

The Extraordinary Journey of Lady Evelyn Cobbold to Mecca



In the 1920s, relations between Sharif Hussein and Britain deteriorated following the war, prompting the latter to support Ibn Saud's campaign to conquer the Hijaz. After a series of military campaigns against his rivals between 1902 and 1926, Ibn Saud declared the unification of his kingdom in 1932 under challenging economic conditions, focusing on securing and stabilizing the country.

After Saudi Arabia took control of the Hijaz and imposed religious policies reflecting its interpretation of Islam, the effects on pilgrims varied. Despite these changes, pilgrims continued to arrive in Mecca from all corners of the world by diverse means—steamships, carts, camels, and even on foot. Among them was Scottish aristocrat Lady Evelyn Cobbold, who adopted the name Zainab after converting to Islam.

In her sixties, Evelyn performed the Hajj pilgrimage and documented her experience in her book *Pilgrimage to Mecca*. She recorded the first-ever car journey from Mina to Arafat and offered observations on local customs and the transformations that had shaped the pilgrimage during this pivotal moment in Saudi history. Evelyn is considered the first Englishwoman to chronicle her journey to the holy sites.

Why She Went on Hajj

Evelyn was born in Edinburgh in 1867 to a Scottish aristocratic family known for its passion for travel. Her unconventional upbringing was spent largely in Algiers, Cairo, and Damascus, which left a lasting impact. As she recounts in her memoirs, she learned Arabic at an early age and often escaped from her governess in Algeria to visit mosques with local friends.

During a visit to Rome to see her Italian friends, Evelyn had an unexpected encounter with the Pope. In the preface to her book, she recalls that when the Pope assumed she was Catholic and asked about her religion, she was momentarily surprised but confidently responded, "I am a Muslim." At the time, she belonged to a Christian family and had not planned to embrace Islam or study it deeply.

Evelyn described that moment as the turning point that led her to study Islam seriously. The more she read, the more convinced she became that Islam was the most natural and lucid faith. She wrote, "Since then, I have never doubted for a moment that there is only one God."

Unlike most converts, Evelyn claimed she had been a Muslim her whole life, that Islam had been embedded in her since childhood in North Africa. In the opening paragraph of her book, she wrote, "I did not embrace Islam—I returned to it. I had always been a Muslim at heart without realizing it."

After declaring her faith, Evelyn changed her name to Zainab. She had long dreamed of visiting Mecca and performing Hajj, which she considered one of the greatest human experiences. She recalled a vivid memory from her youth in Cairo when crowds gathered as the Kiswa, the covering of the Kaaba, was ceremonially sent off by the Khedive and his entourage—a moment that profoundly inspired her.



Bayt al-Baghdadi in Jeddah

In 1933, at the age of 65, Evelyn resolved to fulfill her dream. At the time, Saudi authorities imposed strict conditions on new Muslim converts, requiring them to reside in Jeddah for a full year to prove their sincerity before being granted access to Mecca.

Evelyn blamed this policy on Europeans who had previously infiltrated Mecca disguised as Muslims and caused disruptions, prompting the Saudis to tighten regulations. To circumvent the restrictions, she reached out to Hafiz Wahba, the Saudi ambassador in London, who empathized with her and submitted her request to senior officials.

With their approval, Evelyn began her pilgrimage. She traveled first to Port Said in Egypt, then by train to Suez under harsh conditions, including a sandstorm. There, she received vaccinations for smallpox and cholera, and then boarded an Italian steamer from Port Tewfik bound for Jeddah. She booked a private cabin, and after four days at sea, reached the shores of the Hijaz.

In Jeddah: Awaiting Hajj Clearance

Evelyn described Jeddah as encircled by high walls on three sides, its skyline punctuated by towering minarets. Life in the city struck her as unlike any other Eastern city she had visited—there were no drink stalls, modern shops, cinemas, or gramophones, save for the traditional markets that catered to local needs. Nevertheless, she admired the city’s distinctive architecture.

While in Jeddah, she was hosted by the family of “Mr. Philby,” a British Muslim close to the Saudi king. She stayed in a house known as Al-Baghdadi, awaiting her Hajj permit. During this time, several prominent figures visited her, including Prince Faisal bin Abdulaziz, the future king of Saudi Arabia.

Evelyn explored Jeddah’s landmarks, markets, and narrow alleys. She dined at a newly opened hotel designed to welcome pilgrims, where American engineers were staying as they negotiated oil concessions with the king.



She also described a striking scene: moneychangers sitting on street corners, leaving their cash unattended as they left for prayer when the call to prayer rang out. Theft, she noted, had been eradicated under the king’s reforms.

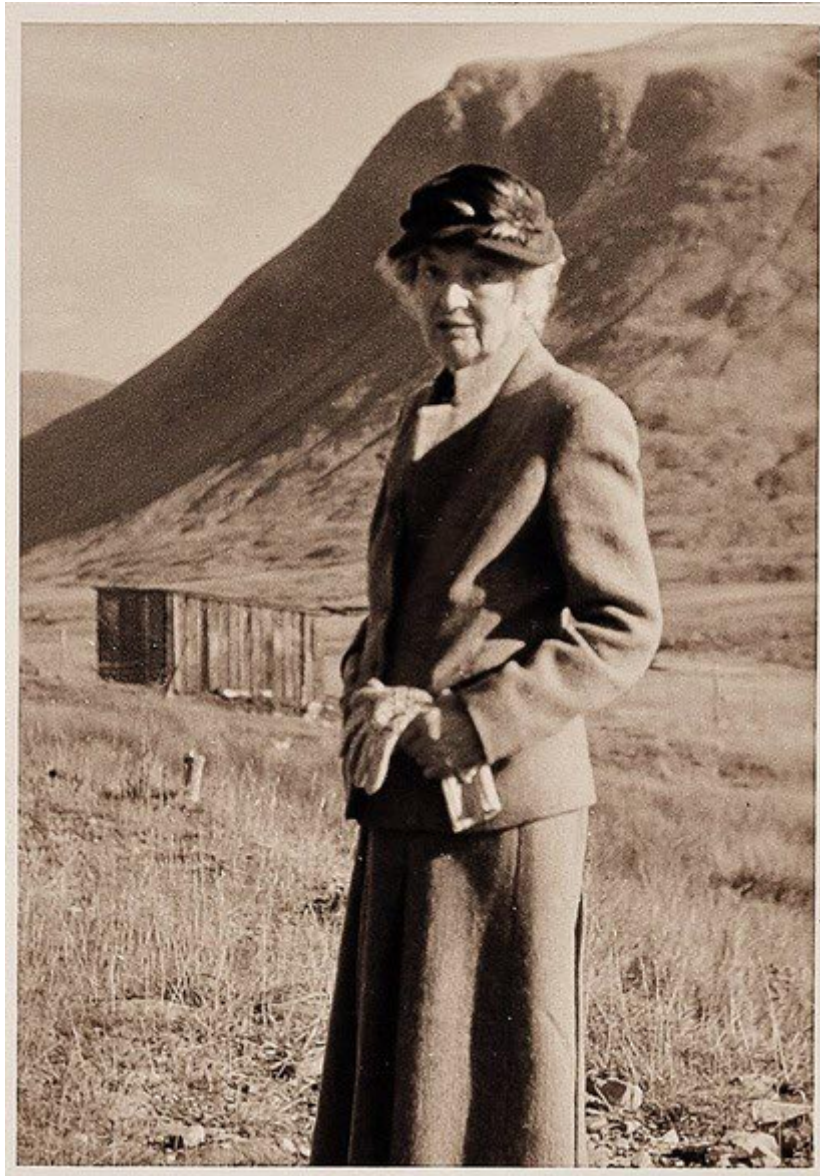
One of her lasting memories was the arrival of the British ship Toledo every two weeks, bringing mail, goods, and newspapers. The locals eagerly awaited the ship's arrival, only to return to isolation once it departed.

Despite her concerns over whether King Abdulaziz would approve her Hajj, Evelyn was elated to learn on March 12 that the king had granted her a special permit. "I had lived through cycles of hope and despair, barely believing my deepest wish would finally come true," she wrote.

In Medina

Her first stop was Rabigh, where she rested for an hour and refueled. En route to Medina, her passport was checked several times by Wahhabi police patrols, which protected pilgrims from the kind of attacks and thefts that plagued earlier eras. She passed through territories of Bedouin tribes that once preyed on pilgrims but now relied on roadside begging.

Her 15-hour journey from Jeddah to Medina was made in a Ford. Only once did the driver and an elderly Sudanese man have to push the car after it got stuck in a ravine. In contrast, camel caravans took about ten days, and pilgrims on foot required nearly three weeks.



Evelyn arrived in Medina at night and stayed in a modern hotel for over a week. She visited the Prophet's Mosque and described standing before the Prophet Muhammad's tomb as a moment of awe and joy, feeling she had crossed a threshold rarely crossed by European men—and never before by a European woman, she claimed.

She engaged with local women, reunited with old friends from Damascus, and forged new ties with prominent residents. She toured the city's major landmarks, including Mount Uhud and the mosques of Quba and Qiblatayn.

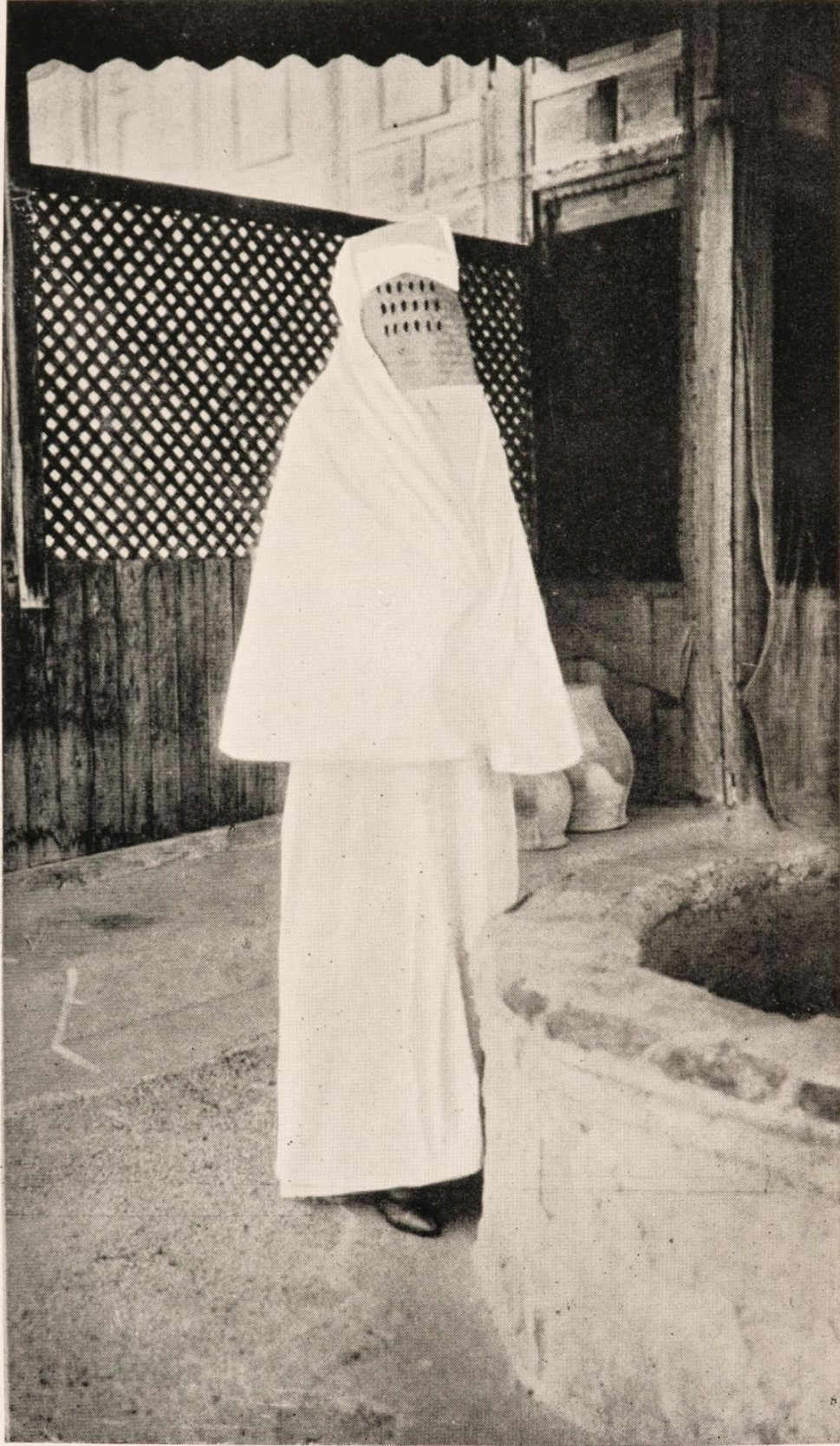
Although cameras were banned, Evelyn secretly carried one and took rare photos of the city and its mosques. She described Medina as a peaceful oasis, free from trams, buses, and congestion. She wandered its markets, especially enchanted by the perfume and fruit souks.

While visiting graves and shrines had traditionally been part of the Hajj



experience, the Saudi regime had abolished such practices and demolished several sites. Evelyn supported this move, defending the destruction of the tombs of the Prophet's family and companions.

She recounted a conversation with Moroccan pilgrims who agreed that praying at graves was un-Islamic but criticized the Wahhabis' severity. Evelyn disagreed and defended the Wahhabi approach, viewing the leveling of graves as a prophetic directive and praising the religious policies of Saudi Arabia as a positive reorganization of Hajj. She believed King Abdulaziz was best suited to guard the holy sites.



[Frontispiece

THE AUTHOR IN PILGRIM DRESS

During her evening strolls, she was captivated by storytellers entertaining crowds in cafes and markets, narrating tales of King Abdulaziz's life—his youth, the recapture of Riyadh, the unification of tribes, and his victories over rivals.

Evelyn left Medina with a heavy heart, bidding farewell to her friends and accepting farewell gifts. She returned to Jeddah by car, where she washed, donned the white garments of ihram, and resumed her journey to Mecca.

In the Sanctuary of Mecca

The drive from Jeddah to Mecca took just two hours, whereas pilgrims on camels needed two days to complete the journey. Until 1933, vehicular access during Hajj was reserved for the royal family, senior officials, and a select few.

Evelyn described her circumambulation of the Kaaba as one of the most profound spiritual experiences of her life. She was overwhelmed by awe, joy, and peace, writing that the ritual symbolized the lover encircling the house of the beloved, abandoning all worldly concerns in complete devotion. She recalled her first glimpse of the Kaaba:

“I was deeply moved by those eyes shining with faith, the fervent prayers, and the hands raised in sincere supplication. I was immersed in a spiritual state I had never experienced before. I became one with the masses circling the Kaaba, my soul enveloped in tranquility, my being flooded with contentment, and my heart filled with reverence.” (p. 171)

In the Grand Mosque, Evelyn heard that King Abdulaziz would be washing the floor of the Kaaba with Zamzam water and perfuming it with rosewater. Though she longed to witness the ceremony, she couldn't bear the scorching heat of the ground and instead went to the Zamzam well.

She explored Mecca's neighborhoods and observed the customs of its residents. She admired the mutawwifs—guides who assisted pilgrims and communicated fluently in multiple languages. She witnessed acts of compassion, such as helping travelers who had run out of money or grown ill, and arranging their return home at no cost.

In her introduction, Evelyn described Hajj not just as a sacred rite, but as a gathering akin to the League of Nations, an international academy of arts and sciences, and a global chamber of commerce.

She saw Hajj as a symbol of Muslim unity, bringing people together from every continent to exchange ideas, build connections, and transcend racial and sectarian boundaries. After fulfilling the rites, Hajj transformed into a platform for discussions in trade, religion, science, literature, and politics—making it a spiritual, cultural, political, and economic institution all at once.

Amid the Great Depression, Mecca's markets were suffering from a severe slump, and the nascent Saudi kingdom relied heavily on Hajj revenues. The year of Evelyn's pilgrimage witnessed the lowest number of pilgrims in recent memory. Gold was the only major currency in use, alongside the silver "Maria Theresa Dollar."

She described the Kaaba draped in its new, gold-embroidered Kiswa, which was not hung until Eid al-Adha, when most pilgrims were away in Mina. The old Kiswa would be cut into pieces and sold near the mosque. She also noted a failed attempt to modernize the Kiswa's production using machines in Manchester—after an expensive experiment, the traditional method was reinstated.

She wrote that the Grand Mosque featured multiple pulpits from which scholars of the four Sunni schools of thought gave sermons. Over 800 workers served the mosque, including 100 eunuchs, whose responsibilities intensified during the pilgrimage season to ensure cleanliness and order.

In contrast to her staunch support for demolishing tombs in Medina, Evelyn expressed regret over the destruction of Khadijah's tomb and other beautiful domes and shrines. She was also disheartened by the closure of Bilal's Mosque.



Evelyn with Prince Saud bin Abdulaziz and the Saudi Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Hafiz Wahba

On her ninth day in Mecca, the moment arrived to travel to Mina, Arafat, and perform the stoning ritual. On the way, she passed the king's palace, where dignitaries were received during Hajj. Because she was a woman, she was not allowed to enter or meet the king.

She visited Al-Khayf Mosque, climbed the mountain where the Cave of Hira is located, and passed areas with rare medicinal plants, including balsam, tied in legend to Prophet Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. By then, she was feeling exhausted and could not bear the full three days in Mina for Eid. She requested—and received—special permission from the king to shorten her Hajj.

The Challenges of Hajj

Historically, Hajj was fraught with hardship and danger, often shaped by the region's political climate. Evelyn praised the measures taken by the Saudi government to ensure pilgrims' safety and comfort: free water and medical clinics, orderly hotels with designated spaces for women and dignitaries, and enhanced security that ended desert looting. She noted that once lawless tribes now feared the king's justice.

She especially commended King Abdulaziz's leadership, contrasting it favorably with the era of the Hashemites. She applauded his civil reforms: banning the slave trade, supporting women's welfare, and establishing modern hospitals.

Her experience was exceptional, particularly as a woman. Though she had to wear a face veil in certain places, she traveled comfortably between cities using luxury transport that was then reserved for the elite. Most pilgrims of the early 1930s had a vastly different experience. Evelyn, observing the socioeconomic divide from the seat of her car, was acutely aware of the disparity.

After Hajj: A New Beginning

Evelyn's journey revealed the essential role of vaccination before Hajj and a mandatory quarantine upon return. She was quarantined for three days in Port Sudan, then resumed her voyage by sea through Suez and Port Said to Marseille, and finally flew to Croydon, reaching her home after a journey that lasted nearly two months.

In her memoir, Evelyn wrote of returning from Hajj filled with happiness. She cherished being the first British and European woman to perform Hajj with royal permission from the Saudi king. She closed her book with these words:

“Time will never erase the memories engraved in my heart. The orchards of Medina, the serenity of the mosques, the thousands of worshippers whose tearful eyes I beheld—all remain vivid in my mind. I shall never forget the majesty of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, nor the awe of standing on the plain of Arafat

beneath the desert sun as our hearts beat with hope and mercy. Those days brought me nothing but goodness, beauty, and wonder. I discovered a world I had never known and found myself within it.” (p. 301)

After Hajj, Evelyn spent nearly 30 years between London and her family estate in Scotland, where she continued to defend Islam and the Arab world, challenging Western stereotypes. She shared her pilgrimage story through lectures and cultural events across London.

She requested to be buried in accordance with Islamic rites: with the janazah prayer in Arabic and her body facing Mecca. When she died in 1963, on one of the coldest days of the year, her wishes were fulfilled. She was buried at the foot of a hill on her estate in Westros, with a British imam performing the funeral. Her favorite verse from the Quran, “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth,” was inscribed on her gravestone.

In recent years, Evelyn’s story has become a source of inspiration for many British Muslims, especially converts, who visit her grave as a tribute to her faith and devotion.