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Discover Bahrain |

The Ancient Modern

By Peter Frost

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A new photographic study looks into the history and development of Muharraq. But as Peter Frost discovered, Abdulla Al Khan's book, *The Sea Rose*, is really about its people.

The history of Muharraq is one steeped in tradition, as any Bahraini will know. So too is the tradition of photography on the island, and the two converge beautifully in Abdulla Alkhan's stunning biopic of 'that special place.' Anyone who wants to get to grips with this unique part of the kingdom should make this coffee-table book a must.

To quote the author himself, Muharraq is an island that looks like a horseshoe and appears 'like a rose surrounded by sea, as it is surrounded by stories that carry its name.'

And indeed there are as many stories as to how it got its name as there seem to be tellers. Some believe its name was borrowed from the nickname 'Almuharraq' after the Arabic poet from the Ignorance Days 'Umru Al-Qays.' Others think it was the name was of an idol which was worshipped by Arab tribes. Many believe it was after an Arab king - and just as many believe it was linked to none of these.



Whatever the origin of the name, the place itself is as complex as the toponymy. For one thing it is not just one place, but seven, including the city, Hidd and three small islands. Getting to grips with all this history is a major challenge and, given the nature of our visual world today, photography is a great way to do it. Hats off to Abdulla Alkhan.

The man behind the lens

Abdulla Alkhan was born in bin-Ali in 1937, the son of a photographer, and his book tells of his memories of helping his dad developing films and drying pictures after school. He joined the Photographic Club in high school and benefited from his father's experience.

In those days (1953), there was no Ministry of Information and government relied on the Photography Club for much of their photography needs. The whole process was coordinated by the Head of Education who also had the daunting task of being front-man for any visiting dignitaries who would be greeted and taken to see the late Shaikh Salman Al-Khalifa at the palace.



Watching all this happen before him gave Alkhan a unique insight into both photography and the culture of the time. By the time school finished Alkhan headed off to Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) and their career school. He won a scholarship to study photography in the UK and returned to the kingdom to work for the petrol company and finally, to open his own studio, Falcon Cinefoto Establishment in 1971. Years later, in 2006 he stepped away from the company and went back to his creative and artistic roots by creating the Bahrain House of Photography. In a sense he'd come full circle, and in one aspect he'd definitely stayed true to the original spirit of his endeavours - he refused to give up the passion and deep history of celluloid for the dry technology of digital. To this day he still works with his trusty Rolleiflex.



Stepping back, looking forward

The book itself divides into 16 chapters along broadly historical lines, starting in the middle of the last century through to today. It's clear where Al Khan's heart lies - in the dusty streets of the Muharraq of old. The early pictures have a grace and strength that's immediately obvious. There's something to tickle every imagination, from the souqs to the traditions to the fruits and the photo biographies. In both black and white and colour, they convey the everyday, but hint at a sense of strong, deep tradition. The photo biographies are especially poignant, freezing as they do moments both everyday and momentous. The pictures of short man Jeel Mard and nurse Roth Rozers (Um Jan) could only come from the 1950s. Jeel Mard's job was to buy eggs from houses and resell them to the RAF in Muharraq. There are pictures of grander men too - UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld having tea with Shaikh Abdulla bin Isa bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, the hilarious picture of a 1963 Muharraq municipal council meeting; central to the picture are no less than six oversized cigarette ashtrays - it must have been a stressful meeting.

E Muharraq, the Sea Rose, Bahrain House of Photography tel 1762 3071.