

Alcatraz Island: The Most Famous Prison in the World

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Alcatraz Island is set in Golden Gate National Recreation Area, located in the bay area of San Francisco. Currently, this island is one of the most famous spots for tourists in San Francisco, and visitors can reach there by private ferry of Alcatraz Cruises which is under contract with the National Park Service. However, this island was used in other ways in the past.

According to the website The Alcatraz Island Experience, "The first people to visit Alcatraz Island were indigenous peoples who arrived there between 10,000 and 20,000 years ago. Two large groups lived around the bay: the Miwok who lived north of the Bay in the current county of Marin, and the Ohlone who lived in coastal areas between Point Sur and the San Francisco Bay." It is quite difficult to find how they used the island because most history was told by oral communication, but researchers guess they put their members who violated tribe law on the island. Alcatraz Island originally had a purpose as a prison.

According to another website, Alcatraz History, "Sgt. Jose Francisco Ortega, chief scout for Gaspar de Portola's expedition,

may have seen Alcatraz Island when he stumbled upon the Golden Gate in 1769." Then the island became known widely when gold rush happened in 1848. According to The Alcatraz Island Experience, "Hundreds of ships, headed for San Francisco during the Gold Rush, wrecked along the dangerous California coastline. The first lighthouse on the West Coast of the United States was built on Alcatraz to guide ships safely into San Francisco Bay. The lighthouse went into service on June 1, 1854." It was quite difficult to explore bay area without the lighthouse. During the American Civil War, Alcatraz Island was used as a fortress, and soldier-convicts were put on the Island. After the Civil War, Alcatraz Island kept running as a military prison. After the civil war, Alcatraz Island became a federal penitentiary from 1934 to 1963. (The Alcatraz Island Experience) According to The Alcatraz Island Experience, "Alcatraz housed some of America's most notorious offenders, escape artists, gang leaders and general trouble makers." All prisoners were under the most secure conditions, and their letters were always checked by warders. Moreover, it was impossible to tell any complains to outside. According to Alcatraz History, "Inmates talked with visitors via intercom and a correctional officer monitored the conversations during each the majority of the time (Alcatraz Captain Phil Bergen stated that they didn't always have time to monitor the conversations, but the vast majority were)." The federal penitentiary was closed in 1963 because of the increasing maintenance and operational fee. Moreover, it was costly to carry supplies to the island by ferry.

According to The Alcatraz Island Experience, in 1969, American Indian activists occupied Alcatraz Island to protest their rights. Activists included college students and families from Indian Country. According to Alcatraz History, they had taken over Alcatraz because it was a symbol of fear and oppression, the conditions governing the Indians own lives: "The Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island was the attempt of our people to awaken a nation asleep." The takeover influenced all over the world. According to Dr. C.C. and Mabel L. Criss Library News, "this key moment in Red Power activism galvanized media, public, and political support that influenced a series of reforms that led to the passage of over 26 pieces of federal legislation, a period that later became known as the era of Native self-determination." They stayed for eight months but the activists gradually left the island because public interest got lost and there was no enough support to activist.

In 1972, a unit of the National Park Service established Golden Gate National Recreation Area which includes Alcatraz Island because of unique natural resources and human histories. According to the National Park Service website, NPS.gov, the National Recreation Area was established by the National Park Service and it "preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations." If a place is set as a National Recreation Area, natural resources and cultural resources will be protected by the organization. According to the website, Historic Preservation on Alcatraz, the

National Park Service "preserve[s] and rehabilitate[s] many different kinds of cultural resources, including historic buildings, artifacts, archeology, structures and landscapes." To protect the island they maintain buildings and monitor the whole island all the time. Then the island finally was opened to all people.

Alcatraz Island, known as "The Rock", is a famous sightseeing spot in San Francisco and The Alcatraz Island Experience said "more than 50,000 people visited Alcatraz during the first year it was open". Alcatraz Island is very famous as a prison in the US from three aspects: evolution to stay close people's life, impressive reputation, and myth.

The first aspect of Alcatraz Island is that the island always evolved to stay close to people's lives. According to Besty Malloy, "Spanish Explorer Manuel de Ayala named this barren rock in the middle of San Francisco Bay Isla de los Alcatraces (Island of the Pelicans)." Since then, the island has always changed by the era, and stays close people's life in the bay area. San Francisco was a much quieter and smaller town than now, but when the gold rush happened in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, a lot of gold seekers visited the West coast through the port of San Francisco. Thus, San Francisco needed to have strong security to defend the city. U.S National Park Service said:

Behind the walls, the army placed cannon at the north, south, and west sides to enable gunfire at incoming enemy ships. When the work was finished, the army had constructed emplacements for 111 cannons that encircled the is-



(Image 1) The lighthouse on Alcatraz Island, constructed in 1854, was the first lighthouse activated on the West Coast (*U.S. National Park Service*)



(Image 2) Mounted Rodman gun (*U.S. national Park Service*)

land. To the north and south, masonry towers jutting out from the island midway between gun batteries held smaller guns to protect the sides of the island.

Also, according to website, Maritimeheritage, "The first the functional lighthouse on the West Coast was built on Alcatraz Island as well". During the Gold Rush era, Alcatraz island had an important role as a defense.

After the gold rush, the Civil War happened, but there was no

fighting near San Francisco and weapons were never used at the fortress, and Alcatraz soon was used as a prison for soldiers who violated rules of the army. According to U.S National Park Service, "Many local politicians and citizens whose loyalty to the Union was suspect, were arrested and jailed on Alcatraz to serve time." Alcatraz changed its role, but it always had a significant part during the Civil War. From this time, Alcatraz switched from fortress to a jail, and many prisoners were moved to Alcatraz. According to San Francisco Call, a newspaper, "All of the long term prisoners in the latter prison are to be transferred to Alcatraz, which thus will be made the place of confinement for the criminal element, while Leavenworth will be the place of detention of soldiers guilty of purely military offenses" (Alcatraz to Held Army's criminals). Only notorious prisoners were left at Alcatraz and short term prisoners were moved to other prisons.

Moreover, depending on the number of prisoners, new living buildings were built. When other prisons got damaged, Alcatraz became an evacuation place for prisoners. According to Ship Passenger, after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, "inmates from nearby prisons were transferred to the infallible Alcatraz."

Alcatraz Island became a Federal penitentiary, and the population on the island increased. As you can see from image 3, workers' families, including children, lived together at Alcatraz. The website, Museum Collection at The Rock, indicates that children went school from Alcatraz by ferry. For some families, Alcatraz was not only prison but also a living place.

When Alcatraz finished its role as a federal penitentiary,



(Image 3) Children at Alcatraz (*Museum collection at The Rock*)



(Image 4) "Welcome to Indian Land" Sign on the Dock
(*Museum collection at The Rock*)

Indian activists came over and occupied the island. It is obvious from image 4, and they changed the sign of the island indicating the land belonged to native Indians, and it became as a symbol of Indian protesting.

After the occupation, the National Park Service established Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Alcatraz Island was opened up as a sightseeing spot. The island included various activities like night tour, garden tour, and exhibition about the Civil War. Alcatraz's garden was started from 1920, and California Spring Blossom and Wildflower Association initiated



(Image 5) Overlooking Rose Terrace (*Alcatraz Gardens*)

island's wide beautification project (The Garden of Alcatraz). The warden allowed well-behaved prisoners to care for outside gardens, but it stopped when the federal prison was closed. The website, The Garden of Alcatraz, said "the Garden Conservancy and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy formed a partnership with the National Park Service to restore and maintain key gardens on Alcatraz." They continue to preserve the garden and promote the Alcatraz to visitors.

The Island is also open for private use, and if you have around 200 people, you can have a dinner reception in a shower room (Alcatraz Island Experience). As you can see from image 6, Germany artist Zedd had a surprise pop-up party at Alcatraz. Alcatraz has a special reputation thanks to its unique history, and many people desire to have a memorable event at the famous prison site in the US. Alcatraz became a famous sightseeing spot not only as a tough prison but also as a natural resource and serving a special experience loved by all ages.

The Second aspect is the reputation of strong security and the horrible image of Alcatraz. There are two prisoners and two ele-



(Image 6) Zedd Surprises Fans with a Party at Alcatraz (*People.com*)

ments of environments that made the reputation. Frank Lee Morris and Robert Franklin Stroud were prisoners who created the strong security image of Alcatraz.

Robert Franklin Stroud is well known as "the birdman of Alcatraz", and his first crime was the murder of a prostitute in Alaska. He was sent to Federal penitentiaries in Washington and Kansas because his daily behavior was difficult to manage. In addition, Alcatraz History said that "In 1916, after Stroud was refused a visit with his brother, he stabbed a guard to death in front of eleven hundred inmates in the prison Mess Hall". He was almost sentenced to death by hanging, but thanks to his mother's begging, he was imprisoned without parole. During his stay in Kansas, Robert Stroud started to become interested in birds when he found an injured bird. He was allowed to breed birds in a lab and studied about birds. Alcatraz History mentions that "As a result of this privilege, Stroud was able to author two books on canaries and their diseases, having raised nearly 300 birds in his cells, carefully studying their habits and



(Image 7) Robert Stroud
at Alcatraz in October 1951



(Image 8) His books
(*Alcatraz History*)



(Image 9) Frank Lee Morris- Alcatraz Inmate # 1441

physiology, and he even developed and marketed medicines for various bird ailments". He got great attention about his works, but US prison authorities decided to send him to Alcatraz to escape the attention. According to Alcatraz Island Experience, Stroud spent six years in solitary confinement in D-Block and an additional eleven years in the hospital. It was forbidden to have birds in Alcatraz, so he spent his time reading books.

Frank Lee Morris is well known as someone who succeeded to escape from Alcatraz. During his young life, he was already used



(Image 10) His cell (*Alcatraz history*)



(Image 11) John Anglin's Cell and dummy heads (*Alcatraz history*)



(Image 12) Fake head (Museum collections at The Rock)

to committing crimes. Alcatraz History said that "from his infant years until his teens Morris was shuffled from one foster home to another, and he was convicted of his first crime at the youthful age of only thirteen", and he spent his young life at a training school for boys. He still committed crimes and was imprisoned at other penitentiaries. Eventually, he was incarcerated at Alcatraz and he met the brothers John and Clarence Anglin,

and with Allen West together they masterminded the scheme of prison break. According to Ghosts of DC, "The plan involved the men chiseling through the walls in their cells over the course of a year, until the hole they created was large enough to crawl through. By May 1962, the holes were complete". However, it is quite difficult to dig a hole. According to Alcatraz History, "A total of 13 official counts are made each 24 hours. In addition, the shop foreman makes six verification counts." From a daily schedule of guards found on Alcatraz History, it can be seen that they also checked all cell houses 4 times between lights out at 9:30pm and morning cell check at 7:30 am, so it was almost impossible for prisoners to avoid guards' monitoring. They used the short time each day to make holes to avoid notice by guards, and as a result carrying out the big plan took more than a year.

Forbidden to have animals and strong monitoring by guards give impression of a high security place. Moreover, sharks in bay area and San Francisco weather make an eerie image too.

There are various kinds of sharks in the bay area. According to the website, San Francisco Bay Keeper, "There are 11 different species of shark that do call the San Francisco Bay home". Also, the Leopard shark is the most common shark found in San Francisco Bay." Most sharks in bay area are small and not man-eating sharks. However, the great white shark, which is famous from Jaws sometimes appears in San Francisco bay. According to Alcatraz Island Experience, "in October of 2015, a great white shark breached to catch and eat a sea lion, approximately 20' off the Alcatraz Island dock."



(Image 13) Fog in the bay area (SF Gate)

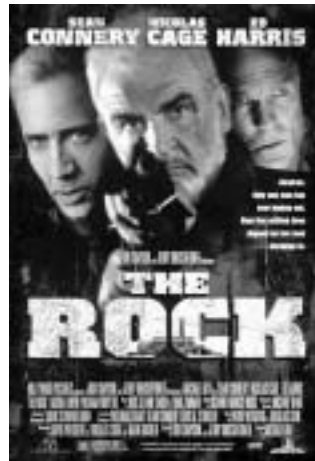
One unique characteristic of San Francisco weather is fog. In summer and winter, there are frequently foggy days. According to the website, *Climate of San Francisco Narrative*, "Summer-time in San Francisco is characterized by cool marine air and persistent coastal stratus and fog, with average maximum temperatures between 60 °F and 70 °F, and minima between 50 °F and 55 °F." *Climate of San Francisco Narrative* also said:

The main source region of wintertime fog in San Francisco is the Great Valley. Radiation fog is formed in the moist regions of the Sacramento River Delta and is advected through Suisun and San Pablo Bays and into San Francisco Bay on cool easterly drainage winds. This type of fog is less common than that of summer, but is typically much denser and has a greater impact upon transportation systems due to greatly reduced visibilities (Root, 1960).

This fog, of course, reaches to Alcatraz Island and it makes the Island appear as if it is a haunted building.



(Image 14) Poster of *Big Hero 6* in Japan (Eiga.com)



(Image 15) Poster of *The Rock* in Japan (Cinema A La Carte)

The third aspect is the myth about Alcatraz and how the myth was imported or arranged to pop culture. Thanks to unique stories on the island, Alcatraz Island often appears in pop-culture like TV drama, songs, and games.

Many Hollywood movies choose the island as their setting, two famous examples are *Big Hero 6* (Image 14), from Walt Disney Studio and *The Rock* (Image 15), Bruckheimer Films.

According to Heather Killingbeck, [*Big Hero 6*] is an action-packed comedy-adventure about the special bond that develops between Baymax, a plus-sized inflatable robot, and prodigy Hiro Hamada. When a devastating event befalls the city of Sanfransokyo and catapults Hiro into the midst of danger, he turns to Baymax and his close friends to help uncover the mystery. The



(Image 16) San Francisco
(San Francisco Travel)



(Image 17) Tokyo (Triple Lights)



(Image 18) A bridge like Golden
Gate Bridge



(Image 19) Japanese ramp on train
(Big Hero 6)



(Image 20) San Fransokyo (Disney wiki)

story is set in an imaginary city, San Fransokyo (Image 20) which was inspired by San Francisco (Image 16) and Tokyo (Image 17).

In the movie, there are a lot of symbols which remind us of Tokyo and San Francisco, and some characters' names come



(Image 21) Japan-Town (Fog City Secrets)

from Japanese, such as the main character, Hiro Hamada. The "San Fransokyo" has a unique history. According to Web site, Disney wiki:

San Francisco initially was a spot of land in California where Japanese immigrants flocked to in the late 1800s. But history was changed when the 1906 earthquake struck the land and caused unspeakable devastation. ... The events of the earthquake, ironically, inspired the city to be reborn, for San Francisco was rebuilt by Japanese immigrants using techniques that allowed movement and flexibility in a seismic event. After the city was finished being rebuilt, it was renamed San Fransokyo due to it being a city made greater than it was before from Japanese and American architecture combined.

San Fransokyo's background is inspired by the history of San Francisco, and the designer also got inspiration from Japan-Town in San Francisco. (Heather Killingbeck). (Image 21)



(Image 22) Ferry to Alcatraz
(The Alcatraz Island experience)



(Image 23) Landing at Akuma Island
(*Big Hero 6*)



(Image 24) Akuma Island (*Big Hero 6*)

In this movie, one island which is called Akuma (demon in Japanese) Island appears and it has an important role. (Image 24) The island has a secret laboratory about teleportation from Silent Sparrow project which needs to install two portals to transport objects from one place to another (Big Hero 6 Wiki).

Akuma Island reminds us of Alcatraz Island from location, purpose, and environment. Akuma Island is located far from San Fransokyo, and Hiro visits there by flight of Baymax. (Image 23) Similarly, to reach Alcatraz Island, visitors must use ferry. (Image 22)

Moreover, Akuma island has secret facilities for teleportation



(Image 25) Caution Sight (*Big Hero 6*)

experiments in Silent Sparrow project, and there are signs to show danger. (Image 25) Meanwhile, when Alcatraz was a federal penitentiary, it also had strong security. Thus, both islands are separated from normal people. Plus, both islands are in a similar environment. After an accident of losing a pilot during a teleportation experiment, the island was shutdown (Big Hero 6 Wiki). Alcatraz was also closed and abandoned for a while after it finished its role as a prison. From those points, the potential circumstances are same between Akukma Island and Alcatraz island. And it's natural to remind us of Alcatraz island in Big Hero 6.

In another example, *The Rock*, according to Ryan Lamble, the basic story is:

The great Ed Harris plays Francis X Hummel, a disgruntled war veteran who, with his band of mercenaries in tow, holds 81 tourists hostage on San Francisco's Alcatraz Island. With an arsenal of deadly chemical weapons aimed squarely at the city, Hummel demands that the government pay millions of dollars' worth of compensation money to the wives of fallen black ops soldiers.



(Image 26) The terrorists (*The Rock*)



(Image 27) Cistern Room (*The Rock*)



(Image 28) Tunnel Maze (*The Rock*)

In this movie, Alcatraz occupied by terrorists, and there are many gun action scenes which remind us the place was used to be a jail. Some scenes were recorded on Alcatraz, but most scenes

were filmed at studios. In this movie people can find hidden tunnels underground. According to Ryan Lamble, "The dark underbelly of Alcatraz Island, as depicted in the film, is a maze of mine carts, deadly jets of fire and rickety walkways". (See Images 26, 27, 28)

In this movie, large hidden tunnels, trails for mine carts, and steam generators are depicted. However, there are no hidden facilities at actual Alcatraz. One possibility how the movie director got inspiration is research by Texas A&M University. The university team had an investigation on the island and they scanned underground. When they scanned the rec yard, they found some structures. According to, Rebecca Morelle, Prof Everett points to a spot where he had found evidence of a subterranean tunnel system.

"(The tunnels) would have been used for the fortifications.

There would have been movement of man and ammunition; it would have been bomb proof and covered with earth so it would have been protected," he explains:

They proved Alcatraz had a hidden tunnel system when it was used as a fortification. Even the scale is small, it was enough to inspire the movie director, and that's why the movie, The Rock has a huge maze of tunnels. Moreover, this exaggerated change inspired many tourists, as Chuck Barney mentions, "Alexandra Picavet, a public affairs officer for the National Park Service, says curious tourists inquire on about Alcatraz's connections to Hollywood on a daily basis." When tourists ask about the tunnel maze underneath, they are all surprised that Alcatraz only had

small tunnels when it was used as a fortification. Even though some settings are fictional, people are fascinated with the island.

From these two examples, the original environment and history of Alcatraz have strong influence which makes movies more attractive, and creates myth by which people can't help but to visit Alcatraz.

In conclusion, Alcatraz Island is a popular island in the US for three reasons: its evolution to stay in the public eye, its impressive reputation, and the myth which has created from movies. In history, Alcatraz had various roles but always stayed in the news and people's imagination. Currently, the island has become a popular sightseeing place thanks to its unique history and environment. These days, Alcatraz has various facilities and activities like various language setting of audio tours to welcome people from around the world. Its popularity will certainly continue in the future.

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