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SELF-DETERMINATION IS OUR RIGHT!



Flying the flag: Belinda with former Mayor of Gibraltar, Tony Lombard, and friends

For one day only last year, Spanish-based British journalist Belinda Beckett donned the red and white to see what National Day looks like from a Gibraltarian's point of view.

National Day

PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID CUSSEN

*Gibraltar, Gibraltar,
The Rock on which I stand,
May you be forever free,
Gibraltar, my own land.*

Chorus, Gibraltar National Anthem

My first concern was that I might get lynched by the Spanish. There I was, on their side of the frontier dressed from head to toe in red and white, like a soldier in uniform caught behind enemy lines.

My second concern was that I might get lynched by the locals for impersonating a Gibraltarian. The Becketts of Ulster have no blood ties to the Rock I know of, yet there I was, brazenly clad in their national colours.

But in Casemates Square where I was sucked into a red-and-white human vortex, I was perfectly camouflaged – no more likely to be singled out for attention than a grain of sand on Eastern Beach.

Some 10,000 citizens packed into Gibraltar's show plaza that day, and it was red hot verging on white hot – even the weather was celebrating! There were people in wheelchairs flying national flags, dapper gents in union jack waistcoats, matronly ladies in white shoes carrying red handbags, kids in red and white face paint, dogs in red and white outfits, teenagers in T-shirts printed with political slogans: 'Wake up and smell the coffee. Gibraltar will never be Spanish.'

Hardly anyone was drinking coffee, though. Beer, yes. Pints of bitter and bottles of ale and Guinness and Magners cider, yes. National Day's a public holiday in Gibraltar and the bars open early. No one was drunk, in the ordinary sense. Everyone was high! 'What are they on?', I wanted to know, so I could get some. But they'd been drinking from the cup of patriotic fervour and, if you aren't Gibraltarian, it doesn't have quite the same effect.

National Day started as a one-off to mark the 25th anniversary of the 1967 sovereignty referendum, when Gibraltarians voted overwhelmingly

to remain British. (They did it all over again in 2002, with the same result.) The September 10 public holiday was so popular it became an annual fixture. Everyone likes a day off work! But with the Gibraltarians it's more than that. It's the chance to dress up, show off and belong. (For weeks beforehand, school kids practice their dance and acrobatics routines for their 15 minutes of fame on the National Day stage.) It's a one-day licence to sing their National Anthem to the rooftops and shout their national pride all the way to the Spanish border.

You meet two kinds of Gibraltarians on National Day. The ones who believe it should be tub-thumping and political and the ones who favour a more civic jolly. It's been one or other, at different times, since 1992. Of late, the tub thumpers are back.

In an innovation in 2012, the Foreign Office in Whitehall, London now flies the Gibraltar flag on National Day. Also that year, the son of the Rev. Ian Paisley (from my own home town of Belfast) was among the visiting politicians seated on the VIP stage. Last year, the Falkland Islands sent a representative to sympathise with Gibraltar's sovereignty struggles with Spain, along with political leaders from seven other Overseas Territories and dozens of MPs of all political hues. Spanish politicians from Mallorca and Catalunya came too. They also have an axe to grind with Spain over their battle for independence.

Red, White & Proud



National Day Treasure: Patriotic former Gibraltar Mayor, Morny Levy, and family



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They even laid on a British Sign language interpreter – Zane Hema, who'll be back this year. He's not the one who made a mess-up of the Mandela Memorial. He's the one who got it right for the Queen at London's 2012 Paralympics.

David Cameron was also in the audience, virtually – a coup for Gibraltar. No British Prime Minister has ever made an address on their National Day before. I was watching from the car park above the ICC Centre – a great vantage point for the opening ceremony – when the face of my own national leader loomed large on the big screen. When he spoke of the Rock's relationship with Britain as "solid, sure and enduring" I felt a flicker of patriotic fervour myself, although it passed.

I'm not the patriotic-and-fervent type but the speeches were pretty stirring if you like that kind of thing. Fabian Picardo gave it full throttle. "Hell will freeze over before any flags fly in Gibraltar that are not our flags," declaimed Gibraltar's Chief Minister. "What we're never going to do is concede one grain of the soil of our land, one drop of our water or one breath of our air. It's ours."

At the stroke of one o'clock, the rooftops of Casemates gushed red and white smoke and a barrage of biodegradable balloons rose in a red-and-white cloud into the sky – 30,000 of them, one to represent every soul in Gibraltar – blocking out the sun, momentarily, before drifting away beyond grasp like fond memories.

The crowd dispersed too, emptying out of Casemates Square in a red-and-white flood, as if someone had pulled the plug: the Mums and Dads and grandparents and push chairs to lunch in one of the bunting-decked pavement cafes; the youth to strike sultry poses in disco bars or drape themselves languidly on chill-out sofas in Ocean Village; the elderly to their favourite arm chairs and garden swings; the pets to lamp posts to figure out how to cock a leg in their restrictive fancy dress outfits. There was laughter in the air and courtesy everywhere. National Day is a happy pill!

"Come too," kind Gibraltarian friends entreated me. But it was their day, not mine, and it felt time to leave. Although, with events planned into the wee small hours by The Self Determination for Gibraltar Group and the Ministry of Culture, the party had barely started.

That night I watched National Day reach its crescendo from the rooftop at home in Los Barrios: hundreds of red and white chrysanthemum-shaped fireworks exploding over the crest of the rock. It was spectacular and strangely humbling... I was coming down with another touch of patriotic fervour.

"They're more British than the British themselves," joked my Spanish neighbours, who were watching too. But that's not true. I'm British, they're British Gibraltarian. Ask any one of them, it's a different thing entirely! ☺

National Day 2014 Events Programme

- 9:30 am** Live Music and Performances by various local schools
- 10:30 am** Children's Fancy - Dress Piazza
- 12:25 pm** Political Rally, Casemates Square
- 1 pm** Balloon Release, Casemates Square
- 1:30 - 3 pm** DJ Music, Casemates Square
- 1:30 pm - 7 pm** Fun for Kids, Naval Ground
- 1:30 pm - late** Fun Activities and Disco, King's Bastion Leisure Centre
- 1:30 pm - late** Live Music and DJ's, Bayside Sports Complex
- 1:30 pm - late** Live Music, Rock on the Rock Club, Town Range
- 2:30 pm - 7 pm** Jazz Friends, Governor's Parade
- 7 pm** Thanksgiving Mass, Shrine of Our Lady of Europe
- 9:30 pm - 12:30 am** Rock Concert, Casemates Square
- 10:30 pm** Fireworks Display, Detached Mole



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