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Touring the Rock

Alcatraz is reminder of prison life

BY LISA SINGHANIA
ASSOCIATED PRESS WINTER

ALCATRAZ ISLAND, Calif. (AP) — With its fat seagulls, blinding sunshine and spectacular views, it's hard to imagine that Alcatraz Island was once home to one of the world's most infamous prisons.

Located 1-1/4 miles off the coast of San Francisco, the picturesque setting seems better suited to a vacation spot than the maximum-security penitentiary known as The Rock that once housed hardened criminals such as Al Capone.

Today the National Park Service operates Alcatraz as a tourist attraction, which draws about 1.4 million visitors a year, a fourth of them from foreign countries. Visitors can take a short ferry ride across San Francisco Bay and walk through the old prison cells, the lunchroom, other prison facilities and the military installations that predated the prison.

An excellent audiotape guide, as well as lectures by National Park Service rangers, helps bring to life what Alcatraz must have been like. Former inmates and guards discuss their typical routines, as well as their own specific memories.

There are also descriptions of some of the escape attempts,

complete with sirens and other sound effects.

Some popular misconceptions are dispelled, including the necessity of the *Bird Man of Alcatraz* character played by Burt Lancaster in the movie of the same name. And fear not: Contrary to popular belief, man-eating sharks do not circle the island.

Once outside the barracks, though, visitors are on their own — and must rely on a few place-marks and other signs along well-marked paths to identify buildings and sites, rather than any formal guide. Although some parts of the island are off limits, primarily for safety reasons, there is still a good deal of exploring to do. (Those with physical limitations may not be able to do everything, although some accommodations are made for the disabled.)

Visitors can walk along the water around the tip of the island near the remains of where guards' families - including their children - once lived, past the warden's now-burned-out house, the prison factory and by the old lighthouse. The prison yard, where inmates used to exercise and watch ships coming into the harbor, is open, too. There's also a protected bird sanctuary, which causes parts of the island to be closed closed seasonally.

Even today, the isolation that

inmates at Alcatraz must have felt is palpable. Although San Francisco's landmarks are easily visible from the island's shores, a boat was really the only way to leave when the prison was operating.

A look outside also provides a powerful reminder of Alcatraz' role in American history after the prison closed in 1963. Painted on one of the building's exteriors are the words "INDIANS WELCOME" - a reminder of the island's 19-month occupation by Native Americans.

In 1969, a group of American Indian activists sailed to the island and set up camp in hopes of increasing awareness of their causes. Federal authorities eventually removed the activists from the island, but Alcatraz is considered a seminal event in the development of the Native American pride movement.

There is a small exhibit in a building near the dock where the ferry disembarks, as well as a documentary to watch. Visitors can also learn more about Alcatraz' previous incarnations as a military reservation and military prison. Although Alcatraz is best known for its role as a federal penitentiary, visitors would be remiss to pass on the chance to learn more about these parts of its history.

If you go to Alcatraz, buy your

tickets days in advance and plan on coming early in the day. Ferries leave about every 30 minutes from San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf through midafternoon, and it is not unusual for them to sell out. It's also advisable to come in the morning, since the island gets crowded very quickly.

Although ferry tickets specify when you arrive at the Alcatraz, you can leave at any time, up until 4:30 p.m. when the last boat leaves. Also, dress warmly. The island can get cold because of the wind and water.

Tickets are available online and by phone through the Blue & Gold Fleet, the ferry contracted by the National Park Service to provide Alcatraz service.

The cost, as of November 2001, was \$13.25 for an adult with an audiotape tour, \$9.25 without the tour, with discounts for children and seniors.

Blue & Gold also offers a pricier "Alcatraz After Dark" tour that is fully escorted and allows a nighttime glance of the island.

Visitors interested in seeing nearby Angel Island, which is known as the "Ellis Island of the West," can buy a combination ticket package that provides transportation to both islands.

Good times reported at the Badlands

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — While some feared the Sept. 11 terrorists attacks might lead to less tourism travel, attractions in South Dakota saw an increase in traffic.

Mount Rushmore attracted 55,033 visitors in November, more than double the number from last year. The figure boosted the 11-month total for the year above 2.5 million or 1.1 percent ahead of last year, according to the state tourism department.

The Badlands National Park, Jewel Cave, the Mammoth Site and Wind Cave also reported

November increases. Traffic was up 25 percent at the Lewis and Clark Recreation Area west of Yankton.

"You hate to benefit from a national tragedy," said Craig Pugsley of Custer State Park. "But South Dakota might be a benefactor of the attacks."

South Dakota tourist attractions have been able to lure people looking for a place for reflection, said Bill Honerkamp, president of the Black Hills Badland and Lakes Association.

"We are seeing the flip side of the terrorist situation," Honerkamp said. "It's interesting to

see what we've always considered special - and what others might have considered corny, - suddenly become wonderful assets."

Tourist attractions also got a boost from this year's mild fall weather.

Custer State Park in the Black Hills reported a 66 percent increase in traffic in October.

The Empire Mall in Sioux Falls also benefited from good weather. Traffic approached nearly 11 million visitors for 2001 and in November was up 5 percent from a year ago.

"People are looking at life

quite differently and are becoming closer to their families. They want to show that through gifts and, in South Dakota, are coming out here more."

Near Hot Springs, Wind Cave National Park had nearly three times as many visitors this November as last but traffic is down slightly for the year.

Visitation at Badlands National Park is down 13.4 percent for the year. But at the end of November, the numbers were up 17.6 percent for the month.

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