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**INSIDE: A LOOK AT AMNH'S NEWEST EXHIBIT:
PTEROSAURS; EXPLORING ALCATRAZ; AND MORE!**

ALCATRAZ – THE UNEXPECTED SUCCESS OF A SAN FRANCISCO ICON

By Judy Jacobs

It may be difficult to convince people otherwise – at least before they visit – but Alcatraz is not just Al Capone and the other gangsters whose stay there made it one of the nation’s most famous historic sites. “The Rock” is far more than that. And its recent history has evolved in a way that was totally unexpected – at least by the people who were involved in the most recent stage of its development.

When Alcatraz opened to the public in 1973, the rangers and National Park Service employees at the time never imagined in their wildest dreams what it would eventually become. They thought that after five or six years people would lose interest in coming to see it. But they were wrong. Four decades later, Alcatraz is one of the most visited U.S. National Historic Landmarks, a designation it was granted in 1986.

But that’s just the latest chapter in a long history that must be understood to put the place in perspective. Although the story of Alcatraz goes back to the Miwok and Ohlone Indians who lived in the area for thousands of years and knew the island, it was the Gold Rush and the resulting increase in ships traveling through San Francisco Bay that brought attention to Alcatraz, which became the site of the West Coast’s first lighthouse in 1854. That same decade, the U.S. military began to defend San Francisco and the coast with forts in several locations, including Alcatraz. A military prison served as part of the fort throughout its history and in the early days held Civil War soldiers, Hopi Indians and military convicts, and later World War I conscientious objectors. In 1934, Alcatraz became a maxi-



Figure 1: Al Capone at Alcatraz. Photo provided by John Martini and Alcatraz Cruises.

mum-security U.S. federal penitentiary, where some of the nation’s most notorious and well-known prisoners were sent, including Al Capone and Machine Gun Kelly.



Figure 2: A group of Native American activists occupied the island for 19 months from 1969 to 1971. Photo provided by John Martini and Alcatraz Cruises.

The closing of Alcatraz in 1963 left it surplus until 1969, when a group of Native American activists occupied the island for 19 months, claiming they had homesteading rights to unused Federal property under a century-old treaty. As the months went by, the number of occupiers dwindled from hundreds to a handful, all of whom were eventually removed, and in 1972 the island was incorporated into the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, part of the National Park Service.

The Lay of the Land

A mere 22 acres, Alcatraz is small in size but large in stature, and is one of the most visible landmarks in San Francisco Bay. Just 1.2 miles from San Francisco, it serves as a focal point for those viewing the bay from the shore. The island’s compact size makes it fairly easy to navigate. It’s only about one-quarter of a mile from the ferry landing to the Prison, but a somewhat steep climb of about 130 feet, said to be equal to the height of a 13-story building. An electric shuttle is available for those with mobility problems to ensure that everyone has access.

The island is laid out with the Prison building at the top towering over everything else. Visitors arrive by ferry

at a dock that has served as the landing point for boats since 1854. The first building one encounters is a massive four-story former military barracks, the first story of which dates to 1866 and was constructed with 10-foot thick brick walls.

Although originally just a single story, the building was expanded with an additional three stories made of concrete in 1905 in order to house soldier prison guards. When the island became a civilian penitentiary, it became an apartment building for the correctional officers of the federal penitentiary and their families. The ground floor now contains the theater, bookstore, and some of the island's exhibits.

A short walk away, the Guardhouse, constructed in 1857, was the original entrance to the fort and is the island's oldest building. Although designed as a defensive building armed with cannon, it never saw battle. Shortly after completion, it was converted into a prison to house U.S. Army soldier-prisoners and Confederate sympathizers.



Figure 3: Exterior of Alcatraz in 1951. Photo provided by John Martini and Alcatraz Cruises

The next building, also on the shoreline, is the Post Exchange/Officers Club, now a ruin. Although ravaged by a fire in 1970, the walls still stand and visitors can look into the overgrown interior through openings in the wall that once served as windows. The building began as the PX (Post Exchange), the store where soldiers could shop, when it opened in 1910. During the federal prison years, it became the Officers Club and contained a variety of recreational facilities including a gym and a bowling alley.

Rounding the final path up to the Prison, The Storehouse, Power Plant and Model Industries buildings can be seen from a distance but are not generally open to the public. Just before reaching the Prison, the focal point of nearly everyone's visit to Alcatraz is the Military Morgue, constructed in 1910 when Alcatraz was still a military operation.

Then we come to the Prison and its Cellhouse where, like the prisoners who once lived here, visitors spend most of their time on the island. Completed in 1912 by convict labor, the Prison was originally a military Disciplinary Barracks and was later renovated to meet the standards of a federal penitentiary, with six guard towers added to help ensure that some of the country's most notorious criminals wouldn't be able to escape.

Adjacent to the Prison with an unsurpassed view of San Francisco in the not-too-far distance, the Warden's House, like the PX, lies in ruins from a 1970 fire. Once an elegant 17-room mansion built in the Mission Revival style of architecture popular in the 1920s, it first housed the military prison's commandants and subsequently four federal penitentiary wardens.

At the same end of the Prison, the West Coast's first lighthouse began as a beacon to seafarers in 1854. A newer lighthouse, constructed on the same site in 1909, remains in operation today.

The Making of Modern Day Alcatraz

As previously mentioned, the National Park Service didn't expect Alcatraz to last more than five or six years as a visitor destination after it opened to the public, and park officials were already thinking about what to do with it when people's interest waned. Instead they had to figure out a way to shore up the crumbling buildings and create a true-to-history site that would override the Hollywood hype and put Alcatraz in its proper historical perspective.

Until 2007, the displays in the Cellhouse were a mishmash of ranger-put-together exhibits, many of which were just props left behind by Hollywood movie companies. The clothing that hung from the cell hooks was a type that the prisoners never wore, and the beds weren't authentic either.

The National Park Service decided to update the exhibits and make them as accurate as possible. They began by creating a furnishings plan for the Prison, working with historians and exhibit designers from the Harper's Ferry Center who specialize in historic furnishings reports. The Harper's Ferry Center, a part of the National Park Service, supplies parks and historic sites with interpretive media and services, including films, signs, waysides, historic furnishings, and artifacts.

To put together the furnishings plan, a team of researchers went through endless photos, government documents, and records from the Bureau of Prisons to determine what was in the cells and other rooms during various time periods. Once the plan was created, they used it to furnish the

cells. They also went beyond the Cellhouse to other spaces in the Prison that aren't even open yet, some of which won't be ready for a long time, including the movie theater and chapel over the front entrance.

After several months of research, the historians decided that 1961 was the period to aim for in refurbishing the Cellhouse. When people walk through the prison today, they see it as it looked from 1961 until the day it closed. The control center, for example, didn't exist until 1960, and the interior colors also date to that period. Hot water and pipes didn't exist in the cells until 1959.

If the Park Service had decided instead to peg it to the days when Al Capone was there, all the colors in the Prison would have had to be changed and the solitary confinement block and control center ripped out. Instead, the park included interpretive panels showing how the prison looked in earlier days and thus was able to remain true to the chosen historical period.

In addition to the inside of the buildings, the Park Service concentrated on the stabilization of the buildings and roadways and to get rid of the hazardous materials. Historic structure reports were created for eight buildings on the island. Most of the work so far has been seismic upgrades and the reinforcement of floors and walls, with much of the work concentrated on the Prison, the most heavily visited building on Alcatraz, where safety became a concern. A recent project to stabilize the basement of the Cellhouse, completed in August, removed the rusted I-beams and replaced them with rebar and cement. The Guardhouse is also being stabilized.

The National Park Service, with support from the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, is preparing to embark on the next phase of the ongoing work to preserve the historic Cellhouse on Alcatraz for future generations. This project will invest \$14,000,000 to repair and stabilize the exterior walls of the Cellhouse with construction planned to begin in the fall of 2015. The Parks Conservancy will be contributing \$4 million to support this project.

The 1850s guardhouse/sallyport complex, which spans the only road on the island and has a large addition built in the 1860s of unreinforced brick masonry, also has been a priority and is currently being rehabilitated and structurally upgraded at a cost of \$2.9 million, also funded by the Conservancy. This project will be finished in 2015.

Additional Challenges

Alcatraz has particular challenges related to the fact that it is an island. Getting everything out there – visitors, water, power – is difficult. Also, being in a marine environment

with historic buildings that degrade creates preservation problems.

To deal with the situation, Alcatraz officials use rainwater for the garden plants and bring in bottled freshwater for drinking. A catchment system on the roof of the Prison and three 500-gallon cisterns help store the rainwater. Solar panels installed on the roof of the Prison two years ago generate 40 percent to 60 percent of the power. The rest is supplied by a diesel generator located on the island.

Another challenge has been how to efficiently handle as many visitors as possible, as Alcatraz's popularity grew. Today, more than 1.5 million people visit each year.

From 1973 to 1986 visitors were given guided tours by rangers, but as the number of people increased from 50 per ferry arrival to 450, they could no longer escort such large groups around the island. Park personnel investigated the use of audio tours, which were still a novelty at the time. They hired Antenna Theater, of Sausalito, Calif. to create one for Alcatraz, and four or five iterations later, the tour remains wildly popular with visitors.

The producers created the initial version by bringing in ex-convicts and former office staff from around the country and interviewing them at length. Some people said that the former prisoners sounded too nice, so the Antenna Theater people went to the United States Penitentiary, Leavenworth, to interview some inmates who had been at Alcatraz and were still doing time.

The ultimate goal was to tell the story of Alcatraz the prison, the inmates, and the employees. An original total of 30 hours of tape was edited down to a 40-minute audio tour. The Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, which funds and manages various projects and services on Alcatraz, paid for it.

Changes were made over the years to incorporate new and more balanced story lines and accommodate changes in technology. At the beginning, Sony Walkmans playing cassette tapes were used.

The 45-minute audio tours are the most popular means of telling the story of Alcatraz, according to several people interviewed for this review, because the audio tour includes the unaltered voices of people who lived and worked on Alcatraz. This is the "raw stuff" of history.

Audio tours allow Alcatraz to tell its story in the most compelling way, while at the same time being able to accommodate an increasing number of visitors to the island. The audio version is also able to reach as many visitors as

possible, since it is produced in 11 languages – English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, Korean, Dutch, Portuguese and Russian – as well as a visually impaired audio-rich version. About 5,500 people visit Alcatraz each day, and 4,995 of them take the audio tour. With 1,400 sets of equipment, people never have to wait in line more than five minutes or so.

In addition to the audio tour of the Cellhouse, rangers conduct interpretive tours of the pre-penitentiary buildings that lead up the hill from the dock to give visitors an idea of the earlier history of the island as a fort and military outpost. They also do 10-minute cell door demonstrations, showing the intricate way in which the old cell doors opened to let the prisoners in and out.

Beyond the Gangsters

The gardens are one of the Alcatraz success stories, thanks to the efforts of The Garden Conservancy, a national non-profit. It worked with the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy in clearing away about five acres of overgrowth and restoring a series of historic gardens to tell the story of the families and inmates who helped tend to them.

Work began in 2003, and in 2006 The Garden Conservancy's Gardens of Alcatraz received a \$250,000 Save America's Treasures award. The award required matching funding, which the Garden Conservancy raised.

The Garden Conservancy, in partnership with the Golden Gate National Park Conservancy, chose five garden areas that best told the stories from the military and the penitentiary days and divided up the work over four years. The money from the award and the matching funds was used to purchase plants, build up retaining walls, and rebuild pathways. When the work began, a lot of the original bulbs and pieces of railing were discovered among the overgrown weeds.

The challenges were many, including getting water and topsoil to the site. Since there is no water on the island, workers created water catchment systems for rain that would fall from the roof of the Prison building.

In order to replicate the gardens, The Garden Conservancy went through historic documents and photos in the Park Archives and the San Francisco Public Library. They talked to former inmates and the families of former guards who grew up on the island and return each year with old family photos for the alumni day sponsored by the National Park Service. They also spent time at the National Archives in San Bruno going through old letters to look for clues about work schedules and what people planted in the gardens.

These gardens give insight into another side of life on Alcatraz and add a different perspective for visitors, especially those who are gardeners themselves. For some prisoners, gardening provided an escape, and many of the families who lived on the island spent part of their leisure time tending to the gardens.

Part of the mission of restoring the gardens was to interpret them for the public. To do this, the Garden Conservancy created a free self-guided brochure, a website, garden tours, and a docent program.

Forty volunteer gardeners work to keep up the gardens, with work sessions scheduled every Wednesday and Friday. They're asked to commit to at least two months, but some people have been doing it for years. Initially, the Garden Conservancy recruited volunteers by visiting garden clubs, posting ads on Craigslist, and going to horticulture schools. Some companies come to garden on Alcatraz as a team-building exercise or as part of a company's community volunteer efforts.

A group of 12 docents share the duties of conducting formal tours on Fridays and Sundays at 9:30 a.m. These tours last about an hour and 15 minutes, and groups range in size from 10 to 70 people, depending on who comes out that day and how much the rangers promote them in their introductory talk to people disembarking from the ferry. On Wednesdays, a docent is there to talk to visitors from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Another unique aspect of Alcatraz is its wildlife, mostly birds. During certain times of the year, visitors can see birds that nest together in large flocks. This is a rare opportunity, since these types of birds usually nest on islands far away from humans. During the bird nesting season, which lasts from February through August or mid-September, the parade ground on the south end of the island is closed off to the public, since Western and California gulls nest in its shrubs and rubble piles. As many as 10,000 birds, the largest concentration of birds in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, may nest on Alcatraz during the peak breeding season.

From mid-April through mid-August, one or more of a group of 30 docents come out to Alcatraz daily to set up viewing scopes and talk to people about bird ecology. The rangers who give the introductory talks to people coming off the ferry mention the spotting scopes and the opportunity to observe the birds.

Although docents don't have to be birders, they do have to feel comfortable talking to people. They undergo a full day of mandatory training at the beginning of April. This

year, the docents started a scheduled 45-minute bird walk on Wednesday mornings at 9:30 a.m. and plan to add a second one next year. Some docents do random guided walks when they happen to be on the island. Birders and those who have the time may want to pick up a copy of the "Birds on the Rock Checklist" at the bookstore.

The Nitty-gritty Details of the Visitor Experience

Alcatraz is only accessible by traveling on Alcatraz Cruises, operated by Hornblower Cruises & Events, a National Park Service concessionaire. The cruise to Alcatraz departs Pier 33 roughly every half hour daily between 9:10 a.m. and 3:20 p.m. Two night tours depart at 5:55 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. until November and then begin at 3:50 after that.

The day tours can be do-it-yourself with an orientation video in the theater in the barracks building at the ferry landing, a roughly 45-minute audio tour of the Cellhouse and a walk around Alcatraz using a self-guided tour brochure that's available for \$1 at the ferry landing.

The night tour includes a boat tour that circles the island, guided tours up to the Prison building, the audio Cellhouse tour, and a chance to attend special presentations, including @Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz, a rare exhibit by the well-known Chinese artist that encompass seven site-specific installations composed of mixed-media sculpture and sound. These highlight issues of human rights and freedom of expression. @Large is installed in four places throughout the island, three of which – parts of the New Industries Building, a section of the hospital, and the A Block cells – are usually closed to the public. The exhibit opened Sept. 27 and will continue through April 26, 2015.

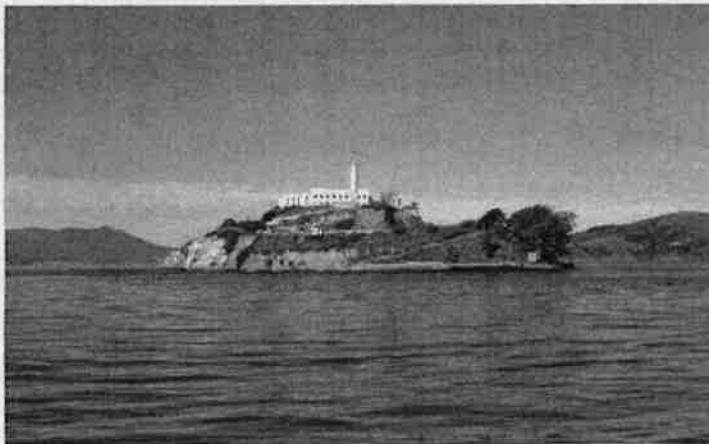


Figure 4: Exterior of Alcatraz today. Photo provided by John Martini and Alcatraz Cruises.

For most people, the highlight of a trip to Alcatraz is the audio tour of the Cellhouse, which tells the stories, cell by cell and place by place of some of the more notorious and interesting criminals who ended up there, why and how,

and their experiences while on Alcatraz. It also brings alive the tales of the guards and their families and what it was like to live and work on Alcatraz.

The audio tour takes visitors on a journey through a building that holds a firm place in the imagination of most Americans and quite a few foreigners as well, judging by the number of languages for which the commentary is presented.

The stories are fascinating and bring a reality check to those who have seen the Hollywood versions of some of them, including the Birdman of Alcatraz, in which Robert Stroud, the Birdman, actually did not raise birds on Alcatraz. He did that at Leavenworth, one learns on the audio tour. In addition, he was a vicious criminal quite unlike the more gentle soul portrayed in the movie and the book upon which it was based.

Even during "low season," Alcatraz is popular, and sometimes crowded, as it tends to be most of the year. A visit is not a spur-of-the-moment decision but most people agree that it is well worth it.

Conclusion

Alcatraz provides a many-faceted informal learning experience that allows people to discover things they never expected to encounter on an island they imagined would only be about gangsters and an opportunity to explore the nation's most famous former prison.

Once convinced that Alcatraz holds a fascination far beyond what they ever expected, a variety of partners – the National Park Service, the Golden Gate National Park Conservancy and The Garden Conservancy – worked hard to ensure that the stories of Alcatraz are told and its history preserved for generations to come. And there's more work yet to do.

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