iris Jones
contributing travel editor

one-of-a-kind traveler

played in the medieval world, because of its geography.

THE ISLANDS and intricate canals of Venice made the city a maritime power while protecting it from invasion by stronger mainland forces.

In Marco Polo's day, it controlled the Mediterranean all the way to Constantinople (now Istanbul) and Galilee (now Israel), sending merchants like the Polo brothers into previously unknown places. The ships and supplies for the Crusades made Venice rich.

I have seen and photographed a few of the places on Marco Polo's hand-drawn map, to be found inside the cover of the book, "Travels of Marco Polo" — Jerusalem and some of the middle-eastern country on his outbound journey, Singapore and India on his way back.

Parts of Jerusalem must look the same now as they did then, before there were Hilton and Sheraton hotels on the high hill behind the holy city. The southwest tip of India, around what is now Trivandrum, surely has the same palm trees and inland waterways seen on Polo's return journey.

WHAT INTERESTS me most, however, is that most of us know only a little more about the world now than the Venetians did in those long-ago days, in spite of National Geographic and satellite communications.

And few of us would attempt such a journey, with all the jet planes and maps at our command.

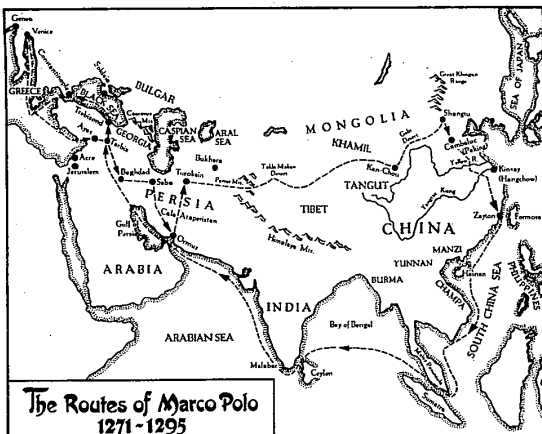
A few adventurers among us cross unmapped deserts and struggle across mountain passes, but too many of us refuse to go anywhere where people don't speak English.

We all have a lot to learn from Marco Polo.



A look at Jerusalem today from the Mountain of Olives.

IRIS SANDERSON JONES



Map shows routes of Marco Polo's travels.

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