

Ibn Battuta's... The Beginning of a Gateway to the World



At the dawn of the eighth century AH, the Mongol threat faded, and the Mamluks expelled the last Crusader strongholds in the Levant, ending a struggle that had lasted nearly two centuries. This solidified their dominance over Egypt, the Levant, and the Arabian Peninsula, and cemented their reputation as protectors of the Two Holy Sanctuaries and guarantors of pilgrims' safety.

While the Christian world still languished under the shadows of the Middle Ages, the Islamic world reached its zenith, spanning half the globe and dominating maritime and trade routes. This unprecedented era of prosperity brought unprecedented security and stability to pilgrimage routes.

With Islam's expansion across Asia and Africa and the conversion of Mongol khanates, the pilgrimage embraced more diverse peoples than ever before. In this context, the young Moroccan Ibn Battuta seized the opportunity to perform the Hajj at the beginning of the eighth century AH—marking the start of his grand journey to explore a vast interconnected Islamic world. He meticulously documented his pilgrimage, becoming one of the most important chroniclers of the era.



From Tangier to Cairo

By the 14th century, Tangier had flourished as a hub connecting four regions—Africa, Europe, the Atlantic, and the Mediterranean. Though firmly Islamic, it remained distant from major centers like Cairo, Damascus, and Mecca. For Moroccan students and scholars, the Hajj was not merely a pilgrimage but also an educational expedition: visiting renowned schools, acquiring books, expanding knowledge, and engaging with leading scholars.

Ibn Battuta, born in 1304 into a distinguished Amazigh judiciary family, set out on this dual journey of faith and learning.

Educated in the Maliki Sunni tradition and destined for a judicial career, he nonetheless, newly graduated at 21, felt an irresistible pull toward pilgrimage. Leaving his family against their wishes—a moment clouded in sorrow—he received parting gifts from them: a fine horse and Ihram garments from his mother. He chronicles:

“I departed Tangier, my birthplace, on Thursday, 2 Rajab 725 AH / 1324 CE, intent on performing the pilgrimage to the House of Allah and visiting the Prophet’s tomb, peace be upon him.”

Ibn Battuta set out overland, riding his camel along the caravan route from Fez to Tlemcen. Along the way, he endured sandstorms and fell victim to brigands who nearly killed him—until a fourth, upon learning of his pilgrimage, felt

ashamed and offered to escort him to Egypt for pay. But Ibn Battuta wisely chose to join a caravan of pilgrims and merchants bound for Tlemcen.

After two weeks, he reached Miliana, then Béjaïa, where he fell ill with fever. Though advised to rest, he insisted, "If God has decreed my end, it will be on the road toward Mecca." He pressed on across the small Kabylie mountains to Constantine, welcomed by its ruler Abu al-Hasan, who gave him a sumptuous robe and two gold dinars—his first charity during the pilgrimage.



He continued to Annaba and then to Tunis, battling fever again. Arriving in Tunis, he felt profound homesickness rather than relief. A fellow pilgrim comforted him and secured him lodging at the city's library. Over two months he recovered and studied under Tunisian scholars. When a new pilgrimage caravan formed, he joined and was appointed its qadi—his first official role.

The caravan traversed the southern Tunisian coast—Sousse, Sfax, and Gabès. In Sfax, Ibn Battuta married a local merchant's daughter, one of his later twenty marriages, though it ended quickly in divorce. Shortly after, he remarried another pilgrim's daughter, celebrating lavishly with the caravan.

He left her behind later and, separated from the main caravan by poor weather, traveled with a small group of Moroccans. Near Sirte, Bedouin attack nearly killed them before they reached Barqa and reunited with the main caravan under Mamluk escort toward Tripoli.

Finally, in spring 1326, after eight months of travel, he reached Alexandria—still eight months ahead of Hajj season—affording him time to explore Egypt. He stayed with the Sufi Burhan al-Din al-A'rāji, who spied a promising traveler, advising him to visit fellow spiritual seekers in India, Sindh, and China. Ibn Battuta later recounted:

“I marveled at his words and resolved to set forth until I met the three he named, delivering his greetings to them.”

He journeyed to Cairo—a flourishing city where he remained for over a month, awaiting the official Egyptian caravan departure in mid- Shawwal. Impatient, he set out alone via the Red Sea port of Aydhab, but political tensions led to ships being sunk; he returned to Cairo instead.

From Cairo to Damascus

Realizing that departing Damascus for Hajj around the 10th of Shawwal might be more advantageous than waiting for the Cairo caravan, Ibn Battuta crossed Sinai towards Syria. Passing through Gaza, he diverted east to Hebron and spent a week in Jerusalem studying with its scholars.

From there he continued along the coast—Asqalan, Ramla, Nablus, Ajloun—until reaching Latakia. Along the way he visited Acre, Tyre, Tiberias, Beirut, Homs, Hama, Ma'arrat, and Samarin, arriving in Halab and estimating his arrival in Damascus on Ramadan 9, 726 AH.

In Damascus, he spent 24 days awaiting the Hajj caravan, earning several scholarly licenses and meeting judges and high officials. Under the care of a Maliki scholar and physician, he recovered his health.

From Damascus to the Prophet's City

Facing financial strain, he faced missing the Damascus caravan—were it not for a generous Maliki jurist who provided a camel and funds for him to reach Mecca. He acknowledged the aid candidly, grateful.

At the sighting of Shawwal's crescent, the Damascus pilgrims, escorted by a Mamluk army, began the journey that took 45–60 days to Mecca. They camped at Kiswa (just south of Damascus), accompanied by the Banu 'Ajrmah Bedouins and led by Emir Sayf al-Din Jban and Judge Sharaf al-Din al-Ara al-awrān. The caravan's route took them through al-anmān, Zar'ah (now Daraa), the Hawran, Bosra (a four-day rest point), Birkat Zāzah, Lajjān, Karak (four days, at al-Thaniyah), Ma'ān, then through 'Aqabat al-awān into the desert. After a two-day trek they reached Tabk.

In Tabk they rested to water the animals before crossing the harsh desert to Medina. Ibn Battuta described Northern Hijaz as a “frightful wasteland,” where

pilgrims faced thirst, disease, Bedouin attacks, cold, heat, and were sometimes killed.

Five days from Tabūk, they reached Bir Thamūd—its waters deep in symbolism and restraint, reminiscent of the Prophet’s passage during the Tabūk campaign, and nearby stood the ancient carved dwellings of the Thamūd in red rock.

The caravan proceeded to al-‘Ulī, where they stayed four days to replenish supplies. Afterward, they reached Medina.

From Medina to Mecca: The Pilgrimage Begins

In Medina, Ibn Battuta prayed gratitude-filled prayers at the Prophet’s Mosque. He stayed four days, visiting al-Baqī‘ cemetery—where many companions lie—and likely also the tomb of Imam Malik, the founder of his Maliki school. He spent evenings in Quran recitation, dhikr circles, and scholarly engagement, marveling at the generosity of the locals toward pilgrims.

On departure, he purified himself at Dhu’l-Hulayfah Mosque, donned the Ihram garments, and, filled with excitement, recited the talbiyah as they passed hills and valleys. They spent their first night at Shu‘b Ali; then traveled through Rawḍ, aḥ-Ḥafrī, Badr, until arriving in Mecca in the morning of October 1326, corresponding to the 20th of Dhū al-Qi‘dah.



Arriving at the Kaaba—“like a bride unveiled before the throne,” Ibn Battuta described—it appeared radiant, internally and externally. He performed ḥawḍ al-quḍm, kissed the Black Stone, prayed by Maqām ḥbrḥm, and drank from Zamzam. He reflected:

“We beheld the noble Kaaba, may God increase its veneration... like a bride adorned in majesty, radiant in beauty... encircled by pilgrims connected to Paradise’s delight.”

He sketched Mecca’s layout—a valley embraced by mountains—with three major gates: al-Mi‘l, ash-Shubaykah (west), and al-Misfal (south). The sacred precinct boasted nineteen gates and five lofty minarets.

He identified the Meccan emirate of two brothers—Asad al-Dīn Rumaythah and Sayf al-Dīn ‘Atīfah—sons of Prince Abū Nimr ibn Qatādah al-‘Asnī, noted for their joint governance of the Haram.

He detailed pilgrimage rituals: the fervent drumbeats from the first of Dhū al-Ḥijjah until the 9th; the 8th of Dhū al-Ḥijjah, when pilgrims and princes lodged in Mina and lit candles; and on the day of Nahr (sacrifice), the Kaaba’s cover from Cairo—a black silk lined with linen, bearing the inscription “God make the Kaaba the Sacred House standing for people” —stood out in depth and beauty.

Ibn Battuta extolled Meccans’ generosity and elegance: white attire, heavy perfume use, kohl-lined eyes, and green “irq” twig toothbrushes. He observed Meccan women as beautiful and perfumed to the point of sacrificing food to afford scents. Their Thursday-night visits to the Haram filled it with fragrance and festivity.

He noted Meccans ate only one meal daily—after ‘Asr—supplemented by dates, remarking how this regimen promoted health and reduced illness. He praised Mecca’s superior fruits, sourced from Ta’if, Wādī Nakhla, and Bīn Mar. He admired Yemeni tribes for bringing grains, butter, honey, raisins, and almonds—lowering prices and sustaining Mecca’s inhabitants.

He described the poor pilgrims living within the precinct who were supported by abundant charity—especially from a Hanafi imam noted for exceptional generosity. He also saw pilgrims from across the Islamic world, including Moroccans, Iraqis, and Khurasanis, known for their lavish giving—living gold coins arrived in Mecca, reducing prices.

Ibn Battuta observed that most Meccans followed the Shāfi‘ī school, with each madhhab assigned a pulpit near the Kaaba. Imams alternated: Shāfi‘ī, Maliki, Ḥanbalī, and Ḥanafī—though all led the Maghrib prayer simultaneously, leading to overlapping rituals whereby the Maliki might bow with the Shāfi‘ī, and a Ḥanafī prostrate with a Ḥanbalī.

Features and Challenges of Pilgrimage

He noted that financial burdens on pilgrims had eased markedly since Ibn Jubayr’s time. Despite his poverty, Ibn Battuta subsisted on charity. He praised

the hospitality extended by rulers, who saw it a duty to provide food, lodging, protection, and financial aid—allowing pilgrims unfettered movement across Islamic regions.

He recorded no stampedes or conflicts—testament to strong organization. Pilgrims joined official caravan contingents from Cairo or Damascus, ensuring a smoother journey than that undertaken by Ibn Jubayr. Schedules were precise to enable simultaneous arrival in Mecca.

Under Mamluk rule, armed escorts guarded the caravans. Ibn Battuta commended the structured fees imposed on caravans, and the provision of water, supplies, caravanserais (khans) with fountains and shops, and the appointment of officials to register pilgrims' property, provide medical care, and regulate commerce.

Yet, he warned of Bedouin bandit attacks, extreme weather, and disease. Some pilgrims perished from cold, thirst, storms, or epidemics. Ibn Battuta himself suffered health setbacks from the harsh conditions.

After performing Hajj in 1326, Ibn Battuta abandoned his original plan to return home and join the sultan's court in Fez. His pilgrimage transformed him. He embarked on a 24-year journey across Islamic lands in pursuit of knowledge and cultural exploration.

Returning to Tangier in 1355, he recounted his adventures to Sultan Abū Inān al-Marīnī, who urged him to document them for posterity. The result was his famed travelogue, *Aḥlām al-Safār* (commonly known as *Riḥlat Ibn Battuta*).