

‘Michelangelo’s Pizzeria, and Gelateria, opening soon!’ exclaims a sign along the grandly-named Riviera Promenade. Gelateria is Italian for ice cream parlour. The façade is sky blue and pink to tone with the crescent of Neapolitan ice cream-coloured houses above it. Beyond the prom, narrow streets and vertiginous steps meander between higgledy-piggledy houses named Villa Genovesa and Villa Napoli. Stray cats recline in the sun, washing flaps on lines strung from balconies and everywhere there are upturned boats, freshly painted or drying out. You could be in the back streets of Naples... just one cornetto and you’ll be singing the song... but, far from it, this is Catalan Bay in Gibraltar!

It may have been named after 350 Catalan servicemen who settled here after assisting Anglo-Dutch forces during the War of Spanish Succession; or after the Catalan fishermen who came here to work the waters in summer. But the Genoese were here before that, when the bay was known as La Caleta. In the 18th century, when they accounted for one third of Gibraltar’s population, public notices were published in Genoese as well as in English and Spanish.

Many day-trippers miss Gibraltar’s Italian connection as the East Side isn’t on the main tourist drag. Most visitors cross the airport runway and advance direct to Main Street, turn right for Morrisons

or take the cable car to the top of the Rock to see the Barbary macaques.

There are macaques here too and the East Side Monkey Troupe’s a discerning bunch. When it’s beach weather there’ll be rich pickings dropped by locals who come here to picnic or enjoy locally-caught octopus and squid.

This peaceful backwater is a world away from the bustling west side metropolis that divides the *ciudadanos* from the *Caletenos*, as the local inhabitants are called. They speak Spanish and they’re Gibraltarian British but under the skin they’re as Italian as Genoese sponge cake. They’ve adopted Dolores, an Italian Virgin, as their patron saint; they have their own fiestas, pastimes and cuisine – spinach pie and *rosto* (penne with tomato and meat sauce); a few ‘old salts’ still put to sea in Genoese *bucetas*. They have pointed hulls at both ends to make them easier to beach without capsizing in strong wind.

In his spare time, master shipwright Gerald Lopez builds *bucetas* the traditional way, in wood, as learned from a veteran *Caleteno* craftsman when he was a boy. He used to sell them, now it’s a hobby but a strange one for someone who admits: “I don’t like fishing.”





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The Italian *Connection*

PHOTOGRAPHY **JON SEGUI** AND **DAVID CUSSEN**

Belinda Beckett explores Catalan Bay, a 'Little Genoa' in Gibraltar.



© Jon Segui

A Beautiful Launderette

Beach volleyball nets are put up on the beach in summer. Once upon a time there were permanent structures for hanging fishing nets out to dry. There were other thriving cottage industries too. Where families spread their beach towels on the sand, washerwomen used to lay sheets out to dry; perhaps the Governor's Long Johns too, as Catalan Bay families did laundry for the military. Where there are colourful sunbrellas there were once posh canvas canopies. Tent hire was a booming business after WWII, when well-to-do Gibraltarians required shade for their picnic luncheons, eaten with proper cutlery no doubt. At their behest, public toilets were provided but, until the 1960s, the village houses had no plumbing. The locals used enamel buckets with lids. Some of the better-appointed homes had two buckets.

Like most 'foreigners' I used to bypass Catalan Bay, only ever viewing it from the terrace of Nuno's (the great restaurant at the Caleta Hotel that's also Italian). Then, last July, I got stuck in the mother of all border queues, hauled up in the East Side Holding Area for several hot sticky hours. Everyone turned off their engines and went walkabout in the bay. I was enchanted by its charm and curious to know how a little piece of Italy turned up at the opposite end of the Mediterranean, in a British territory.

A lot of what's known is recounted in *The History of Catalan Bay*, a book by Tito Vallejo, the charismatic historian guide who featured heavily in the Channel 5 documentary, *Gibraltar, Little Britain in the Sun*. Anyone who's watched it wouldn't recognise this other Gibraltar, devoid of British bobbies, red telephone boxes and Jolly Boys. They're filming a third series this summer and they've asked Tito for input. He's full of anecdotes. "Historically, the Caletanos didn't wear shoes unless they were going into town and didn't put them on until they reached the Cross of Sacrifice," he says, adding to my intrigue.

There's no museum dedicated to Catalan Bay and the priestly records kept at Our Lady of Sorrows, the

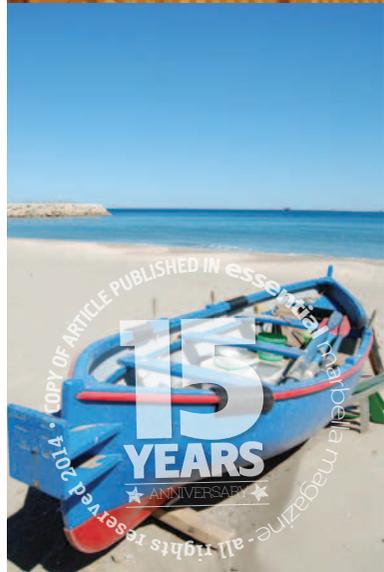
pretty parish church where Italian WWII prisoners sang in the choir, have been lost. The Sea Wave restaurant's walls showcase old photographs but historical records reside in the Garrison Library so there's nothing much on site to enlighten tourists.

The locals have their own stories, handed down by word of mouth. Vincent Pisarello was born in a cottage by the beach before it became The Village Inn in the 1960s. Pisarello is a Genoese name, as is Parody, Baglietto, Danino, Olivero, Robba and Montegriffo – the Gibraltar phone book is full of them. Fashion designer John Galliano and Gibraltar's Chief Minister, Fabian Picardo, are of Genoese descent.

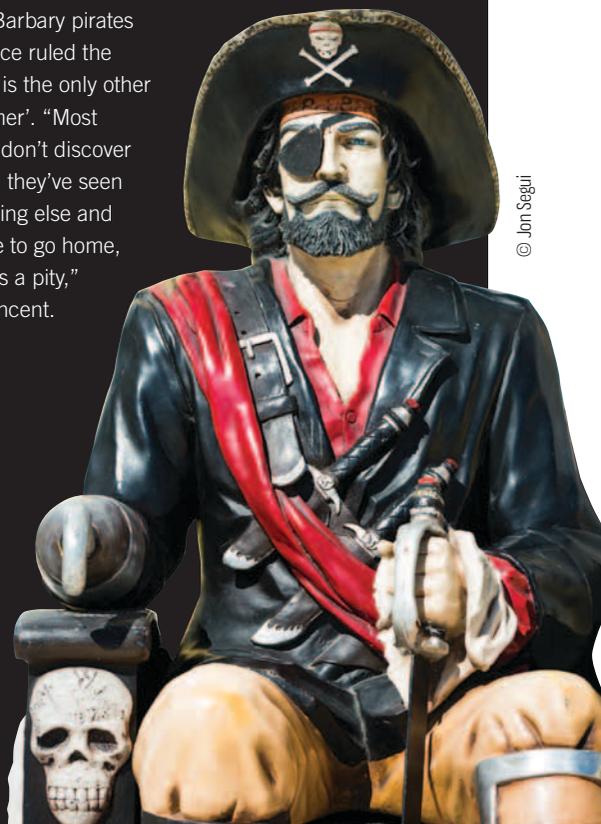
"My grandfather was one of the last people to speak the Genoese dialect but no one could understand it, not even the Genoese!", Vincent tells me, while we watch dolphins in the bay over coffee at Stefano's. A life-sized mannequin of Captain Hook on a bench outside (a reminder of the Barbary pirates who once ruled the waves) is the only other 'customer'. "Most people don't discover us until they've seen everything else and it's time to go home, which is a pity," says Vincent.



They hey we're the East Side monkeys © David Cussen



Genoese buceta © David Cussen



© Jon Segui



Titty Rock

© David Cusser

Titty Rock

They'd be sorry they missed La Mamela, colloquially known as Titty Rock and Genoese for 'mammary'. This 'boob'-shaped boulder fell from the cliff face in the early 18th century and landed tit up in the sand, killing a cow and a donkey but causing no human fatalities. Fishermen would touch it for luck before putting out to sea (or not, depending on who's telling the story). You can read a scroll relating to its history (or not) at La Mamela Restaurant. (You can read my review of the restaurant further on in this issue).

Rockfalls are still a hazard in Catalan Bay. Two of George Bonfiglio's great aunts were killed in a landslide that buried their house. "They wouldn't cooperate with the rescuers because they were ashamed to be seen in their nightclothes," he says, shaking his head at the needless tragedy.

I meet George walking along the prom with a set of oars slung over his shoulder, looking every inch the fisherman, although he used to work for Gibraltar's Ministry of Defence. His great,

great grandfather arrived here in 1805, making George fifth generation Gibraltarian Genoese. He once paid a sentimental visit to Varazze, where many Gibraltarian Genoese came from. "I found a community like Catalan Bay's twin, and people with surnames identical to my neighbours," he says. "Some people say the Genoese arrived with the British fleet in the 17th century but my grandfather always told me they came here from Liguria to fish."

Genoese fishermen would take leave of their families and embark on the long journey to Gibraltar in their bucatas to fish from Easter until September, sleeping in shacks on the beach. "When Napoleon overran northern Italy, they came here to avoid conscription, bringing their families with them," explains George.

During the Civil War, Spanish fishermen sought refuge in Catalan Bay, working alongside the villagers. There was none of the argy-bargy over territorial waters we see today. If there was any doubt over pecking order, it was decided by the toss of a coin.

Size Matters

George tells me it's true that some Caletenos eschewed shoes. "The main work of the local fishermen was hauling heavy net, laid out at sea, from the beach. They wore harnesses across their upper torso to pull the nets, similar to Egyptian slaves. The strain of keeping their balance on the sand caused their feet to splay and they needed over-sized shoes that gave them a clown-like gait, so they only wore them in town. You could probably tell who was from Catalan Bay by the odd way they walked!" he chuckles.

In its heyday Catalan Bay boasted a 25-boat fishing fleet which caught supper for half of Gibraltar. At one time there was a thriving tuna industry, including a cannery and an almadraba off Eastern beach (a Phoenician style of trap net that you can also read about in this issue.) "The fleet used nets of varying mesh size and caught different species seasonally to conserve fish stocks," says George, who fishes for pleasure these days, in a fibreglass boat he copied from his family's 1914 buчета. He's caught mackerel, grouper, gilthead, black bream and bass. "What doesn't get eaten for supper goes in the deep freeze," he says.

Cows and goats were once kept in beachside byres to provision the community, and the bay had its own transport - a horse and carriage, which the local washerwomen hired to collect dirty laundry from the military barracks around town. They took it back, freshly ironed, in wicker baskets on foot, to turn more of a profit. "Each family had their own customers," says George whose grandmother was engaged in this cottage industry. "They'd steep the linen in wine barrels and scrub it on washboards before drying it on the sand. Strangely enough, there were no seagulls then, as there are today, to spoil their hard work," he laughs.

When the Royal Navy Dockyard opened in the late 1900s it offered real wages and the chance to buy bigger houses in town. Many locals married 'townies' and, of the 200-or-so residents today, less than half are true Caletenos. Residents of the Neapolitan ice cream-coloured houses called Little Genoa are recent arrivals.

Some traditions linger. Dolores, the adopted Italian virgin, is still paraded through the streets during the end-of-summer fiesta, a time of rowing races, fishing competitions and sailing regattas. The old boys who get together at the Catalan Bay Social Club might indulge in an occasional game of tapone (Genoese skittles). At Christmas, Italian carols are sung. And on any day of the year, if the wind's blowing your way, you might catch the delicious aroma of rosto wafting through Genoese shutters. ☺



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George Bonfiglio