A World Traveler in India (1300s)
Ibn Battuta


During the time of the Roman Empire, it was relatively easy for travelers to feel at home in distant parts of the empire; there were religious similarities through Roman emperor worship, cultural connections through Greek and Latin culture, and political and economic unity. At the height of the Islamic world, during Europe's Middle Ages, similar conditions existed. Some religious unity existed in Muslim territory; merchants traveled freely between kingdoms; and a degree of cultural unity was emerging. Just as in Rome's heyday, numerous scholars and writers visited the far reaches of the territory controlled.

One of these Muslim visitors was Ibn Battuta, who was born in Morocco and lived from 1304 to 1368. A devout Muslim, Ibn Battuta traveled through Egypt and the Middle East as a young man, then set off for East Asia. After visiting parts of India, he even journeyed to China. While he describes many aspects of the societies he encounters, he is primarily concerned with what Muslims were doing and how the religion functioned in faraway places. Nonetheless, his writings give us a detailed look into the places he visited. In this excerpt, he visits the capital of the Delhi Sultanate, Delhi.

On the next day we arrived at the city of Dihlí [Delhi], the metropolis of India, a vast and magnificent city, uniting beauty with strength. It is surrounded by a wall that has no equal in the world, and is the largest city in India, nay rather the largest city in the entire Muslim Orient.

The city of Delhi is made up now of four neighbouring and contiguous towns. One of them is Delhi proper, the old city built by the infidels and captured in the year 1188. The second is called SírÍ, known also as the Abode of the Caliphate; this was the town given by the sultan to Ghiyath ad-DÍn, the grandson of the 'Abbasid Caliph Mustansir, when he came to his court. The third is called Tughlaq Abad, after its founder, the Sultan Tughlaq, the father of the sultan of India to whose court we came. The reason why he built it was that one day he said to
a former sultan "O master of the world, it were fitting that a city should be built here." The sultan replied to him in jest "When you are sultan, build it." It came about by the decree of God that he became sultan, so he built it and called it by his own name. The fourth is called Jahan Panah, and is set apart for the residence of the reigning sultan, Muhammad Shah. He was the founder of it, and it was his intention to unite these four towns within a single wall, but after building part of it he gave up the rest because of the expense required for its construction.

The cathedral mosque occupies a large area; its walls, roof, and paving are all constructed of white stones, admirably squared and firmly cemented with lead. There is no wood in it at all. It has thirteen domes of stone, its pulpit also is made of stone, and it has four courts. In the centre of the mosque is an awe-inspiring column, and nobody knows of what metal it is constructed. One of their learned men told me that it is called *Haft Júsh*, which means "seven metals," and that it is constructed from these seven. A part of this column, of a finger's breadth, has been polished, and gives out a brilliant gleam. Iron makes no impression on it. It is thirty cubits high, and we rolled a turban round it, and the portion which encircled it measured eight cubits. At the eastern gate there are two enormous idols of brass prostrate on the ground and held by stones, and everyone entering or leaving the mosque treads on them. The site was formerly occupied by an idol temple, and was converted into a mosque on the conquest of the city. In the northern court is the minaret, which has no parallel in the lands of Islam. It is built of red stone, unlike the rest of the edifice, ornamented with sculptures, and of great height. The ball on the top is of glistening white marble and its "apples" [small balls surmounting a minaret] are of pure gold. The passage is so wide that elephants could go up by it. A person in whom I have confidence told me that when it was built he saw an elephant climbing with stones to the top. The Sultan Qutb ad-Dín wished to build one in the western court even larger, but was cut off by death when only a third of it had been completed. This minaret is one of the wonders of the world for size, and the width of its passage is such that three elephants could mount it abreast. The third of it built equals in height the whole of the other minaret we have mentioned in the northern court, though to one looking at it from below it does not seem so high because of its bulk.

Outside Delhi is a large reservoir named after the Sultan Lalmish, from which the inhabitants draw their drinking water. It is supplied by rain water, and is about two miles in length by half that breadth. In the centre there is a great pavilion built of squared stones, two stories
high. When the reservoir is filled with water it can be reached only in boats, but when the water is low the people go into it. Inside it is a mosque, and at most times it is occupied by mendicants devoted to the service of God. When the water dries up at the sides of this reservoir, they sow sugar canes, cucumbers, green melons and pumpkins there. The melons and pumpkins are very sweet but of small size. Between Delhi and the Abode of the Caliphate is the private reservoir, which is larger than the other. Along its sides there are about forty pavilions, and round about it live the musicians.

The sultan's palace at Delhi is called *Dar Sara*, and contains many doors. At the first door there are a number of guardians, and beside it trumpeters and flute-players. When any amir or person of note arrives, they sound their instruments and say "So-and-so has come, so-and-so has come." The same takes place also at the second and third doors. Outside the first door are platforms on which the executioners sit, for the custom amongst them is that when the sultan orders a man to be executed, the sentence is carried out at the door of the audience hall, and the body lies there over three nights. Between the first and second doors there is a large vestibule with platforms along both sides, on which sit those whose turn of duty it is to guard the doors. Between the second and third doors there is a large platform on which the principal naqīb [keeper of the register] sits; in front of him there is a gold mace, which he holds in his hand, and on his head he wears a jewelled tiara of gold, surmounted by peacock feathers. The second door leads to an extensive audience hall in which the people sit. At the third door there are platforms occupied by the scribes of the door. One of their customs is that none may pass through this door except those whom the sultan has prescribed, and for each person he prescribes a number of his staff to enter along with him. Whenever any person comes to this door the scribes write down "So-and-so came at the first hour" or the second, and so on, and the sultan receives a report of this after the evening prayer. Another of their customs is that anyone who absents himself from the palace for three days or more, with or without excuse, may not enter this door thereafter except by the sultan’s permission. If he has an excuse of illness or otherwise he presents the sultan with a gift suitable to his rank. The third door opens into an immense audience hall called *Hazar Ustún*, which means "A thousand pillars." The pillars are of wood and support a wooden roof, admirably carved. The people sit under this, and it is in this hall that the sultan holds public audiences.
Analysis Questions: On a separate piece of paper answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. Is Ibn Battuta impressed with Delhi?

2. What sits outside Delhi, named after Sultan Lalmish?

3. Does the author spend more time talking about the city's religious buildings or the city's defensive walls? Why?

4. Where are people executed by order of the sultan?

5. What was named "Hazar Ustan"?