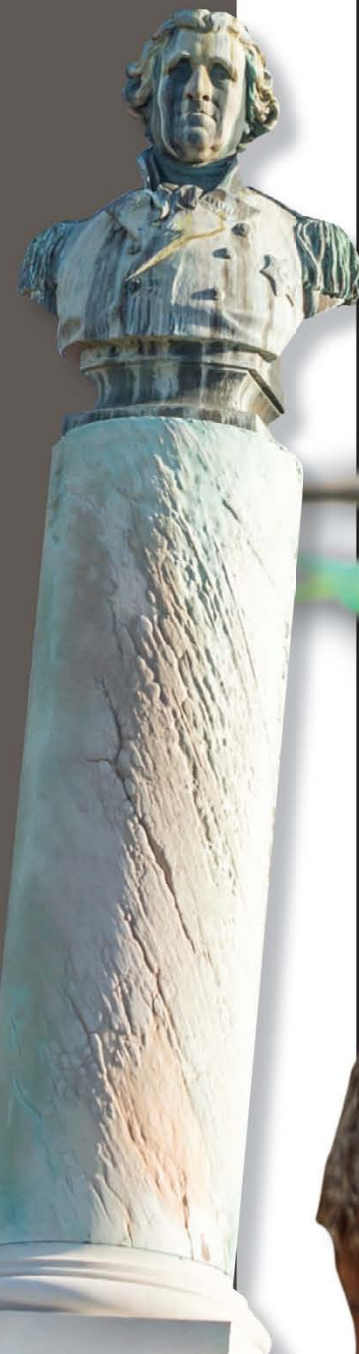


# the secret GARDEN

PHOTOGRAPHY JON SEGUI AND COURTESY OF GIBRALTAR BOTANICAL GARDENS

**Belinda Beckett discovers a park within a garden on a rock, surrounded by sea, that's home to the maddest menagerie of animals in the world.**



**a** more disparate collection of creatures you would never expect to find sharing a peaceful green corner of Gibraltar.

Patagonian parrots, chunky Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs and miniature tamarin monkeys, more at home in the tropical forests of Colombia, enjoy contented coexistence under a sweet-scented canopy of pine trees in Gibraltar Botanical Gardens... unbeknownst to a great many visitors (and more than a few local residents) who think monkeys are the only animal act in town.

But Alameda Wildlife Conservation Park is no zoo. And, while The Rock's rich biodiversity famously stocked Neanderthal man's larder during the last Ice Age, none of these creatures were ever on the menu. So what are they all doing here, this motley crew of 160 mammals, birds and reptiles, each with a name and personality, making up a most 'unnatural selection' of species?

"Many of the animals are here because they have to be, there's nowhere else for them to go," explained Park Manager Jessica Leaper. But it was one of her team of helpers – Marcus, the bird keeper – who told me their sad story when I stumbled upon this secret garden quite by chance, last year, following discreet wooden signposts to the Wildlife Park.

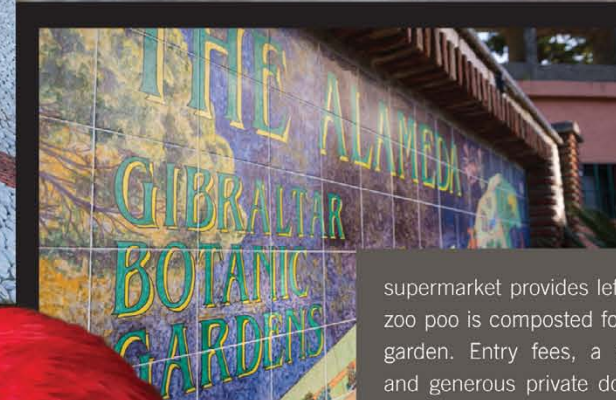
In 1994, Gibraltar customs officers boarded a ship from Indonesia and confiscated a contraband consignment of parrots and primates. Wrenched from their native habitats, they had been transported in the most inhumane conditions to be illegally traded as exotic pets: among them, dozens of rare African grey parrots, crammed 10 at a time into buckets, and monkeys that had lost tails and toes in hunters' traps.

Return to the wild was impossible, cross-border laws prevented them from being sent on to zoos and the only

recourse – other than putting them down – was to keep them in Gibraltar. The Alameda Botanical Gardens was the ideal sanctuary. Enclosures were rigged up and, over time, the collection grew with the addition of other confiscated animals and unwanted exotic pets.

But this story has a happy ending. Animal lovers, the local ornithological society and a handful of dedicated volunteers saw that the park could fulfil important educational and wildlife conservation roles and, in 2003, it opened to the public. Since then, although the illegal animal trade has thankfully declined, a captive breeding programme has added one or two endangered species to the collection, along with native species that may eventually be reintroduced to the Upper Rock Nature Reserve.

Every little helps. The local vet waives visiting fees, Morrisons



supermarket provides left-over fruit and veg, and zoo poo is composted for the park's own kitchen garden. Entry fees, a small government grant and generous private donations gradually raised sufficient funds for a complete makeover.

Thus, what began as a make-shift rehab centre for some very sick animals officially reopens this month as Gibraltar's first bio park. It provides five-star accommodation for every healthy guest, complete with room service and interior décor themed on their homelands.

Specialist rock art workers have created immersion exhibits that transport the visitor to Asia, Africa and the South American rainforest. Clever terracing, soft netting and natural barriers give the illusion of space in this compact little park. Waste ground has been transformed into a walk-through aviary modelled on a Madagascan paradise for some distinguished new guests – an established group of ring-tailed lemurs, flying in from a zoo in The Netherlands any day now.

Other popular crowd-pleasers include Itchy and Scratchy, a pair of cotton-top tamarins. Originally from Newquay Zoo, they have raised three sets of twins – a huge coup for the park as they're among the world's top 10 endangered primates. Less than 1,000 remain in the wild. There are future plans for a live 'tam cam' in their enclosure to record the family's daily activities.

Also delighting all who see them are Asian short-clawed otters, Trixie and Dixie, infamous for effecting 23 escapes in two years from Newquay Zoo; Babe, a randy pot-bellied pig, his missus, Peggy, and son, Rodney, whose birth at the park surprised everyone as his father was thought to be 'past it'; and Wally, a tragic little porker who spent the first months of his life squashed into a hamster cage. By the time he was rescued by Gibraltar Police, the cage wire had grown into his skin.



Visitors will also meet one or two of the original animals rescued from the 'death ship', including two pigtail macaques and the aptly-named Plucky, an African grey parrot. Scores of her companions died from post-traumatic stress but 10 survivors recovered enough to pair up at the park. Sadly, they were stolen just before the breeding season. However, Plucky is no longer alone! She's all loved up with Blackie, a black lory.

Would you like to sponsor one of these animals? For just £30 a year you can! You get a colour photo of your 'adopted' animal, a fact sheet, sponsorship certificate, annual newsletter and free entry to the park for a year (valid for a family of two adults and two children). It would make a great birthday present!

"Every one of our animals has a different personality, especially the monkeys with their amazing facial expressions," says Jessica, who first came here to study The Rock's famous Barbary macaques for her Masters Thesis in Evolutionary Psychology, returning to Gibraltar as a park volunteer and taking over as manager in 2008.

A mine of information on animal behaviour, her enthusiasm shines through as she shares anecdotes about her scaled, furred and feathered friends.

"We have three female Barbary macaques that were born on the Upper Rock but, while male macaques swap family groups, alien females would never be accepted," she says. "We've managed to re-home some of our larger monkeys but illegally trafficked animals are not permitted across the border, even in transit. However the airlines have now agreed to transport some animals for us, which opens up possibilities for future breeding programmes."

Jessica is keen to raise awareness about the cruelty of keeping exotic pets on Gibraltar. "We've had many iguanas brought to us over the years, usually because they grew too big, too fast and require specialist care," she says. "Many had been fed animal proteins which cause irreversible organ damage."

Throughout the year the park holds workshops, Fun Days and school visits, giving youngsters a chance to help with enrichment programmes, such as hiding food in the enclosures for foraging. However, Jessica operates a strict 'hands-off' approach for all but the domestic rabbits kept for cuddling in the petting zoo. Lessons are also given on the insects and bugs that live naturally in the surrounding gardens. Halloween night is a favourite event, when the stars of the show are the pipistrelle bats that sleep by day in designer boxes hanging from the trees.

One sadness for Jessica was the death of her last remaining prairie dog, Choco, in January, just as a couple of sexy young gals were due to join this expert North American burrower. But Choco lived long enough to enjoy his finest hour on the AWCP's official 2012 Christmas card, wearing a 'Photoshopped' Santa hat, where he received 'Likes' from scores of fans on the park's Facebook page.

The good news is, a new family of prairie dogs are on their way to this enchanting little park where, just as in all good fairytales, they're sure to live happily ever after.

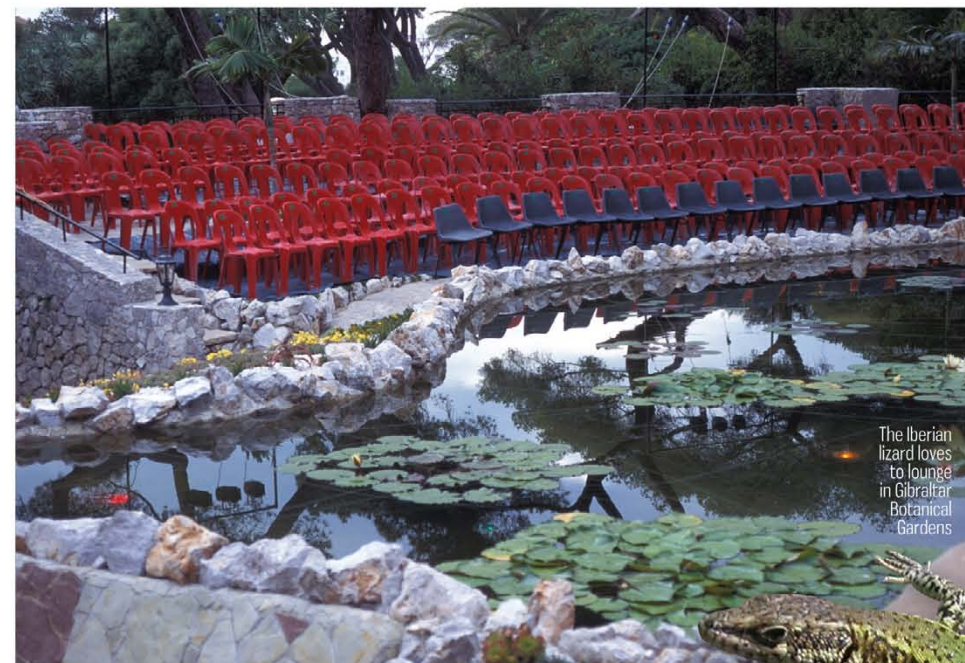


The AWCP is open Monday to Sunday from 10am to 5pm. Adults £5, children under 16, £2.50. Further information: [www.awcp.gi](http://www.awcp.gi)



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The AWCP logo, starring escapologist otters. Irnie and Dixie © Gerard Kalleher



The Iberian lizard loves to lounge in Gibraltar Botanical Gardens

## Garden theatre

The heart of Gibraltar Botanical Gardens hides another 'wow factor' – the Alameda Open Air Theatre which has been 'entertaining the troops', off and on, for nearly 50 years.

The waterfall and Koi carp-filled lake – the largest area of open fresh water on the Rock – provides a magical setting for concerts, dinner dances, conferences and variety shows and has also hosted the Miss Gibraltar Beauty Pageant. With dressing rooms, a bar and a professional technician to ensure seamless backstage organisation, most shows at this 435-seater amphitheatre play to a full house.

From June 21-23 this delightful al fresco playhouse will stage a new 'first' – a Fringe Theatre Festival to rival Edinburgh's, with international acts showcasing drama, dance and music that will spill out into the streets of Gibraltar. To book, visit [www.gibfringe.com](http://www.gibfringe.com)

## 'THE ROCK' GARDENS

It's not everyone whose name is immortalised by a weevil but Dr Keith Bensusan, Director of the Alameda Botanical Gardens, has that unusual honour. His discovery of a new species of weevil in both Gibraltar and Ceuta in 2010 was especially remarkable, as *Torneuma bensusani* is flightless, blind, subterranean and not very good at swimming!

This is not the notorious red palm weevil that's public enemy number one to palm trees, by the way. "The weevil that attacks palms is a single species out of some 60,000 known globally," says Dr. Bensusan. "Weevils are the largest group of organisms on Earth."

It's one of the wonders of science that makes a visit to the Gardens fascinating for both visitors and the scientists and staff who work there, with new finds constantly adding to an incredible tally of over 2,000 plant species and a rich variety of fauna.

Blackcaps and greenfinches, hoopoes, kingfishers, kestrels, booted eagles, tawny owls and a variety of reptiles (bats, geckos, lizards, the harmless horseshoe whip snake) are among the visitors attracted to the fresh produce growing in this free 'supermarket' for animals! And this is healthy cuisine, thanks to a close-to-zero tolerance of chemicals.

Among a rainbow palette of scented climbers, creepers, scramblers, shrubs, succulents and almost every plant the green-fingered gardener could dream of, there are some rarer finds to set horticultural hearts racing. The Gibraltar campion was rediscovered in 1994 and nurtured back from the brink of extinction. Other notable plants growing in the Gardens include the Gibraltar chickweed and Gibraltar restharrow, unique to The Rock, and the Gibraltar candytuft which can only be found here, in Ceuta and northernmost Morocco.

The Gardens first opened in 1816 to provide a recreational green zone for the families of garrison troops. Funded by the temporary legalisation of gambling (public lottery funding is nothing new), a sub-tropical jungle took root in sandy soil next to the old Parade Ground which had been partially used as a cemetery – hence headstones can still be seen here to this day.

Mediterranean species quickly mingled with specimens

transported on ship's from the other side of the world – testimony to Gibraltar's long naval history as well as a symbolic mirror of its colourful multicultural society. These have been augmented by the Botanic Gardens' more recent acquisitions.

Visitors can meander pathways bordered by Chinese wisteria, Australian jasmine and agapanthus from South Africa. The Italian flair of an 18th century Genoese gardener can still be seen in the charming sunken garden known as The Dell. A favourite location for Gibraltar weddings, its lily pond of terrapins, goldfish and frogs provides the perfect 'photo opportunity'. The Alameda also boasts a South African coral tree planted by the Earl and Countess of Wessex during their controversial visit last year as part of Gibraltar's Diamond Jubilee celebrations.

The Alameda hasn't always been green and pleasant. Neglected for nearly three decades when the border with Spain was shut, cutting Gibraltar off from the outside world, it became a seamy nocturnal hangout for unsavoury characters. Litter blew through its whispering pines and most of the valuable botanic collections were lost forever. However, if plants could talk, the spectacular 220-year-old Canary Islands dragon tree would have an interesting tale to tell. One of the few specimens that pre-dates the park, this spiky tree is an unusual relative of the lily whose red resin, nicknamed dragon's blood, is used to stain the wood of Stradivarius violins.

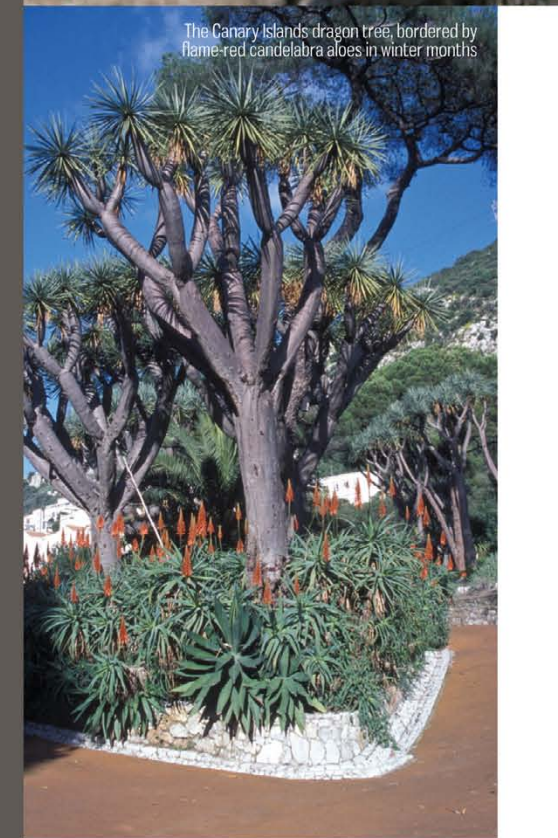
Since its renaissance in 1991, the Alameda receives year-round TLC from a team of home-trained gardeners, qualified horticulturists, science graduates and postgraduates, craftsmen and one of the world's leading tree surgeons. As well as an educational role as an open-air classroom for schoolchildren, it maintains important plant collections augmented via its contact with other, important botanic gardens such as Kew and Edinburgh.

The Alameda Gardens are a therapeutic walk in the park all year round. Even in winter, the candelabra aloe ensures that the floral show goes on. And, unusually for such a wonderful attraction, entry is free!

www.gibraltargardens.gi



The Gibraltar campion has been nurtured back from the brink of extinction



The Canary Islands dragon tree, bordered by flame-red candelabra aloes in winter months