

097/065/026

The Rock — tight but lively colony

By Jack and Carol Baker

GIBRALTAR—The residents of this British colony have recently become an attraction almost rivalling The Rock itself.

Even before Spain clamped shut the peninsula's land border in 1968, the emigrating Gibraltarians were an interesting breed: Latins speaking Spanish among themselves but switching to English in accents thick as London fog; staunch Roman Catholics fiercely loyal to the British crown; a polyglot mixture of Genoese, Maltese, Neapolitans, and Spaniards, blended with Britons, Portuguese, Jews, Moroccans and Indians.

Then as now, it was surprising to meet swarthy Iberian policemen in English bobby helmets. It's also a little startling to see local *senoritas* in miniskirts and Rolling Stone sweaters; somehow they seem intended for shawls, fans and Sevillian lace.

But since Spain closed the frontier, demanding the return of its long-lost property, the Gibraltarians have taken on an heroic quality. As in days of yore, a siege mentality has developed. The inhabitants seem determined not to let their enforced confinement

bother them, at least outwardly.

"We've never had it so good," they'll tell you, which is partly true. Prosperity is high, thanks to a hefty British subsidy, an active ship repair yard, and a vigorous tourist program. The latter has successfully lured English tourists to the 1400-foot Rock, stressing the five beaches, the Moorish castle, the spectacular caves, tax-free shopping, and, most important, security ("a little bit of Britain in the sunny Mediterranean").

"We have everything we want right here," the natives say, pointing to the new casino, cable cars, parks, sports facilities and construction. "If the British were pulling out, Holiday Inn wouldn't be putting up that 250-unit tower, would they now?"

They'll tell with pride how Admiral George Rooke captured The Rock in 1704 during the War of the Spanish Succession: "British for the last 264 years. Gibraltar was only Spanish for 248 years, you know. The Moors had it for seven centuries before that."

But sometimes the restlessness surfaces. "The only thing I've got against

Admiral Rooke," says tour guide Charles Aguis, "is that he didn't go about 20 miles farther."

There's no denying it: This is a tight little peninsula — just three miles long and less than a mile wide. To the 26,000 Gibraltarians, add 4000 British military personnel, plus 3000 Moroccan laborers (imported to replace the Spanish day workers). All live elbow-to-elbow along the narrow streets round the mountain, leaving the upper reaches to 40 Rock Apes, semi-tame monkeys that roam free in two separate tribes.

Since its geography is mostly perpendicular, the

colony would be crowded at the best of times. When prodded, Gibraltarians admit their style is cramped.

Like incoming tourists, Gibraltarians can take advantage of cheap daily flights to London (\$100 return). But they can no longer walk or drive to the Spanish mainland. In fact, to get back to Europe, they must first go to Africa. This involves taking a ferry (two hours) or plane (20 minutes) to Tangier, 37 miles away, then taking another ferry back to Algeciras, which, maddeningly, is clearly visible from Gibraltar harbor. Visitors must take the

same senseless round trip in reverse, soothed somewhat by the scenic shorelines along the straits.

"We can live without Spain," says Mr. Aguis. "In a way, it's a blessing. The people are solidly together. We've had to use our resources as never before. This used to be a dead place on weekends. Now it's one of the liveliest spots on the Med — pubs, nightclubs, dancing, cinemas, the lot. We've learned to entertain ourselves."

"The thing you miss most is the Sunday drives into Spain," says shopkeeper Fred Davis. "But when they closed the border, they cut themselves off, too. We used to spend a lot of money in Spain. They're suffering as much as we are."

His last sentence sounds empty — almost as sad as seeing old cars doomed to spend the rest of their lives driving around 2.2 square miles of rock, their engines chained to a 20 mph speed limit.

Halfway up The Rock, we stop at The Galleries, fortified tunnels built to withstand the Spaniards' Great Siege of 1779-83.

"That's La Linea," our cabdriver says, pointing across the British airfield. The Spanish town, less

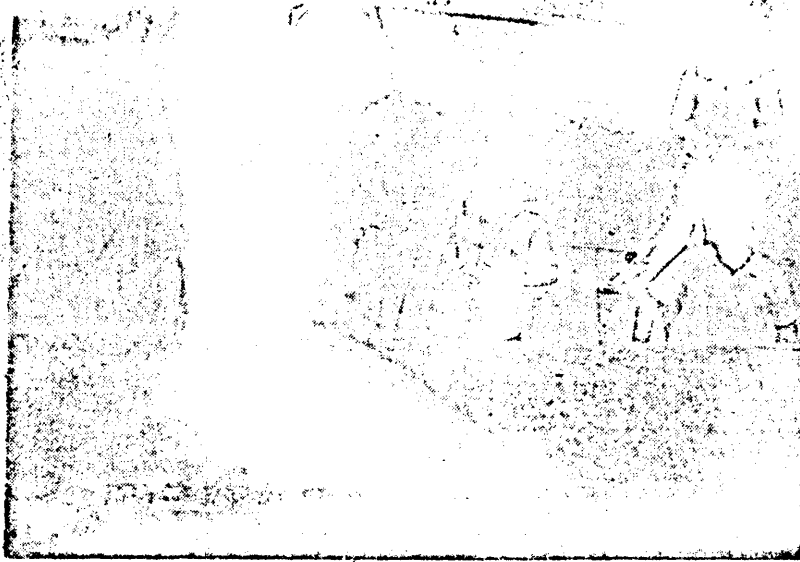
More on Gibraltar

HOW TO GET THERE: Direct flights from London and Tangier. Daily ferry connections with Tangier. Travelers from Spain must take a ferry from Alueciras or Malaga to Tangier, then double back to Gibraltar.

HOTELS: The Rock and The Catalan Bay, both with outdoor pools, are the best hotels (about \$15 a double room). The new 400-room Parcmar and 250-room Holiday Inn open this winter. Reasonably-priced apartments can be rented at Both Worlds, a modern seaside complex.

RESTAURANTS: Good bets are Harry's Trafalgar (English and Indian food), the Lotus (Chinese), and St. Michael's Cabin (French). Fish and chip buffs will find three shops: The Yorkshire, The Irish Town and The Truly British.

INFORMATION: For further information, write to The Gibraltar Tourist Office, Cathedral Square, Gibraltar.



HIGH ABOVE GIBRALTAR THE ROCK APES ROAM FREE.

than two miles away, seems close enough to touch.

In Catalan village, on the east side of The Rock, we meet Lorenzi Sardena, a mustachioed quarry worker of Italian descent.

Talking about traffic, he mentions a town council regulation. We ask who heads the council — meaning a mayor, a prefect or a governor? Mr. Sardena thinks we mean the head of state.

"We have our Queen," he says, taking off his cap and placing it over his heart. Then he looks skyward and adds, "God bless her."

This scene would be wildly improbable in Edinburgh, Toronto or Melbourne. Indeed, it would be highly unlikely at the gates of Buckingham Palace.

But such patriotism abounds in Gibraltar, where Union Jacks are ubiquitous, shops display Royal family photos, and taxis sport "Britain Forever" signs. (In the 1967 referendum, the people of The Rock voted to remain British by a staggering 99.7 percent; only 44 citizens voted to sever ties with the Queen).

The closed border itself has become an attraction. Here the frontier gates stand nose to nose. The rusty Spanish ones are locked and chained, the customs personnel 200 yards away across the Spanish-administered Norman's-land. But with characteristic formality, the British continue to open their gates each morning and close them at midnight. A uniformed guard stands smartly at the gates, which have recently been repainted. For decoration, the posts have been topped by cannonballs.

By maintaining the opening ceremony, the British seem to be telling the Spanish that "it's up to you." The paint job implies that "we're here to stay." As for the cannonballs, the British who have withstood many sieges here, are letting the Spanish draw their own inferences.

"The English," our Gibraltar caddy says admiringly, "have a very subtle sense of humor."

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