



A Day at the Museum

Sporting a fresh coat of paint and looking decidedly sprightly for an institution celebrating its 85th birthday this year, the Gibraltar Museum is still only in the youthful stages of its continuing evolution, as Belinda Beckett reports.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE **GIBRALTAR MUSEUM** AND **FINLAYSON NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY**

A fierce spotted hyena rooting through the remnants of a primitive barbecue along a shoreline buzzed by vultures suggests that going to the beach in prehistoric Gibraltar was not for the faint-hearted!

And although this is the Gibraltar Museum and it's only a stuffed hyena, playing a part in a realistic reconstruction of what life might have been like when Neanderthals ruled the Rock, it fairly fires the imagination.

It's just one of many fascinating exhibits you can see here, where every artefact, document and sepia-toned picture tells a thought-provoking story.

Thanks to the talents of the Curator, Dr Clive Finlayson, his wife Geraldine and son Stewart, all expert wildlife photographers, impressive colour images of Gibraltar's present-day flora and fauna also illuminate exhibits in a museum that goes way beyond presenting dusty archaeology in glass cases.

With Gibraltar's history as a fortress, its enviable collection of military memorabilia is a source of fascination for visiting descendents of garrison officers. But few would guess that the once luxuriously-appointed home of Gibraltar's Chief Ordnance Officer – in a street appropriately named Bomb House Lane – hides a well-preserved Moorish bath house within its foundations. Restoration work was only completed in 2005 and today you can walk through the hot room, cold room and tepidarium, and see some of the original old columns that stood witness to Muslim men (women would probably not have been admitted) sweating away the dust and grime of the day.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, parts of this important Islamic antiquity were seconded for a military stables and a wine cellar where officers stored their vintage tipples. Such an act of sacrilege seems incongruous today but times were hard back

then, when there was often a war on (or at least a siege) and preserving lives, rather than heritage, was the priority.

As Gibraltar officially lacked a museum until 1930, some of its most valuable treasures were lost to London. Even so, it is still one of the oldest museums in this part of the world.

There had been talk of one since the mid-18th century and, in 1835, a group of officers formed the Gibraltar Scientific Society, renting a building to house a skeleton collection that included specimens of morbid anatomy, provided by the hospital!

The discovery of the skull sometimes referred to as *Gibraltar Woman* was a major coup for the Society and its Secretary, Lieutenant Edmund Flint, who unearthed it from Forbes Quarry in 1848. At the time, no one realised its true significance – proof that the Neanderthal race survived in southern Europe for at least eight millennia longer than originally thought.



The famous Neanderthal skull found at Forbes Quarry

When the Society broke up a few years later, *Gibraltar Woman* was labelled 'ancient human, died before the universal flood' and stashed at the Garrison Library. While she languished in a cupboard, her thunder was stolen by *Neanderthal Man*, coined after a similarly pre-historic skull was found in Germany's Neander Valley. *Gibraltar Woman*, and the skull of a four-year-old Neanderthal boy found in the Devil's Tower area in 1926, were shipped to London's Natural History Museum where they still reside.

The casts of the two skulls are among the most popular exhibits at the Gibraltar Museum today. Two of the first to be made at London's Royal College of Surgeons in the 19th century, they are historically valuable in their own right. But what really catches the eye is the lithograph reconstruction of the face of the Devil's Tower Child, an angelic-looking, fair-haired boy who looks remarkably modern and huggable and owes nothing to the old misconception that Neanderthals were brutish and ape-like.

Gibraltar is a living museum and its caves are chief benefactors. Ongoing excavations at Gorham's and Vanguard caves have added over 40 per cent to the Gibraltar Museum's collection of prehistoric arrowheads, tools, bone fragments and fossils and the 1931 Ancient Monuments and Antiquities Act ensures that the Rock gets to keep them.

The Museum is in constant evolution, as signs saying 'Gallery Closed for Works' denote. As more treasures are unearthed, displays are updated to keep them relevant and showcase exciting new discoveries in a meaningful way.

Even so, there's only space to display 30 per cent of the collection in this Aladdin's Cave of antiquities where visitors walk along a maze of corridors, and up and down many flights of stairs, to exhibition rooms on three levels.

One exhibit which remains a fixture, and has an entire room to itself is a magnificent 1:600 scale model of the Rock, one of two created by the Ministry of Defence in 1865 and perfect in every detail, from the windows in the buildings to the shadows cast by the sun. "It's probably one of the most valuable pieces in the collection," says Clive Finlayson. "The whole of Gibraltar was surveyed to create it, a six-year process, and we still have the original cloth plans, which took three years to produce.



New reconstruction of the Neanderthal landscape outside Gorham's Cave in the Ice Age

"When the model was being restored, the team working on it thought that the shadows were a serious case of staining until they noticed that the 'stains' were all facing the same way," adds Clive, a walking encyclopaedia of fascinating facts. "Lieutenant Charles Warren who carried out the survey at the start of his career went on to serve with Lord Kitchener and became Chief Commissioner with the London Metropolitan Police. He resigned for failing to solve the Jack the Ripper Case!"

Historic photographs lining the walls in the model room depict spectacular episodes from Gibraltar's military past, from the North African operations during the Second World War to the construction of the naval dockyards. They provide an eye-opening insight into a soldier's life in harsh 19th century Gibraltar, and the way it looked in pre-landfill days, when the sea lapped at Casemates Square's bastion walls, submerging Ocean Village and the business district as we know them today.

In a neighbouring room devoted to the Great Siege, military enthusiasts can marvel at a well-

stocked arsenal of cannon balls and mortar shells, blunderbusses and flintlock pistols.

A copy of the Royal Warrant signed by Queen Isabella of Castile in 1502 granting Gibraltar its Coat of Arms (featuring the 'key' symbol), may reopen old wounds among Spanish visitors. The document acknowledges that 'the said City is very strong and by its situation it is the key between these our kingdoms in the Eastern and Western Seas and the sentinel and defence of the Strait'.

Other museum highlights include an Egyptian Mummy containing the body of a young man from 7-800BC Thebes, brought up from a wreck; and one of the most complete collections of Phoenician scarab beetle amulets on the Iberian Peninsula, dating from 7BC – treasures donated from the Gorham's Cave excavations.

A 15-minute film tracing the history of Gibraltar from the Jurassic era to the present day puts the collection in context. Placed at the entrance so that that visitors view it first, it's tempting to revisit this air-conditioned room to see it all again afterwards, and rest your feet awhile!

True museum buffs should set aside at least a couple of hours to take everything in – and there will be even more to see shortly, including what Clive mysteriously promises will be "a very special and surprising new exhibition opening at the Museum early next year."

All kinds of curious artefacts donated over the decades languish in the Museum's archives, from trophy skulls of wildebeest shot by garrison officers to Scottish claymores and an original Samurai uniform. "There are even mummies of a human hand and a cat whose provenance is quite unknown!" says Clive. But with all that's going on at the Museum right now, it's unlikely these oddities will ever see the light of day.

"We are very excited about the future, developing the museum further as well as our outposts at Parson's Lodge and other sites, linking it to the possibility of having a World Heritage Site in 2016," enthuses Clive. "That would be a really good way to start the next 85 years."

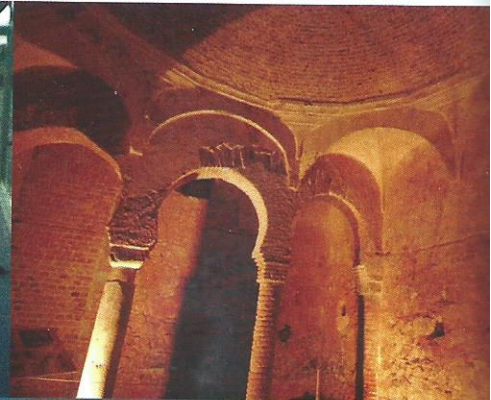
🌐 www.gibraltarmuseum.gi



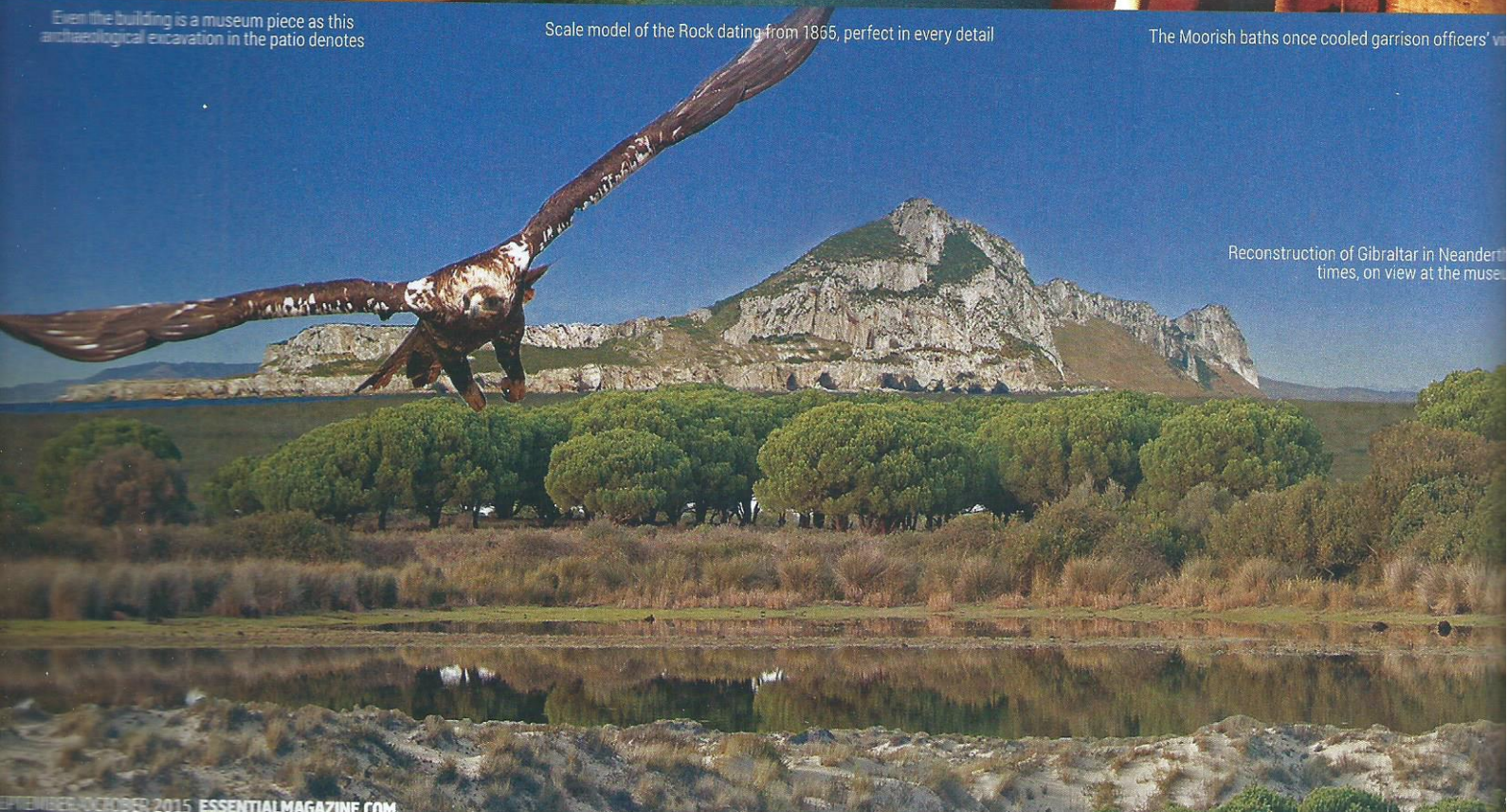
Even the building is a museum piece as this archaeological excavation in the patio denotes



Scale model of the Rock dating from 1865, perfect in every detail



The Moorish baths once cooled garrison officers' vi



Reconstruction of Gibraltar in Neanderthal times, on view at the muse