

MONKEYING AROUND

GIBRALTAR MAY SOUND LIKE A BRITISH SEASIDE TOWN THAT'S DRIFTED SOUTH, BUT POISED AT THE JAWS OF EUROPE AND AFRICA, THE NATION HAS ITS OWN DISTINCT CHARACTER. GISELLE WHITEAKER MEETS THE MONKEYS ON THE ROCK.



Top right: The Barbary Macaques on the Rock are infamous. Above: Trinity Lighthouse at Europa Point.

Landing at Gibraltar International Airport is quite the thrill. The single runway just out into the water on reclaimed land and it bisects a highway – cars are held up for each plane like a train crossing. Throw in the Garrison Cemetery and Victoria Stadium abutting the runway and the Rock looming over both, and it feels like you're landing on the main street. You're not far off. Within minutes of departing the airport you're in the thick of it.

It's evening by the time I walk up the red-carpeted gangway into the glitzy lobby of the seven-deck, 465-foot Sunborn Gibraltar to check in for the weekend. The five-star superyacht hotel is permanently moored at Ocean Village, a smart answer to the lack of space available in the 2.6-square-mile British Overseas Territory. Besides the novelty value, the unique hotel combines the appeal and prestige of a luxury yacht with the style and facilities of a contemporary hotel. The rooms are generously proportioned, each with a private balcony or terrace, and when I reach up to open the curtains, the automatic control takes over, the fabric peeling itself back to reveal magnificent sea views. Clever design is apparent throughout the rooms, such as the wardrobe opening to both the bedroom and marble bathroom, giving easy access to clothing post-shower, and a sophisticated room-control system built into the phone with one-touch operation for temperature, lighting and multimedia.

Dragging myself out of the comfortable king-sized bed the next morning, I'm amongst the first to arrive at the Sky Restaurant on the top deck, the pinkish hue of morning glowing on the horizon. It's a spectacular sight, as is the breakfast buffet, where I fuel up for the day ahead. By the time I stroll back onto *terra firma*, the sun is up and the sky is a brilliant shade of peacock blue. There's a chill in the air, but it's already 10 degrees warmer than London and the temperature is set to rise.

Passing through the Grand Casemates Gates, I enter the pedestrianised, old, fortified portion of the city. The Rock of Gibraltar stands sentinel over the shops and restaurants lining Grand Casemates Square and gulls wheel high in the sky as I stroll along the Main Street, admiring the buildings that display



a fascinating blend of Genoese, Portuguese, Andalusian, Moorish and British Regency styles. Passing through the Referendum Gates at the far end of the Main Street, past a statue of Nelson, I pop down to Queensway Quay to sip a coffee on the waterfront, before following the defensive Line Wall back to the square, taking in old bastions and cannons along the way.

Back at Sunborn Gibraltar, guide Martin from Blands Travel whisks me away to explore further afield, starting at Europa Point, the southernmost point of Gibraltar, adorned with the Europa Point lighthouse and the eye catching Ibrahim-al-Ibrahim Mosque, a gift from King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. From here we wind our way up the Rock to St. Michael's Cave, a spectacular network of limestone caves located within the Upper Rock Nature Reserve. The organic curves of the stalagmites and stalactites, highlighted by evolving coloured lighting, look like an enchanted kingdom, and descending to the lower levels of the cave, it's easy to believe I've stumbled on a magical new world.

Outside, several of the Barbary macaque monkeys Gibraltar is known for are patiently posing for photographs. Around 300 animals in five troops occupy the Upper Rock area, managed by the Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society, who ensure they receive a daily supply of fresh water



Top: The view of the Rock from Europa Point.
 Above left: The luxurious Sunborn Gibraltar.
 Above right: A spacious onboard suite.

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The magical St Michael's Cave.



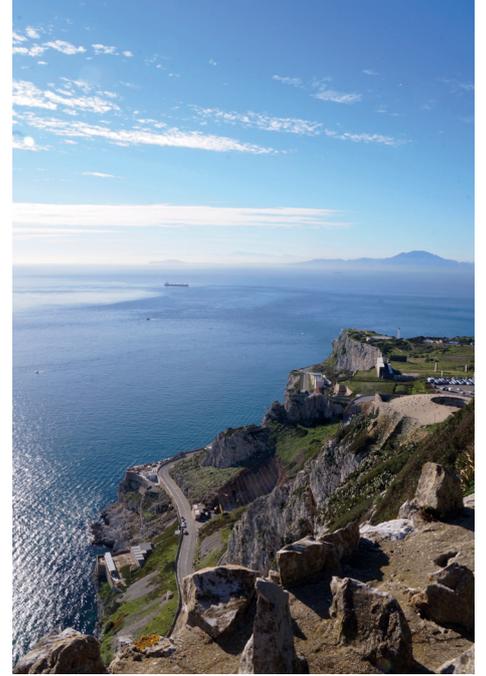
Dusk over Gibraltar.



Sunborn Gibraltar's sundeck.



The Sky Restaurant onboard Sunborn Gibraltar.



Left: A monkey watches the visitors. Right: One of the spectacular views from the Mediterranean Steps.

and vegetables, fruit and seeds to prevent them raiding the town. It is said that as long as the monkeys remain, so will the British. This small family of simians seems contented.

At the World War II Tunnels, Martin hands my care over to German tunnel guide Jens, a man with extensive knowledge of Gibraltar's wartime history and a keen sense of humour. Gibraltar has around 34 miles of tunnels, nearly twice the length of its road network, and the entire 16,000-strong garrison could have been housed here, along with enough food to last them for 16 months. The Rock that seems like such a solid presence is in fact more like Swiss cheese. The tour only takes in a small segment of the tunnels, but it gives a fascinating perspective on the preparations for war, as do the Great Siege Tunnels higher up the Rock, dug during the Great Siege of Gibraltar at the end of the 18th Century.

On the way back to Sunborn Gibraltar, I pick Martin's brains about the Mediterranean Steps, a steep hike up the Rock that promises spectacular views. I want to see more of the monolithic promontory and I'm considering riding the cable car up and walking down the steps. Martin persuades me otherwise. "The walk up is superb, and on the way down, you can stop at the suspension bridge and the Moorish Castle", he says, giving me an assessing look. I pass muster. "You'll be fine," he says reassuringly, "Just go slow and take plenty of water."

Sitting in the Sunborn Gibraltar's Sky Restaurant later in the evening, watching the sun paint the sky crimson and orange, I vow to make the most of my final day in Gibraltar, preparing myself for that hike by feasting on delicious seafood – buttery scallops, red mullet, and prawns coated in a pleasantly crunchy coating – followed by a decadent banoffee panna cotta. I plot the walk and set up my reward – a late lunch at La Sala, another of Sunborn Gibraltar's restaurants, popular for its all-day Sunday roast.

"How's Gibraltar?" one of my friends messages and I don't know how to reply. There's so much here to experience: fantastic food, friendly people, chic hotels, historic sights, hiking, and I have yet to make it to the beach. I can't fit it all into a single weekend. May the monkeys never leave. ■

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INFO

Sunborn Gibraltar has a total of 189 luxury guest hotel rooms and suites with marina, Rock or sea views – in most cases framed by wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling windows leading to a private terrace or balcony.

To book your stay, see www.sunbornhotels.com/gibraltar