Exploring GIBRALTAR

Travel columnist Carole Edrich takes us on a tour of Gibraltar, to explore its renewal.

I'm not exactly sure of the last time I was in Gibraltar, which I once visited regularly to see a good friend. Direct flights were hugely expensive, so I'd often fly to Malaga. The bus from there to the Rock took hours, hurtled over bridges, followed scary winding roads, and left me with motion sickness that took a full day to subside.



I am on the way back for three days which turn into a little more than two. Strong winds, driving rain and waterspouts on Gibraltar's runway make us divert to Malaga and go the rest of the way by coach, so discover the road is much improved. On touchdown we're told that anyone using a wheelchair or who might have difficulties should stay back, tell the staff, and they'll be given a taxi to Gibraltar. Had we realised that leaving with everybody else would mean wandering around Malaga airport until we eventually stumbled on the coach departure area, being turned out with our luggage on the Spanish side of the airport, then battling the same weather that had caused the plane's diversion, we would have stayed behind.

My ADHD loves Gibraltar because there's so much to find in such a small space. Ian Fleming developed Operation Goldeneye here when he was a real spy. Sean Connery stayed here. The opening scene of The Living Daylights has Timothy Dalton careering down roads on the Rock itself. There's a farm with wild noisy cockerels right in the middle of the city, an entire offshore gambling and finance industry tucked beside 14th and 15th century walls, and Barbary macaques steal tourists' sandwiches (legend has it they'll protect British Gibraltar for as long as they stay). I've been commissioned to photograph around 100 places of interest. For an ADHD brain that thrives on pressure, it is perfect. For an ME body that requires careful management, it is about as stupid as it gets.

So much has changed! Main Street (think a Spanish-looking, English-speaking, duty-free version of London's Oxford Street) has been pedestrianised since 2001, and even though Gibraltar has the highest number of vehicles per kilometre of road in the world, walking remains the dominant mode of getting from A to B. Everywhere can be walked or bussed to. The bus we want to Europa Point is full and doesn't let us on, and when we decide to walk instead, we find more than one road with absolutely no pavement.





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It feels like they've reclaimed half as much land again as they once had. The reality's closer to a (still amazing) 10%, with more to come. I think it looks like more because Gibraltar itself is a whopping great rock and the older buildings have accreted around it, while reclaimed land is flat, modern and accessibly designed. The first time I went, Casemates Square was a car park. Now it's a tourist-and-entertainment centre with an impressively accessible loo. ►











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Gibraltar has five Changing Places Toilets in other locations which, if you look at percentages, puts it only slightly behind the very best of the UK. Eastern Beach and Catalan Bay also have free amphibious chairs, mobi-mats and dedicated attendants for wheelchair sea dips.

That doesn’t mean the whole place is accessible. After all, it’s a rock. Because of this there will always be challenges. Many accessibility ramps (as distinct from streets named for military ramps) are often alarmingly steep. A local in a wheelchair tells me that you’re fine if your wheelchair’s electric. I suspect it would have to be souped up. The famous tunnels are dark, extremely damp, very long, and without seating. St Michael’s Cave with its stalagmites, stalactites and light show is full of steps, but the cave is quite small, and wheelchair users can still see the famous angel and get to the natural auditorium. Wheelchair users aren’t charged the £30 access fee for Upper Rock locations, so they need not force themselves to cram as much as possible into one visit.

Something I’d have liked to do too, to better manage my ME.

My two-day rush ends after walking to the airport on the only road in the world that cuts right across the runway.

Sitting in the lounge I reflect on how Gibraltar has so successfully renewed itself between this and my last visit. It survived being cut off from Spain by Franco for over fifteen years, changed its economy when the British military left, reduced unemployment to less than 1%, increased visitors from four to twelve million annually, and renewed so much land through reclamation. Soon its border will change again, fully opening the Territory to Spain and Europe, and another renewal will begin.

Meanwhile, once I’ve emailed this feature to the editor, my adrenaline will drop and my ME will take over. Can I renew myself before losing the next five days to my disability? If a whole territory can be as resilient as Gibraltar, surely – hopefully – I can too.

And Another Thing...

When the undocumented, painful but hilarious trials I’m currently stuck in one place managing are over, I plan to tour my solo comedy show where I combine tasting (non-alcoholic drinks or wine, and I might add different waters) with standup about my travel muck-ups. I want to do this in non-traditional venues, like the funeral director, hair salons, wine bars and nail bar that I’ve sold out at before.

Unsurprisingly, there’s no directory of places-that-aren’t-performance-venues-that-might-be-persuaded-to-host-one, so until recently I was a bit stuck on how to find them. Then I found this wonderful list of accessible loos in Gibraltar ***(https://tinyurl. com/vh7p65sj)*** which made me think there might be similar lists elsewhere. Problem solved! If they’ve already thought about accessibility, they’re my type of people (and more likely to welcome a disabled performer). I’ve since discovered lists of hair and nail salons, beauty parlours, wine bars, funeral directors and more with accessible loos, in the UK and beyond. What better places to start!

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