Alcatraz: General Information

Getting There and Back

The Red & White Fleet ferry service carries visitors to Alcatraz from San Francisco's Pier 41. Ferry tickets can be purchased in advance at Pier 41, Fisherman's Wharf. Tickets may also be purchased at the ticketbooths at Pier 41 at departure time, tickets are limited and often sell out quickly. **We strongly recommend that you buy your tickets in advance.** For more information, call the Red & White Fleet's information office at (800) 229-2784, ext. 2700, or (415) 546-2700. To reserve transportation for a group of 15 or more, call Group Reservations at (415) 546-2653.

The ferry departs from Pier 41 for the 10-minute trip to Alcatraz. Arrival and departure times vary with the season. You may stay on Alcatraz for the entire day if you wish, taking any of the regularly scheduled ferries to the mainland; however, be sure to note what time the last ferry leaves the island. **There are no overnight accomodations.**

Ranger Programs

The National Park Service offers many programs to help you enjoy your visit to Alcatraz. First-time visitors are encouraged to view the introductory slide show offered in the theater near the dock. Ranger walks and programs are offered highlighting military history, famous inmates, escapes, natural history and the Native American Indian Occupation. Program titles and locations change each day and are posted on the island.

Bookstores

To answer your questions about Alcatraz and help you remember your visit, the bookstores at the cellhouse and dock level carry a wide range of books, cards, and posters.

Alcatraz Cellhouse Tour

Visitors can tour the cellhouse with an award-winning audio tour. This cassette tour features narration by former correctional officers and inmates who lived and worked on Alcatraz. The tour, available in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Japanese, can be obtained at the cellhouse entrance for a nominal fee.

For a Comfortable Visit

Take along a jacket or sweater. Alcatraz's position in the middle of the Bay offers breathtaking views but little protection from strong Bay winds. The island is often foggy and cold, even in the summer, and a warm day can unpredictably change into a chilly one.

Wear comfortable walking shoes. Many of the pathways are uneven, and the way to the cellhouse requires climbing a steep incline and many steps.

Do not plan to eat on the island. Food and drink are not sold, and eating and drinking are permitted only in the dock area where the ferry berths. No alcoholic beverages are allowed on the island.

Even though there are over 550 toilets on Alcatraz, only the restrooms on the dock and at the front entrance to the cellhouse are functional. There are no drinking fountains, but water may be obtained at the National Park Service Information Office on the dock.

Your Support

It costs a lot to maintain the historic buildings and grounds of Alcatraz. Because there is no admission fee to this park, voluntary donations from visitors play a much appreciated part in the upkeep of the park. If you wish to contribute to Alcatraz's future, you can find donation boxes at the dock and in the cellhouse near the dining hall.

Fort Alcatraz

North Beach and Alcatraz from Russian hill, 1863

From 1775, when Spanish explorers first sighted the island, until the middle of the nineteenth century, Alcatraz was uninhabited. It wasn't until California became part of the United States in 1848 that military engineers decided Alcatraz was the perfect location for a fort to defend San Francisco's harbor. In 1850 the island was designated a military reservation, and by 1853 a fort was under construction there to become the first permanent military outpost on the Pacific coast.

Workers reshaped the island, blasting away one shore to make it steeper and cutting deep into solid rock. Then, huge iron cannon were dragged up the slopes and mounted so that they defended the island from all directions. Eventually, over a hundred cannon were placed on the island—and not one ever fired a shot in defense of the Bay. Before the fort was completed, technology had raced ahead and made the cannon obsolete. Newer, more powerful guns were employed near the Golden Gate and beyond; and Alcatraz's cannon—and fortress—were no longer important to the Bay's defense. In 1861 the fortress was converted to a military prison, and in 1901 the last cannon were dismounted.

Gun crew loading a 15-inch Rodman cannon, 1870

Soldiers at attention in front of the old Army Citadel, ca. the 1870s

Military Prison

First military prison on Alcatraz, ca. 1902

Confederate sympathizers, along with soldiers being disciplined by the army, were the earliest inhabitants of the military prison on Alcatraz. By the 1870s, American Indians, captured in the Indian Wars, were imprisoned on the island.

For many years, the prison population was small; during the summer of 1898, there were fewer than 25 prisoners. Then the Army began shipping military prisoners from the Philippines during the Spanish-American War, and the count in April of 1900 soared to 441. The old prison survived the great 1906 earthquake, but by 1909 the Army had decided to build an enlarged reinforced-concrete cellhouse. Over the next two decades, the prison served until at last it became expensive to run, overcrowded, and often the object of complaints from San Francisans. In 1933 the Army transferred the prison facility to the newly created Federal Bureau of Prisons.

This photo, taken just before a meal, gives no hint of how overcrowded this dining hall actually was during the 1890s.

In the Second Prison, 1904, military convicts lined up for the morning count under the watchful eye of an armed guard.

Alcatraz girls' club, "Just Us Girls", 1941

Federal Penitentiary

Alcatraz, 1934

A crime wave swept the nation during the years of Prohibition and the Great Depression. When some of the most notorious criminals were imprisoned, they continued to cause trouble wherever they were. A maximum-security, minimum-privilege federal penitentiary was needed to hold the most incorrigible public enemies and troublemakers; Alcatraz became that prison in 1934. These hardcore offenders were not sent to Alcatraz for rehabilitation—they were sent there to learn how to live within the regulations calling for rigid discipline. If they reformed, they might be returned to another, less restrictive prison.

Family Life on "The Rock"

For the wives and children of the correctional officers, life on "the Rock" was not too different from everyday life in the city. A small community flourished in the newly built apartments and residences on the parade ground. The families shopped in the grocery store, bought stamps at the post office, and relaxed at the bowling alley. The prison launch carried children to and from school on the mainland each day and carried their parents to the city for shopping or an evening on the town. Years afterward, Alcatraz families fondly recall life on "the Rock": baseball games, high-school dances, clubs, weddings, Thanksgiving dinners, and cake and coffee with neighbors. It was a place both ordinary and special.

Prison Routine

An average of 264 men were imprisoned in the federal penitentiary throughout its 29 years, a low number by prison standards. There was one guard for every five inmates; the prisoners were closely supervised. As soon as a new inmate arrived, he was informed of the regulations and made aware that the rules were strictly enforced. A violation of the rules would result in a warning, a loss of privileges, a loss of earned time off for good behavior, or a sentence in solitary confinement.

On a typical day, inmates were awakened at 6:30 a.m. After washing, dressing, and tidying their cells, they were counted and marched to a 20-minute breakfast. Next, they were mustered in the recreation yard for work assignments. Morning work lasted until lunch was served at 11:40. At noon they were marched back to their cells, counted, and then released in the yard to return to work. At 4:15 the workday ended and the men counted once more before their 20-minute supper. At 4:45, they were locked in their cells for the rest of the evening, featured immediately, and intermission was found in hiding several days later.

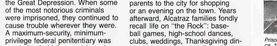
Prisoners marching to the industrial shops, ca. 1938

and the lights went out at 9:30. Just as sailors measure time by bells, the prisoners could measure time by counts: an average of 13 counts were made in each 24-hour period.

Escapes

"I was a fool to try it. I'm shot all to hell," Arthur "Doc" Barker said as he lay dying after his failed escape attempt in 1939; he had concluded what most prisoners had—that Alcatraz was nearly escapeproof. The guards' unwavering vigilance, the high-security facilities, and the island's isolation in the cold bay made escape almost impossible. Yet, between 1936 and 1962, 34 men risked their lives in 14 different attempts.

In 1934, the first federal inmates were collected from other U.S. prisons and shipped to Alcatraz in specially built railroad cars.



Quentin state prison. He prepared "the Rock" for its first groups of incorrigibles and managed the prison for the next 14 years.

April 27, 1936

The first escape attempt was made by Joseph Bowers, who was shot and killed while trying to scale the fence in view of the guards.

December 16, 1937

On this foggy day, Ralph Roe and Theodore Cole vanished from the mat shop. There was nowhere to go but the sea, and its icy temperature, combined with a strong seaward tide, make it unlikely that they survived, although they were never seen again.

May 23, 1938

In an especially brutal escape attempt, inmates Thomas Limerick, Rufus Franklin, and James Lucas beat officer Royal C. Cline to death with a claw hammer. A hail of bullets from a guard tower halted them as they climbed out onto a roof.

January 13, 1939

Before dawn, Arthur "Doc" Barker, Dale Stamphill, Rufus McCain, William Martin, and Henri Young sawed through the soft iron bars of "D" Block. Guards fired on them at the water's edge, fatally wounding Barker and recapturing the rest.

Launch Warden Johnston transports bodies of Crettzer, Coy, and Hubbard.

August 7, 1943

Huron "Ted" Walters clambered down the rocks at the shore and was captured there nearly an hour later, still trying to steel himself to take the plunge into the cold bay.

May 21, 1941

While working in the mat shop, inmates Joseph P. Cretzer, Sam Shockley, Arnold Kyle, and Lloyd Barkdoll first overpowered one guard and then others. After trying for an hour to saw through the steel window bars, the four men were finally persuaded to surrender.

September 15, 1941

Bank robber John Bayless slipped out of the garbage detail and made it into the Bay before he was spotted and hauled to shore, nauseated from swallowing salt water.

April 14, 1943

Armed with homemade knives, Floyd Hamilton, Harold Brest, Fred Hunter, and James Boarman jumped two officers in the industrial area. One guard worked free of his knife and drove away the alarm. Discovered in the water, Boarman was fatally shot. Brest and Hunter were captured immediately, but Hamilton was found in hiding several days later.

July 31, 1945

John Giles managed to assemble a complete army uniform as he worked in the prison laundry. In this disguise, he boarded the army launch that collected the laundry, not knowing that a head count earlier that day would make an Alcatraz stop. The departing launch relayed that it had one soldier too many, and the warden soon determined that a boat was missing. Then Giles stepped off the launch, an escort was waiting to return him to Alcatraz.

May 2, 1946

A bloody escape attempt that became known as the Battle of Alcatraz was planned by six inmates—Bernard Paul Coy, Joseph Cretzer, Marvin F. Hubbard, Miran Thompson, Sam Shockley, and Clarence Carnes. Overpowering several guards and capturing weapons, the inmates took over the cellhouse for two days. By the end of the siege, two guards, William A. Miller and Harold Stites, and three of the inmates had been killed; Shockley and Thompson were later executed at San Quentin for the guards' deaths.

Dummy heads made of soap, cement, and scraps of hair from the barbershop floor

again, the high tides and low temperature that night make it unlikely that they ever reached safety.

December 14, 1962

The last escape attempt was made by John Paul Scott and Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

July 23, 1956

Attempting his break alone, Floyd P. Wilson disappeared from the dock crew and eluded the guards for 12 hours before his hiding place was discovered.

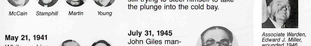
September 29, 1958

Clyde Johnson and Aaron Burgett subdued a guard and broke away from the garbage detail. Johnson was captured immediately as he clung to a sea wall, but it was 13 days before the Bay gave up Burgett's body.

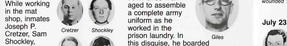
June 11, 1962

Frank Lee Morris and brothers Clarence and John Anglin crept through deteriorated concrete in their cells and climbed over the perimeter wall to the water's edge. To prevent detection, they left carefully made dummy heads of themselves in their bunks. Although they were never heard of

Associate Warden, Edward J. Miller, wounded 1946



Guard Harold Stites, killed in 1946 escape attempt



Morris C. Anglin J. Anglin

month sentence, longer than any other inmate on Alcatraz. Later paroled, Karpis died in his native Canada in 1979.

1946: Warden Johnston's home is bombed.

1948: Alcatraz, he had become an expert gardener and author on the diseases of cacti. Ironically, Stroud was never allowed to keep birds on Alcatraz and spent the next 17 years in solitary confinement in "D" Block. He died at age 72.

1951: Alcatraz's last escape attempt was made by Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

1954: Warden Johnston's home is bombed.

1955: Alcatraz's last escape attempt was made by Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

1957: Alcatraz's last escape attempt was made by Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

1961: Alcatraz's last escape attempt was made by Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

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1964: Alcatraz's last escape attempt was made by Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

1969: Alcatraz's last escape attempt was made by Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

1970: Alcatraz's last escape attempt was made by Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

1971: Alcatraz's last escape attempt was made by Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

1972: Alcatraz's last escape attempt was made by Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

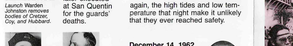
1973: Alcatraz's last escape attempt was made by Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

Today: Alcatraz's last escape attempt was made by Darl Parker, who sawed through the bars in a basement room and decided to swim for it. After a short time in the Bay, Parker gave up and turned back. Scott was later found clinging to some rocks near the Golden Gate Bridge, too weak to haul himself out of the water.

Indian Occupation

Native Americans proclaim Alcatraz "Indian land," 1969.

With the prison shut down, what was to be done with the island? The mayor's office in San Francisco was flooded with suggestions: turn it into a memorial—a park—a gambling casino—a wildlife refuge—or a home for abandoned pets. While the debate continued, the government labeled Alcatraz *"surplus property."* On November 20, 1969, a boatload of 89 native Americans landed on Alcatraz and claimed it as Indian land in an attempt to focus national attention on their situation. In the next two years, they tried to establish a native-American educational and spiritual center on the island. Without sufficient financial and political support, the dream died. Personal tragedies and dwindling resources caused many of the native Americans to give up the plan, and in June 1971 the last activists relinquished the island to U.S. marshals.



American Indians occupy Alcatraz, 1969–1971.

Creating a National Park

By 1971, fire, vandalism, and weather had taken their toll on the buildings on Alcatraz. The General Services Administration, in charge of maintaining public buildings, sent wrecking crews to demolish some structures. Once again, public attention was turned to the island, and citizen groups went to work to save the remaining buildings from complete destruction. On October 12, 1972, Alcatraz was designated part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, a vast city-linked national park, and in 1973 the island was opened for tours. Today, the National Park Service manages the island, working constantly to repair the historic structures on Alcatraz and to preserve the island's natural beauties.

Golden Gate National Park Association

The Golden Gate National Park Association is a nonprofit organization that supports Alcatraz and the National Park System. The Association publishes educational materials, manages park bookstores, raises funds for park improvements, and sponsors special research and conservation projects. You can join in the Association's efforts to improve the park by becoming a member. Association members receive a quarterly newsletter, discounts at park bookstores, and complimentary admission to San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park at Hyde Street Pier in San Francisco. To find out how you can become a member of the Association, call (415) 776-0693 or write: GGNPA, Fort Mason, Building 201, San Francisco, CA 94123.

National Park Service ranger recounts Alcatraz history.

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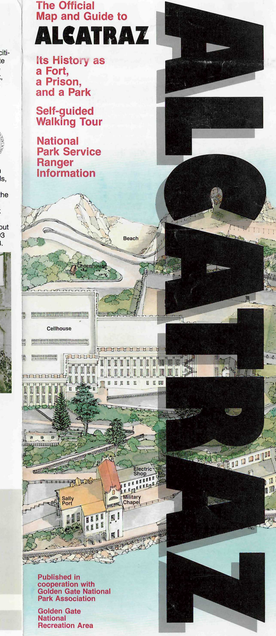
The Official Map and Guide to

ALCATRAZ

Its History as a Fort, a Prison, and a Park

Self-guided Walking Tour

National Park Service Ranger Information



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Golden Gate National Recreation Area