

Around the World in 72 Days



The Grand Idea

In 1873, the French author Jules Verne published a novel called *Around the World in 80 Days*. The story told the imaginary adventures of a character called Phileas Fogg who accepted a £20,000 bet to travel around the world in record time. Nobody had ever attempted such a challenge before, but everything changed when the journalist, Elizabeth Jane Cochran, read his book.

Elizabeth, better known by her pen name, Nellie Bly, was a journalist working for the American newspaper *The World*. Bored and seeking adventure, Bly decided she would try to complete the book's journey in real life. At first, her manager was uncertain. He thought it would be better to send a man because a woman would need a companion and more luggage! Bly's reply was simple: 'Start the man and I'll start the same day for some other newspaper and beat him.' She embarked upon her journey two days later, alone and carrying just one bag.



The Starting Line

In Bly's day, transport was far slower and more limited than today. Cars had only just been invented, air travel did not yet exist and it was even difficult to make phone calls to book tickets or reserve seats. Bly started her journey from America on the 14th November, 1889. She sailed on a ship called the *Augusta Victoria*, noting her departure to the second. As well as making sure to keep precise timings of her travels, Bly also carefully mapped out her route. Knowing that she could face unforeseen delays, she only bought a ticket for the first part of her journey so that she could change her schedule easily.

Unfortunately, her journey did not commence smoothly. On the ship to England, Bly was faced with an unexpected foe – seasickness! She was so badly affected that she slept for 22 hours; fortunately, she soon recovered and was able to continue her voyage without any further health problems. She sailed across the Atlantic Ocean towards London, arriving a whole week later.



A Detour

Impressed by Bly's boldness, Jules Verne invited her to visit him at his home in France during her trip. Despite her hectic schedule, Bly hopped on a train to Paris and took a special detour to meet him, even missing out on two nights of sleep! Verne's wife, Honorine, was especially struck by Bly's courage, commenting: 'She is trim, energetic, and strong. I believe, Jules, that she will make your heroes look foolish.'

After leaving France, Bly travelled onwards to other countries, including Egypt, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong and Japan. As well as steam ships and trains, Bly also travelled on more unusual forms of transport, including a *jinricksha* (a cart-like vehicle used to carry passengers), a boat called a catamaran and a donkey called Gladstone. She experienced many different and exciting adventures during her voyage – from crocodile-hunting to an unexpected snowstorm, even buying a monkey in Singapore!



Bly: The Celebrity

Bly's expedition sparked an explosion of media interest. *The World* printed geography lessons on all the countries that Bly visited. Eager to keep up public interest, they also ran a competition offering a trip to Europe to the person who could accurately estimate Bly's journey time. Almost a million people entered and sales of the newspaper rocketed, transforming Bly into a national celebrity.

To make things even more dramatic, a rival reporter, Elizabeth Bisland, left New York on the same day as Bly, travelling in the opposite direction in a race to defeat her. Bly won the contest easily, however, returning to America on January 25th, 1890 – an incredible record time of 72 days, 6 hours, 11 minutes and 14 seconds. Cheering crowds filled the streets to greet her. Following her success, Bly went on to write an account of her adventures in a book called *Around the World in Seventy-Two Days*.



A Lasting Voyage

Since the nineteenth-century, there have been many different attempts to travel the world in 80 days, each with its own twist. The book has generated several film and television adaptations. Since 1993, the Jules Verne trophy is given to any boat that sails around the world in under 80 days.

Bly's voyage, however, remains the very first to imitate Verne's story in real-life – an adventure which, on her return to America, she would fondly remember as 'A ride worthy a queen.'

