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City in the Rock

The Rock of Gibraltar's World War II and Great Siege Tunnels tell what life was like during wartime.

By Richard Varr

Water dribbles through cracks in the mountainside like the steady sprinkling of light rainfall, slickening the chipped rock walls and paved walkways of what can be called a fortress inside a fortress.

“We have a saying in Gibraltar that there are more tunnels than roads,” said guide Kyle Gonzalez who’s leading a tour through just a small section of the World War II Tunnels that snake deep into the belly of the famous Rock of Gibraltar.

“They made a city in the Rock, adding hospitals and power stations.”



Life-size dioramas depict life inside the tunnels during the war.
RICHARD VARR

“Visitors usually are amazed how the workers lived and how they survived the ordeals they went through,” said Gonzalez—ordeals like cold seawater showers, threats of enemy attack, fears of tunnel collapses while drilling, colonies of scurrying rats and continuous darkness. “If you were on patrol here, you didn’t know what time of day it was. You’d never see the sunlight.”

While many might hop a cable car to the Rock’s summit for stunning views of two continents, or walk along Gibraltar’s cobbled Irish Town and Main Street’s central shopping district lined with pubs serving bangers and mash and crunchy fish and chips,

visitors soon realize perhaps the greatest history lesson of this British overseas territory is below ground.

A Bulwark Like No Other

Dank, chilly and dimly lit, the World War II Tunnels served as a bulwark like no other—impenetrable by the then known capabilities of bombing and shelling from the air, land and sea. It was home to 16,000 British soldiers and an additional 5,000 engineers and laborers who worked around the clock from 1940 to 1943, hammering, drilling and blasting the mountain's Jurassic-era limestone to dig most of the 34 miles of tunnels that remain today.

Despite more than a dozen military sieges by mostly the Spanish over the years, the British have held onto this strategic peninsula on the southern edges of Spain since 1704. The Rock guards over the narrow Strait of Gibraltar, the east-west passageway from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea separating Europe from Africa. With the looming Nazi threat just before WWII, British military leaders thought an invasion of Gibraltar was inevitable, so they set in motion a tunnels excavation plan. Civilians were evacuated, but despite three years of drilling and blasting, the feared Nazi attack never materialized.



The 1840s Trinity Lighthouse stands at Europa Point, one of Europe's southernmost points.
RICHARD VARR

British coal and rock miners were joined by a Canadian tunneling company that used superior water-cooled, diamond-tipped drilling and blasting techniques, pointed out Gonzalez. “What the British could do in one week, the Canadians could do in one day. The British drill wasn't practical because it overheated,” he said. They worked 16-hour shifts, with one bed used by three workers in staggered shifts. The resulting rubble served as landfill to extend the runway at Gibraltar's airport.

The 45-minute tour leads less than a half mile through tunnels, many with life-sized dioramas including soldiers and workers that help visualize what it may have looked like nearly 80 years ago. Some tunnels lead to more cavernous openings. “These were mostly storage areas for general supplies, medicines, clothing, food and water,” said Gonzalez. At one point, there's access to a mountainside lookout with views of the airport runway and local cemeteries below, and with wide-reaching panoramas of Spain's southern coastline.

While many workers were blasting new tunnels, others were removing rubble or reloading

supplies—often relocating storage areas to control rat colonies. The tunnel network also had power stations, communication centers, cafeterias, reservoirs deep below and a separate ventilation tunnel complex.

The more cavernous areas sheltered rounded-roof Nissen and Quonset huts for storage, housing and hospitals, their asphalt or bitumen-coated panels resisting metal degradation from dripping water and the constant 90-plus percent humidity. “A lot of workers would feel claustrophobic in the tunnels, so they would put curtains in the windows to simulate the outdoors,” said Gonzalez.

He explained many of the workers were volunteers and not soldiers, some older and disabled, wanting to serve their country in times of war. Most of them left in 1943 upon tunnel completion. And the small number of women nurses had guards where they slept for protection from the few soldiers or workers who might harass them.

Visits by Allied leaders highlighted the tunnels’ strategic importance. They included Prime Minister Winston Churchill, French General Charles De Gaulle and Polish Prime Minister Wladyslaw Sikorski. U.S. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower used the tunnels as a base to command the British/U.S. North Africa invasion known as Operation Torch.

Great Siege Tunnels and St. Michael’s Cave

From the WWII Tunnels, a stairwell that’s closed to the public ascends about 300 steps up to the Rock’s first tunneling project, the Great Siege Tunnels, dug out to repel invading Spanish and French during the 14th and final siege of Gibraltar from 1779 to 1783. Began in 1782, it took only five weeks for 18 men using sledgehammers, crowbars and gunpowder explosives to tunnel about 80 feet into the mountain, creating strategic firing points facing the Spanish border. When the British successfully thwarted the attack in early 1783, the tunnel had been extended to 370 feet with four cannons.

Excavations continued after the siege with the tunnel reaching a chamber known as St. George’s Hall, with space for seven guns. Today, life-sized dioramas there and along other sections of the sloping tunnel re-create a likely yesteryear scenario. From outside, a closer look at the Rock from the border – at vantage points with picturesque views of Gibraltar Bay in the foreground – reveals the ascending line of cannon



The stone Moorish Castle dates to the 14th century.
RICHARD VARR

embrasures pockmarking the mountainside.

St. Michael's Cave is one of the 140 or so caves within the Rock and the only one opened to the public. Converted to a hospital during World War II but never used, the cave is now a tourist attraction with its enormous pillar-like stalactites and stalagmites illuminated by spotlights creating shifting color patterns. Legend has it that Gibraltar's free-roaming macaques monkeys slipped through an undersea passage from Africa that leads through a sub-cave in St. Michael's known as Leonora's Cave. Discovered in the 1940s, the Lower St. Michael's Cave dips to an underground lake. Tours there require some climbing using ropes.

Outside the Rock

Some of Gibraltar's other strategic military sites include the 100-Ton Gun on the peninsula's western shore. The 1880s cannon could fire a 2,000-pound shell from five to eight miles. The 19th century Harding's Battery gun stands at Europa Point, one of Europe's southernmost points, with its 1840s Trinity Lighthouse. Made from the Rock's limestone, the arched American War Memorial honors American-British cooperation during both WWI and WWII. And the 14th-century Moorish Castle, a small stone fortress, sits along the mountainside and is often illuminated at night.

The territory's ancient through modern history is highlighted in the Gibraltar Museum, which includes onsite 14th-century Moorish baths in the basement and a recent UNESCO exhibit featuring accurate forensic reconstructions of a Neanderthal woman and child from two locally found skulls from that era.

Taxi and bus tours up the Rock lead to points of interest within the Upper Rock Nature Reserve including the Great Siege tunnels, St. Michael's Cave, mountain lookouts including the Queen's Balcony (named after Queen Elizabeth II's visit in 1954), and the Apes' Den where Gibraltar's sometimes mischievous and tailless macaques cluster. These attractions and sites can also be visited by taking the cable car to the top of the Rock and then walking down paved roadways that twist along the mountainside.

Planning Your Trip

For more information, go to visitgibraltar.gi. Tours to the World War II Tunnels should be booked in advance. To learn more, log on to visitgibraltar.gi/see-and-do/tours-excursions/explore-the-world-war-ii-tunnels-22 and rocktoursgibraltar.com/tourist-attractions/world-war-2-tunnels. For travel-planning assistance, contact your AAA Travel agent or go to AAA.com/travel.

Richard Varr is a freelance writer based in Houston.

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