

On tour with the Saudi British Society

The Saudi-British Society organised its first official trip to Saudi Arabia in November 2009. It was led by the Hon. Secretary, Ionis Thompson.

About 17 of us started our tour in Riyadh and finished in Jeddah. We had a wonderful guide who was able to gain access for us to sites which had been indicated as being inaccessible, such as Dir'iyyah (because of the restoration work in progress) and later the Standing Stones of Rajjajil at Sakaka, al Jouf. We spent a morning in the National Museum in Riyadh (most impressive) and the restored area around the old Murabba Palace. We went up the Faisaliah Tower and looked at the exhibition of King Abdulaziz's life in the Musmak Fort. Then we flew to al Jouf and drove straight to the Standing Stones at Sakaka where groups of pillars, up to 9 feet high, are set out to face the rising sun on a rocky terrace. Their purpose is unknown but they have been dated to the 4th millenium BC. Here we had the site to ourselves in the lovely afternoon light. Nearby is a restored old castle on a small hill where Lady Anne Blunt and her husband Wilfrid Blunt stayed in the 1870s, opposite a well-preserved Nabataean well.

Our guide then arranged for us to meet a local family, the women of our party being entertained by the women and girls of the household while our men talked politics and religion to the men of the family. This was deemed a very worthwhile addition to the tour. Al-Jouf itself has an ancient mound, Qasr Marid, with a romantic crumbling castle on top, dating from at least Nabataean times (ie 1st century BC) and probably much earlier, beside the third earliest mosque in Islam, the Mosque of Omar.

We didn't have long enough to enjoy al Jouf in the early morning, as we had a long bus journey to our next night stop, al Ula. We went via Tayma, home of the Babylonian king Nabonidus in the 7th century BC, where we stopped but were unable to get inside the excavations as the German team were not working there at the time. Al Ula is the nearest place one can stay to Madain Saleh, the wonderful Nabatean town, sister city of Petra, which flourished between the 1st century BC and 106 AD when it was incorporated into the Roman Empire. The site is still remarkably empty of tourists at this time of year and we had a wonderful day wandering about from one tomb cluster to another, all cut into the yellow sandstone rock.

A French team is excavating the site, though they weren't there at the time, and they have discovered fascinating things, such as fragments of ancient shroud in the tombs and places of worship in the religious precinct reached

Photographs clockwise from Top Right
Group outside Beit Nassif, Jeddah old town,
al Jouf, minaret of Mosque of Omar and Qasr Marid,
Lunch at guide's farm, Madain Saleh,
Standing Stones of Rajjajil at Sakaka, al Jouf,
Tombs at Madain Saleh.

