

We will rock you in Gibraltar

By Tim Wall

“It’s a wonderfully unique country. From one end to the other, I can do the whole country in one sentence. Here goes: Lighthouse, Mosque, Cannon, Rock, Monkeys, Cannon, Fort, Pub, Pub, Duty Free Shop, Cannon, Duty Free Shop, Cannon, Runway, High Street, Other Bit of Runway, Spain.” – Comedian Mark Steel, performing a [BBC radio gig](#) in a cave in Gibraltar

As a chess player, taking part in the Gibraltar Masters is about as unique an experience as you are likely to get. The ancient hunk of rock, a couple of miles long and half a mile wide, is a strange mix of contradictions: Formerly a military naval bastion of the British Empire, now the promontory prospers under a benevolent corporate tax regime that attracts everything from insurance companies to online gambling firms, which reportedly store their powerful computer servers deep in the tunnels that criss-cross the small peninsula.

Awarded to Britain in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, and confirmed as British in a 1967 referendum where the population voted 12,138 to 44 to reject Spanish sovereignty (a result nearly matched by Gibraltar’s huge Pro-Remain vote in the 2016 Brexit referendum), Gibraltar is nowadays more British than Britain in a 1970s sort of way. Hence the red telephone boxes, old-fashioned policemen’s helmets and British Fish and Chips advertised everywhere while most of the locals speak an eclectic fusion of Spanglish, with three words of Spanish to each word of English.

The first thing that strikes you on reaching Gibraltar (in my case by bus transfer from Malaga thanks to the efficient organisation of ECF Arbitre extraordinaire Pete Purland) is the fact that the high street has Gibraltar’s airport runway running right through it, so you need to time your border crossings carefully so as not to be delayed for the start of play by a British Airways plane landing or taking off.

The Gibraltar International Chess Festival, now in its 19th edition, is the brainchild of tournament director Stuart Conquest and the owner of the Caleta Hotel, Brian Callaghan, and has grown into probably the strongest open tournament in the world. It is certainly one of the friendliest, and can be proud of its festival nature, with many varied evening events to keep professional and amateur players happy. This year – my first – saw a simul by legendary World Champion Anatoly Karpov, masterclasses by Azerbaijan's Shak Mamedyarov and ex-World Championship Candidate Alexander Beliavsky, a 'Battle of the Sexes' fun chess tournament, a pairs blitz and a chess-and-general knowledge quiz night, ably hosted by English IM Lawrence Trent.

The tournament venue is the luxurious Caleta Hotel, which is around the back of the rock, a couple of miles away from Gibraltar town centre. In its bar each evening a host of grandmasters can be seen, analysing their own games and kibitzing other players' games. In general, to describe the tournament as 'chess heaven' for an enthusiastic amateur would not be inaccurate.

My special 'Welcome to Gibraltar' moment came in Round 1. It was about 10 minutes to three, and I was about to play one of the strongest players of the modern era, the legendary grandmaster Alexander Beliavsky, vanquisher of nine world champions.

Beliavsky was already there at the board when I arrived, and I introduced myself as well as I could in my rusty Russian. For several minutes, we had a lovely conversation about chess in his hometown of Lviv in western Ukraine, his time as part of Mikhail Botvinnik's chess school, and he smiled politely as I told him a passably funny story about David Bronstein turning our weekend tournament encounter in Scotland into a blitz game, just to amuse himself.

Then, as the time to start the game approached, he grew serious, and we were silent. I could not quite believe what I was about to do – play the sharp and uncompromising Leningrad Dutch against a former Candidate for the World Championship who had been playing both sides of the opening since the 1980s.

My best hopes (and worst fears) were fulfilled as Beliavsky plunged straight into one of the sharpest gambit lines against the Leningrad. Bizarrely, despite going astray with a suboptimal move just out of the opening, I was able to survive as Beliavsky's memory seemed to momentarily fail him, and we wound up in a complicated position where he first sacrificed the exchange, and then

we emerged with a strange material balance where his three minor pieces, buzzing around my king, seemed to be just about frustrated by my two rooks and a passed d-pawn on the sixth rank.

After some to-ing and fro-ing, during which I wrongly estimated myself to be winning, Beliavsky elegantly forced a draw by marching his king all the way to my side of the board, threatening mate and neatly requiring a threefold repetition. Despite being obviously disappointed with a draw, after our concluding handshake, Beliavsky sportingly discussed a couple of variations he had rejected, including one (that I hadn't seen at all) where I could sac my queen and somehow be at least equal.

Gibraltar Masters 2020, Round 1
White: Alexander Beliavsky (2529)
Black: Tim Wall (2218)
Leningrad Dutch A87

1. d4 f5 2. g3 Nf6 3. Bg2 g6 4. c4 Bg7 5. Nc3 O-O 6. Nf3 d6 7. O-O Qe8 8. Re1 Qf7 9. e4

*Beliavsky plays one of the most aggressive replies to the ...Qe8
Dutch Leningrad - a system that he has played with both colours!*

9...fxe4 10. Ng5 Qxc4 11. Ngxe4 c6?!

Not for the first time, I couldn't remember the theory.

11... Nxe4 12. Rxe4 Qf7 13. Rf4 Bf6 14. Nd5 Na6 15. Qb3 c6 is the best way to play for Black in this complicated position. Both the following lines lead to an approximately equal endgame: a) 16. Nxf6+ exf6 17. Rxf6 Qxb3 18. Rxf8+ Kxf8 19. axb3 Ke7; or b) 16. Nxe7+ Kg7 17. Nxc8 Qxb3 18. axb3 Raxc8.

12. d5! Bg4



13. f3?!

Maybe it was Beliavsky's turn to forget the theoretical recommendation.

13. dxc6!? is an interesting queen for pieces sacrifice, when one line goes
13...Bxd1 14. cxb7 Nc6 15. bxa8=Q Rxa8 16. Nxf6+ Kh8 17. Nfd5 Bxc3 18. bxc3
Ba4 19. Nxe7 with a good position for White.

But simply 13. Qd2 is a straightforward way to play, which should give White the advantage.

13... Bf5 14. Nxf6+ Bxf6 15. g4 Bd3 16. Bh6 Rf7

16... Re8 may have been safer, to keep the back rank protected.

The reason for this becomes apparent in a few moves.

17. Rc1 Qa6 18. Kh1 c5 19. Re3 c4



20. Bh3?!

Taking aim at the e6 and c8 squares, but the immediate sacrifice may have been better.

20. Rxd3!? is a line pointed out to me by Beliavsky after the game. He had counted on this exchange sacrifice at the time, but then noticed that Black can sacrifice the queen and the passed d-pawn is quite powerful: 20...cxd3 21. Nb5 Bg7 22. Nc7 Bxh6 \$1 23. Nxa6 Nxa6 24.Rc4 Nc5 and Black is doing well.

20... Bd4

The computer prefers 20... Be5.

21. Rxd3 cxd3 22. g5 Be3 23. Ne4 Bxc1 24. Qxc1 Nc6 25. dxc6 Qxc6 26. Qe3



A highly unusual material balance of 3 minor pieces v. 2 rooks has arisen. Objectively Black is doing very well here, but I was short of time and up to move 40 I only had one or two minutes on the clock, even with the 30 second increment.

26...Qd5?!

26... d5! should be winning for Black.

27. Kg2 Kh8?!

The cold-blooded 27... Qxa2! again should win, but I was extremely paranoid about the a2-g8 diagonal. Eg: 28. Qxd3 Qxb2+ 29. Nf2 Qa2.

28. Nc3 Qe5 29. Qxd3 Rf4 30. Ne2 Rb4 31. b3 e6 32. f4?!

The endgame should be good for Black, even though my king is in a very bad situation, cut off in the corner.

32...Qe4+ 33. Qxe4 Rxe4 34. Kf3 d5 35. Ng3 Re1 36. Kf2 Ra1?!

36... Rd1 37. Bxe6 Re8 should keep an advantage for Black. In time trouble I went for what looked like the simplest move - attack the a-pawn.

37. Bxe6 Rxa2+ 38. Kf3 Rd8 39. f5!



39...Ra6

Not 39... d4?? 40. f6! (threatening 41. Bg7 mate) which wins for White.

Or if 39... gxf5? 40. Nxf5.

40. Kf4

Not 40. f6 Rxe6 41. f7 d4 42. f8=Q+ Rxf8+ 43. Bxf8 Re3+.

40... d4

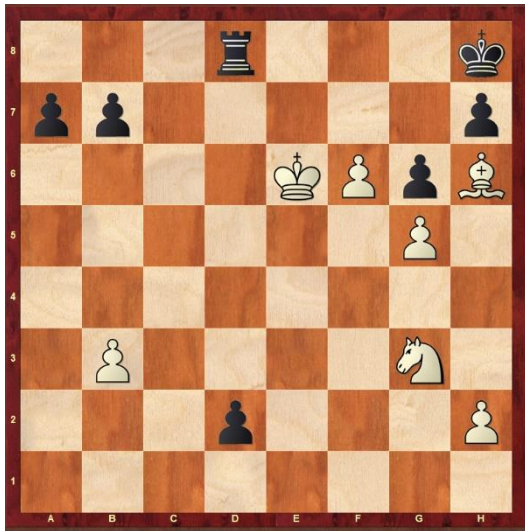
Just made the time control - phew!

41. Ke5

If 41. Bc4 Rc6.

41... d3 42. f6 Rxe6+ 43. Kxe6 d2

Not 43... Kg8?? 44. f7+ Kh8 45. Ke7 d2 46. f8=Q+ Rxf8 47. Kxf8 d1=Q 48. Bg7 mate.



Now Beliavsky was able to force an elegant draw.

44. Kf7! Rd7+

There are nice ways to get checkmated: 44... d1=Q?? 45. Bg7 mate, or 44... Rg8?? 45. Bg7+ \$1 Rxf7+ 46. fxf7 mate.

45. Kf8 Rd8+ 46. Kf7 1/2-1/2

Neither player can avoid a repetition of moves without losing.

I think I'm more or less correct in assuming that such an experience – the pleasant chat and game against one of the world's top players – would not be possible in many places.

After spending the first two rounds upstairs with the giants of the chess world – including such famous names as Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, former World Champion Veselin Topalov and the indefatigable Vassily Ivanchuk – I was clearly suffering from impostor syndrome, and perhaps to avoid high altitude sickness it was almost a relief when I was relegated to join the rest of the plebs in the second playing hall, three floors lower down in the Caleta.

I had heard about the indignity of playing downstairs at Gibraltar, but I have to say I didn't find it in the least inhospitable. There were many more familiar faces from around my rating downstairs, and (if you had time to spare on the

clock) you could walk straight out for a stroll on to a lovely veranda overlooking the Mediterranean.

Downstairs was where I spent the rest of the tournament, but I was rewarded in the end by receiving a second-place rating prize (for the 2150-2249 category) of £1,000 – equal to the highest prize I have ever won at a chess tournament. Engrossed in the games each round, I made my way to 50% by the end (5/10), but I had quite forgotten that there were rating prizes, and it was only when I was sitting in the closing dinner and prizegiving that it dawned on me that I might have won something.

It was an extremely pleasant experience two hours later (near midnight) to have to queue upstairs in a corridor to give my bank details. Other players waiting for their prizes (some in cash) included all the stars of the tournament, including Russian winner David Paravyan (who picked up a cool £30,000 after winning the playoffs). Next in the line to me was multiple British Champion Gawain Jones, who complimented me on winning my prize, then ruefully observed that I had won more money than he had, despite the fact he had finished on 7/10, just half a point behind the winner.

The evening for me was rounded off perfectly when I met the president of FIDE, Arkady Dvorkovich – a strong amateur player himself – in the hotel bar and he allowed me to show him a tricky puzzle once set me by the Romanian GM Mihai Suba.



The diagram above – a helpmate with only White's moves known, shows White's four moves: 1. f3 2. Kf2 3. Kg3 and 4. Kh4. On the fourth move in reply, Black delivers checkmate.

Even though the hour was late, a genial Arkady Dvorkovich demonstrated excellent powers of logic in solving the puzzle in less than half an hour. (It had taken me and some friends a full hour to solve the puzzle when Suba showed it to us in the early 1990s.) Can you do better? The answer will be given next month...

In conclusion, I would heartily recommend a visit to the Gibraltar International Chess Festival. It is a unique experience to rub shoulders with the world's best players, many of whom are extremely friendly and happy to chat, analyse and play blitz, no matter what your rating or title. It's possible to play in the Masters, Challengers or Amateur events, with various schedules and timetables, and many amateur players also come over just to watch and soak up the atmosphere.

For those who are interested, the dates of next year's event are: January 18-28, 2021. All the necessary info, including online commentary and daily reports, is on the tournament's excellent website: <https://www.gibchess.com/>