

Travel

January 29, 2016 4:02 PM - Sunday January 31, 2016 – Sacramento Bee

Universal stories are Alcatraz's appeal

Northern California transplant visits Alcatraz for first time

Alcatraz was voted No. 1 U.S. landmark by users of TripAdvisor

The island tells stories of ruined lives and possible redemption





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A U.S. Coast Guard boat goes past Alcatraz Island, which is part of the U.S. National Parks Service. Marcio Jose Sanchez The Associated Press

By Jack Chang

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I never knew what to do with Alcatraz.

During the dozen years I've lived in Northern California, I had never bothered to visit, and hadn't felt the worse for it. I didn't understand the appeal. Was it the boat ride? The views of San Francisco? The tour of the prison itself? Like Southern Californians who never go to Disneyland or New Yorkers who shun the Statue of Liberty, I had ignored what's always been there.

Then Alcatraz popped into my consciousness this past summer, days after I moved back to California. The users of travel website [TripAdvisor](#) picked it as the [No. 1 landmark in the United States](#), over the Empire State Building, the Lincoln Memorial and even Lady Liberty. Cooler than the Golden Gate Bridge, which ranked second on the list? Maybe it was time, finally, to find out.

My first surprise: Like some hot new restaurant, the waiting list to visit the island can run weeks, even months long. Searching online, I had to scroll through pages of sold-out ferry times to book a ride with Alcatraz Cruises, the only vendor that runs boats there. Many tour companies advertise Alcatraz visits but only one actually goes there.

By the time my late-summer reservation rolled around, I nearly had forgotten why I was going. In fact, I was starting to dread it like a dinner date I had scheduled with friends I had since fallen out with. No. 1 or not, I still wasn't convinced. The hubbub at Pier 33 didn't help – the shuffling lines, the semi-obligatory photo in front of a screen printed with an Alcatraz backdrop, the coupon offering an immediate discount on the photo. The message was clear: Buy the freaking photo.

I shuffled up the steps to the ferry's top deck. Around me, tourists from around the world were looking tired and weary, like some selfie-taking journey to Ellis Island. Then the ferry left the dock and we were at sea, with the waves and seagulls and the high-rises of the Financial District stark against the electric blue sky. The millenia-old charm of sailing, of cutting through the spray, had taken over. The sun glinted off the waves and the boat swayed us into a daze. About 15 minutes later, we pulled up to that famed formation – the lighthouse and the main cellhouse hunched on top of that rock, a moon to the bright, slender sun of the Golden Gate Bridge. The top deck grew quiet, as French and Chinese and Spanish tourists studied the island. Here was America's No. 1 landmark. Could reality match the hype?

Rather than acts of courage, Alcatraz remembers the most wretched among us, and how they lived with themselves.

It was all there – the cold cells, the amazing views of the city and the East Bay, the Prohibition-era, gangsterland history. I paced the cell blocks, per the audio tour’s instructions, took in the vintage radios and other artifacts, peeked outside at the bird poop-splattered exercise yard and ran a shoe across the shrapnel marks left in the concrete by Marine grenades used to squash a 1946 escape attempt. I was starting to see the allure: As opposed to the Golden Gate, this place told an intimate story. It wasn’t an epic about human ingenuity triumphing over overwhelming obstacles. This was a monument to bad choices, regret and the flickering possibility of a second chance. It was about the little society inside the blocks, the rows of cells with their cruel nicknames – Times Square, Park Avenue, Michigan Avenue – the inmates’ desperate customs, their mean crimes, all brought to life through the evocative soundtrack playing in our ears.

Inside D Block, which housed some of the toughest cons, former Alcatraz inmate Robert Luke, 88, shuffled through the crowd with a walker, breathing from a compact oxygen tank. Tourists gathered near him, but from a polite distance, as if this octogenarian was still dangerous. In fact, he was just hocking his memoir, “Entombed in Alcatraz,” which details his bank-robbing years, the 29 days he spent naked in solitary confinement in D Block, and his long road back into the light. After he was released in 1959, he moved to Sonoma County, found work in a warehouse and married wife Ida Marie, who joined him in the Alcatraz gift shop that day.

“I’d just go away in my head,” Robert Luke said, explaining how he survived those days in the dark cold. “You’ve got to be tough if you’ve got to be in prison.”

The stories continued in the long, sunny New Industries Building, where images of senior inmates still in lock-ups around the country hung on banners as part of “Prisoners of Age,” a Human Rights Watch-sponsored exhibit. The testimonials spoke of generations of alcoholism, drug addiction and petty crimes, before the big, tragic mistake that put them away. “I feel like I played in hell,” read one from 67-year-old Thurmon Jetton, who drunkenly killed his lover with a baseball bat when he was trying to swing at her enraged husband. “Course I was told and told by different people. I’ve had all kinds of people try to get me out of this.”

Two hours later, I was back on the ferry. Being able to leave the island felt like a luxury. So did the rest of my Saturday afternoon crossing San Francisco’s buzzing streets to meet a friend in Noe Valley and then to Alameda to catch a dance performance.

Is this the country’s No. 1 landmark? I couldn’t begin to measure that. I’ve always been in love with the Golden Gate – its symbolic post at the edge of the continent, its elegant symmetry. The Lincoln Memorial is pure history, that temple floating above the capital’s daily business. But at Alcatraz, I found another world in the middle of one I thought I had always known – violent, claustrophobic and still somehow hopeful, where flawed people paid for their sins but still created meaning in the bleakest of circumstances. Rather than acts of courage, Alcatraz remembers the most wretched among us, and how they lived with themselves.

Maybe that’s why those online voters honored Alcatraz. Human weakness, redemption, hope in the face of despair – it’s the oldest story there is.

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