

The Travels of Sindbad



1 Explorer Tim Severin steps back a thousand years to recreate Sindbad’s legendary voyages. The selections below detail Severin’s adventure.

An idea forms

5 To recreate Sindbad’s voyages, I’ll need to research, design, and build an early medieval Arab ship and use it to sail from the Persian Gulf to China. Searching for more data about traditional Arab ships, I visit the
10 country of Oman, which has a long history of shipbuilding. I am welcomed to Muscat (the country’s capital) by the Minister of National Culture, who tells me that Oman will pay for
15 the entire project—the ship, the crew, the voyage—all on behalf of the Omani people and the Arab world.

The voyage begins

With a team comprised of 17 Omanis and 10
20 Westerners, our ship *Sohar* departs Muscat on November 23 and heads east into the Arabian Sea toward India.

By December, we reach India’s coast, and after a short stay, we sail to Sri Lanka, or Serendib,
25 as early Arabs called it. The name has given us the word “serendipity” (meaning “a lucky chance”) in English, and it’s easy to see why early visitors to this beautiful island gave it this

name. On his second voyage, Sindbad
30 was carried by a giant bird to “the valley of the diamonds”—a place possibly in Sri Lanka, a country famous for its precious gems.¹

Later, during his sixth voyage, Sindbad claimed Serendib’s king held magnificent parades
35 during which huge, decorated elephants marched in the streets. In fact, what visitors to Sri Lanka may have seen during Sindbad’s time (and can still see today) was *Perahera*—a
40 parade held every year in which people and elephants, dressed colorfully, march through the streets to honor the Buddha.²

Adrift at sea

In early February, we depart Sri Lanka, hoping to catch strong winds that will carry
45 us eastward toward the Indonesian island of Sumatra. The winds are light, however, and after three weeks at sea we are still 1,127 kilometers (700 miles) away. I begin to worry about our fresh water and food supplies. And
50 then we get lucky. In early March, a storm passes over and we catch fresh water. About a week later, the crew also catches 17 sharks and replenishes³ the food supply.

¹ A **gem** is a jewel or stone (for example, a diamond) that is used in jewelry.

² **Buddha** is the title given to Gautama Siddhartha, a religious leader and founder of Buddhism.

³ If you **replenish** something, you make it full or complete again.



▲ Arab *dhow*s being built at Sur, the shipyard where *Sohar* was built. For centuries large oceangoing ships that sailed to Africa and Asia were built here.

The Land of Gold

55 On April 5, two months after leaving Sri Lanka, the winds **accelerate** and we make progress. Finally, by April 18, we reach Sumatra, known during Sindbad's time as the Land of Gold—a place of great wealth and beauty, but also believed to be home to terrible dangers.

Here, during his fourth voyage, Sindbad's crew met island natives who fed them food that made them sleepy. Once drugged, the crew was to become part of the natives' dinner menu. Fortunately, Sindbad refused to take the food, and as a result was able to escape before he could be eaten. Hashish, a drug derived from a plant and used in northern Sumatra as a flavoring in food, may have been the source for this story.

While visiting Sumatra again during his fifth voyage, Sindbad was captured this time in a forest by a short, old man with dark skin and red hair who could not talk. Sindbad called this strange person the Old Man of the Sea.

More likely it was the great ape of Sumatra: the orangutan—a highly intelligent animal who is a close relative of humans and is now an endangered species in the forests of Indonesia.

Stormy weather

After a **brief** stay in Sumatra, we sail quickly to Singapore and then on to our final destination: Guangzhou, China. In the South China Sea, we're hit by a **violent** storm. Our main sail is broken, and as the crew **struggles** to repair the damaged sail, the ship nearly capsizes.⁴ During his sixth voyage, Sindbad spoke of the terrible weather in this region, and for the next five days, *Sohar* is hit regularly by storms. The weather finally improves, and by July 11 we reach the port of Guangzhou. We have been at sea for seven and a half months and have covered 9,656 kilometers (6,000 miles).

Our Chinese hosts treat us to a huge celebration, though at one point, I can't help but feel sad. We have traced Sindbad's route, and now our great adventure is ending. But inside me, there is happiness too: the **generosity** of the Omani people, and the determination of the men who built and sailed *Sohar* made the voyage a reality. Now this journey, like Sindbad's seven voyages, will become another **tale** to be told.

⁴ If a boat or ship **capsizes**, it falls and turns upside down in the water.

◀ Five years before his Sindbad voyage, explorer Tim Severin led another expedition to sail across the North Atlantic. The team traveled from Ireland to Canada in a traditional Irish boat made from wood and leather.

