

# Feisty for three centuries

*On August 4<sup>th</sup> 2004 Gibraltar celebrates its 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary*

By Bramwell Ryan

“I’d rather be dead than Spanish.” Stout, with the indeterminate eyes and weak lips common to the standard issue Brit, he barely drew a breath before charging on with more invective. “We’d asked for the Queen but London only sent us a Princess. Still they had the nerve, yes the nerve, to protest her visit.”

Cramming 30,000 residents and thousands of daily tourists into six square kilometers is tough. More so when about the half the area is mountain and there is no option of expansion. Turn up the heat to 35 degrees, add a major anniversary, touchy politicians and you have the tiny colony of Gibraltar.

It is 300 years since Britain captured the Rock, located at the very south of the Iberian Peninsula at what was then the only entrance or exit to the Mediterranean Sea. On a map Gibraltar looks like someone tweaked the hind end of Spain. While pinching bottoms doesn’t cause the same outrage in Europe as in North America, the Spanish are not amused that the United Kingdom, and its relic of the colonial past, still holds tight to this portion of back end.

Spain is perhaps understandably nervous about what happens on this tiny piece of land. The 8<sup>th</sup> century Muslim invasion of Europe started in Gibraltar when the Visigoths sided with the Muslims by lending their ships to the Berber chief, Tarik Ibn Zeyad. He landed those ships, and thousands of battle hardened warriors, near Tarik’s mountain, or Jebel Tarik. If you say those two words quickly, and drop the last syllable, you get the origin of the name Gibraltar.

More recent Spanish annoyance with the Rock ebbs and flows like the currents between the sea and ocean nearby. In 1969 the border was closed for 13 years. Until recently Spain barred cruise ships that had docked in the colony. The Spanish will not connect to the Rock’s cell phone system, it has almost no street signs directing travelers to Gibraltar and often slows customs to a crawl. As well, Madrid protests any official activity within the colony. Recently, as part of the tricentennial celebrations Princess Anne, daughter of Queen Elizabeth (yes, the Princess sent instead of the monarch) spent three days in Gibraltar. Before, during and after her visit the Spanish government

coughed and huffed. The spluttering only intensified the attachment most Gibraltar residents feel for their homeland.

While most other colonies in the world struggled free of their European masters in the last 50 years or so, Gibraltar is definitely heading in the other direction. Rather than fighting for emancipation, the tiny colony wants to burrow ever deeper into the embrace of Britannia. In some ways Rock residents are

more British than the British. Signs of devotion are everywhere. Union Jacks flutter in far more places than they do in the UK. Hundreds of balconies sport more than one Union Jack on the clothesline, in some cases wedged between the wet trousers and drying bras. The Rock accent is a mulled version of the Queen’s English. On the beaches one sees a sight

common only in Bournemouth and other homeland seaside destinations: men in shorts with pasty white legs, wrapped to the knee in black socks with sandaled feet. The currency is the Gibraltar pound, pegged to the value of the UK pound, mushy peas are served without gagging in local pubs, the BBC is on the telly and the locals are deeply patriotic. Even the local newspaper makes strengthening the homeland ties a top priority. The daily Gibraltar Chronicle ran six and a half pages on Princess Anne’s visit. Those pages, one quarter of the newspaper, ran 25 photographs of her Highness and the official events – and that was just the first day of coverage.

Great Britain captured Gibraltar in 1704, and ownership was ceded by Spain in perpetuity by the Treaty of Utrecht (the same pact that also forced France to give most of its Canadian real estate to England). Since then the feisty Rock residents have been determined to keep the Spanish, and any other interloper, out. Late 18<sup>th</sup> century sieges led to the local development of the first gun able to fire downwards.



Inside the famous Rock are carved more than 50 km (32 miles) of tunnels, which were the headquarters of a naval fleet in World War II and where Eisenhower masterminded the North African landings in 1942. The tunnels are still used today by the British military, which monitors shipping in and out of the Mediterranean.

London and Madrid have frequently agreed to talk about the future of the colony and there have been rumours of joint sovereignty. Not surprisingly Gibraltarians protested. In a November 2002 referendum they voted overwhelmingly to stay British. London refused to recognize the poll but the feisty locals had their say. And their position is as set in stone as the Rock that dominates the town. More than one Gibraltar resident claims they would rather be dead than Spanish.

This summer though, sovereignty discussions are taking a back seat to plans for the biggest party in a century. The countdown is on to the August 4<sup>th</sup> tri-centennial celebrations. Like all tiny places - countries, islands or colonies - the sense of pride and fastidiousness is oversized. Gibraltar is like a smaller version of Switzerland: obsessively clean with everything done properly and on time. Maintenance crews buff the grey cobblestone of Main Street – the attractive pedestrian thoroughfare that runs through the middle of town – with a yellow floor polisher spitting white soap. Well dressed and coiffed shopkeepers open and close their sparkling and ordered stores at precisely 10 am and 7 pm.

From the top of the Rock, up 426 metres (1,350 feet) by cable car, Gibraltar looks ready to welcome the world. Everything is paved over save for the mountain itself. Below there's little green space and the few patches that do exist are tightly managed, like the Gibraltarians themselves. The art of putting many things in a small space is highly developed. Homes and offices are piled on top of each other. Many streets are not called avenue or road but 'slopes' – an accurate description. Across the stormy 25 km/16 mile Strait are the ghostly outlines of northern Moroccan mountains. The wind carries the inviting charcoal smell of Africa. Across the Bay, home to three species of dolphin, is the busy Spanish city of Algeciras and much closer, in front of your face are apes. Six packs of Barbary macaques live on the mountain. They were introduced two centuries ago, are the only wild primates in Europe and are the best-known citizens of the colony. Local folklore says that Gibraltar will cease to be British on the day there

are no apes left on the Rock. But there's no danger of them disappearing anytime soon since they form part of the bedrock of the huge tourist industry. Tens of thousands of visitors come to Gibraltar every week, on cruise ships, by car, by plane (the runway crosses the main street which must be closed for landing and take-off) and on foot crossing from Spain. Many come to see the apes, shop for tax-free jewelry, tobacco and alcohol and to enjoy a taste of Britain in the sunny south.

Spain's hankering to get the Rock back after 300 years is a bit of a puzzle. It too owns several tiny colonial enclaves, including Melilla and Ceuta, located across the water in Morocco. But the political voices of territorial ambition will be ignored for the next few weeks, dismissed like the incessant screeching of the seagulls that sound like

whiskey-soaked voices laughing at the targets below.

Long before the Rock was British it was called a Pillar of Hercules, one of two mountains (the other is in Morocco) erected on either side of the Strait of Gibraltar to mark the edge of the known world. The colony is one side of the ancient entrance to the sea at the centre of the earth. For this anniversary, it hopes to welcome the world, even the Spanish.

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