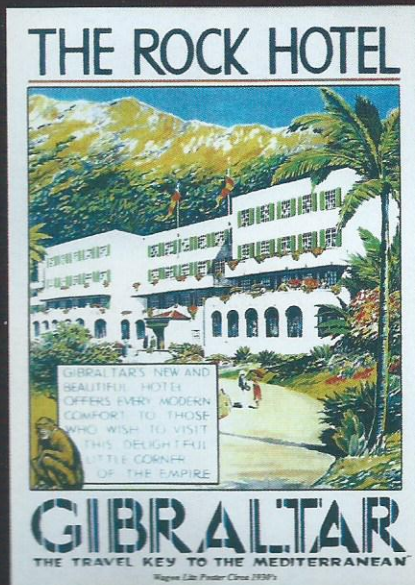




# THE RENAISSANCE OF Breathtaking views The Rock Hotel

She turns 83 this year but, far from showing her age, the Rock Hotel is looking ravishing after a stunning 10-month makeover, ready to share her history and hospitality with a new generation of guests.

WORDS **BELINDA BECKETT** PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF **THE ROCK HOTEL** AND BY **JAYDEN FA**



'G ibraltar's new and beautiful hotel offers every modern comfort to those who wish to visit this delightful little corner of the Empire', reads a postcard printed in the 1930s, depicting The Rock Hotel in her flapper days.

The Empire is history, and there have been four changes of British monarch since then, yet this veritable grand dame of hotels is looking just as glamorous today.

Of course, it's no secret that she's had 'work done', including massive internal surgery to lift floors, lower ceilings, reframe and double glaze windows and give her new plumbing and wiring!

With talk of sky bars and spas at one point, some of her admirers were concerned about mutton being dressed up as lamb. But like the best cosmetic surgery jobs, her refreshed new look is subtle and appropriate for an octogenarian wishing to age gracefully. She's still genteel British colonial meets glorious Art Deco – but now with a head-turning 21st century update representing a multi-million pound investment.

A palette in 50 shades of earthy colours, from bitter chocolate to mushroom and buttermilk, creates a sepia-toned effect like a photograph from the last century, while upping the ante from faded elegance to fabulous four-star deluxe.



The luminous lounge



Carpets have been tossed out in favour of warm, natural wood flooring, reverse hot and cold air-conditioning has replaced the cranky old heating system, many of the bedrooms sport rainforest showers instead of bathtubs, and every guestroom floor boasts a spacious lobby with squashy sofas and soft lighting. Space has been gained by putting previously defunct areas to new use, so there are 84 bedrooms and four suites as well as five Junior Suites.

Most amazingly, the hotel has remained open throughout this magical transformation. A project management company specialising in 'working hotel' refurbishments came up with a schedule that caused minimum disruption for all. Guests, travel agencies and tour operators were all made aware of the project. Dust and noise were confined behind solid wall screens showcasing architects drawings, providing

updates on the work in progress. Most of the bedrooms were finished well before the start of last summer season.

First impressions count and the most obvious exterior change is the hotel's new snow-white coat of paint. Built into the side of the limestone cliff overlooking the lush Botanical Gardens, on eye level with cable car travellers, you can see the façade shimmering in the distance from the top of Main Street. At closer quarters, you notice The Rock Hotel sign, picked out in sky blue Hercule Poirot lettering.

Indeed, you almost expect to bump into Agatha Christie's dapper Belgian detective sipping his welcome sherry in the lobby, where one of the greatest transformations has taken place. Talk about a dramatic entrance – the long marble reception desk is now flanked by wall panels covered in hessian-textured

paper with wengue wood trim, aptly emulating the colours of Louis Vuitton luggage. The original white marble floor was partially taken up and relaid with a stunning black and white chessboard inlay.

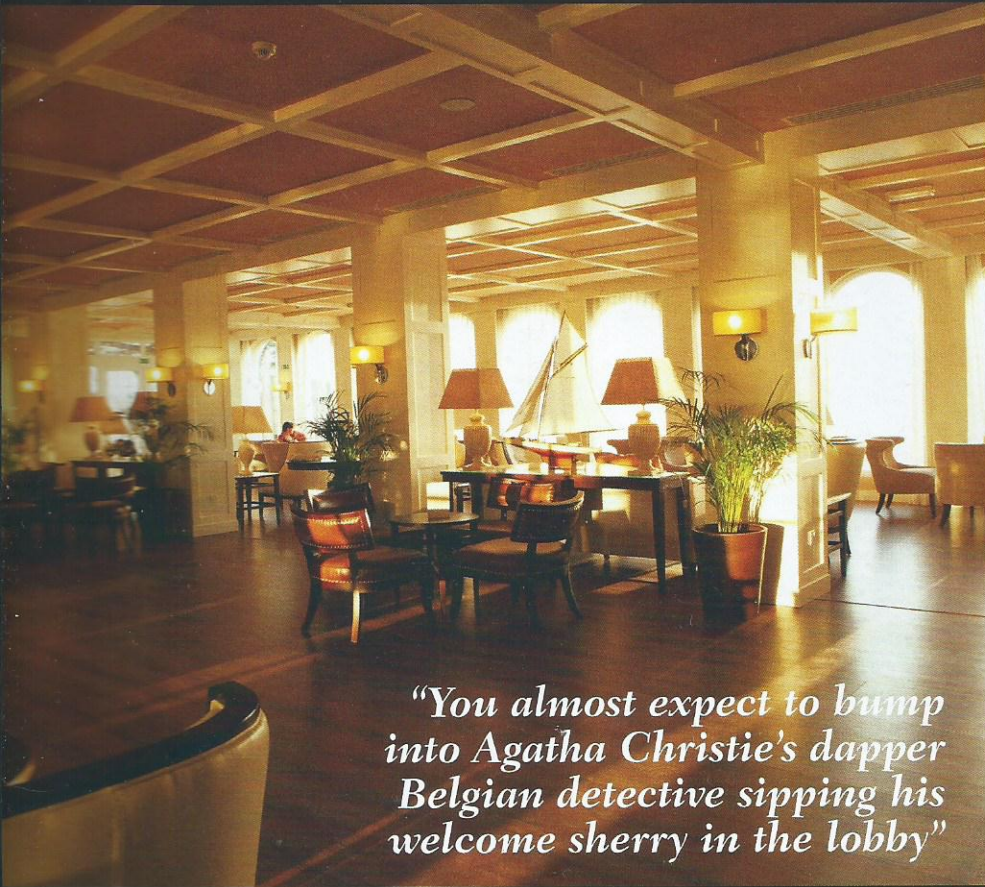
It's worth noting here that smart room cards have replaced the old-style keys with their cuddly toy monkey tags. This will be appreciated by most guests as, apart from the obvious bulge in the trouser pocket they created, they squeaked when pressed, often at inopportune moments!

Of Gibraltar's real monkeys, some known to be fans of the hotel, there has been no sign... in fact, there has been a complete absence of unwelcome furry visitors since one entire troupe was shipped off to Scotland last year. But, as double insurance, monkey-proof windows in the bedrooms which tilt open from the top will keep any future inquisitive primates at bay.

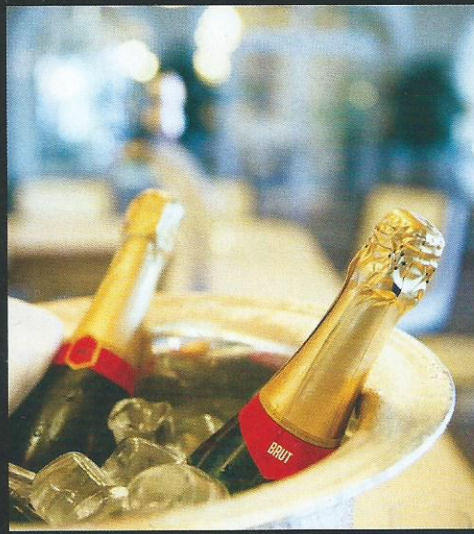
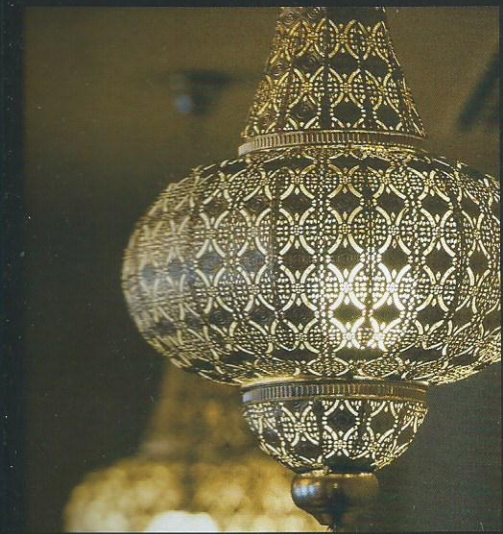
Balcony for two







*"You almost expect to bump into Agatha Christie's dapper Belgian detective sipping his welcome sherry in the lobby"*



Above the lobby in the lounge, sunshine streams through the colonnade of arched windows, making this luminous space seem even more incandescent with its new pastel colour scheme and light-reflecting, mirror-panel doors. The exterior panorama has changed but you still get Imax cinema views stretching from Africa to Algeciras across one of the world's busiest shipping lanes – now with Queensway Quay and Ocean Village marina vistas thrown in too!

Vintage-look wood floors, louvered screens and coffered ceilings with white beams and bamboo-textured paper are other nods to Gibraltar's colonial past. Many original pieces have been retained, like the heavy cream marble lamp bases, which are now topped with new shades. Some new objets d'art created especially for the hotel have been added: a raffish silver rhino ornament; giant wooden wall sculptures hand-carved in the shape of leaves.

Squashy sofas and armchairs upholstered in tactile fabrics and leathers in shades of toasted teacake and clotted cream are a reminder that English afternoon tea is still a favourite time-honoured ritual, served in the Lobby Lounge Bar and on the iconic Wisteria Terrace whose gnarled old vines sprout purple blossom twice-yearly. This dreamy outdoor space has been refreshed and now hooks up with the stunning new restaurant for al fresco dining (see our restaurant review towards the back of this issue).

A snazzy new cocktail bar takes centre stage in the lounge. No longer tucked away in a separate room (now the restaurant), it has become a convivial new meeting place with comfy high seats where guests can come sociably together around the three-sided bar.

Also ousted from the old bar, are framed photographs of some of the many guests who have signed the Visitor's Book, down the decades: Errol Flynn, Sir Alec Guinness, Andres Segovia, Sir Winston Churchill, General Eisenhower, along with a representative selection of British royals, cabinet ministers, football managers and more current stars from Gibraltar's annual Music Festival. They will take up residence in a new gallery in the upper lobby, touching mementos to the hotel's incomparable history.



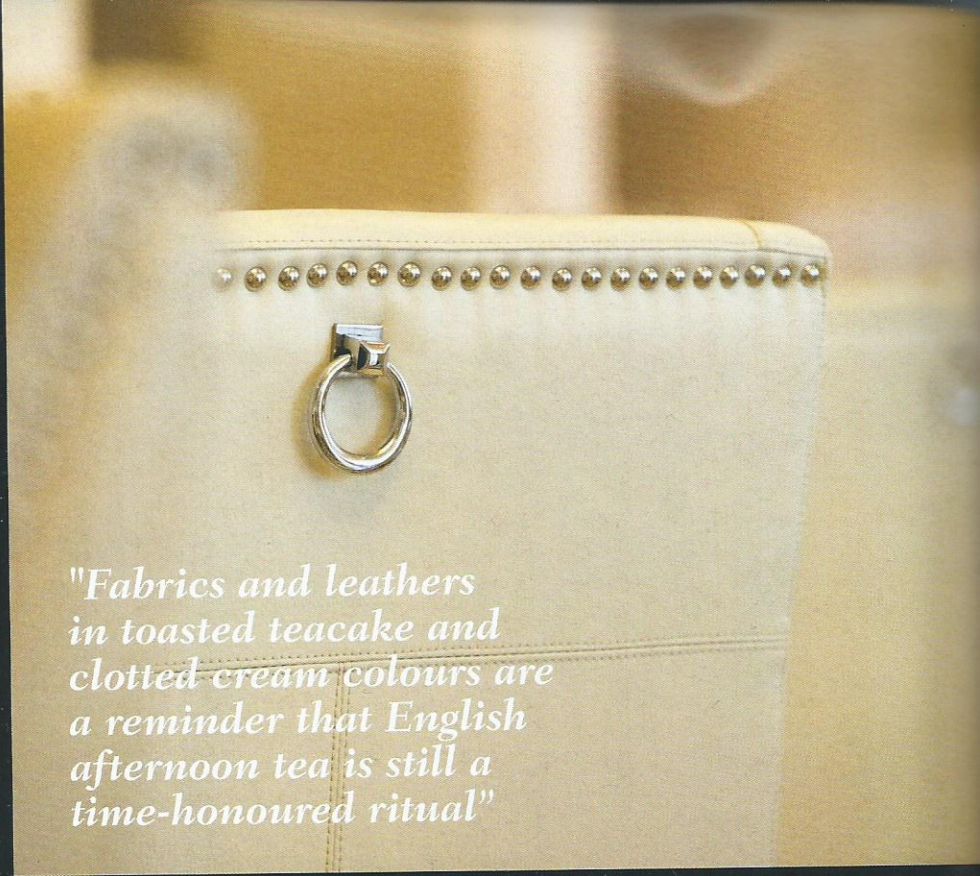
Often, the guests themselves bring that history to life. "Only the other week, a young man came to see us because this was the hotel where his grandparents had met here during the war, when she was a nurse and he was a serving officer," says Sales Executive Leanne Delaney.

Many guests have been holidaying at the hotel for decades and seem to heartily approve of the new look. "Everyone loves it and quite a few guests have compared it to London's 5-star Corinthia Hotel, or Raffles in Singapore," says Leanne. Having sipped a Singapore Sling in that iconic establishment myself, many years ago, I see what they mean.


Guest floors, minus their orange carpet and blood red bedroom doors, are unrecognisably airy and spacious in their fresh pastel hues. Bedrooms are decorated in restful shades of pale olive green, wengue and biscuit, with pine-coloured floors. The beds are romantically colonial, dressed in their crisp white canopies.

All the bedrooms are southwest-facing and en suite, as before, but now with sumptuous Porcelanosa bathrooms and showers. Some rooms still have bath tubs but no longer the playful yellow rubber ducks that drove some of the guests quackers! Wardrobes in white wood and glass slide back to reveal new safes for guests' valuables, and there's wifi and flat-screen satellite TV. Balconies and terraces sport new cane furniture. Guests are still provided with a kettle, cafetière, teapot and all the ingredients for brewing up their own tea and coffee.


The former restaurant becomes the new conference and meetings room, renamed the Victory Suite after its impressive mural depicting the Battle of Trafalgar raging in front of the Rock (artistic licence, as it actually took place much further west, at Cape Trafalgar). The adjoining Sunset Terrace, once a storeroom, has been given a new lease of life with a wood-effect tiled floor, rattan sofas and decorative bay trees. With its dramatic views, it will be a winner for conference coffee breaks and cocktail parties. The Rock is renowned for its banqueting and events catering and can comfortably handle small-to-medium conferences of up to 100 delegates.



*"Fabrics and leathers in toasted teacake and clotted cream colours are a reminder that English afternoon tea is still a time-honoured ritual"*



En suite dreams with a colonial touch



The restaurant struts sepia-toned style





Over the road, next to the hotel's private garden and outdoor pool, the sumptuous Moroccan khaima seating 220 guests is in big demand for glitzy weddings (Gibraltar Chief Minister Fabian Picardo's included). The bottle green and burgundy canvas tent will shortly be replaced with one in white, the better to blend with bridal colour themes. The pool restaurant has a satellite kitchen and fully-stocked bar and hosts weekly barbeques, among other events, in summer.

"No other hotel in Gibraltar has a pool the size of the Rock Hotel's and we keep it open from the beginning of April to the end of October, which is also unusual," says Leanne.

Happily, amid all these changes, the Rock Hotel has hung on to many of the features people love best: the umbrellas 'for the use of guests in inclement weather'; the antique afternoon tea trolley with its charming silver cake stands; the wonderful old oak newspaper

stand in the lounge, with its copies of The Times and The Telegraph hanging from wooden binders.

Not forgetting those 1930s hotel postcards which can still be bought today. Who needs WhatsApp when you can indulge in the delightfully anachronistic ritual of licking stamps! You can even sit at one of the antique desks from which scores of famous visitors have penned their own postcards home, over the decades. It's all part of the special guest experience at this legendary hotel.

But if you want real history and nostalgia, talk to the people who work here. They are what's changed the least. Many have worked here for 20, 30 or even 40 years and that's part of what keeps guests coming back – for the wonderful staff who understand their every need, and the colourful tales they have to tell.

➤ Further information [www.rockhotelgibraltar.com](http://www.rockhotelgibraltar.com)



## Rock Around The Clock

» **8-10am:** The buffet breakfasts are legendary and you don't have to be a guest to enjoy them. We recommend a long, lingering full English on the Wisteria Terrace. For time-challenged executives, the continental Express Breakfast will do nicely.

» **12-4pm:** For business people who need a congenial spot to talk shop, the Lobby Lounge Bar offers space, privacy and an eclectic menu: Moroccan chicken pastille, smoked salmon brioche, pulled pork and glazed cheddar sandwiches all sound lipsmackin' good.

» **4-6pm:** Everything stops for tea, as much of an institution at the Rock as the London Ritz. You get a silver cake stand heaped high with finger sandwiches, home-baked cakes and scones with jam and cream, plus a pot of English tea for £13.95.

» **6-8pm:** When the sun's over the yard arm, bar flies head to the lounge for a retro Rock cocktail, a refreshingly British glass of Pimms or a funky Rock Ape Cocktail as cheeky as its namesakes.

» **7.30-11pm:** Dinner is served. Read our review further on in this issue.

The khaima, for magical events

