

The New, Improved 'Rock' Tour

A renovated Alcatraz tells tourists its prison stories in greater depth

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Alcatraz Island, Calif.

For 29 years the federal penitentiary here, just 1.4 miles from San Francisco, held some of the most notorious criminals in American history. The infamous roster included Al Capone; Robert Stroud, the so-called Birdman of Alcatraz; and George "Machine Gun" Kelly.

The U.S. Penitentiary, Alcatraz, was the most secure prison in the system, housing the worst of the federal lot. Most came from other institutions. One anonymous wag perhaps explained it best: "Break the rules and you go to prison. Break the prison rules and you go to Alcatraz."

The 22-acre island in the middle of San Francisco Bay was, despite its beautiful setting, very hard time. In its years as a federal prison, from 1934-1963, fewer than 1,600 prisoners were housed; it was rare when the prison population exceeded 260 convicts, all under heavy guard. The message was clear: No one escapes from Alcatraz.



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Each year, nearly 1.5 million people visit this 22-acre island in San Francisco Bay.

Nevertheless, a 1977 movie starring Clint Eastwood, "Escape From Alcatraz," tells the story of one successful escape from the island, this in June 1962. The three escapees have never been found and are presumed dead by most experts, yet the FBI and other law-enforcement agencies have not closed the case and continue to pursue leads. The escape was one of only 14 in the history of the prison. Most escapees were captured quickly, usually on the island, but five inmates actually eluded capture -- the three in 1962 and two in 1937.

Undoubtedly owing to the international mystique of Alcatraz and its recurring role in motion pictures, TV shows and books, the island has remained a strong tourist attraction, with nearly 1.5 million people visiting annually. Now, thanks to a continuing relationship between the National Parks Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, its nonprofit partner, the Alcatraz experience has been considerably expanded and upgraded. After raising \$3.5 million for renovation and associated new projects, the Conservancy is telling the island's story in greater depth.

"What we wanted to do was make the Alcatraz visit more authentic," says Katy Olds, associate director of visitor programs at Alcatraz. "We wanted to describe what the inmates and the guards actually experienced, how segregation played a role here, how families lived on the island, and much more."

Among the new and improved opportunities for visitors is a revamped 42-minute cellblock audio tour that replaces the one used for many years on the island. "What we did was keep the most memorable parts of an audio tour that was listened to by millions over the years," Ms. Olds says, "and added a significant number of additional stories." The new digitized audio tour contains interviews with former convicts, correctional officers, plus former residents, as well as sound effects recorded on the island. It comes in eight languages, including Mandarin and Dutch, to accommodate visitors from around the world.

The audio tour in the cellblock is just one aspect of what occurs after the 15-minute ferry ride from San Francisco. First, in a new tour route, visitors have to walk a road that leads up to the cell house, just as the inmates did. They hear about standard procedures in place at the time, including a strip search and the issuance of a prison number, a rulebook and prison clothing. One can instantly envision the stark circumstances awaiting a new prisoner. Soon home would be a cell 5 feet wide, 9 feet deep, and 7 feet high. There an inmate would spend up to 23 hours a day unless he earned the opportunity to work in one of the jobs on the island.

A grim reminder of the island's past recently occurred when workers went in to the old clothing-issue area to clean and paint it as part of the new tour. "While we were pulling out shelving that had not been touched since the prison closed, we discovered -- still in its secret hiding place after all these years -- a large handmade knife, commonly called a 'shiv,' hidden here by an inmate," Ms. Olds recounts. "History is still coming alive around here."

Alcatraz includes a fascinating set of museum exhibits, including period photographs, prisoner artifacts, correctional-officer badges, shackles, handcuffs and other reminders of the island's prison history. The displays and exhibits also look at other historical aspects of the island, such as the magnificent lighthouse, Alcatraz's time as a military fort, and then its role as a military prison from 1859 through 1933, before it became part of the federal prison system.

In addition to the impressive displays are the prison cells, furnished as if still occupied, along with the newly revamped Alcatraz Cellhouse Museum store, which has been greatly upgraded and contains numerous historical exhibits, including tools used by inmates in the 1962 escape attempt. The work on the island also includes greater accessibility for the handicapped, thanks to the construction of an elevator within the prison that connects all three levels, along with a handicapped-accessible tram that runs to and from the cellblock.

The island's theater is showing a newly produced film about Alcatraz, and speakers, who often include ex-convicts and former correctional officers, regularly come to the island to mingle with tourists.

"In the summer," Ms. Olds says of Alcatraz, "we accommodate better than 4,800 visitors a day, but we could sell 10,000 tickets." The best advice is to line up early to go to prison.

Mr. Sobel is a frequent contributor to magazines and newspapers and an on-air political and military analyst for several radio and TV stations.