Alexander von Humboldt – scientist and humanitarian

He climbed Vesuvius three times, studied Indians and dived to the bottom of the Thames in a diving bell: Alexander von Humboldt was regarded as one of the world’s greatest scholars and explorers in his own lifetime. The 6 May 2009 is the 150th anniversary of his death.

Born in Berlin in 1769, Humboldt enjoyed a good education: he and his elder brother Wilhelm – also later to become a scholar and founder of Berlin’s Humboldt University – were instructed by private tutors, from whom Alexander early on acquired his enthusiasm for voyages of discovery. While still a student at the University of Göttingen, he therefore visited England and, on his return, spent some days in revolution-racked Paris, a period Alexander later described as the best time of his life.

After inheriting a considerable fortune from his mother, he was finally able to fulfil his dream: travelling around the world. After a few false starts, Humboldt was eventually taken into the service of the Spanish king and arrived in America in the summer of 1799. For five years, he travelled the country, studying a volcano among other things, travelled 2,000 kilometres by boat on the Orinoco River and climbed Mount Chimborazo in Ecuador to over 5,700 metres, setting a new altitude record in mountaineering, which made him an instant celebrity throughout Europe. On his return, Alexander von Humboldt was celebrated like a hero.

After moving to Paris, he wrote a monumental 36-volume work about this period as well as other scientific works. But after only a few years, he began to feel the travel itch again and set about planning a lengthy trip to Asia. Political circumstances doomed this project to failure, but instead he visited Italy and England from 1822 onwards, again writing detailed accounts of his travels. But Humboldt’s studies now took their toll: by 1827, the fortune he had inherited was used up and he was compelled to enter the service of the Prussian King Frederick William III.

For this reason, he began giving his famous Kosmos lectures at Berlin University. Only two years later, though, he embarked once again on a lengthy expedition, travelling 15,000 kilometres across the entire breadth of Russia as far as the Chinese border. Among the items he collected on this trip was a diamond – the first ever to be found outside the tropics.

From 1834 onwards, he began writing down his Kosmos lectures, which were all best-sellers right from the very first volumes. Though political turmoil hindered this project, he continued to work on it until his death on 6 May 1859.

Humboldt’s acquaintances included Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the American
President Thomas Jefferson and numerous other statesmen as well as world-famous scientists, artists and scholars.

Also named after him is the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, with promotes scientific cooperation between outstanding foreign and German researchers with the support of the Federal Government and other national and international partners.

Source: [www.humboldt-portal.de](http://www.humboldt-portal.de)  
[www.humboldt-foundation.de](http://www.humboldt-foundation.de)