

Journey of a Lifetime

The visit of HRH Princess Alice,
Countess of Athlone
to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

25 February to 17 March 1938



HRH Princess Alice was the first member of the British royal family to visit Saudi Arabia, and the only member of the royal family to meet King Abdulaziz, founder of the modern Kingdom and father of the present King as well as his four predecessors.

During her extraordinary trip which took her to the hills above Makkah and into the heart of Riyadh and of Jeddah, she took more than 300 photographs.

These pictures capture forever the essence of her ground breaking and historic journey. They now belong to the King Abdulaziz Public Library Riyadh who have sponsored this exhibition of her photographs.



King Abdulaziz Public Library Riyadh

A journey to remember

Princess Alice's historic trip to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1938 followed an invitation from the future King, then Crown Prince Saud during a chance meeting over lunch at Ascot racecourse in 1936.



A woman who enjoyed adventure, Princess Alice took up the invitation and journeyed to the Kingdom on the Royal Naval cruiser, HMS Enterprise in February 1938. She was accompanied by her husband the Earl of Athlone and the British Minister Plenipotentiary, Sir Reader Bullard.

At the time of the trip, Britain was moving towards war with Germany and the Kingdom was on the brink of dramatic change following the discovery of huge reserves of oil beneath its desert sands. Although politics were not on the agenda at any time, the objective of the trip from both sides was to strengthen friendly ties between the two Kingdoms.

25 February

HMS Enterprise docks in Jeddah harbour signalling the arrival of Princess Alice, her husband the Earl of Athlone and an accompanying delegation. She is welcomed by another of King Abdulaziz' sons, Prince Faisal, who also later became king.

26-27 February

King Abdulaziz hosts a tea party for the Princess and then a banquet for the British royal party. This was considered an extraordinary occasion, signifying the importance of the visit.



Recounting their meetings in a book of reminiscences for her grandchildren, Princess Alice wrote: "He was a huge man, a great gentleman with a most engaging manner. He was charming and full of jokes and Granpa and I became his hero worshippers. He was obviously pleased to welcome us, and I thanked him very much for inviting me, as he had never before asked a female to an audience or a meal."

At the dinner she met Harry St John Philby, who had converted to Islam and was known by the Saudis as Hajji Abdullah Philby. She wrote: "He is most



interesting and knows everything one wants to hear about, even to rare birds and gazelles and plants. No one in the English colony likes him, as he is now a Muslim but he's the only man worth talking to."

28 February

While the Princess attended a reception by Muslim ladies, the Earl visited King Abdulaziz to present him with a personal letter from King George VI. It was at this meeting that Hafiz Wahba, then ambassador to the United Kingdom, took a picture of the Earl with King Abdulaziz, unfortunately the only occasion when a picture was taken with the King.



Later that day the Princess walked around Jeddah taking unusual pictures of the city following a rare rain storm.



1 March

The Princess' entourage leave for Taif, in a convoy of cars, camping overnight in the desert. The stay in Taif lasted for two days, a hill town which straggles along the top of an escarpment 5000 feet above the holy city of Makkah, and a cool summer retreat for King Abdulaziz, his family and his government. During their stay they rode horses in the mountains of Hadda.



4 March

The entourage, with the princess dressed in a traditional Abbayah, sets out towards Riyadh, passing by the Ashairah Wells and camping at Dafinah. The Princess made notes of the extraordinary scenery she was passing through; barren plains, rocky outcrops and desert oases. She records everything with her camera taking "a charming snap of a camel caravan at a well, beautiful... camels and the people resting all around." The party proceeded along Jabal Nir and camped the second night in al-Qa'iyah and the third at Marat. Their final camp before Riyadh was at Wadi Hanifah.



8-9 March

Before entering Riyadh the party were met by Crown Prince Saud who accompanied them to Badi'ah Palace on the outskirts of the city. The following day they visited the amir's palace in the city and took a tour by car which included a visit to Masmak Fortress, site of the 1902 battle, won by King Abdulaziz, which was the historic start of his campaign to reunite the Kingdom. They also took a tour of the ruined city of Dir'iyyah followed by a tea party in the gardens surrounding the ruins.



10-11 March

Crown Prince Saud presented the Earl with a gift of thoroughbred horses, before taking him and the Princess on a two day hunt to the north east of the capital.

The princess recorded drinking camel's milk, hunting quail with hawks and visiting and photographing a number of beduin tents. In the evening they were entertained to a performance of the famous traditional Najdi dance known as the Ardha.



12-14 March

The party leave Riyadh and head for Hasa and “the last camp and the best” recalled the princess. The following day their vehicles got stuck in the sand in the region of al-Furuq. Arriving in the town of Hasa, they are welcomed by Saud bin Jiluwi governor of the Eastern province.

The next day they visited an oases and on the next went riding both on horses and on camels before visiting local families and enjoying a garden tea party and evening banquet held in their honour.



15-16 March

The party left for Khobar and then Dharan where oil had just been discovered. On the occasion King George VI sent a telegram of congratulations to King Abdulaziz, in which the British monarch noted that the discovery had coincided “happily” with Princess Alice’s visit.

17 March

The princess' last visit was to the famous well number 7. She placed a gloved hand on the pipe and recorded later: "thro' my gloves it was boiling hot and you could feel the oil shaking the pipe as it rushed up thro' it."

The princess left Saudi Arabia from the port of Khobar that evening "with many regrets at the conclusion of a lovely and interesting journey".



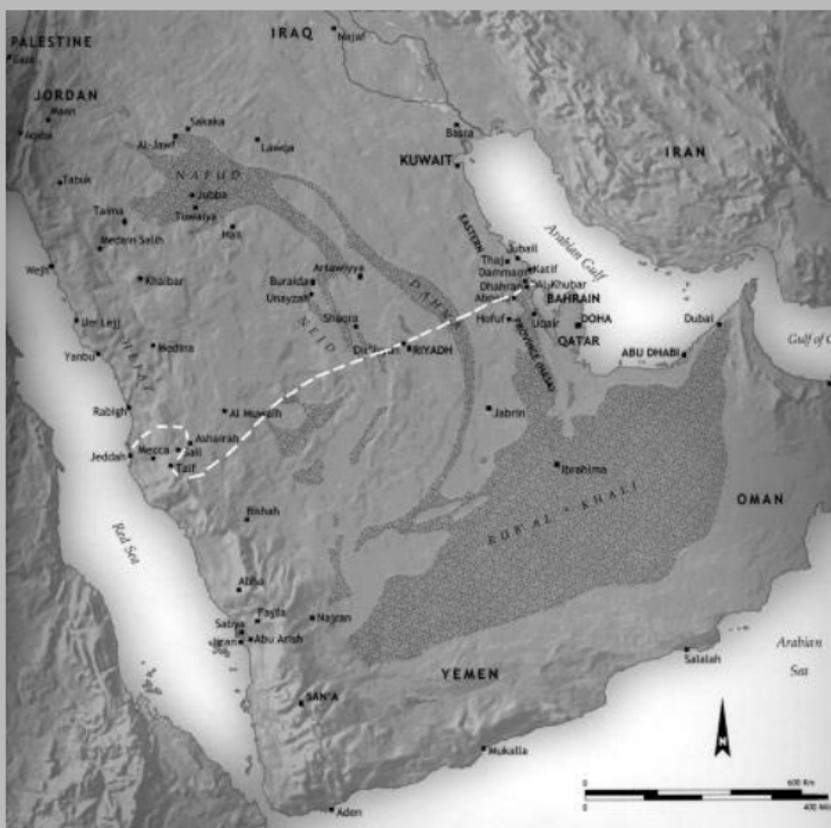
Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone

25 February 1883 – 3 January 1981

HRH Princess Alice was the longest living of Queen Victoria's granddaughters. Her father was Prince Leopold, Duke of Albany, the youngest son of HM Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

She was christened and married in St George's Chapel, Windsor and her funeral service was also held there. She is buried alongside her husband, Prince Alexander of Teck, the Earl of Athlone, at Frogmore.

She had three children, a daughter Lady May Abel Smith who survived her and two sons Rupert who died following a car accident when he was 20 years old and Maurice who died aged 6 months.



The route Princess Alice took across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

King Abdulaziz Public Library Riyadh

The Library was established by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in 1985. In this short span of time, the library has attained one million items including books, rare books, manuscripts, coins, maps, photographs, Audio video, microfiches, and microfilms.

The library has also established an image centre. This includes rare photographs of Muhammad Sadiq Bey 1197 AH (1880 AD); Mirza 1298 AH (1881 AD) and Ahmed Hilmi amongst hundreds of others.

The library has been striving to ensure that it provides a primary resource and base for the promotion of cultural and educational activities through organized international conferences, symposiums, seminars and exhibitions. So far the library has organized and sponsored some 50 national and international events.