

The Jewish Traveler:
Gibraltar
By Esther Hecht



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A haven, beacon, last stop and way station all in one, this European speck of land long hospitable to Jews resonates with history and power despite its small size.

To ancient travelers, Gibraltar—the steep rock at Spain’s southern tip—was the end of the world. It was as far as traders would go: first Phoenicians, then, much later, Spaniards, Jews, Genoese, Portuguese and Moroccans.

Throughout the ages, Gibraltar’s location at the western edge of the Mediterranean Sea made it the perfect place for a fortress, and this seemingly solid rock is riddled with miles of tunnels. During World War II, General Dwight D. Eisenhower worked in the Admiralty East-West Tunnel while planning the Allied invasion of Italy.

Today, Gibraltar is a stop for cargo ships, cruise liners and yachts entering the Mediterranean. Visitors enjoying the tax-free shopping on Main Street will see wooden Genoese shutters; blue-and-white Portuguese tiles; and intricate British Regency wrought-iron balconies. Add to the mix red telephone booths, mailboxes with the royal insignia and bobbies and there is little doubt that Gibraltar is a British territory.

Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Jews live and work side by side in this place that is called Gib by locals. And, despite The Rock’s size—just one-tenth that of Manhattan—there is plenty to keep a visitor busy: tunnel tours, beaches, animal life, casinos, a cable car offering spectacular views, a stalactite cave and the romance of history.

History

The Jewish community recently celebrated its tricentennial in Gibraltar, but documents show a Jewish presence as early as the 14th century.

Many of the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 passed through Gibraltar en route to North Africa. Jews returned to The Rock only in 1704, after an Anglo-Dutch force took possession of the fortress.

When Spain signed the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, ceding the fortress to England, it stipulated that no Jews (or Muslims) could live there. Yet, in 1729, England allowed Jewish traders from Morocco to visit. Soon after, a community was established, and in 1749, Jews won the legal right of residence. The 600 Jews then made up one-third of the population and played a visible role in public life and trade with Morocco and England.

During the Great Siege (by France and Spain) from 1779 to 1783, many Jews fled to London. But by

1805, Jews made up half the citizenry. The Ladino newspaper *Cronica Israelitica* appeared in 1843. The community peaked in size in the middle of the 19th century—also the height of The Rock's naval and military importance.

In 1878, there were 1,533 Jews and they controlled most retail trade. During World War II, Jews left Gibraltar along with most of the civilian population. Of those who returned, some have had leading roles in government.

Community

Gibraltar's 650 Jews constitute just over 2 percent of the territory's population of 28,000. They are Sefardim, most of them descendants of settlers from Tetouan on the northern coast of Morocco, just south of Gibraltar. They cling proudly to their religion and customs, investing heavily in the Jewish education of their children. There is a Talmud Torah (through grade eight), a boys' high school and a girls' high school as well as a small kolel (post-high school yeshiva). Youngsters conduct a full Shabbat service at a synagogue within the Talmud Torah, while their elders pray in one of four synagogues, all Orthodox. When children reach marriageable age, parents seek out suitable matches.

According to community registrar Mesod Belilo, the community center has fallen into disuse for lack of interest. But international organizations such as WIZO and Maccabi, the international sports association, as well as Hadassah International (www.hadassah-international.org) are represented.

Belilo, father of five, is a structural engineer. Others, such as community president Haim Levy, father of eleven, are lawyers; some are bankers or accountants. Some are involved in the massive luxury real-estate development under way on reclaimed land. And several are merchants, selling perfumes, jewelry and electronic equipment.

The Sabbath has a public presence in the city center. All Jewish-owned shops are closed, and after synagogue services, Main Street becomes a promenade where friends and relatives greet each other and exchange a bit of gossip before heading home for a festive meal.

Many families send their sons to yeshivas and their daughters to religious seminaries in Israel, and the community is staunchly supportive of the Jewish state. Cantor Abraham Beniso of Nefutsot Yehuda Synagogue says proudly, "We sing 'Hatikva,'" Israel's national anthem. But when Gibraltar celebrated 300 years of British rule in 2004, the Jews, as loyal British subjects, sang "God Save the Queen"—in Hebrew.

Sights

Gibraltar's Jewry is visible and well represented, particularly in the city center. Four streets have been named for prominent Jews: Serfaty's Passage, Abecasis's Passage, Benoliel's Passage and Benzimra's Alley.

Like Jews throughout Europe, however, those in Gibraltar are security conscious. Visits to synagogues must be prearranged by contacting Abraham Benady of Holyland Tours (011-350-567-49-000). To join a local family for a Shabbat meal, contact Esther Benady (350-72-606).

Finding the synagogues is easy, as they are marked with a Star of David on the Gibraltar Tourist Board map and all are in the city center, which is closed to automobile traffic.

Start at the northern end of Main Street, near Casemates Square. Walking away from the square, take the second right, Parliament Lane. The double wooden doors at 20 Parliament Lane lead to Abudarham Synagogue, a small prayer house with dark wooden pews facing a central bima. Before electricity was installed, illumination came from gaslights, and the chandeliers and silver lamps hang

from the now-defunct gas pipes. A gilded crown tops the carved wooden Ark, and above it light flows in through a small round red-and-blue stained-glass window. In the small courtyard, a marble donation box has slots for 14 destinations, including the poor, the Talmud Torah and the Western Wall.

Outside the synagogue, turn right and walk to the end of Parliament Lane, then turn left on Irish Town and walk about three blocks. Just past the central police station, a red-brick building with Moorish-style arches that was once a Jewish market, the entrance to Etz Chayim Synagogue (91 Irish Town) will appear on your left. The arched dark wooden entrance door is set in a pinkish marble frame with gilt lettering indicating that the congregation was founded in 1759. This small house of worship is also called Esnoga Chica (Little Synagogue).

Just beyond the synagogue, Irish Town leads into John Mackintosh Square. Cross the square, noting on your left Gibraltar's House of Assembly. In the entrance, a marble plaque commemorates Gibraltar's fallen in World War I, and a bronze medallion on it bears the likeness of "Lt. S. Benzecry, the hero of Bournon Wood." The large cream building on the right is City Hall; it was once the mansion of wealthy Jewish merchant Aaron Nunez Cardozo.

Just past City Hall, turn right and then left on Line Wall Road. After nearly three blocks, Nefutsot Yehuda Synagogue, surrounded by a beige wall, will be on your left (65 Line Wall Road). The entrance, however, is around the corner, on Bomb House Lane.

With its marble pillars and marble enclosure of the bima, two-toned Moorish-style horseshoe arch above the Ark, ornately patterned walls and ceiling and shining silver candelabras and chalices, Nefutsot Yehuda has the most lavish interior of Gibraltar's synagogues. The beige Dutch-style façade, with its shaped gable outlined in white and with a Star of David displayed prominently, is also the most vivid of synagogue exteriors in Gibraltar, rising above the high wall that surrounds the compound.

According to a sign at the entrance, a synagogue has existed near this site since the early 18th century. The current congregation was founded in 1800 by Dutch merchants and is today popularly known as the Flemish Synagogue. A fire in 1911 gutted the synagogue; it was rebuilt with the bima moved from the center to just in front of the Holy Ark.

The building is a short distance from the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Trinity to the east and a small mosque to the west. The peaceful coexistence of these houses of worship is one of the hallmarks of Gibraltar society.

The Gibraltar Museum (350-74-289; www.gib.gi/museum), just opposite the synagogue entrance, is worth a visit in its own right, especially for its medieval Moorish baths. The museum displays do not mention Jews, but its archives contain drawings made around 1820 of Jewish Gibraltarians in characteristic dress.

The promenade on Line Wall, opposite Nefutsot Yehuda Synagogue, is known in Spanish as El Boulevard Hebreo (Jews' Boulevard); some say this is because children from the adjacent Talmud Torah used to play there.

As you exit the synagogue, turn left on Bomb House Lane, passing the Derech Eretz Talmud Torah (10 Bomb House Lane). Cross Main Street and walk up Bishop Rapallo Ramp. Turn left on Governor's Street, which will become Cornwall's Parade and then Engineer's Lane. Just past the intersection with Bell Lane, on your right will be Shaar Hashamayim Synagogue (47/49 Engineer's Lane). Two arched windows, one bearing the date 1912 and the other inscribed with the name of the synagogue, in Hebrew and English, flank the wooden entrance door.

The loud but melodious singing of Shaar Hashamayim's male congregants may not have been so pleasing in the past, at least not to the cantor. An old sign (in Spanish written with Hebrew characters) in the courtyard advises congregants that it is forbidden to "help" the cantor with the prayers or to say "amen" louder than he does.

The courtyard walls are faced in colorful tiles with a floral motif echoed in the wrought-iron balustrade.

The dark wood furnishings of the interior contrast with the marble floor and are ornamented with intricate carving; the oldest pews bear a royal insignia of a tower and crown. The Ark has three arched sets of doors topped by a pediment. Directly across the street, at 40A Engineer's Lane, is the Yede Rashim Society Charity Shop.

Maps of Gibraltar show Jews' Gate near the old Jewish cemetery and not far from the stalactite St. Michael's Cave. The cave is on the southern edge of The Upper Rock Nature Reserve (home to the Barbary apes, the only monkeys in Europe living in the wild). At the southern end of Main Street, take the left fork, Trafalgar Road; it turns into Europa Road, which leads to Jews' Gate. Pass the Pillars of Hercules monument on the right, and next pass the Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society on the left. A few yards farther down, stone steps on the left lead to the cemetery. It is illegal to cut back the brush in the spring because birds nest there, so the extent of the cemetery is not always obvious. Of the 800 tombstones, about 30 percent are legible.

At the northern end of Gibraltar, an inscription on the war monument at the corner of Devil's Tower Road and Sir Winston Churchill Road mentions "sailors, soldiers and airmen" from the British Commonwealth who gave their lives in Gibraltar in the two world wars and some of whom are buried in the Jewish cemetery. The reference is to the new Jewish cemetery; the entrance is opposite No. 19 Devil's Tower Road, through a tiny lane between the Lady Williams Cancer Support Center and a house surrounded by a beige stucco wall. A good view of the cemetery can be had from Jock's Balcony on the Tunnel Tour (www.gibraltar-rock-tours.com).

Personalities

Aaron Nunez Cardozo (1762-1834) was a prominent merchant and a British liaison to the Barbary States. Merchant and diplomat Don David Pacifico (1794-1854)—born in Gibraltar and hence a British subject—while posted to Athens was attacked in an anti-Semitic riot and his house was destroyed. To convince a reluctant Greece to compensate Pacifico, Viscount Palmerston, the British foreign secretary, ordered a blockade of the port of Piraeus and captured 200 Greek ships.

Sir Joshua Hassan (1915-1997) was the first mayor as well as the first chief minister (equivalent to premier) of Gibraltar. He advocated autonomy for Gibraltar but also the colony's right to remain under British (rather than Spanish) rule. He was knighted in 1963. He was also active in Jewish and Zionist affairs and was president of Nefutsot Yehuda Synagogue.

Books, Films, Music

DoubleShot, a James Bond thriller by Raymond Benson (Coronet), opens in the Convent (the Gibraltar governor's official residence) and involves a plot to wrest Gibraltar from Britain. The 1987 film The Living Daylights begins with an aerial view of The Rock and shows James Bond and other agents parachuting from a plane onto the Upper Rock as part of a training exercise.

In the classic British comedy film The Captain's Paradise, Alec Guinness plays a prosperous captain plying a route between Gibraltar and Morocco, with a wife in each port.

From Fortress to Democracy: The Political Biography of Sir Joshua Hassan by Sir William G.F. Jackson and Francis J. Cantos (Ashford, Buchan & Enright) portrays Hassan's role in Gibraltar's

political development.

Israeli composer and guitarist Ariel Lazarus, inspired by his Gibraltarian grandfather, Cantor Abraham Beniso, produced the CD Keter Malchut: Sephardic Prayers and Songs (The Sephardic Music Project). In June 2004, he performed his original work, "Gibraltar Suite," in St. Michael's Cave as part of Gibraltar's tricentennial celebrations. The concert is available on the DVD A Night of Classical Guitar and Gibraltar's Jewish Liturgical Music (contact@ariellazarus.com).

Recommendations

Arrive on a cruise, berth your yacht in a marina, drive in from southern Spain or fly in on Gibraltar Airways and stop traffic as your plane swoops across the international highway.

Abraham Benady's Holyland Tours arranges Jewish heritage tours (350-75-965; holyland@gibtelecom.net).

Thinking of getting married? John Lennon and Yoko Ono did it here in 1969, and Sean Connery did it twice, in 1962 and 1975. There are no residency requirements. For Jewish couples, contact Mesod Belilo (350-79-548) at least two weeks in advance.

The Caleta Hotel (www.caletahotel.gi) on Catalan Bay on Gibraltar's eastern side features comfortable accommodations and excellent service; it is a 40-minute walk to a synagogue. Both the Elliott Hotel (www.gib.gi/eliotthotel) and the Rock Hotel (www.rockhotelgibraltar.com), which can provide a kosher breakfast, are considerably closer to synagogues.

Glatt kosher Solly's Salt Beef Parlour and Delicatessen (just off Main Street at 8 Cannon Lane; 350-78-511) serves a variety of meats, including salt beef (corned beef), and side dishes such as Israeli salad and Moroccan-style carrots.

For dessert, especially on Sundays (when most shops are closed), visit Amar's kosher bakery (47 Line Wall Road; 350-73-516), established in 1820. Two Sefardic pastries on offer are Japonesa (a cream-filled donut) and piramide (a pyramid-shaped, chocolate-covered sponge cake).

Then sit on a bench on Jews' Boulevard, savor your sweets, look out at the passing ships and consider how the end of the earth became a safe haven for Jews.