

## TRAVEL

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## Little Britain

Gibraltar is an intriguing blend of old British colonialism and Spanish pride, writes **Tim Pile**



Photos: Tim Pile

**T**he top of the Rock? You'll do it in a couple of hours," a cafe owner assures me when I ask about hiking up the local landmark. "Make sure you get there." Walking up to the highest point in Gibraltar is strenuous but satisfying. Southern Iberia unfolds below and coastal towns shimmer in the heat haze all the way to Malaga. In the opposite direction, the outline of Morocco suggests intrigue. Barbary apes shadow my ascent, melting into the foliage when I approach them.

Anchored at the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea, the Rock of Gibraltar is a huge lump of limestone that's a bastion of Britishness still subject to a disputed claim by Spain. It's where tapas meets toad-in-the-hole.

Homesick Britons drive down to the colony from the Costa del Sol to stock up on essentials from home and can be back in Torremolinos in time for lunch.

Few tourists stray the couple of hundred metres into the Spanish settlement beside the border.

At first glance, La Línea de la Concepción is an unexceptional blue-collar town, spoiled by unattractive high rise apartments. However, the Spanish gateway serves as a perfect foil to Gibraltar.

La Línea offers plenty of distractions. There's an impressive selection of museums and a crowded calendar of Andalusian festivals to enjoy throughout the year.

Watersports enthusiasts spend days windsurfing, waterskiing and scuba-diving, while golfers work on their handicap at Alcaidesa, the only links course in Spain.

Fishermen and sun worshippers share 14km of sandy beaches that end abruptly at a sturdy fence marking the official boundary with Gibraltar.



The Rock offers breathtaking views of the Mediterranean and beyond

It's reminder of a political impasse that shows little sign of easing. Less than cordial relations between Britain and Spain culminated in head of state Francisco Franco closing the frontier indefinitely in 1967.

Only after Spain's inclusion in the European Community in 1985 were the gates finally reopened. (Officials adopted the pragmatic strategy of allowing Spanish citizens to cross into the colony to work, while opposing the right of Gibraltar to exist as a British outpost.)

One consequence of the continuing standoff is that neither tourist office is willing to promote sightseeing possibilities on the other side of the border, but travellers should find it easy to travel from one side to the other.

Mornings are best in Gibraltar. It's a 20-minute stroll from the heart of La Línea to the frontier. The air is scented by the strong coffee brewing at Café Immaculada. There are no signposts to Gibraltar on the Spanish side. Fortunately, the Rock is hard to miss.

On foot, immigration formalities are smooth. Bright red double-decker buses wait just beyond the customs hall, and you half expect the destination boards to read Piccadilly Circus.

They whisk passengers along Winston

Churchill Avenue to Cathedral Square, not far from retail landmark British Home Stores.

After juggling languages, currencies (pounds are accepted, as well as euros) and daily newspapers, it's time to fuel up for a busy day of exploring.

Governor's Parade is a quiet plaza a couple of blocks from the bustle of Main Street. Al fresco breakfast choices come in three distinct flavours, highlighting Gibraltar's historical collision of cultures.

Customers at Pickwicks tuck into sausage, bacon and eggs; next door at El Teatro, chocolate con churros (dough pastries served with thick cups of chocolate) fly out of the kitchen; and Marrakech serves oven-warm flatbreads, wild honey and mint tea.

Sightseeing is easy in Gibraltar. Taxi tours are a good way to develop a sense of the territory, but setting out on foot is equally rewarding. The principal attractions can easily be reached by starting at the top of the Rock and working your way down.

Military personnel lead fascinating walks through the honeycomb of tunnels gouged out of the cliffs that have ensured the successful defence of Gibraltar throughout the ages. The views from strategically sited cannon



A traditional British bobby on the beat (top) and a red telephone kiosk are vivid reminders that Gibraltar remains a British territory

ledges aren't for the faint hearted. Another main attraction on the way down is St Michael's Cave, which was used as a military hospital during the second world war.

Rich with stalagmites and stalactites, the natural grotto is now a venue for concerts. Nearby, the City Under Siege exhibition recreates the conditions suffered by Gibraltarians during prolonged

Spanish assaults. Sub-tropical Alameda Gardens marks the end of the descent and offers tranquility, refreshments and shady benches to rest weary limbs in preparation for the night ahead.

Experienced tourists know that La Línea is the place to be after dark. Gibraltar buzzes by day, but is deserted by sunset – when Andalusians are starting to make plans for the evening.

When the pubs in Gibraltar's Irish Town are calling last orders, the cake shops, cafes and tapas bars along the pedestrianised main street in La Línea start humming with life.

Lodging options are plentiful on both sides of the border. In Gibraltar, the Rock Hotel has a stylish cachet and an illustrious roll call of former guests, including Prince Charles, Sean Connery and John Lennon. Something as opulent on the Spanish side would require a drive towards Marbella.

However, La Línea has perfectly serviceable accommodation and it makes sense to stay overnight. Beds are easy to find, rates are reasonable, and by choosing a hotel near Calle Real, you'll be a few paces from your bed when you start to flag.

**Getting there**  
British Airways ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies from Hong Kong to Gibraltar via London

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SCMP GRAPHIC

## Detours: Bowled over

"*Oishii* [delicious]," says the TV presenter almost before the morsel touches her mouth. Japan seems to be a nation obsessed with food. Television shows scour the land, and sometimes the rest of Asia, searching for culinary gems. This love of food extends to museums dedicated to particular dishes.

Gyōza curry and ramen have all become museum fare. Until recently Yokohama had two

such establishments: the Shin Yokohama Raumen Museum and the Yokohama Curry Museum.

None of these foods originated in Japan, although they've become an integral part of the country's cuisine. Japan seems adept at taking something foreign and making it its own. Ramen is the most successful import and some Japanese travel great distances just to sample varieties.

Ramen probably arrived in Japan through Yokohama. Its origins lie in China and *la mian* (pulled noodles). Yokohama opened to foreign trade in 1859. Chinese traders settled in the port and brought their own food, which probably included *la mian*.

Little is known about the precise history of ramen. Its popularity spread from port areas in the early 1900s and it soon became a firm favourite. Regional variations developed, making Japanese ramen different to *la mian*. The main flavours are *shoyu* (soy sauce) in the Tokyo region, *miso* (soy bean paste) in Sapporo, *shio* (salt) in Hokkaido and *tonkotsu* (made from double-boiled pork bones) around Hakata.

Descending the stairs of the Shin Yokohama Raumen Museum, visitors are taken back to Tokyo in 1958, the year the first instant ramen

was produced. The two basement levels feature a street scene complete with barbers, a cinema, a pharmacy and clothes shops. A street entertainer keeps the crowd happy by telling stories.

Although it's all good fun, the place is more theme park and restaurant than museum. Renovations are planned, including an overhaul of display information to cater better to English speakers. For the moment, the eight restaurants behind the street facade are the main reason people come here. They're some of the best ramen restaurants in Japan and serve all the major styles of the dish. Queues form even on weekdays as ramen fans from local offices arrive to slurp the noodles.

Ordering can be confusing;

diners must buy tickets from a vending machine and the names of dishes are in Japanese. At least the prices are understandable to visitors, with most bowls costing 700-900 yen (HK\$60).

I choose the Komurasaki restaurant, which specialises in a style of ramen from Kumamoto on the island of Kyushu. My *tonkotsu* ramen is topped with three slices of pork, corn, bean sprouts, spring onions and thick green seaweed. As for the taste: *oishii*.

Shin Yokohama Raumen Museum ([www.raumen.co.jp/english/](http://www.raumen.co.jp/english/)) is near Shin-Yokohama station (Yokohama Arena side) at 2-14-21 Shin Yokohama, Kohoku-ku. Admission is 300 yen (HK\$20).

Mark Andrews



Shin Yokohama Raumen Museum. Photos: Mark Andrews



## Big deal

Farrington American Express Travel has a three-night package to Chiang Mai from HK\$3,690 per person, twin-share, valid from August 25 to September 30. Accommodation at this price is at the D2 Hotel ([d2hotels.com](http://d2hotels.com)), or you can stay at the Chedi ([ghmhotels.com](http://ghmhotels.com)), below for HK\$4,650; the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi ([mandarinoriental.com](http://mandarinoriental.com)) for HK\$4,590; or the Four Seasons ([fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com)) for HK\$5,450. Direct flights with Hong Kong Express are included in these prices, but breakfast is included only at the D2 and the Chedi. For details call Farrington American Express Travel on 3121 3000 (Hong Kong), 3121 3900 (Kowloon), or e-mail [info@farringtonamex.com](mailto:info@farringtonamex.com), quoting Package ID: L2007FSP0087.

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## Entrée: Chelsea Harbour

In the heart of Chelsea, next to the River Thames, is a secluded marina offering a varied selection of delicious cuisines and glorious water views, with the upmarket shops of King's Road nearby.

## Lots Road Pub and Dining Room

114 Lots Road  
Packed with arty types, Lots Road Pub (right) delivers aesthetically and gastronomically. Dark wooden panelled walls give the pub a traditional touch, yet the interior is contemporary. Modern British pub grub on offer includes burger and big chips (£8.50, or HK\$135) and Lincolnshire sausages with sweet mashed potato and gravy (£9.50).

## Blue Kangaroo

555 King's Road  
A family restaurant around the corner from the Lots Road Pub, Blue Kangaroo prides itself on food adults and children can enjoy. Parents love the place because the basement is given over to a huge jungle gym, allowing children to run riot while their parents enjoy their food. Salmon fish cakes (£9.95) and goat's cheese salad (£6.95) are good value, although the children's burger is costly at £5.45.

## Chutney Mary

535 Kings Road  
In 1990, Chutney Mary pioneered



upmarket Indian food. It's award-winning menu offers a wide range of dishes, including duck galouti (£9) and crispy rock shrimp (£10) as starters, followed by narangi mugh sailana (£15), a satisfying chicken curry. The setting is refined and romantic, with soft blue lighting – a perfect place to take your partner.

## The Chelsea Ram

32 Burnaby Street  
A traditional British pub, the Chelsea Ram attracts an interesting mixture of customers, which is refreshing in an area where the stockmarket and rising property prices can dominate every conversation. The food is far from traditional, drawing on Scottish, French and Italian influences and including salmon with mashed potato (£8) and lots of typical British vegetable dishes such as Brussels sprouts and parsnips.

Nicole Fall