

Marco Polo

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When thinking back to childhood summers, many of us likely have happy memories of playing a water game called Marco Polo with family and friends in a swimming pool. It seems like even that simple call-and-response—a single ‘Marco...’ followed by a chorus of ‘Polo’s—can bring us back to those sun-soaked days. We may recall the fun of seeking out everyone else or the joy in evading capture for another round, all punctuated by giggles and smiles.

The Marco Polo game is a version of Blind Man’s Bluff (or Buff, as it’s known in some regions) that is played in a swimming pool with at least three players. Whoever is designated as ‘it’ either is blindfolded or is told to keep their eyes closed until they tag someone else. Next, this person will count to an agreed-upon number like 10 while the other players try to create as much distance as possible between themselves and whoever is ‘it.’ To find the other participants, ‘it’ will call out ‘Marco’ multiple times and everyone else is supposed to reply with ‘Polo.’ Whoever is tagged is then ‘it,’ and then the game goes on to another round.

Although these are the basic rules, other variations exist as well. One such rule says that if whoever is ‘it’ suspects that a player has gotten out of the pool, ‘it’ can call out, “Fish out of water!” and the player who is out of the pool then becomes the next ‘it.’ Another guideline that some players may want to add is that

no one is permitted to hold another player in place, using that person as a shield; anyone who does this would then become ‘it.’

Now that we’ve reviewed how the game is played, let’s take a closer look at its namesake. A 13th-century trader from the Italian city of Venice, Marco Polo is credited with giving Europeans the first glimpses of China. Along with his father and uncle, he made a 24-year-long journey from Venice to China, where he became a trusted ally of the Mongol leader Kublai Khan, before returning to Italy. Marco shared the details of his journeys in the famous book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, which also inspired explorers such as Christopher Columbus in their ventures.

But how did this pool game become linked with a 13th-century Italian explorer? Whether true or not, a variety of theories exist to account for the connection. Perhaps the most popular explanation posits that it’s inspired by the idea that Marco Polo was clueless as to where he was going on several occasions during his long voyage, much like how one might imagine a blind person reacting to an unfamiliar environment. Supposedly, this is the inspiration for why the blindfolded player ‘it’ has to ‘explore’ the pool without using his eyesight.

A second story relates that while Marco was traveling in China with his family through the Taklamakan Desert—a place whose name means ‘the desert from which one never returns’—that he fell asleep and his horse wandered off from the rest of the caravan. When he woke up, he couldn’t see anyone, but he heard voices calling out his first name, ‘Marco,’ and responded with his last name, ‘Polo.’ He eventually reunited with the group.

A third tale states that Kublai Khan developed such a strong attachment

to the Polo family that he refused to let them leave China. He only allowed them to leave when one of his daughters was going to marry a fellow Mongol leader in Persia and the Polos were included as members of the wedding party. During the long, dangerous journey from China to the Gulf of Persia, the ships carrying all the passengers capsized during a severe storm, with only about 18 people, including the princess and the Polo family, surviving. As the waves were tossing everyone about and the visibility was extremely limited, those in the water cried out ‘Marco,’ since he was their leader and he called back ‘Polo,’ so they could connect with one another.

No matter where its name came from, there’s no denying that the Marco Polo game is popular. It’s played around the world in places including North and South America, Europe, and Australia, and is known by other names such as Mermaid on the Rocks and Alligator. Its more common variation, Blind Man’s Bluff, is believed to have originated in the 1500s when it was a popular parlor game for ladies. Research shows that Marco Polo was known as a water game in America by the 1960s: when asked to name a game played in the water, some respondents to a Dictionary of American Regional English survey completed between 1965 and 1970 responded with “Marco Polo.”

This game has been a part of our collective summertime experience for generations and will continue as a joy-filled seasonal tradition for many more years to come. So, jump in and enjoy some fun in the sun!

Marco...?

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