

# SOLID AS A ROCK

Roger Wheeler visits Gibraltar

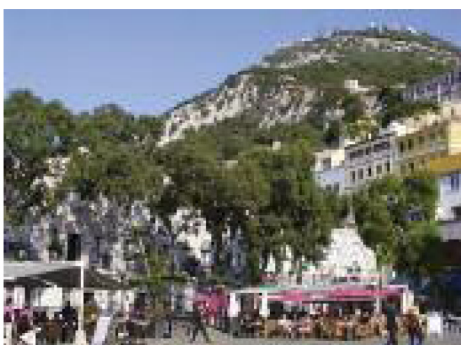


**Gibraltar** is a fascinating place, but not many people have been there. Amazingly, some people think that it's an island off the coast of Spain rather than a peninsular at the far southern part. Several UK airlines fly there making it a convenient airport to head into the fleshpots of the Costa del Sol. Indeed most people arrive at the airport, turn right and walk straight into Spain without glancing over their shoulder; they are missing an interesting and intriguing place.

Gibraltar has been a British Overseas Territory since 1713 and for most of that time the Spanish have wanted it back. They can make visiting **The Rock** a problem, when they feel like it, particularly if you take your car, though most of the time you can just walk across the border without so much as a glance from the Spanish border guards. We decided to spend some time in Gibraltar on our way back to Gatwick and were very pleasantly surprised.

Spanish car rental companies have offices virtually on the border, so it's simple to either pick-up or return your car and stroll the few metres back into the UK. **The Rock** itself is quite spectacular at 426m high and its commanding position over the Strait gives it control over all maritime access to the Mediterranean. Up to 1984 the British naval dockyard provided over 60% of all Gibraltar's economy but today that is down to just 7%. Now it is internet gaming, banking and tourism that provides the wealth of this unusual and absorbing place.

The centre of the town is almost completely pedestrianised; the main square, **Casemates**, is very attractive and is the main hub,



CASEMATES

surrounded with shops and restaurants. **Main Street** is stuffed with cheap jewellery, perfumery and cigarette shops, aimed squarely at the many cruise ship passengers that can flood the central section for a few hours a day; but you can easily get away from the tourist tat and wander through the historic old town where you'll be almost alone.

Gibraltar is full of history, the Rock itself honeycombed with tunnels and caves, the most spectacular being **St Michael's Cave**, which is astonishing and can be turned into a concert hall seating hundreds. Winston



ST MICHAEL'S CAVE

Churchill was convinced that there would be an invasion of Gibraltar during the WW2 and so a massive network of tunnels was built, which are now open to the public and are well worth a visit. You have to go on one of the organised Rock tours, it's the only way you get to the top to see the **Strait of Gibraltar**, the **Rif mountains in Morocco** and the famous, evil, **Barbary Apes** who whilst have quite a lot of Kodak appeal will steal anything and can be quite aggressive.

This is a very small place, where you feel like you are in England, but not quite. The currency is almost the same, the **Gibraltar pound**, and is equal to sterling with the Queen's image on it. Most of the big UK stores are there, but prices are considerably lower than the UK thanks to the special tax arrangements the Government of Gibraltar has with the UK. On that note booze is extremely cheap with gin and scotch at around £4 a bottle, but duty free limits apply when either going into Spain or returning to the UK: 1 litre of spirits and 200 cigarettes maximum.

There are quite a few reasonable hotels, though I cannot recommend The Rock Hotel or The Elliott Hotel as they don't appear to welcome same-sex couples. I don't know why and as Gibraltar is a member of the EU, Human Rights etc, it is illegal. Both hotels claimed to be full which wasn't true but I wasn't in the mood to pick a fight. We did, however, find the most amazing welcome at the **Caleta Hotel** which is on the eastern side of the Rock. This is a first class, 4 star, 168 room hotel, with outstanding staff. The rooms have sea or Rock views and offer excellent value for money. They do lots of weddings but have yet to host a civil partnership, the manager was hoping for one soon. We felt really welcome although the place was full. We had a fantastic self-catering room with bedroom, lounge, bathroom, full kitchen and balcony with great views along the coast of **Andalusia**. The restaurant is excellent, almost fine dining at a reasonable price, plus access to the city centre is dead simple; the



CALETA HOTEL

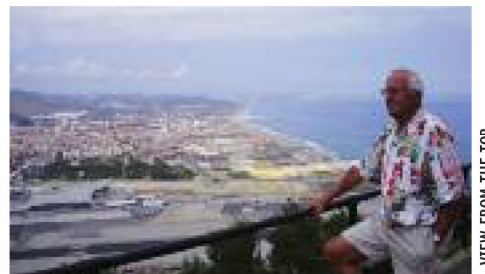
buses are free for the four minute journey. The whole territory is undergoing extensive redevelopment, with huge new apartment buildings, leisure centres and marinas on reclaimed land. There's a lot more to Gibraltar than meets the eye not to mention the obvious secret military installations that are there despite official denials. The Rock is home to 28,000 although about 7,000 cross from Spain every day for work. Spain is constantly trying to re-claim the Rock, even closing the border from 1969 to 1982 which meant that the Rock was isolated. It was a difficult time for the residents and many fled out to the UK. The Spanish Government even stopped their Queen Sofia attending our Queen's Jubilee Party. Speaking to Gibraltarians today it quickly becomes clear that there is no way that Gibraltar will ever revert to Spain, they are very proud to be Gibraltarian and intend on staying that way.

## more info

[www.gibraltar.com](http://www.gibraltar.com)

[www.gibraltar.gi](http://www.gibraltar.gi)

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