

Road Signs to Gibraltar

By Patrick J Lambe

The Spanish resent the British presence so much that they only place one sign for Gibraltar on the highway, practically right on the exit ramp. The road looked like it had been seeded from the Jersey Turnpike - Burger King and McDonald's, strip malls and oil refineries, most of the neon business signs in English. Not the fabulous Costa del Sol I'd heard so much about.

I ditched the stolen car on the street next to the bus station, behind the American-style diner. The guy I nicked it from would be getting it back with a burned-out clutch. I couldn't find an automatic when I was window shopping in Seville, and I'd never learned to drive a manual.

Walked through the streets of the Spanish border town Las Lineas, past the lines of golf carts the Europeans call cars waiting to cross into The Rock.

Two armed Spanish guards smoked and talked about the lottery in front of the Customs Office. One of them glanced at me and waved me through. The British guard asked me if I had a passport. I dug it out and he welcomed me to Britain without having me open it. Then I hurried across the airstrip that served as the border into the town of Gibraltar.

I was thankful the local authorities were making my first hit in a foreign country so convenient.

I regretted ordering the whisky the second the guy sitting next to me opened his mouth. The Cannon Hotel has a small bar in the lobby. The Irish bartender came from around the counter to sign me in at a table next to the arched entrance. That's when the only other guy at the bar asked, "Why the hat?" in an accent that sounded vaguely French to me.

Ignoring him, I asked the bartender, "Has a package arrived for Mr. Blaine?"

"I'll have to check in back." He went around the bar to a storeroom. I'd been told he was to be my contact should I need anything, a small time hood who knew what was going down in town. My handler assured me he was the only guy on the Rock who knew why I was here.

"Pardon me, but why the hat," the Frenchman repeated.

He had short grayish hair and sharp features, dressed like most Europeans: slacks, button-down shirt and leather shoes. Very fine lines crossed the bridge of his thin nose.

"Just keeping the sun out of my bald spot." I turned toward the bar, sipping the whisky.

"Why this place?" The French guy had half a Cruzcampo and a full shot of brown liquor in front of him. He picked a cigarette out of the ashtray and inhaled. It didn't look lit to me.

"You mean the hotel?" I asked, looking for the Irish guy who seemed to have gotten lost in the store room.

"No, this place." The Frenchman gestured with his hands. "This horrible place."

“Doesn’t seem that bad to me.” The bartender came through the storeroom door, a rectangular package held in both hands.

“It’s built on monkey shit. The whole fucking town, monkey shit.” The Frenchman laughed hard. He didn’t seem to notice that he’d dropped the unlit cigarette onto the floor.

I took the package from the bartender, wondering why he didn’t throw the drunken Frenchman out, and went up the stairs to my room. Put it on my bed and cut through the cardboard with a Swiss army knife.

The rifle had taken a circuitous route to get here. My handler told me it’d been built by twelve-year-old gunsmiths in a small town on the Afghan/Pakistan border. I swiftly assembled it.

The sight was wrapped in a separate package and I had a hell of a time getting it to sit correctly on the rifle barrel. I checked it when all the pieces were assembled. Looked like it would get the job done.

A postcard rested at the bottom of the box. It showed a white lighthouse with a red stripe around the middle: Point Europa, facing Africa from the southern tip of Gibraltar. Not actually the southernmost part of Europe, but close enough.

There was a crude bull’s-eye drawn in pencil on the back of the card, with the words ‘*dos dias*’ written next to the picture.

I rang down to the Irishman, asked, “Can you talk?”

“I’ll come up.”

Hanging up the phone, I placed the gun on the floor and kicked it under my bed.

I let the Irishman in, and he took a seat on the windowsill.

“The job was supposed to go down tomorrow,” I said.

Pushing the curtain aside, the Irishman looked out the window into the courtyard, said, “So you hang out for a day, see the sights.”

“That’s going to be a problem.”

He let the curtains fall back together, faced me. “No big deal. Go to the upper rock. See some monkeys fucking each other silly, if you’re lucky.”

“It was supposed to go down tomorrow.”

“What’re you crying about? It’s not like your paying for the room.” He stood up from the window and started toward the door, turned before he went through, said, “It’s a small town, but full of tourists. If you go out, try to stick to the main street where you won’t be noticed.”

I slid the gun from under the bed, took it apart and put the pieces in my backpack. Then I leaned back on the pillow with my hands around my head and stared at the ceiling, trying unsuccessfully to get some sleep.

There are signs all over the top of The Rock in at least five languages saying that the monkeys associate plastic bags with food. I spotted the German family with their sauerbraten-laden bags strolling down from the parking lot toward the concession stand outside of Saint Michael’s cave before the apes did.

Several apes sunned themselves on the rocks overlooking the Mediterranean, generally ignoring the tourists. They’re not actually apes; they’re macaque monkeys, the

only wild primates in Europe. Some sources say the Moors bought them from Africa. Another story claims they came through underground tunnels under the strait.

Local legend says that when the apes leave, so will the British. The Spanish are lighting candles in churches all across the Iberian Peninsula, praying for the blessed day that the monkeys troop back to the Dark Continent.

I'd discounted the tunnel theory, until my handler gave me the map of the cave system around Point Europa, the tunnels I was supposed to escape through after I put a bullet through the Arab's head.

I took another sip of Heineken to get ready for the show. The first monkey to spot the food was one of the smaller ones. The bastard actually checked out the larger apes, making sure they didn't see what he was up to, then he made his move, darting from behind and grabbing a plastic bag out of the young German girl's hand.

The larger apes sprang into action, ignoring the father's German yelling. One of them bared its teeth and ripped the bottom of the bag the father was holding, spilling sandwiches onto the roadside. The mother German dropped her bag on the ground and grabbed her stunned-looking daughter. The monkeys scrambled for the sandwiches, ignoring the Germans.

The biggest ape fought off the smaller apes, then collected all of the sandwiches and scampered up the road a bit. It placed its back against the stone wall and ate, growling at any of the smaller apes that approached it. The German family watched as Dr. Zaius wolfed down their lunch. At least the monkeys hadn't given up on World War II yet.

A simian hand snaked over the wall, behind the alpha ape. I looked over the side and saw that the smaller ape who'd swiped the bag from the girl had climbed behind the wall after it had finished its stolen sandwich. It waited until another monkey made a run at the food, making its move when the big ape went to chase the interloper off, grabbing a sandwich and scampering up a tree.

I don't think the bigger monkey even noticed it was missing its wienerschnitzel when it came back to its perch.

Exhausted after hiking all over The Rock, I stumbled into the first bar I could find, a local English-style pub wedged between two Spanish-type houses overlooking the main part of town.

It was the little things that struck me as strange about Gibraltar, the deliverymen in the morning unloading cases of beer out of open flatbed mini trucks, the Jewish high-school kids in long-sleeve white shirts and yarmulkes ducking into the bar to ask who won the Madrid soccer game, the dark-haired locals changing from British accented English to Spanish in mid sentence.

The Guinness was going down smoothly when I noticed the Frenchman eyeing me from a dark corner. He made a look of disgust and pushed unsteadily away from his table, stumbled toward me.

"*Monsieur Hat*. Are you following me?" he said, pulling out a bar stool.

I fought off an impulse to kick the chair out from out of him before he placed his ass down on it. "Just stopped in for a drink after playing with the apes." I said.

An Indian-looking man who sat on the other side of the Frenchman nervously gulped down his drink, placed money on the bar, and left.

The Frenchman eyed me for a couple of seconds. The flesh around his eye socket was a jaundiced color. "I don't think you're at Gibraltar with honest intentions." He broke off the eye-fucking and gestured to the bartender for another drink. "You look like you're here to kill someone."

The bartender didn't look happy as he grabbed a fresh shot glass, but he poured a measure of Jameson's and placed it in front of the Frenchman.

I caught his eye and said, "I'm gonna even up, and I'd like to buy that last one for my friend here."

The bartender glanced away from me to the Frenchman real quick. I wasn't fast enough to catch what went on between them, but the bartender had a pensive look when he looked back to me, said, "That won't be necessary, *Monsieur* drinks for free."

I turned back to the Frenchman. He was staring into his drink. The Spanish have a turn of phrase that sprang to mind when I saw the expression on his face - *mal leche*.

Bad milk.

A fierce electric storm rolled in from the Atlantic on my way back to the hotel. The Irish guy leaned in the entrance, smoking a cigarette and watching the lightning highlighting the top of the rock.

I brushed past him and took a Heineken out of the refrigerator next to the bar, then joined him in the doorway. The raindrops started as we stared at the street, distorting the light from the streetlamps.

"The Frenchman's going to be a problem." I said.

The Irishman seemed intent on the lightning. "He's drunk twenty-four-seven. I doubt he remembers his own sainted mother."

I took a sip from the green bottle, almost dropping it when a tremendous thunderclap startled me.

The Irishman looked from the fireworks to me, amused. "You sure you're up for the job, laddie?"

"The Frenchman might remember me. I had some words with him at another bar."

The Irishman flicked his cigarette into the street, said, "He's a miserable fuck. Comes in to pickle his liver and bitch about living in Gib almost every day. Crying about how much he misses France." A thoughtful expression came onto his face. He pivoted back to the storm. "You'd be doing both him and me a favor if you put him out of his fucking misery."

Frenchie was still at the bar when I caught up with him, slumped over a shot glass, empty seats surrounding him. The rain had slowed down, but the streets were running with streams from the deluge. I waited in an ally across from the bar, the tiled gable of a closed-up auto repair shop keeping the drops off my head.

I didn't have to wait long. Trailed him up the hill on a winding cobblestone road leading toward the upper rock.

Double checking to make sure no one was around, I got his arm into a chicken wing and forced him into an alley. Bashed his head a couple of times against a stone wall, checked his pulse to make sure the job was done right.

A drunk falls down and hits his head during a rainstorm. It might float with the authorities, depending on how closely they look at the corpse. I wasn't too worried, the locals would have a much more obvious and high profile murder to worry about as soon as I dealt with the Arab first thing in the morning. Maybe this one would slide through the cracks.

It wasn't that long of a hike to Point Europa from the hotel. I left early, before the dawn had moved out across the Mediterranean. Lightning still occasionally illuminated the sky several miles out to sea.

The cave was easy to find. I assembled the gun by flashlight, then settled in with my binoculars waiting for the Arab's car. The dossier said he was an early bird, and the Irishman had assured me Point Europa would be his first stop of the day.

The limo pulled up just after first light. A little girl got out before the Arab and ran towards the lighthouse. The Arab sprinted after her, a bodyguard behind him. I couldn't tell through the binoculars if the girl was his daughter or granddaughter, the papers said he had one of each around the same age.

He picked her up and held her in the direction of the lighthouse for a few seconds. I waited until he set her on the ground and she'd skipped off a few feet, then I put a round through his head.

I followed the plan to a T. Left the hardware where I'd taken the shot from. Followed the British Military tunnel to the Mediterranean side. Hiked down the hill a little ways and caught the first bus back into town. Spent the day hiding right out in the open, eating tapas, drinking Guinness. Bought a book in the English book shop. The kind of mindless thing you read on airplanes. It was about World War II espionage on Gibraltar.

I overheard a lot about the shooting in the street and at the bars, speculation about the cause of the assassination. Truth is, besides the mechanics, I didn't really know the reason myself.

A blond woman was behind the bar when I got back to my hotel in the early evening. She was talking about the murder to a man seated at the bar, said the little girl would probably be emotionally scarred for life. Mentioned the girl was the granddaughter. I think the daughter would have endured more psychological damage.

I limped up the stairs to my room, exhausted from all the hiking of the last two days. I put out the No Not Disturb sign and locked the door. Slept for the first time since coming onto The Rock.

The Cannon includes a complimentary English breakfast. I ordered one from the same blond girl who had worked the counter the night before. She bought a Gibraltar Chronicle along with the bangers and mash.

“Where’s the Irish guy,” I asked. “I haven’t seen him around.”

A dour look came over her face. “The cunt called me at home yesterday. Said another business opportunity came up, said he wouldn’t be coming into work anymore. Didn’t even have the decency to give me notice.” She left to serve other guests.

I cut into the banger and opened up the paper to see what it said about the Arab. The news about the assassination was there, but it was sharing a headline.

Notorious underworld figure, French ex-patriot Pierre Aiton, has been found dead, apparently murdered. Authorities are seeking a man described as a ‘tall, Spanish speaking, sunburned American wearing a short brimmed hat’ for questioning. Aiton is believed to be involved in large-scale smuggling operations and narcotics trafficking.

Folding the paper, I got up and left the hotel without taking another bite. I walked to a bar that was decorated to look like Lord Nelson’s flagship. I sat in a dark corner, ordered tea and another English breakfast in my best British accent.

The article said the border would be closed and all the outgoing ships searched because of the two murders. The police were looking into a possible connection between the two crimes and the mysterious American.

There was no way I was going to meet the Moroccan fishing boat that was supposed to ferry me to North Africa. The Irish prick had set it up.

I heard French accents coming from the entrance. The bartender was pointing me out to two snail eaters. Luckily the kitchen was in the back and I skulked through the entrance into an Irishtown ally. I ran through an opening in the old wall and hustled down Linewall Road, toward the docks.

No reason to call my handler. He’d probably already dispatched one of my colleagues down to finish me if I somehow escape from the British authorities or French gangsters. The mick had really fucked me.

There’s only one road sign leading from the Spanish mainland to Gibraltar. One too many as far as I’m concerned.

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