



My first experience with "The Rock" prison in San Francisco Bay happened on a disturbing April day in 1946. With World War II ended, our troop ship was returning from the Philippines to the Navy base on Treasure Island, located under the Bay Bridge, between San Francisco and Oakland.

As our ship passed close by Alcatraz, we could see Navy landing craft unloading armed Marines as they stormed onto the rocky shore. It resembled so many wartime operations in the Pacific, we at first believed it was a realistic training exercise.

We heard gunfire and saw puffs of smoke from Marine grenades and artillery. Gee, it was nice of the Navy and Marines to put on this great show just for we veterans returning from the Pacific war. Some of the guys lined the ship's rail and cheered.

We soon learned the operation was definitely not to entertain us. Alcatraz convicts had disarmed and captured two prison officials and murdered them. The desperate men then barricaded themselves in a cell block. After three days of intense combat, the three ringleaders of the uprising were dead.

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

As we took the scenic 20-minute ferry ride from Fisherman's Wharf's Pier 33, we listened to the narrated history. Since the early 1930s, the island was a Federal prison for such guys as Al Capone, Alvin Karpis, Machine Gun Kelly and the Birdman of Alcatraz, Robert Stroud.

When we stepped ashore, 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. There was an introductory video available to see in the island theater, and we also were given audio sets to guide us 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.

Before visiting the cellblock area, take the outdoor Agave Trail. It's easy to walk along, 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, and 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 walking and talking among the tourists as guides. They were retired guards and ex-prisoners. Some of us went into maximum security cells, where all light is 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 isolation.

The latest price listings for boat rides and visits are about \$50 for adults, \$40 for seniors and \$30 for kids. There's also a special after-dark tour 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 couples find it a romantic experience. Maybe the late Bonnie and Clyde would feel the same way.

The island is now part of the National Park Service. For info about visiting Alcatraz, go to www.nps.gov/alca/planyourvisit