

Travel

ALCATRAZ

The cellhouse rocks

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Contributing Writer

"You are entitled to food, clothing, shelter and medical attention. Anything else you get is a privilege." So reads number five, prison rules and regulations (1934) for Alcatraz.

The Rock lies in the heart of San Francisco Bay, just two kilometres away from the sights and sounds of one of the world's most beautiful cities. Hard to believe that in its long history this once desolate island has been home to Native peoples, a fortress, a lighthouse, a U.S. military prison and, in 1934, became a maximum-security federal penitentiary housing some of America's most notorious criminals, among them Al 'Scarface' Capone, 'Doc' Barker, Alvin 'Creepy' Karpis, George 'Machine Gun' Kelly and Robert Stroud, the Birdman of Alcatraz. Today, the island is a national parkland — its buildings preserved, its birds and wildlife protected — that offers visitors an unforgettable experience.

I arrived by ferry from Pier 33, marveling at the city's skyline, the sail boats out in the Bay and the spectacular Golden Gate Bridge. The wind and the waves whipped up a sense of excitement as the boat approached the dock.

Statistics in the guidebook are interesting. The cellhouse was never filled to capacity — the average number was 260 prisoners. There were no executions on Alcatraz, although there were five suicides and eight murders. In 29 years, a total of 36 prisoners tried to escape and all but five were recaptured.

I climbed the half-kilometre from the dock to the cellhouse, stopping at the morgue along the way. The elevation change is 40 metres, equivalent to a 13-storey climb, and the views are dramatic.

At the cellhouse tour entrance I am handed audio equipment. At first sight, I am shocked by the size of the prison cells, stacked three storeys high and lined up in long rows with names like C-D Street and



View of the Golden Gate Bridge from the yard of Alcatraz and (below) C and D blocks inside Alcatraz.

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Broadway.

A narrow, metal-framed bed hangs from chains on the wall, with a thin mattress, head at the bars, since a small lavatory lies at the foot. On the back wall, a sink with two shelves above, a small table and chair opposite the bed and an overhead light.

Some cells are dressed with typical belongings — balls of wool to crochet, books from the prison library, shaving utensils, a smoker's pipe, drawings.

Cells in B and C blocks were for general population. African-American inmates were housed in the top tiers while Asian and Latino inmates were mixed in with the white prisoners.

A metal doorway marked Isolation leads to D Block or The Hole where violent inmates were segregated, sometimes in total darkness. Testimonials from former inmates make for a vivid tour. "Nothing could blot out the knowledge of what and where you were, or the certainty that this was all that life held for you in the future," one said.

I step out of the gloom and into the bright sunlight of the recreation yard where I am trapped by rusting barbed wire and chain-link fencing atop imposing concrete walls. I can see the freedom and feel the freedom, like the inmates listening to the laughter and voices from the local yacht club on New Year's Eve, yet I am shut away, so near and yet so far.

The urge to escape must have been overwhelming. A



three-day siege in May 1946 when escapees trapped inside the cellhouse shot several of the guards held hostage resulting in a military bombardment, became known as the Battle of Alcatraz.

Amidst the sound effects on the audio of gunfire and men's cries and the clanging of metal cell doors, I look up at the shafts of daylight streaming in through barred windows. Shrapnel damage in the walls and bullet holes are still visible from the uprising.

At the next stop on Michigan Avenue in B-Block, I stop outside cells number 138, 150 and 152 where inmates escaped

through air vents they had enlarged by chipping away the cement with spoon handles. They even made dummy heads and left them in their beds to deceive the guards. They climbed out onto the roof along a ventilator shaft, down a cast-iron stovepipe, entered the water with flotation devices made from raincoats and were never seen again.

A prison no more, the island's now permanent feathered residents choose to make their homes on its cliffs and are protected from human visitors. A bizarre legacy perhaps to the original Birdman of Alcatraz, I ponder as the ferry casts off from these mythical shores.