

## **San Francisco on \$30** **by Brian McAleer**

### ***Day One***

Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2004

One million people visit 'The Rock' every year and I nearly didn't get to go there.

I arrived at San Francisco International Airport on a sunny Sunday afternoon, happy to be back in California. I was happy because for the second time I would indulge in the state that's like a country in itself. Apart from being to L.A., I had also toured America's most livable city, San Diego. I was now completing 'the list' by visiting the third major city of the state. And I was completing My Year Away in the same place where it started. America; where my journey began, and where it would end. Quite fitting.



Taking a bus from the airport, I arrived in downtown feeling hot, dirty, and tired. As I walked into the downtown area, I could hear chanting, banging and horns. The first thing I saw when I walked up the steep slope of Mason Street was hotel workers on strike on every corner. They were yelling about their rights concerning health care and banging their sticks against buckets and trash can lids. The sound felt like it was punching my ears but in a way, the message was getting through to me as well. That sound would make the stay of a hotel guest pretty unpleasant, but luckily for me I was staying in a hostel.

To see where I was in conjunction with my hostel, I pulled out my travel book; flipped to the city map and realised I had to walk up an awfully steep slope to get there. I didn't want to do that so I hailed for the first taxi I saw and it pulled up right away. Loading my over-packed suitcase in the trunk, I gave the driver the address and he realised that it was just up the street too, but understood why I didn't want to pull it up there. Driving off, we ended up only passing two blocks when we pulled up in front of the Hostelling-International's San Francisco Downtown.

Before leaving England, I had called the hostel in advance asking them if I could just show up and get a bed on the day.

“What date will you be arriving sir?” the woman I spoke to said  
“Sunday October 3<sup>rd</sup>” I answered.

She informed that I’d be fine in getting a room and that was a relief for me as my credit card had been cancelled long ago and I didn’t want to ask any relatives for a loan. In true back-packer style, I lived and worked in three different countries without any credit on my credit card. Paying your debts is a small priority for a young traveler and no matter how hard you try to ignore it, it’s like an itch; you know it’s there but it won’t go away. I can’t remember how I really survived and every now then I would just go to an ATM and check if there was just a few dollars in there. After a while, the inevitable happened when my card was gobbled up.

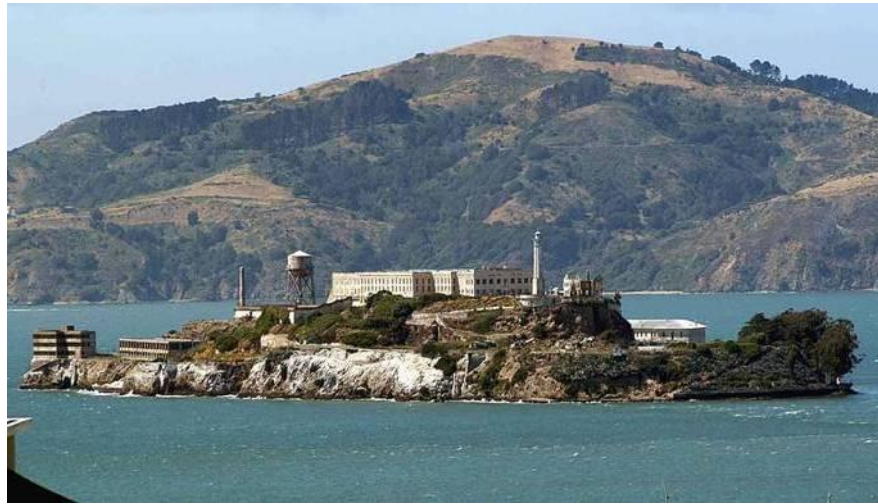
My stay would only be for one night, and for that night I was going to sleep. After checking in I found my room on the fourth floor and was rather pleased with it. Apart from the chanting of the strikers on the corner outside my window, the room was pleasant and quiet. It was an old room with high ceilings and an old-fashioned heater attached to the wall. Outside my room, the hostel was made up of five levels and there was something different to do on each of them. In the foyer were all your “Where to go and what to do” brochures for San Francisco. Second level had e-mail and internet access, which is always busy unless you use it at about six in the morning when everyone else is asleep or just coming in from a night on the town.

If you have pre-believed notions that hostels are full of young, loud, horny, drug-taking, boozing, pick-pocketing travelers, well they are, but not as much as you think and rarely would one guest fit all those descriptions. Hostels are usually very well organised and divided in accordance with the different needs of their customers. Some guests like to keep to themselves as they are just there to crash, whereas other go around and chat to every person they come across to have the entire hostel experience. My home for the night was relatively quiet, which suited me fine as I was only staying one night and had decided to keep things low key.

After unpacking and showering I was looking forward to a good sleep, but not before a little exploring. As my hostel was right in downtown and only a stones-throw away from Union Square, I checked that out first. Arriving on the corner of Powell and Geary Streets, the square lay out in front of me and was surrounded on all sides by department stores, high-end boutiques and a wide-range of hotels. Walking into the square I subtly did a 360 degree turn to take it all in; I spotted the 1904 St. Francis Hotel, remembering that’s where President Ford was shot in 1975. Turning my attention back to Union Square, I was surprised at how small it honestly was. Expecting something like Trafalgar, it was about the size of a couple of basketball courts.

My eyes lit up and I gave a grand smile when I saw my first one slowly coming towards me. It had come from the Cable Car Turnaround at the bottom of Powell Street, which was just one of several in the city. *‘I will ride one of you before I leave San Francisco’* I thought to myself and made a mental note that riding a cable-car would come second on my to-do-list. There were scores of other tourists walking around and I could spot them out compared to the locals. They looked like the residents of any other city; walking by the on-lookers, deep in thought and ignoring everything else that was unfolding. By this point it was starting to get cold and dark.

My mission for the first night was to walk down Powell Street, all the way to Fisherman's Wharf because situated there was Pier 41. That's where the ferries left from. That's where I would catch my first glimpse of...



Alcatraz Island. Staring directly at it, it blended in perfectly with the mist and haze like it had always done. The walk from downtown to the pier was half an hour, but it was an informative tour as I discovered San Francisco's version of Chinatown. Gazing at it in sheer amazement with its iconic appearance and mysterious shape, I knew I had made it and could just hop on a boat and go there. It was mine for the taking but first there was the issue of actually getting on the ferry. If there was no chance of getting a ticket, I'd miss my opportunity and I definitely wasn't swimming there. Several prisoners did manage to escape the prison but never made it to shore, likely due to the almost freezing temperatures of the bay, or the current, which moved faster than any human can swim.

Sighting the ticket booth to my right I walked over. It was closed but I read the information signs that explained the ferries left every half hour from a quarter past nine and onwards. The cost was \$16.50 and I felt relieved to have enough. However, recalling back to the words in a travel book, it was stated that the tickets had to be booked in advance due to the popularity of the site. The sign also expressed that you could buy a stand-by ticket but that didn't guarantee you a spot on the ferry. So I was met with the dilemma of whether or not to take a chance and buy a ticket or save my money for something else. How busy was it going to be the next day? With the ticket booth closed I went to the nearest place where someone might have some information, a souvenir shop.

"Seven post cards for a dollar" the young Chinese man behind the counter said.

He caught me off guard a little and was pointing at a display rack. Post cards did sound like a good idea since I had no camera and didn't have sufficient money to buy even a disposable one. Before selecting my seven I approached the worker and asked about my chances of getting to Alcatraz on stand-by. He recommended I just try as there was no way to tell how many people would show up with pre-paid tickets. I

agreed, and would rock up tomorrow, purchase a stand-by and just hope. I chose my postcards, two of which, of course, were pictures of Alcatraz.

Sitting on a bed and reading, when I returned to the hostel at around 7.30pm was another young traveler. We introduced ourselves and chatted about our adventures. His name was Tom.

"I leave for Australia tomorrow evening. I've been away for a year and I'm ready to hang up my traveling boots," I said "for the moment at least."

"Oh yeah? I just left my job in England to travel the world" Tom said "I think I just needed to do it before it got too late, you know?"

"I totally agree. So where are you headed?"

"I'm hiring a car and driving across country by myself, to New York" Tom said proudly.

"That'll be fun. I'm off to Alcatraz in the morning, and I'm looking forward to that a lot".

One traveler's journey was ending and another's was just beginning, and that's always how it was. Since Tom had done all of San Francisco in the past three days, he gave me his map of the city. It was worn and creased, but much more efficient to carry and use than the map in my brick-sized travel book.

## ***Day 2***

Monday 4<sup>th</sup> October 2004

*'Can I be bothered getting out of bed?'* was the question I asked myself when I woke from twelve hours of blissful slumber, on Monday morning. That thought soon passed me by when I remembered what was in store for the day. By 9.30am I was already showered and packed. At 10.45pm that evening, my plane would take off from San Francisco International bound for Sydney and then onto Melbourne.

My budget for the day was thirty dollars: leaving my back pack and suitcase in the hostel lockers cost \$2.00 for twelve hours. \$16.50 for my Alcatraz ticket, \$6.00 for the train ride from Powell Street Station to the airport, \$3.00 for the cable car ride from downtown to Fisherman's Wharf, which left \$5.00 out of the thirty (as well as the few bucks I found in the bottom of my suitcase) for food or whatever else that amount could buy. I made the decision to sacrifice a proper meal in exchange for the comfortable and quicker train ride to the airport, instead of a stuffy, old bus, and an experience on a cable car which no visit to San Francisco would be complete without. I defeated my urge to indulge in a mouth watering American hamburger I had enjoyed so many of, by ordering myself to wait until I got onto the plane to eat – in 14 hours.

The city streets swarmed with people; those on their way to work, other tourists and those obnoxious chanters outside each hotel. There was a cool, refreshing breeze that pinched my cheeks and picked me up off my feet. Thinking I might have enough money for a coffee and a muffin I headed to Starbucks. Ordering a Vanilla Latte and a Caramel and Apple Muffin, I spotted someone I recognised in the milling crowd, dressed in denim and looking much looser. It was one of the flight attendants from the Frankfurt flight! He was with a girl and they were talking and putting sugar in their

coffees so I didn't say anything. As they walked out, he looked at me and the expression on his face registered with the thought that says *'I know your face, but from where?'* What a small world we live in.

Cable Cars were passing me left and right and every so often, one would return to its point-of-call at the bottom of Powell Street. I began walking to the Cable-Car Turnaround. The queue to get on was long and being only 10.15am I stressed over how long it might be in another hour or so. The ticket booth was near the queue, so I headed over and purchased a one-way pass. With that in one hand and my coffee and muffin in the other, I waited about twenty minutes. The people moved forward quickly when we were called to board, and when my turn came, I had to go right in and take a seat, missing out on the fun of hanging off the side of the car like a tourist should. Once the car was full, the conductor required our tickets be handed to him for checking. The Cable Car jerked forward causing everyone to grab hold then we were off, to the envious looks of all the people still waiting in line.



Our route took us up the steep incline of Powell Street, passing Union Square, Broadway and more hotel workers, chanting and complaining. Still on Powell, we went through Chinatown then left onto Jackson's Street, and if you keep following that, you'll hit Pacific Heights, the exclusive hilltop neighborhood, which is home to the rich and famous. We didn't get to check out the mansions and pads, as we hung a right onto Hyde Street and went down the steep decline, through Russian Hill, where you can find a few of the city's museums and scenic stairway gardens. The journey took about fifteen minutes, and after a noisy ride of clinks and clanks, we arrived at another turnaround. The conductor thanked everybody for riding the Cable Car and I was back in Fisherman's Wharf.

Café's and restaurants were setting up for the day's trade as I strolled down Beach Street. Once again I was heading for the ticket booth at Pier 41, excited but also a bit worried. I was hoping I would have my chance to visit Alcatraz Island and experience what it had to offer. It has been the basis of many movies and books and has become a symbol of America's dark side. From fiction rather than fact, there were stories to be told there about the prison and the men who lived in its cells – Al "Scarface" Capone and Robert Stroud the famous "Birdman of Alcatraz". The truth of the island had often been overlooked in the fog of its myths and my goal was to experience all of that and visit the place used in one of my favourite movies, "The Rock".

“Now you do know that this ticket does not guarantee you a spot?” the woman in the ticket booth asked.

“Yes I do” I replied and I could read the fact as well, as it was clearly printed on the ticket circled in pen by her three seconds earlier. With my stand-by pass clenched firmly in my hand, I walked towards Gate 7 and saw the sign for where I was to stand. The people with the pre-paid tickets were already beginning to queue on Pier 41. If I didn’t join them, I could wait for the next one or get a refund. It felt like I was being mocked for being on stand-by because my line was right opposite Gate 7 where you walked through to board the ferry. Faces of excitement passing through there would look slightly to their left to see faces of hopefulness a few metres away.

11.05 am. The herd of ticket holders on Pier 41 began to move forward as the staff at the gate called for them. I became alert and watched them pass by, one-by-one. There were at least three hundred people and before they entered the gate, some of them stopped to get their picture taken in front of a blue sign with a view of the bay behind it. The sign read “I visited Alcatraz Island, San Francisco”. I amused myself in exchange for my worry by imagining a sign that said “I was put on stand-by to visit Alcatraz Island, but I missed out”. At least then I could show people that I nearly made it there.

I continued to wait but my patience was fading. Once everybody from the pier was aboard, the staff in their bright, yellow and blue jackets held their walky talkies up close and listened to a muffled voice. From my point of view there was plenty of space on the ferry but how could you tell really? Then the moment I was anticipating came as one of the staff turned to the other people and I in the stand-by queue and said,

“Okay folks, come on over” and waved us towards the gate.

A rush of excitement filled me, I was jumping on the inside and satisfaction shone like light from my face. I almost skipped over to the gate, followed the ramp that led onto the ferry and boarded. I was finally going to Alcatraz Island.

All the seats on the first level had been occupied and there was a line for the snack bar already. Without paying much attention to that or anything else I headed up the stairs and onto the top deck, feeling like a child, and found a spot to lean against on the barrier. Before we set sail I turned to observe the white city in front of me, the Bay Bridge to my left and the Golden Gate Bridge to my right. Then I turned around and peered through the fog at my destination. I was excited because I had achieved one of my major traveling goals. Thinking about “The Rock”, I couldn’t wait to step onto the island, go exploring and discover all the spots the film used. The engines started, my ferry slowly backed out of the dock, and within a couple of minutes we were lined up with the island and moving non-stop towards it, a mile and a quarter across the bay.

On the way over I started to hear the track ‘Fort Walton, Kansas’ play over and over in my mind. It’s the same piece of music I listened to on my Discman as my plane was taking off from Sydney bound for Los Angeles, a year ago tomorrow. I expected that I might have started humming the music once I was approaching Alcatraz Island

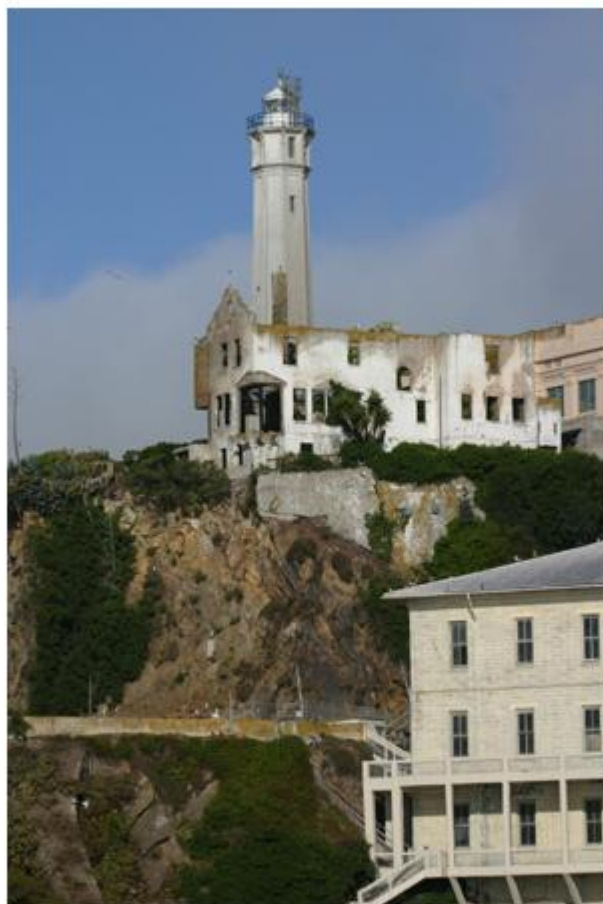


because the moment was having an emotional effect on me. I was at a time in my life when I was living my dreams.



As we steamed across the bay, the music left my mind because we had a little visitor on the top deck that caught everybody else's attention too. A woman was devouring a ferry hotdog just a few feet away from me, when its meaty scent attracted our visitor, a seagull. It was a rather large one too and it gently hovered above the woman. Looking sympathetic she broke a piece off and threw it off the top deck and into the water below. The bird swooped down like a true professional, lurked just above the surface, shot its head into the water and retrieved its prize from the churning foam. The hotdog woman, the people along the rail and everybody else was impressed by this achievement. The bird flew back up to us while chomping away at the same time. He found his provider again and began lingering just above her once more. But she had finished eating, and seeing this, the scavenger retreated, no doubt, in search for another sympathetic person with food.

A little over ten minutes after leaving the pier, the ferry arrived at Alcatraz, slowed down and connected smoothly and gracefully with the floating dock. Roughly three hundred people, including myself, walked off the ferry along the ramp to set foot on the island. Rangers kindly directed us to the dock area and the first thing I heard was a loud voice. It belonged to another ranger who was holding a megaphone to his mouth, and standing prominently on a cement box, with one hand on his hip. He was in front of the information booth and officially welcomed all the visitors to Alcatraz Island. Once everybody was on the dock the man with the voice went on to briefly talk about the island's history, the day's special guest and pointed out where the maps were. There were three demonstrations on offer and in my mind a grand adventure was shaping up for the day ahead.





‘A \$2 dollar donation will be greatly appreciated’ is what a sign said to me on the map stand. You didn’t have to pay for the flash and comprehensive map but the island would use any money for the conservation of the birds and plant life. Two dollars wasn’t much, but it was a chip off the bone from my budget. Never the less I popped two crumpled bills into the slot and took my map. Opening it out revealed an almost poster-sized map that came complete with a drawing of the entire island and the name and description of every building. On the reverse side was some important information about Alcatraz, when it was a fort, then its days a prison, the Native American population who occupied it as activists and some facts about the natural side of the site. Guiding my finger across the map I followed the route to my first stop.

Near the entrance, behind a table was the days special guest; an old woman who had lived on the island as a child, being the daughter of one of the wardens. This was in a room situated on the outside of the Cell House. She had gone on to become pretty successful in life (typically) as a published writer. She was speaking to visitors about her childhood days and signing copies of her book. She looked friendly enough but I didn’t approach her as I didn’t know what to say to her without saying something different and original; a question she hadn’t heard a thousand times before, basically. To me, it would also feel a bit unusual to be up close to someone who lived such an early life. To think she grew up playing in the yard 100 metres away from the most notorious criminals in history, kind of sent a shiver down my spine.

When I walked into the place that housed some of the worst criminals in history, everybody in there was wearing head phones. And so I was in the Cell House and these days you can purchase a guided audio-tour, which describes every inch of the most famous spot on the island. For \$6.00 it’s not a bad deal, but once again I had to go without the pleasantries. I guided myself around and after walking up and down the aisles; I wondered which cell was used to lock up Connery and Cage when their characters were captured by the hostile marines. I investigated and soon found it. It was Cell Block D and was closed off to the public. You could peer through the bars of the gate where a faded sign was attached to the spiral stair case winding down from the second level. It described how the cell was rarely used in the prison days and was now conserved in its natural state. Impressed with the Cell House, I soon moved on.

All the attractions had talks and demonstrations from the rangers and were at well spaced-out times of the day. There was one show where a talk informed the visitors about the shower room and the how the guard system worked when prisoners used the facility. There was also the “Lockdown Show” when only once a day, you could enter the cells and be a temporary prisoner. But I didn’t catch all that glitz and the reason was I had begun winding down and was feeling all 'attractioned' out after a year of visiting museums, parks and monuments. As I appeared outdoors again for some fresh air, I spotted a ranger, standing on the foot path and not looking particularly busy. At that moment a dying question I had thought about popped back into my head, so I walked up to him to get my answer.

“Excuse me mate?” I said politely

“Yes sir, how can I help you?” he asked

“How long have you been working here?” I asked and he looked a little confused by that.

“About eight months now”

“Oh, so you weren’t here when they were filming the ‘The Rock’ then? Can you tell me how much of the movie was actually made here?”

“Sure, I can tell you that” he said and I stood up straight and listened “Well naturally all of the exterior shots were done here on the island, in the space of a few weeks, and all of the indoor scenes were done on sets down in Hollywood”

“So they didn’t film inside any of the buildings then?”

“No” he said firmly

“That makes sense because I noticed how it looked different in some places?” I said and he looked at me blankly and nodded. That was all I wanted to know, so I thanked him and moved on.

Two hours after arriving I had been through and around every building and site on the island. Taking out my map, I pin-pointed the Agave Trail and began walking there, to find a quiet spot and reflect upon my day. As I sensed I was being touched by a very spiritual connection to Alcatraz I also felt like I had traveled back in time. By that I mean the impression I got when I would occasionally glance back to the city; it suddenly looked futuristic compared to the buildings on the island. Once I reached the trail I came to the edge of the island and sat on some rocks over looking the shore. I pulled out my travel journal and just held it tightly for a few minutes. Looking for the right words to express everything at that moment, was important so I gave it some serious thought. After some consideration, I wrote the following passage;

*“I’m sitting on an island right now. From my view I look out onto the San Francisco Bay with the city dead ahead, the Bay Bridge to my left and the Golden Gate Bridge to my right. So which island can I be on in order to see all this? I’ll tell you; it’s The Rock, and I’ve made it here. I’m at the very end of my journey and what an experience it has been. For my last day of freedom I decided to tour the island at my own pace, much like my life over the past year. It would have been nice to have somebody special to me here to share the moment and share the feelings I felt being in this place. But there’s no point dwelling on that since I’ve come all this way. I might as well go off and enjoy my last half an hour or so before it’s time to get back on the ferry and return to the city. From there I will commence the next journey, the one back home.”*



There is another track from “The Rock” soundtrack called ‘Jade’. It figures early on in the film when Sean Connery’s character meets with his daughter, Jade. It’s a beautiful and soft piece of music, played out by flutes and sweeping violins. The song played in my mind, and signified the end of my trip.

After writing that and reading it through I was confident I had summed it all up. It was the most personal entry of my travel journal, and looking at the words compared to my entries about London, Boston, and Toronto, I could clearly see that. I boarded the ferry half an hour later and as we pulled away I gazed at the island for the entire trip back. That day I went on and saw some other sites of San Francisco; an up close view of the Golden Gate Bridge, The Palace of Fine Arts and I just walked from one end of the city to the other, taking in the ever changing view of the houses. I topped off the day with a visit to the Martin Luther King monument in downtown and read all his quotes. But for the rest of the day I was honestly thinking about Alcatraz and I would always associate San Francisco with that place and promised myself to remember the adventure that was trying to get there and just making it.

