

# INTREPID TRAVELLER

## Rosita Forbes

With her remarkable stamina and a penchant for hats, Rosita Forbes blazed a trail from Africa to Afghanistan, writing a series of books about the people and places she encountered. Travel writer **Duncan J.D. Smith** follows in the footsteps of this now largely-forgotten lady explorer

**T**he stereotypical gentleman adventurers of the early 20th century met their match in Rosita Forbes (1890-1967), one of England's first and most flamboyant lady-explorers. She was born Joan Rosita Torr on 16 January 1890 at Riseholme Hall, north of Lincoln, and was the eldest of five children. Her father Herbert James Torr was a landowning squire who failed in a bid to become a Liberal MP (unlike his father John Torr who was successful). Joan's exotic middle name – often shortened to Sita – came from her mother Rosita Graham Torr, whose father, Duncan Graham, had married a half Spanish woman “with enormous blue eyes... and blue-black hair”. Fireside tales of her crossing the Andes with her father, Joan's great grandfather, had a powerful effect on the young Joan, inspiring her to want to make her own mark on the wider world. Another inspiration was her great uncle, William Torr, a cattle-breeder so renowned that he was asked to advise the Farmer King, Louis of France, on his own herd. William rode all the way from the Lincolnshire fens to Paris on horseback to dispense his knowledge!

At school Joan proved herself good at examinations and demonstrated a gift for foreign languages. She also loved the outdoors, horses, hunting and maps. As she wrote in her book *Adventure*, one of the rare books in which she provides any autobiographical details, “I always collected maps, and I preferred the kind decorated with stiff little ships,

sails bellying in a breeze which looked like a comet, with unicorns or savages to decorate the wilderness...The curly red lines across African deserts had the fascination of a magnet, and I hoped

fervently that the pioneers who were writing their names over the blank spaces would leave just one small desert for me.”

She left home at seventeen and on 5 October 1911 married her first husband,



Left: Rosita Forbes, author's portrait for *Unconducted Travellers*, 1919

Right: Forbes as 'Khadija' for her Libyan desert trip

(All images from Margaret Bald)



**That is the charm of a map. It represents the other side of the horizon where everything is possible. It has the magic of anticipation without the toil and sweat of realization. The greatest romance ever written pales before the possibilities of adventure that lie in the faint blue trails from sea to sea**

Rosita Forbes, *From Red Sea to Blue Nile* (1925)

Colonel Ronald Foster Forbes, a soldier bound for the east. Unfortunately, although the marriage took her to China, India and Australia, she disliked not only garrison life but also the colonel's terrible temper, and in 1917 the pair were divorced. After parting Forbes went home via South Africa, where she attempted to ride north from Durban across the Zambezi. Although the authorities forbade her attempt, and she was forced into using a more orthodox route to England, it would be her first taste of lone travelling.

Back in England she joined an ambulance going to France on war service, and between 1915 and 1917 served as a driver at the Front for the Société de Secours aux blessés militaires. The French government awarded her two medals for her efforts. She then came back to London and drove an official car for the British Government – but was soon bored. Before long she was looked up by a girlfriend called Undine, recently released from hospital, who said she too was tired of London, and that they should go around the world together. As Forbes confessed in her account of the thirteen-month journey (1917-1918), *Unconducted Wanderers* (1919), the pairing was a

good one: “With another girl, equally undismayed by official restrictions, I had wandered round the world, mostly off the map, borrowing what we needed in the way of horses, the floor of a native hut as a bed, the pirogue of the Indo-Chinese customs or the New Guinea government yacht ... *The Times*, reviewing my first book, said we had asked for everything we wanted with the assurance of well-bred children who had never been refused.”

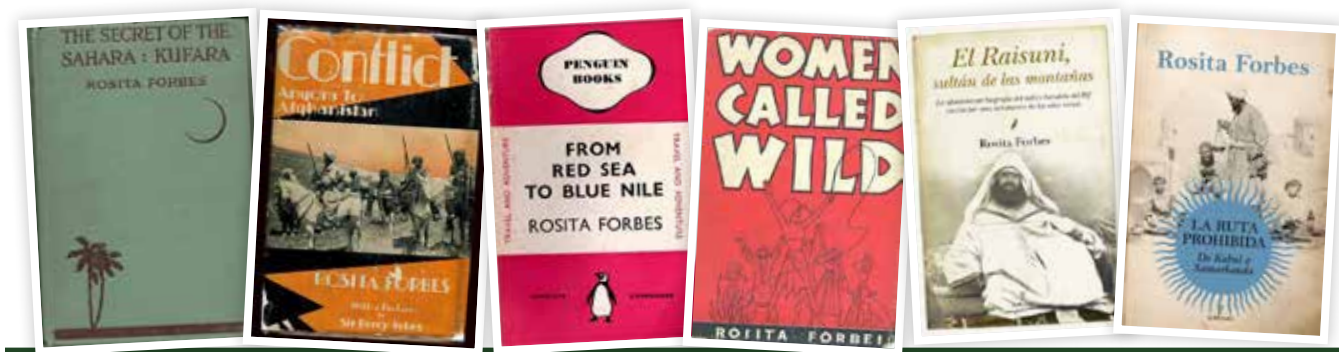
Starting in New York and moving to California and Hawaii the two behaved like regular tourists but once in the Pacific and East Asia they were getting into one scrape after another, including being captured by the Southern Army in China whilst trying to go overland by river junk and sedan chair from Canton to Hankow. They escaped by shooting the notorious Sian River rapids in the wet season, when no other boat would take them. All in all, they visited some thirty different countries, including Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, New Guinea, Java, Sumatra, Malay States, Siam, Cambodia, China, and Korea. With its strong feminine point of view *Unconducted Wanderers* garnered a laudatory review in the *Times Literary Supplement* – but didn't sell particularly

well. Unlike later books it lacked Forbes' trademark acute observations of a land and the real life of its inhabitants.

### **Into the Libyan Desert**

Back in Europe in 1918 Forbes went to Paris in the hope she might pick up work as a journalist at the forthcoming Peace Conference. After little or no success she was contacted by an editor who wanted a series of articles on French colonisation in northern Africa – and was dispatched to Casablanca. Taking Undine with her, the two drifted slowly eastwards, with Forbes picking up copy as she went, until they arrived a thousand miles away in Massawa in Eritrea, on the Red Sea. Here Forbes' partnership with Undine came to an end, the latter wanting to continue “seeing things” whereas the former now wanting to “know things”. This thirst for knowledge, combined with a penchant for stylish clothes and wide-brimmed hats, would over the next twenty years be the making of Rosita Forbes as both serious author and celebrity.

Forbes went through Abyssinia to Khartoum and thence to Cairo, where the British authorities (effectively the secret service) asked her to continue on



to Damascus to see what she could learn of King Faisal's new Arab kingdom. It was here in 1920 that Rosita Forbes changed from being a casual onlooker into a serious student of politics. Completing her task for the British she set about writing and lecturing in support of Arab Nationalism. It is interesting to note that her single piece of true exploration, the expedition to the Libyan Kufara oasis in the winter of 1920-21, achieved with the assistance of King Faisal, stems more than anything from the desire to write about the Arab world with authority.

A thousand miles square, the Libyan

penetrated the desert and reached Al-Kufrah (Kufara), the stronghold of the Tibu people and the most isolated oasis in the Sahara.

From the Tibu the Zwaya learned how to lead camel trains across the desert for up to sixteen days without water or grazing. With this knowledge they were able to open up a direct trade link with Ouaddai (Wadai) and Borkou (Borku), powerful sultanates far to the south-west in what is today Chad.

The eastern part of the Libyan desert, however, still remained unexplored: a vast area of dunes known as the Great Sand

Hassanein Bey was a member of the Turkish ruling class in Egypt who, while serving on the British mission to the Senussi during the Great War, decided to visit the now legendary Al-Kufrah oasis with the blessing of Sayyid Idris. He originally planned to take his old Balliol friend, Francis Rodd, son of the British Ambassador to Italy, but when Rodd dropped out, Forbes stepped in. From the start Forbes took full credit for planning, financing and facilitating the journey, as was pointedly revealed in her book of the journey, *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara* (1921). In her own words what she wanted to do was "to cross some six hundred miles of desert ruled by the fanatical Senussi and jealously guarded by the Italians established on the Tripolitanian coast, in order to reach a group of oases whose exact position was unknown".

So as not to cause undue attention she dressed as an Arab woman and called herself Sitt Khadija, claiming to be the recently-widowed daughter of an Egyptian merchant called Abdullah Fahmi; to account for her poor Arabic she claimed a Circassian mother, a slave-girl in the harem of the Bey of Tunis. Her book portrays Hassanein Bey very much as her assistant, whereas in reality it was his connections with the Italians (through Francis Rodd) and Sayyid Idris, that enabled them to travel south at all, with an all-important Senussi escort.

Embarking in November they didn't take the usual caravan trail from Tripoli but rather the more hazardous Benghazi-Ouaddai route, guarded fiercely by Libyan tribes. The journey was hell on earth, with smothering sandstorms, sick camels, murderous porters, and lack of water being a few of their tribulations. Forbes' poor compass skills would cause the expedition to miss the Taiserbo and Zighen wells north of Al-Kufrah; Hassanein's quick wits on the other hand

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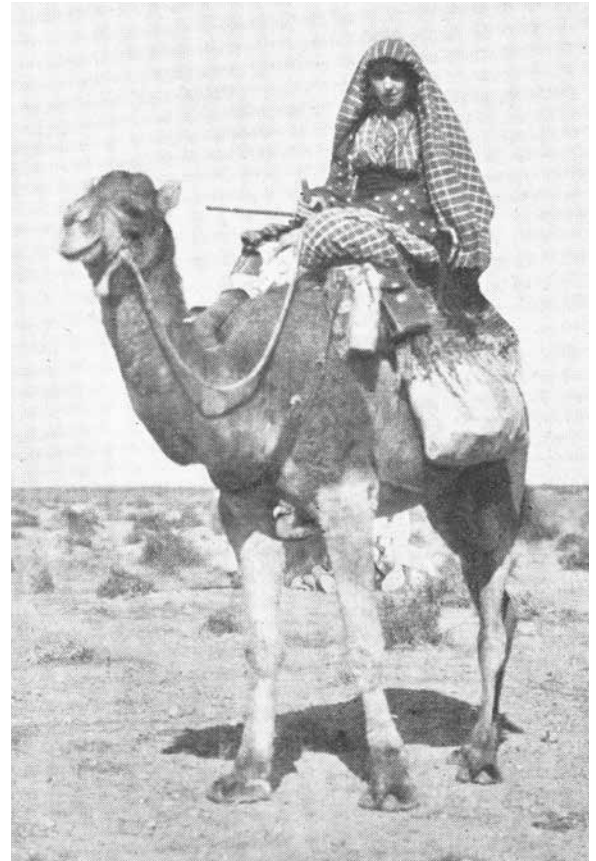
desert is the largest desert on the planet, its extremes of temperature engineering a moonscape of jagged rocky plateaux rising out of pebbled plains and colossal sand dunes. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus was one of the first to allude to the desert's harshness describing it in about 450 BC as "wholly sand, very scant of water and utterly and entirely a desert." Neither the Ancient Egyptians, the Romans, the Greeks nor the Arabs dared venture into its interior, indeed it wasn't until the 19th century that the Zawayia, an Arab bedouin tribe of Cyrenaica (eastern Libya), followers of the Sufi spiritual leader Sayyid Muhammad ibn Ali as-Senussi (the Grand Senussi),

Sea that effectively cut off Al-Kufrah from Egypt. By 1918 the French had conquered Chad and the Italians occupied coastal Libya having been unable to suppress the tribes of the interior. In eastern Libya an uneasy British-brokered peace reigned between the Italian Governor in Benghazi, the capital of Italian Cyrenaica, and the head of the fanatical Muslim Senussi sect, Sayyid Idris al-Senussi (later King Idris I of Libya), who administered the affairs of several oases, including Al-Khufrah. Into this delicate political situation stepped two very different explorers, who shared little in common: one was the Oxford-educated Egyptian civil servant Ahmed Hassanein Bey, the other was Rosita Forbes.

Far right: Forbes during her four-month journey through the Libyan desert

Right: Ahmed Hassanein Bey, Rosita's co-explorer in the Libyan desert

Left: A small selection of Forbes' book covers, published in many languages



prevented them from being murdered by Zwaya tribesmen. Nevertheless they eventually reached Al-Kufrah, which was set in a valley hemmed in by shale and sandstone cliffs. On the clifftop was perched the village of Taj, the sacred centre and headquarters of the Senussi brotherhood. Rosita Forbes was the first non-Muslim woman ever to enter it: sensibly she took photographs with a concealed camera. Here the pair stayed for ten days with the ikhwan (or brothers) at the behest of Sayyid Idris. But when they ventured down into the valley to visit the slave market and caravanserai at Jof they were once again threatened by Zwaya tribesmen. Upon their return the Senussi recommended they take a different route back across the desert to avoid ambush, via Jaghub and then Siwa. Despite Hassanein Bey falling from his camel and breaking his collarbone on the way, they were eventually picked up by a Camel Corps patrol and escorted to safety.

### The Secret of the Sahara

Having arrived in Alexandria in February 1921 Hassanein Bey recuperated while Forbes became the talk of the town.

Being pursued by photographers and pressmen undoubtedly helped develop her famous talent for self-promotion. As veteran traveller and Arabist Gertrude Bell put it, "in the matter of trumpet-blowing she is unique..." Back in London Forbes managed to transcribe her travel journal in less than a month and sold the resulting manuscript to Cassell's in Britain and Doran Doubleday in the United States.

With an introduction by explorer, linguist and colonial administrator Sir Harry Hamilton Johnston and serialisation in *The Sunday Times*, *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara* was classic Forbes, being a combination of poetic passages describing the landscapes she had seen, as well as political observations and fascinating interviews with the people she met. With such experiences quite beyond the ken of most readers she would soon become one of the most popular travel writers of the day.

Her motives for down-playing the role of Hassanein Bey remain unclear. Perhaps it was a simple craving for fame (although she claimed in her autobiography to find fame tiresome), or else a need to put

herself centre-stage in her books? There may also have been an element of wishing to prove herself in a man's world after the collapse of her first marriage. Gertrude Bell was again damning in her praise: "I am so sick of Rosita Forbes! and the thing that makes me sickest is that she scarcely ever alludes to that capital boy, Hasanain (sic), who was with her, an Egyptian, without whom she couldn't have done anything. She doesn't know a word of Arabic."

In London Forbes was much in demand as a speaker at lunches and dinners, a challenge she took up with gusto. She spoke to a full house at the Royal Geographical Society and was even summoned to Buckingham Palace, where she sat on a gilded sofa between King George V and Queen Mary showing them her "precious map – the first of the Libyan Desert". Forbes was also courted by the War Office, because of their interest in the politico-military situation on the western borders of Egypt, where she took a shine to a member of the general staff, another colonel, the choleric, hunting-mad Irishman Arthur Thomas McGrath, D.S.O. They were married on 22 October that same year in the Chapel Royal, but

Below, left: Arthur Thomas McGrath, D.S.O.

Below: Forbes leaving Buckingham Palace after taking tea with the King and Queen in 1921

having already made her name as Rosita Forbes she decided to retain this name professionally. Honeymooning on the continent Forbes took time out to address the Royal Antwerp and the French Geographical Societies, both of whom presented her with gold medals in 1921 and 1923 respectively.

A silver medal from the Royal Society of Arts in London (1924) for her paper *The Position of the Arabs in Art and Literature* would follow. Returning to London the pair lived at 20 Great Cumberland Place, which Forbes had re-decorated by Robert Lutyens, son of renowned architect Sir Edwin. For Forbes, however, the Kufara episode would ultimately be tinged with sour grapes. The Royal Geographical Society did not honour her with a medal, most likely because the scientific information she brought back was too meagre. She and Hassanein Bey had only taken along an aneroid barometer (to measure heights above sea level) and a prismatic compass, permitting little more than a simple compass traverse of their

route to be made. Even this was in reality undertaken later by Dr. John Ball, the Director of the Desert Surveys of Egypt.

### Morocco to Abyssinia

Throughout the 1920s and well into the 30s Rosita Forbes used her travel experiences as the backdrop for a string of novels, and prompted by her publisher she followed these up with her first biography, a portrait of Mulai Ahmed er Raisuni, Sherif of the Riffian Berber tribe. *El Raisuni, the Sultan of the Mountains: His Life Story* (1924) was the result of a series of long interviews Forbes had with Raisuni over eleven days in 1923 in his Atlas Mountain fastness in Morocco.

With a red henna beard and claiming a pedigree stretching back to Noah he was surrounded by three score slaves, nine daughters, three sons, and two wives. The book includes a letter written by Raisuni himself which starts as follows: "Glory to God, on Monday the 7th day of Moharram, the holy, the first month of the year 1342 (in the Muslim calendar), there came to visit us the beautiful, the precious pearl, the learned, well-educated Sayeda Rosita Forbes, the Englishwoman." The story would eventually be heavily fictionalised in the 1975 film *The Wind and the Lion*. On the strength of the book Forbes spent the winter of 1923-24 on a lecture tour of the United States. Every bit as gruelling as one of her expeditions she gave an incredible eighty-eight lectures in ninety-one days!

In late 1924 Forbes extracted a

commission from *The Daily Telegraph* to accompany explorer, orientalist and writer Harry St. John Bridger Philby (spy Kim Philby's father) on a crossing of the Rub 'al-Khali, the uncharted Empty Quarter of Southern Arabia. The British authorities at Aden considered the journey too dangerous and so Forbes decided instead in 1925 to make a 1,100-mile trek by foot and mule through Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia), accompanied by the photographer Harold Jones. The resulting book *From Red Sea to Blue Nile: Abyssinian Adventures* (1925) tells of their search for legendary Lalibela, with its Christian churches hewn from solid rock, and Axum, the capital of the Queen of Sheba. During the journey Forbes



**Below, top: Forbes with cameraman Harold Jones, filming a documentary in Abyssinia**

**Below: Forbes in Abyssinia**

was entertained by the regent Ras Tafari (Haile Selassie). Forbes and Jones also made a film of the same name although of the original 11,000 feet of film taken only a tantalising six minutes survives today (surviving playbills show the intrepid Forbes crossing the Nile surrounded by spearmen to keep crocodiles at bay!).

Between 1925 and 1930 Forbes devoted much of her time to writing mediocre romantic fiction about well-to-do but bored heroines in jeopardy in exotic lands, drawing once again on her colourful travel experiences. Two of her African novels were even sought out by silent film producers of the day, being *If the Gods Laugh* (1925), released in 1927 as *Fighting Love* (directed by Nils Olaf Chrisander and starring Jetta Goudal and Victor Varconi), and *Account Rendered, and King's Mate*, released in 1928 as *The White Sheik*.

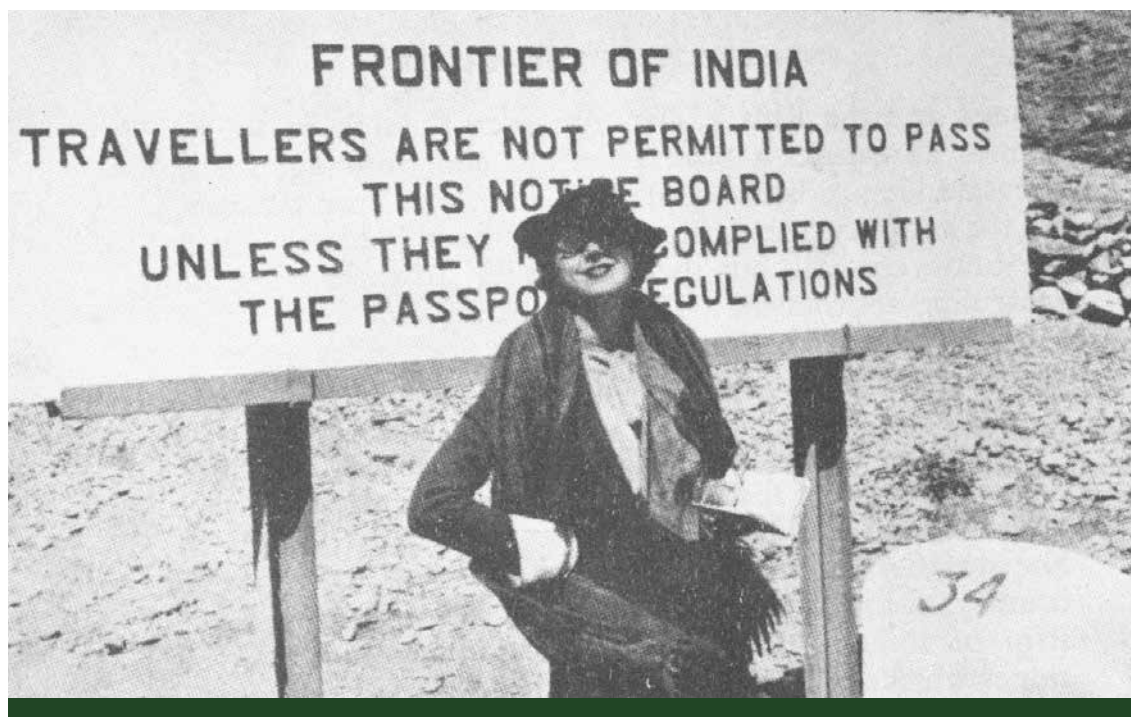
Journeys continued alongside these novels, including a newspaper commission to visit Persia to write an article on Reza Khan, the soon-to-be Shah of the soon-to-be-formed Iran, and a Balkan tour writing for the *Daily Telegraph*. She also sailed a twenty-ton open dhow with a crew of eight Arabs (only one of whom had ever done the journey before) across and down the Red Sea (1922-1923) in the midst of winter gales, to land at the forbidden port of Jeizan to explore unknown Asir (both in Saudi Arabia) and Yemen, again disguised as an Arab woman. An attempt to complete the holy journey to Mecca was not a success though, and was one of the rare times that Forbes' dogged determination was thwarted. Still not yet forty, however, she had already travelled across all the world's continents except Antarctica, and in 1928 she summed up her experiences in the anthology *Adventure – Being a Gipsy Salad, Some Incidents, Excitements and Impressions of Twelve Highly Seasoned Years*.



### Into the Heart of Asia

In 1929-30 Forbes returned to serious travelling and set out on her most extensive journey to date, an 8,000-mile journey on horseback and by truck to Central Asia and the new countries of the Near East, some of which, such as Syria, Transjordan and Iraq, did not exist before the First World War, and all of which were being changed by the impact of Western ideas on their ancient customs. Her observations were made known in one of her best and most serious travelogues, *Conflict: Angora to*

*Afghanistan* (1931), with a forward by Afghanistan expert Brigadier-General Sir Percy Molesworth Sykes. True to the book's title she set out from Angora (today's Ankara) in the new Turkey of Kemal Ataturk (whom she met) going via Syria and Palestine to the North Arabian desert (where she met Ibn Saud) and the borders of Iraq. Thereafter, she traversed Persia to the borders of Baluchistan and Afghanistan, then returned back along the Russian frontier through Azerbaijan (where she saw the fight between the Communist Red Army and Causasian



Left: Rosita at the barrier on the Indian-Afghan frontier in the Khyber Pass

peasants on the Aras river) and Kurdistan (into which she slipped with a party of Armenian gun-runners and saw the battle on Mount Ararat between Turks and Kurds).

The book's endearing value is Forbes' clear commentary on the social, economic and political conditions at play in the countries she visited. She notes, for example, the contrasts between the new towns in the Persian oil fields, which are like a town in middle- western America, and the ancient bandit-haunted villages of Luristan.

In 1931-1932 Forbes and her husband made a tour of South America. Taking in Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador the journey covered some 23,000 miles; only Colombia and Venezuela were omitted. In the book *Eight Republics in Search of a Future*, she outlines each country's political, social and cultural history and traces their struggle for independence from their 19th-century colonial rulers (Spain and Portugal) through to the political turmoil of the 20th century (military coups d'etats, popular insurrection and revolutions by both left and right, civil wars, brief periods of democracy, but mainly various forms of dictatorship). With this in mind she then attempts to predict each country's future with varying degrees of success.

### Wild Women and Remarkable Men

Following the publication of another novel *The Golden Vagabond* (1936), Forbes turned her thoughts to Central Asia. Despite government warnings about poor conditions for travellers in the Soviet Socialist republics of Central Asia she was determined to traverse the mountain kingdom of the Afghans – a stronghold of Feudalism supposedly closed to outsiders at the time – and reach far-off Samarkand, in Turkestan (today Uzbekistan). She dedicated the resulting book, *Forbidden Road – Kabul to Samarkand* (1937) (published by Penguin in paperback as *Russian Road to India by Kabul and Samarkand* in 1940) “To all fellow travellers who ‘for lust of knowing what should not be known’ have taken the road to Samarkand.”

She started this incredible 8,000-mile odyssey in 1935 in Peshawar, that charming, mostly lawless city that sits at the base of the nearby Khyber Pass. Forbes of course had to venture into the city's old bazaars, investigating rumours of “the secrets of Peshawar that all men know.” From here she travelled by chauffeur- driven car through the rugged terrain of India's (then Pakistan's) North West Frontier Province, entering Afghanistan through the Kohat Pass. In Afghanistan she visited Jalalabad and Kabul (with a detour to Kandahar)

followed by a crossing of the Hindu Kush by way of Bamyan, with its giant Buddhas, and Doab. She then crossed the Mazar Pass and entered Mazar-I-Sherif. Heading north now she passed through Balkh and crossed the Oxus (modern Amu Dar'ya) at Termiz and entered Russian Turkestan (modern Uzbekistan), where she reached her eventual goals of Bokhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, and beyond.

Along the way little escapes Forbes' observant eye, including the new cotton farms of Tadjikistan and the felt tents of horse-breeding nomads in the Steppes. In her inimitable manner she effortlessly disarmed the Afghans in a way that military men from Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan to the British themselves had failed to do. The result was one of her most informative and readable travelogues, full of the maps, indexes and appendices that made them so different to her novels.

The Second World War placed severe limitations on travellers and travel writing but Forbes adapted herself well, devoting much time to supporting the Allied war effort by lecturing in Canada, North America and Great Britain. A book called *Heroines of Our Time* (1939) by Hannah Bellis listed Forbes together with the likes of Marie Curie and Sylvia Pankhurst (more trivially she had been named London's best dressed woman in



Above: En route to the Raisuni's home in the Rif Mountains, Morocco  
Left: In front of a gate at Angkor Wat, Cambodia, 1917-1918

Quote below: *From Red Sea to Blue Nile* (1925)



1937!). The distinguished labour historian Margaret Cole included a chapter on Forbes in her book *Women of Today* (1938), revealing that “she gives the impression of having done the things which she has done mainly because she thought it would be amusing or interesting to do them and not for any more esoteric reason.”

Forbes and her husband then turned their attentions towards the Caribbean, where in 1939-1940 they carved out a 400-acre estate, Unicorn Cay, on the east coast of the sparsely inhabited Bahamian island of Eleuthera. Their house, which still stands on a low hill on Banks Road, near North Palmetto Point on what the locals call “north shore”, was designed by Forbes herself in the style of a Loire Château, with a large courtyard and entrance flanked by turrets.

In 1940 Forbes published *These Men I Knew: Interviews with Various Rulers and Statesmen*, being her impressions of more than two dozen men (and one woman) whom she had met or interviewed. It was of particular interest at the time since she had twice met Hitler in Germany in 1933, as well as Hermann Göring, Joseph Goebbels, Joseph Stalin, and Benito Mussolini, all major players in the war now raging.

In 1944 she published *Gypsy in the Sun*, the first volume of her autobiography,

**The perfect journey is never finished, the goal is always just across the next river, round the shoulder of the next mountain. There is always one more track to follow, one more mirage to explore**

covering the period 1920 to 1934, followed by *Appointment with Destiny* (1946) covering 1935 to 1943; the pair would later be abridged and reissued as a single volume, *Appointment in the Sun* (1949). In *Appointment with Destiny* Forbes hinted at her imminent withdrawal from serious travelling when she admitted her desire to “find a fragment of earth fresh as the first morning in Eden. I did not want comfort or intellectual intercourse. I wanted an old-fashioned and primitive condition dependent on my own brain and hands.” Other than a biography of Sir Henry Morgan - *Pirate and Pioneer* (1946) - and *Islands in the Sun: On the West Indies* (1949) (detailing a trip from the Bahamas to Trinidad via Jamaica, Cuba, Curacao, Barbados and Grenada), Rosita Forbes effectively disappeared from public view. Now enjoying her own fragment of

Eden on Eleuthera, and having visited most countries of the world except New Zealand and Tibet, it is hardly surprising.

Arthur McGrath died on 18 January 1962 and was buried on Eleuthera close to Unicorn Cay. Rosita remained on the island until 1966, when she moved to Bermuda to be a little closer to England, just in case of illness. Her final address was Clare Cottage in the parish of Warwick. She died there on 30 June 1967, and was buried on 1 July 1967 in grave plot 119 at Christ Church, one of the oldest Scottish Presbyterian churches in the New World. Her burial record is one of the very few instances in which her full name, Joan Rosita McGrath, is given (the grave itself carries a metal plaque with ‘Rosita Forbes’ written in smaller letters below, together with the quotation “Let light perpetual shine upon her”, reflecting Rosita’s lifelong love of the sun.

For all her many journeys, books, accolades, and an obituary in *The Times* of 4 July 1967, Rosita Forbes remains today a largely forgotten traveller. ●

For a selection of Rosita’s writings see *From the Sahara to Samarkand* by Margaret Bald. For a full list of Rosita’s books and a longer version of this story, visit

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