

Rock of Gibraltar
PICTURE: Shutterstock/Artur Bogacki

Rock on a roll

With its sterling currency, no VAT and a Mediterranean climate, Gibraltar is an affordable destination for a summer break, discovers **Kathryn Liston**

Gibraltar may have waited 180 years to be officially designated a city, but the tourist office is wasting no time in promoting itself as a destination for affordable sun in 2023.

The British Overseas Territory at the tip of the Iberian peninsula was granted city status by Queen Victoria in 1842, but was left off official lists because of an administrative error, which was rectified last August.

While Gibraltarians are delighted, they've always regarded Gibraltar as a city – albeit a small one. Now a variety of new, upscale experiences have recently opened that are worthy of its new status.

This Little England in the Med has other advantages for cash-strapped tourists too. British pounds are accepted everywhere, so visitors are not affected by exchange rates, and there's no VAT, so goods are cheaper.

"There's no currency risk, no VAT and the cost of living is less than in the UK," Kevin Bossino, chief executive of the Gibraltar Tourist Board, tells me on my visit. Coffee and booze is around half the price it is

in the UK. At the buzzy Ocean Village, I find beer for £2.50 a pint and a bottle of wine for £6.95 during happy hour.

FAMILIAR AND EXOTIC

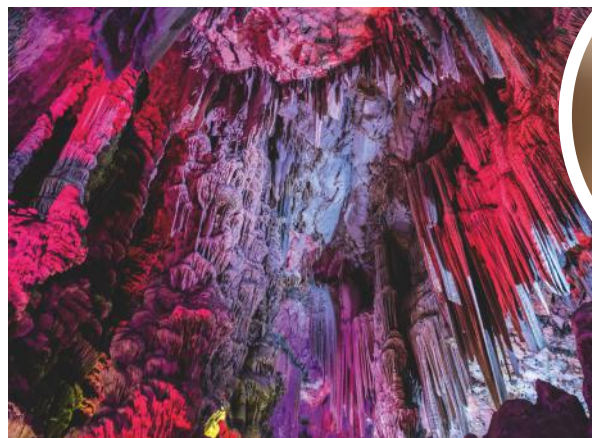
Summer temperatures average 25-27C, everybody speaks English and visitors will find fish and chips, British telephone boxes and bobbies – alongside delicious Mediterranean tapas and artisanal experiences.

However, Peter Millhouse opened Gibraltar's only gin distillery, Spirit of the Rock, in 2019, to promote a "lesser-known and better Gibraltar". He uses local flora to create small-batch handcrafted spirits. I spent an informative and entertaining afternoon tasting the delights of Campion gin, made from the rare and endemic campion flower, and Candytuft, which is indigenous to North Africa and Gibraltar.

Nearby, the refurbished Mario Finlayson National Art Gallery, which reopened in City Hall in 2021, is showcasing six local artists, such as Elio Cruz and Leni Mifsud. A street art trail is also worth exploring. ➤

DESTINATIONS

EUROPE | GIBRALTAR



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: St Michael's Cave; a Barbary macaque; Alameda Botanic Gardens; striped dolphins

PICTURES: Shutterstock/trabantos, Thomas Schiller; Visit Gibraltar

MONKEYING AROUND

You need to have eyes in the back of your head on the Rock – Gibraltar's most famous sight – as I found when a Barbary macaque decided to use my back as a springboard.

The iconic monkeys are not the only wildlife that visitors can enjoy. It was rush hour in the Bay of Gibraltar during our dolphin-watching boat trip. We saw dozens of dolphins leaping, playing and swimming at speeds of up to 35mph. Around 2,000 bottlenose, striped and common dolphins inhabit the bay, thanks to an abundance of food and no net fishing.

Characterful ring-tailed lemurs kept us entertained at Gibraltar's only wildlife conservation park in the Alameda Botanic Gardens. The park cares for unwanted and confiscated exotic animals, and manager Jessica Leaper educates the public about endangered species.

UNDERGROUND TREASURES

"Beware, Neanderthal crossing!" says the road sign at Gorham's Cave Complex. It may be tongue-in-cheek, but the caves at this World Heritage Site have unleashed evidence of Neanderthal life dating back 120,000 years.

You also need to be fairly fit to navigate the 345 steps and clamber over rocks to reach the cave. But it's worth the effort. There's also a viewing platform where a 20-minute talk runs daily from 10am-2pm.

Majestic St Michael's Cave is impressive. Its mighty stalagmites and stalactites provide a fascinating backdrop to the light and sound show which takes place every 20 minutes. Concerts are held here too. There's

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also an abseiling adventure for visitors wanting to explore the Lower Cave and lake.

Below the streets of Gibraltar, some of the city's best military history can be found. The World War II Tunnels make up an underground city, built to house 16,000 people and enough food to last 16 months. Even more impressive are the Great Siege Tunnels, which were carved out by hand with sledgehammers and crowbars – you can still see the marks in the rock. This labyrinth was built to protect the Rock from being captured by the French and Spanish between 1779 and 1783.

History continues to be a strong selling point for trips to Gibraltar, but change is most certainly afoot. Vijay Daryanani, minister for business, tourism and the port, says: "Gibraltar has a lot to offer for a five-day trip. Our intention is to grow the overnight stay market from the UK, but for that to happen we need to attract more hotels. There is a lot of interest from potential investors."

With a 120-room IHG Indigo-branded hotel due to open near the Old Town later this year, and plenty of reasons for Brits to book a summer break, this affordable Little England in the Med is already on the rise. **TW**

ASK THE agent



"During the pandemic, Gibraltar was one of the first destinations to reopen to UK travellers, and many tourists who discovered it then have returned. They make friends, feel comfortable and go back. There are also not the peaks and troughs that there used to be – people are going year-round. It is a very good family destination, plus we are seeing more weekend breaks and a lot more young people visiting."

Ali Haque,
sales consultant,
MyGibraltar



Red telephone box

BOOK IT

Kirker Holidays offers a five-night B&B stay at the Sunborn Yacht Hotel in June from £1,110, including flights, private transfers and a private walking tour. kirkerholidays.com gibraltartraining.com