

THE BARBARY MACAQUES OF GIBRALTAR
**EUROPE'S
WILD PRIMATES**

Italian wildlife photojournalist Luca Giordano visits the Rock to learn about its furry, wild, unruly and much-loved inhabitants

TEXT AND PHOTOS
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■ A family group
of Gibraltar Barbary
macaques
Macaca sylvanus.



As I join the queue into Gibraltar in the small Spanish town of La Línea de la Concepción just south of the border, I can't help but look up at the Rock. The majestic promontory of Jurassic limestone, dominating the surrounding lowland 426 meters high appears to be glistening at me in the morning sunshine. I now find myself entering Gibraltar, one of the British Overseas Territories, a little strip of land located on the southern extremity of the Iberian Peninsula, covering no more than 7 square kilometres. Around 30,000 people live here from British, Spanish, Portuguese, Maltese and even Genoese descent. I'm here to take pictures of primates, but as a professional wildlife photographer I'm not so interested in humans. Instead I will focus on another incredible primate: the Barbary macaque *Macaca sylvanus*. These animals represent the only wild population of monkeys in Europe, and have lived here from « *time immemorial* », long before Gibraltar fell under British control in 1704, at least according to Hernandez del Portillo (often dubbed as Gibraltar's first chronicler), who famously wrote about the presence of the macaques in 1610. One theory suggested that they directly descend from the macaques that lived in Southern Europe during the Pliocene, up to 5.5 million years ago. However, DNA samples have established, that at least today's Gibraltar macaques descend

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■ According to the latest census, some 250-300 animals split in five or seven troops occupy the Upper Rock area of the Gibraltar Nature Reserve.





from North African populations of this species, pointing towards the Gibraltar macaques having been replenished by later importations from Morocco and Algeria by the British in the 1940s. Nowadays, the Upper Rock Nature Reserve offers shelter to almost 250 individuals, divided into seven extended family groups, each occupying their own territory. The macaques are synonymous with the Rock and are arguably Gibraltar's biggest tourist attraction. Although free-ranging, the macaques are habituated to human presence and appear to be extremely confident in and around people. In specific areas, they often approach humans and interact with them. However, it is important not to forget that these animals are not tame and that we remain strangers: when provoked or threatened,

the monkeys can bite! For this reason, the authorities are continuously trying to discourage hand feeding. Anyone caught doing so is liable to be fined up to £4,000 upon summary conviction. Moreover, the macaques are closely provisioned and monitored by a designated Macaque Management Team, who provide them with a daily supply of water, fresh vegetables, fruit and seeds. In any case, the provisioned food is not the only food resource for the monkeys: the Upper Rock Nature Reserve is covered by a thick coat of vegetation, characterised by several hundred different species of plants. The macaques' largely folivorous natural diet means that they regularly forage on many of these plants, particularly when the tourists head back down. The animals are monitored 365 days a

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The macaques' contact with large numbers of tourists was causing the integrity of their social groups to break down, as they began to become dependent on humans. This induced the monkeys to forage in the town, resulting in damage to buildings, clothing, and vehicles. Close contact with humans has also led to the macaques learning how to open pockets and unzip handbags and rucksacks in order to steal food from humans. For these reasons, deliberately feeding the macaques in Gibraltar is now an offence punishable by law. Anyone caught feeding the monkeys is liable to be fined up to £4,000.



The Barbary Macaque population in Gibraltar is the only wild monkey population in the European continent. Although most populations in Africa are facing declining populations due to hunting and deforestation, the population of Barbary monkeys in Gibraltar is actually growing.

The macaque population had been present on the Rock of Gibraltar long before Gibraltar was captured by the British in 1704 and according to records, since prior to reconquest of Gibraltar from the Muslims. It was during the Islamic period when a purported introduction may have taken place.




year by the Management Team, who occasionally trap animals to vaccinate, tattoo and microchip them for identification purposes. Other vital statistics such as body size and weight are also taken to check upon their health. During my visit, I spent most of the time with Barbary macaque enthusiast Brian Gomila. Brian completed a Masters in Primatology at the University of Roehampton in 2004 and he has been studying macaques for many years now. His association «Monkey Talk – Gibraltar» is constantly working with the public in order to show monkeys in all their wild beauty and above all as a resource for Gibraltar. In fact, macaques are not always seen in this way: occasional forays into town, that often result in damage to property and

vehicles, do not help the monkeys' reputation. However, Brian is sure that a compromise can be reached and he believes in educating local tour guides so that they are able to showcase the macaques in a non-intrusive and sustainable way. To this effect, the Department of the Environment has recently launched a programme offering Brian's Macaque Educational Outings to all licenced guides.

"It is imperative that our guides become conversant on the macaques. One cannot talk about the macaques in the same way as you would about a historic monument. The macaques are dynamic animals and so it pays off for guides to be able to interpret their behaviours in order to be able to captivate tourists and provide them a safe and educational

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A Gibraltar Barbary macaque is perched on a rocky ledge in the foreground, looking out over the city of Gibraltar. The city is built on a hillside, with numerous buildings and a prominent red-roofed structure. The sea is visible in the middle ground, with a long pier extending into the water. The background shows more of the city and the surrounding landscape under a clear sky.

■ The Gibraltar Barbary macaques are considered by many to be the top tourist attraction in Gibraltar. The most popular troop is that of Queen's Gate at the Apes' Den, where people can get especially close to the monkeys. They will often approach and sometimes climb onto people, as they are used to human interaction. Nevertheless, these are still wild animals and will readily bite if frightened or annoyed.



experience", says Brian.

It is extremely interesting to speak with this enthusiastic man and to learn about the macaques' social behaviour, facial gestures and body postures. Towards sunset, away from the masses of tourists, we have a unique chance to spend some time among the macaques in their natural habitat, including wooded areas and cliff faces, and to observe their natural behaviours. Barbary macaques live in multi-male, multi-female societies of around 40 individuals, whereby each animal has a dominance rank. Grooming is one of the behaviours that contribute to reinforce the strict bonds existing among group members: the meticulous act of cleaning a relative from parasites and other organic matter is used to reinforce their relationships and reduce stress levels.

As the sun is disappearing beyond the horizon, we climb on a cliff where macaques usually come to spend the night. While we watch the animals in their last interactions of the day, Brian tells me about a popular belief of Gibraltar. This tale holds that, as long as Barbary macaques remain on the Rock, Gibraltar will remain under British rule. A simple, foolish belief, one could say. However, an important person, in the past, showed real trust in this statement. In 1942, an outbreak of disease caused the population of macaques on Gibraltar to plummet to just a handful, and Prime minister Winston Churchill himself ordered to immediately import some macaques from Morocco, thereby boosting the moral of the troops. The risk of being left without their furry lucky charms was becoming too high to bear...



Gibraltar's Barbary macaque population was under the care of the British Army and later the Gibraltar Regiment from 1915 to 1991, who carefully controlled a population that initially consisted of a single troop. The "Keeper of the Apes" would keep the official records, maintaining an up-to-date register for each ape, listing their births and names and supervising their diet, which they drew officially every week. Following the withdrawal of the British garrison, the Government of Gibraltar took over responsibility for the monkeys.