

# Sahara

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Photographs by Basil Pao

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# SAHARA



MICHAEL PALIN

Photographs by Basil Pao



PHOENIX

# GIBRALTAR

*Day One*

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## GIBRALTAR

Only 300 miles from the Sahara Desert there is a place where brass bands play, warm beer is served and a blue lamp marks the police station. Where people shop at Marks & Spencer and twenty-one gun salutes sound on royal birthdays. Where Noël Coward played cabaret and John Lennon got married.

This corner of a foreign land that seems forever England is a gnarled limestone rock, nearly 4 miles long and 1400 feet high, tucked into Spain's lower regions like a prostate, dominating the dozen miles of ocean that separate Europe from Africa.

For the Berber chief Tariq Ibn Ziyad, who first settled on the Rock thirteen centuries ago, it held the promise of escape from the hostile Sahara and a stepping stone to the rich underbelly of Europe. It became known as Jebel el Tariq, Tariq's mountain, which, eroded down to the single word Gibraltar, it has remained ever since.

The Britishness of Gibraltar, which began with Admiral Rooke's invasion in 1704, is well entrenched. Contemplating my map of North Africa outside Pickwick's Pub, I order a coffee. No messing with *latte* or *machiato* here.

'Coop or Moog?' I'm asked in a thick Geordie accent.

I choose cup.

Cars are squeezed into a pleasant shady square beside me. Buildings are squeezed around the cars: an attractive colonial house with deep balconies and freshly painted wrought-iron railings on one side, the handsome Georgian façade of the garrison library on the other and, next to it, the offices of the *Gibraltar Chronicle*, the veteran local newspaper, which broke the news of Nelson's victory at Trafalgar.

For me, a first-timer in Gibraltar, there have already been surprises.

First of all, that there are buildings of quality which are not just selling duty-free booze or fish and chips, and secondly, that Gibraltar's Britishness is one layer of a deceptively international cake. The balconied, green-shuttered cottages that stretch up the steep alleyways leading off Main Street were largely built by Portuguese and Genoese, and the Catholic cathedral was converted from a mosque by the Spanish. There are, I'm told, more working synagogues on Gibraltar than in the whole of Spain. The Alameda gardens reflect Andalusian taste. The uncharitable view is that Gibraltar is an ordinance depot reinventing itself as a tax haven, but the reality is more complicated and a lot more attractive.

Nevertheless, it is Britishness that holds this polyglot community together. Sitting on the terrace of the Rock Hotel as the day fades, it is quite possible to believe that the sun will never set on this tenacious shred of Empire. Sipping a cocktail, surrounded by comfortable, chintzy, Home Counties decor and the soft sound of *Daily Telegraphs* slipping from snoozing laps, I imagine the Rock of Gibraltar as a liner, loosing its moorings and sailing slowly off, bearing inside its crumbling white flanks the last traces of the old order. This, I must admit, is after a couple of quite generous whiskies, of the sort I am unlikely to find elsewhere on this trip, together with marmalade, eggs and bacon, cups of tea, pints of beer, *Match of the Day* and all those things that I miss idiotically when I'm in foreign parts – and parts don't come much more foreign than the Sahara Desert.

Later, I settle into bed and with one long, last, loving glance at the Corby trouser press, turn out the light.

## *Day Two*



## ACROSS THE STRAIT

At the highest point of the Rock of Gibraltar, where a sheer cliff face plunges 1400 feet into the Mediterranean, there is a gun emplacement called O'Hara's Battery capable of lobbing artillery shells

from Europe into Africa. I'm assured it's never been used in anger and, indeed, as I climb the last few steps on this idyllic Mediterranean morning, the only signs of anger are from seagulls swooping at my head to warn me off their nests.

From up here, the confrontation of the continents is quite a sight to behold. The two land masses don't just meet, they rise to the occasion. The white cliffs of Gibraltar facing up to the serrated black crest of Jebel Musa on the Moroccan shore. The Greeks and Romans were aware of the symmetry and called the twin peaks the Pillars of Hercules, the end of the known world, beyond which lay outer darkness.

Gibraltar remains protective to the last, as if testing my resolve to take on something as bleak and inimical as the Sahara. Since the beginning of human history people have been trying to leave the desert behind, from Tariq Ibn Ziyad and the Islamic armies who crossed the Strait in the eighth century, to the African migrants trying to cross it today. On the morning news there is a report of a boat-load of immigrants capsizing in the Strait last night. Amongst them were three pregnant women. They were only saved from drowning because one of them carried a mobile telephone. I try to find a Spanish newspaper for more details, but no Spanish dailies are sold anywhere in Gibraltar. I sense a glimmer of paranoia here, as if the natural siege mentality that seems to hold Gibraltarians together might be threatened by too much information.

So I'm not persuaded to linger, not by the fine books and leather armchairs of the garrison library, nor by the sound of the British Grenadiers, nor even by the sight of the midday flight back to London roaring across the airport runway, which also happens to be the main road out of Gibraltar.

Once the plane has raced past us and soared out over the Atlantic, the barrier opens and it's a short walk to the frontier. This is not a happy place, for either side. Spain has never concealed its irritation over what it considers British occupation of Spanish territory, and the referendum of 1967 in which Gibraltarians voted overwhelmingly to remain British was followed by closure of the frontier for sixteen years.

Now things are less confrontational but just as niggly. The Spanish examine drivers' papers with elaborate care, causing huge

traffic jams, and the Gibraltarians reply with a large sign pointing out who's to blame: 'Gibraltar regrets the inconvenience caused to you due to frontier restrictions imposed by the Spanish authorities contrary to your European rights to free movement'.

The next sign we encounter reads 'Policía', and after a perfunctory going over we're out the back door of a long, low, anonymous customs shed and into Spain, where a huge welcoming billboard directs us to the nearest McDonald's.

The ferries that cross the Strait of Gibraltar leave from Algeciras, 3 miles from the frontier. We board a solid, ponderous old vessel called *City Of Algeciras*, which will take one and a half hours to cover the dozen nautical miles between here and Africa. As the new generation of lightweight ferries has clipped the crossing time to thirty-five minutes, I'm not surprised to hear that this is her final voyage.

I'm puzzled, though, by the lack of any ceremony. If this had been, say, the last journey of an Isle of Wight ferry, it would surely be full of people in anoraks pointing cameras and tape-recording the last blasts of the ship's horn. Instead, it's like a ghost ship. In the saloon the television screens beam American basketball to rows of empty seats. In the main lounge 'Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me' thuds out to a few thin Moors with wispy beards and close-cropped black hair.

A vigorous westerly rips in as we reach the open sea, where the bottle-neck entrance to the Mediterranean shrinks to a mere 9 miles. This is dangerous water, a tide race of accelerating currents and a thousand ship movements a day, a difficult stretch to navigate at the best of times, but in a tiny boat, at the dead of night, potentially suicidal.

The bonus of this urgent west wind is a panorama of dramatic clarity. The fingers of Europe and Africa almost touching and between them, dead centre, the sun merging slowly with the horizon. I feel for a moment a jubilant sense of freedom, of being in limbo, beyond tribal loyalties, national boundaries, anthems, flags, customs, papers, permissions and prejudices, free from all restraints except the elements themselves. I feel positively Homeric. Then a particularly fierce gust picks me up and hurls me, bodily, into the bar.