



It looked at first like so many wartime operations in the Pacific, that we believed it was some kind of realistic training exercise. We could also hear gunfire and see puffs of smoke from Marine grenades and artillery pieces. We thought: wasn't it nice for the Navy and Marines to put on this great show just for us who were finally coming home from the Pacific war? Some of the guys lined the ship's rail and cheered the realistic show. We soon found out what was actually happening. It was no exercise and very real.

The operation was definitely not designed to entertain us. Convicts had disarmed and captured two prison officials, and after murdering them, the desperate men barricaded themselves in a cell block. After three days of intense combat, the battle was over, resulting in many casualties. In addition to the two murdered prison officials, the three ringleaders of the uprising were also dead. That shocking event proved to be exciting for us, but not the kind of welcome back to the States we would have chosen.

We visited Alcatraz as tourists several times in the 1990s and early 2000s, after the island prison had long been retired to become a popular San Francisco tourist attraction. More than a million people a year come to see what "The Rock" was all about, and visit the actual prison cells where some of the most dangerous criminals in American history served their time.

As we took the scenic 20-minute ferry ride from Fisherman's Wharf's Pier 33, we listened to the narrated history. We already knew that since the early 1930s, the island was a Federal prison for such guys as Al Capone, Alvin Karpis, Bonnie and Clyde's getaway driver, Floyd Hamilton, Machine Gun Kelly and the Birdman of Alcatraz, Robert Stroud.

When we stepped ashore (without Marines), we were met by a National Park Ranger, who told us about the various areas we could explore, and then we were on our own. An introductory video was available to see in the island theater, and we also picked up tape players with audio to use as we progressed through our visit.

A warning: if you're elderly or have a mobility problem, you should know the Alcatraz visit involves lots of walking, as well as climbing steep hills and steps. If you need help, before you sign up for the visit, ask about wheelchairs or other devices that are available. I was much

younger when I visited with my family about ten years ago. However, today I couldn't hack it without some wheels.

Before visiting the cellblock area, I'd recommend you take the outdoor Agave Trail. It's easy to walk along the ocean shore, and gives great vistas of the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco city skyline. Local volunteers plant seasonal flowers, adding to the beauty of the surroundings. You almost forget that "The Rock" was a prison. You realize the same beautiful views once meant that freedom was so near, yet so far, to the long-term convicts who served their time there.

When we entered the forbidding cellblock building, we were surprised to see elderly men walk and talk among the tourists. They were retired guards and ex-prisoners, all friendly guides together several decades after their relationships were a bit more strained. Some of us went into maximum security cells, where all light was cut off, and spent two or three scary minutes in total darkness. That gave us some indication of how it would feel if we were to spend days, weeks or months in such terrible isolation.

When we did our tour of the island, our cost, including the ferry ride, was about \$15 for adults and \$5 for kids. The latest price listings are \$40 for adults, \$35 for seniors and \$26 for kids. There's also a special after-dark tour available for those who enjoy the night ferry ride and the spooky cellblocks, where ghosts of former prisoners are said to roam. The price is a bit more costly, but many young (and old) couples find it a romantic experience. Maybe the late Bonnie and Clyde would feel the same way.