

## Escape Into Alcatraz: Visiting the Infamous Prison

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

There can't be many places in the world that the mere mention of the name instantly strikes a chill into your heart, but, what's your reaction when you hear the word Alcatraz?

The star of many movies, this island, nicknamed the Rock, sits in the middle of San Francisco Bay, a brooding reminder of how it once housed the world's most infamous prison. Even today, as you look out at Alcatraz from the hills of the city, you can't help but get a shiver along your spine. There's something very foreboding about the whole island and it's no wonder, with its history.

Step back in time two hundred years and this place was barren -- no flowers, no grass, nothing. It was only when the military arrived in 1848 that they bought with them dirt to start creating a fort. And that was how Alcatraz started, as a military outpost to defend the west coast of America. But imagine life for a group of men on an island exposed to strong ocean winds, with nothing to do. It was a disaster waiting to happen. As the men slowly got themselves into trouble, so the fort transformed into a military prison, getting more and more full as time wore on. And so it remained until 1933, when it was taken over by the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

This was to be a new type of super-prison and one that would house the country's worst criminals -- kidnappers, murderers and gangsters. Over the next three decades, some of the most notorious names resided here with no hope of escape. And as you begin your tour to Alcatraz on one of the ships of the Blue and Gold Fleet you're asked to put yourself in the shoes of those prisoners who were brought here. How you would feel, knowing that this desolate island would be your home for the next few years? It's a sobering thought, as you sail further away from the bright lights of San Francisco and closer to the dock of the island.

You arrive at Alcatraz Pier, exactly the same place that the prisoners first set foot on the island and immediately you get an understanding for how they must have felt arriving. It's a steep, quarter-mile walk up to the main cell block -- the equivalent to a thirteen story climb. Unlike for the inmates, an alternative exists these days for tourists; you can take a SEAT (Sustainable Easy Access Transport) instead, an electric shuttle that runs along the route.

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Once you get to the cell block, it's on to what must rank as one of the best audio tours ever produced. Voiced by former prisoners and guards, it explains to you in detail about life on the Rock, taking you through an average day, interspersed with information about the infamous names that once spent those average days here. What strikes you immediately is how cruel this place is. Strategically positioned, from certain parts of the cell block, it was possible to see the sunsets and parts of the skyline, constant reminders of what these men had left behind.

Your visit takes in the dining area, kitchen (complete with the silhouette of knives to check that they were all returned at the end of every meal), library and perhaps the part that everyone wants to see -- the cells themselves. If you're claustrophobic, it may not be a good idea to try them out for size, but it is a fascinating experience -- and a once in a lifetime photo opportunity!

By the time you finish the tour, you've been taken through famous incidents like the "Battle of Alcatraz" in 1946, when a group of inmates overpowered the guards and captured their guns, but failed to break out of the cell house. It may not be easy to transport people back 60 years in time, but 35 minutes of this tour will make you feel as if you've lived through the days of Alcatraz as a prison.

While you're on the island, you can also take outdoor walks with National Park Service rangers and volunteers, who now look after Alcatraz, learning more about its military history, flora or the Indian occupation. This was the final chapter in the history of the island, before it passed into the ownership of the National Park Service. For nineteen months between 1969 and 1971, Alcatraz was occupied by a group of Native Americans, who demanded a deed to the island so that they could establish a university, cultural center and museum. They quickly established their own island-based community, with an elected council making sure that everyone on the island had a job and that all decisions were made with everyone's consent. But consent couldn't be gained on their demands and there was soon a stalemate with the government. Finally that was broken when armed federal marshals, FBI agents and Special Forces police removed the remaining protestors.

Evening tours were introduced in the 1990's and offer a range of extra activities not available during the day. One of the highlights is the tour offered by National Park Service rangers and volunteers on the incline up to the cell house. The guides are full of fascinating facts about the history of the island, allowing you to quickly forget the walk and instead concentrate on the story of how this place developed to become an infamous penitentiary. Once you've completed the audio tour, you can choose from a variety of additional programs on Alcatraz. When we

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visited, we were fascinated by the demonstration of the cell door slamming. It may sound mundane and as if it would be over in seconds, but this proved to be a great opportunity to learn even more about life on the Rook.

Alcatraz Island is open every day of the year except Christmas Day and New Year's Day, or during extreme weather. If you're planning to visit at peak times, especially during the summer or at holiday weekends, be warned -- tickets to Alcatraz have been known to sell out as far as a week ahead. Tickets can be purchased online at <http://www.blueandgoldfleet.com> and boats leave from Pier 41.

*About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)*

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