

A Rock for all Ages - Gibraltar

“ Why are we going to see a stick of rock?” asked Oliver and Max “We’re not talking about edible confectionery boys” I replied ironically, “this is Gibraltar we’re talking about, a prize piece of military real estate that England has fought to keep hold off for over 200 years”. Unsurprisingly Oliver and Max, five and three respectively, were distinctly unimpressed by my historical location, location, location analogy, but when I remembered my audience and started to regale them with the prospect of seeing dolphins, cable cars, caves and Barbary apes, the stick of rock was momentarily forgotten and all of a sudden I, their father, had their undivided attention. Such is the contrast of this rocky promontory, on the south-western tip of Spain, that its appeal is universal across all age groups.

Mention Gibraltar and most people think of the Barbary apes; those cuddly creatures who inhabit the top of the rock and are famously photographed on tourist’s shoulders or seen on postcards as the marketing man’s image of this rocky outpost. However, Gibraltar is far more than a nature reserve for these photogenic creatures.

For a piece of rock approximately four miles square, with a population of just over 28,000, Gibraltar appears to have assumed a disproportionate amount of political and military importance in recent times. However when you take the cable car to the top of the Rock and look across the Straits of Gibraltar, to the Atlas mountains in Morocco, and then north across the Bay of Algeciras to the Spanish mainland, you begin to realize that geographically Gibraltar holds the key to the Mediterranean, and appreciate why visitors are greeted as they cross the runway onto the rock with the legend – Gibraltar Cradle of History.

There are daily flights into Gibraltar, from Gatwick and Luton, onto a runway which cuts across the main road leading onto the rock. You couldn’t imagine the M25 being closed to allow a flight to land at Heathrow but this is all part of the Gibraltar experience. Once on the Rock there are a number of hotels from which to enjoy your stay, or to establish a base for travels into Spain.

The economic lifeblood of Gibraltar is the daily arrival of the cruise ships whose disembarked passengers’ generally make Casemates Square their first port of call. Casemates is the social hub of Gibraltar City and reminiscent of many a Mediterranean Plaza. Its selection of bars and restaurants are populated during the day by locals and tourists who’ve just started or are about to contemplate the long walk up Main Street; the retail mecca for duty free, jewellery and souvenir shopping.

Wherever you are, the rock dominates your view. Sitting in Casemates, enjoying a refreshing drink, you are overlooked by the grassy slopes of the rock pockmarked with dark and long ago vacated gun emplacements. The Trafalgar cemetery, at the top of Main Street, is a salutary reminder of the high price paid by many to keep Gibraltar British and more poignantly it’s also the final resting place of many who fought in Nelson’s final battle.

The well maintained battlements surrounding the centre of town bear testament to its military resistance over the centuries. By contrast, recent land reclamation has enabled modern Gibraltar to expand beyond these historical walls, and its commercial aspirations are perfectly demonstrated in the designs of the glass fronted apartment blocks and office buildings now standing on land which until recently would have been a thriving harbour.

“Very interesting Dad” said Oliver “but what about the dolphins?”. The history lesson, I decided, could wait, and we hopped into one of the many minibus style taxis found in Gibraltar and headed to Marina Bay for our trip into the Bay of Algeciras on the Dolphin Safari. The sea was calm, the dolphins playful and the boys enthralled to be so close to these beautiful creatures in their natural habitat. Cruising back we were passed by the ferry from Gibraltar to Tangiers and reminded that 15 miles away was the hustle and bustle of a Tangiers souk yet we were heading back to an English Crown Colony where Morrisons was your local superstore and the Queen’s birthday was still celebrated as a bank holiday!

Quaint and quirky possibly, a glimpse of England from another era probably, a good old fashioned holiday with something for all ages definitely. Oliver and Max even got their stick of rock, and it didn’t rain once.