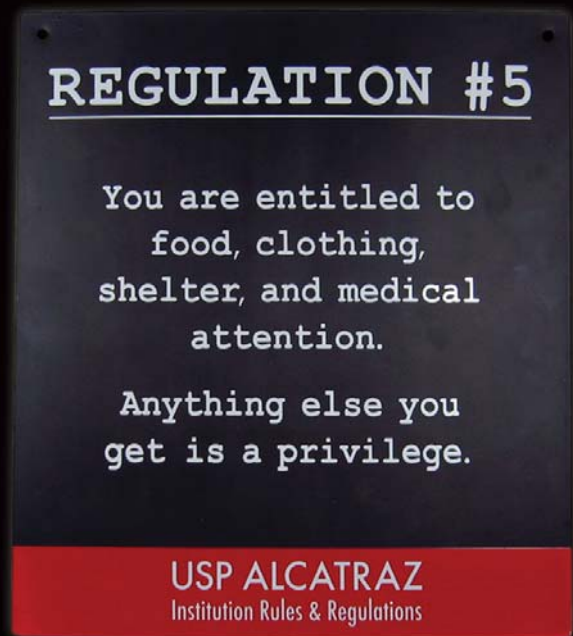




**A  
CAPTIVE  
AUDIENCE:**

The New Store on  
**ALCATRAZ**

WORDS BY STEVE BERGER



**F**or more than 150 years, the small island of Alcatraz in the San Francisco Bay has captivated Americans' imaginations. In the mid-1850s, it became home to a U.S. Army fort and the first lighthouse on the West Coast. During the Civil War, Alcatraz first housed military prisoners. It remained a military prison until 1934, at which time it was turned over to the Department of Justice for what would become its most famous incarnation as home to America's most notorious gangsters and murderers. However, since 1972, The Rock has been operated by the National Park Service (NPS), attracting tourists from around the world.

While Hollywood often glorified or vilified Alcatraz and its infamous inmates, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the NPS have been working diligently to portray what life was really like on The Rock. For nearly 20 years, they have conducted tours and provided an audio interpretation of Alcatraz's heyday.

### **Integrating the tour with the store**

Beginning with the NPS Historic Furnishings Report three years ago — which identified the most significant spaces on Alcatraz — professionals from these groups embarked on a project to enhance the Alcatraz experience further by integrating its audio tour experience with an expanded museum and retail experience. The tour portion of their efforts will be unveiled in November, and the new, expanded retail space will open in early 2007.

The core team included staff from the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the NPS curator,

along with several outside consultants who are acknowledged experts in their fields. According to Clover Earl, director, sales and interpretive media, the core group met every Thursday for three years. Marien Coss, architect, project manager, says that everyone listened to each other and the outside consultants without making judgments, so all the ideas could be put on the table in order to make the Alcatraz experience really rich for visitors.

## Designing an authentic retail experience

Among the many challenges the group faced was how to create an exciting retail experience. What parts of the prison should be refurbished, and to what time period? What artifacts should and could be displayed? What would work as gift items? What products could be developed — or artifacts reproduced — which, according to Robert Lieber, associate director, product development, would be unique, of high quality, long-lasting and become “hero products” that could be sold for many years to come? Nicki Phelps, director, visitor programs, added that the merchandise available on The Rock (as opposed to items hawked in the souvenir shops on the mainland) would be authentic and of high quality so people could commemorate their visit, share their experience with friends and family, and even take the items to school.

There were countless trips to Alcatraz, walks around The Rock and through its buildings, interviews with visitors and hundreds of hours of research. It was decided that the tour would begin at the entrance to the prison building, where prisoners not only surrendered their freedom but also gave up their identities to simply become a number.

The new audio tour (available in eight languages on an MP3 player) includes many parts of its predecessor, especially narratives from former inmates and families who lived at Alcatraz, including the daughter of one of the guards. The 45-minute narrative begins in the cell building, where visitors hear about life in the prison as they go through the warden’s office, down through the cell blocks, to the dining hall and finally culminating in what was once a storage area and root cel-

lar, which has now been transformed into a 3,000 square-foot retail experience.

## Transforming a storage area into a showplace and gift shop

Originally, Alcatraz’s largest gift shop was only 420 square feet. Many visitors bypassed it altogether, while others felt cramped and didn’t stay long. According to consultant Richard Altuna, visitors will stay longer, learn and buy more when they equate being in a space with having a good time.

To create this new retail space, team member and architect Coss had to get permission to open up a wall between two rooms, which was accomplished with a pleasing archway. Retaining the prison’s ambiance meant returning rooms and cells to their original color scheme, including white walls with green trim and pink bars on windows that are very high and unevenly spaced.

The window locations also helped drive the display designs that were created by Gallagher & Associates to show off approximately 50 artifacts that help illustrate the Alcatraz experience.

Throughout the tour, there are huge, four-foot by six-foot photo posters developed by Pentagram International Design. In the retail area, these photos and the accompanying artifacts create a near-museum experience and help define areas for merchandise. The themed areas are designated as clothing, kitchen and dining utensils, escapes, correspondence, a kids’ section (from families who lived on the

island), rules and regulations, correspondence and recreation.

Posters in the retail area are hung away from the wall so artifacts can be displayed further back, above the shadow line, to protect them from sunlight. The custom-designed cases for artifacts include UV-coated glass and silica gel to protect the delicate items from light damage and the bay’s humidity.

Choosing the appropriate artifacts was a combined effort on the part of the team, with much of the work being done by Lieber and NPS curator Diane Nicholson. Although Nicholson had never worked with artifacts as potential merchandise inspirations, Lieber was looking at which artifacts could be reproduced as “hero products.” Lists went back and forth, items were assessed for historical significance, as well as for fragility and their ability to withstand Alcatraz’s harsh climate. Fifty or so initial artifacts, from tableware and trays to handcuffs, pins and badges, were chosen both for display and for reproduction for the Alcatraz store. Nicholson says that the artifacts will be carefully monitored and those that show signs of wear will be removed. Several will also rotate out and new ones will come in to take their place.


## Authors’ area the focal point of the new Alcatraz store

While reproductions of artifacts are certain to be a hit among visitors, the store’s focal point is the authors’ area. In fact, Altuna conceived of a main axis for the store in which the perimeter fixtures encourage visitors to orient



themselves toward the authors' area. Almost every day of the year, Alcatraz features an author whose book is available in the store. Many of these writers are former inmates, correctional officers or family members who lived on The Rock, including the Native Americans who occupied the island briefly.

The main store on Alcatraz is designed to capture 100 percent of the visitors as they end their tour and turn in the MP3 audio sets. The other two shops remain in their original locations. The first is on the dock where visitors disembark. This store offers film and other point-of-purchase items visitors might want before they begin their tour. It also features "Save the Rock" merchandise, including actual pieces of The Rock. The second store highlights the relationship between Alcatraz and Hollywood – fact versus fiction. For example, the well-known Birdman of Alcatraz never kept birds on Alcatraz; rather he did his famous bird raising and writing earlier while at Leavenworth.

The entire three-year process drove the team to develop an integrated experience that immerses visitors into the reality of life in a maximum-security prison. The Alcatraz audio tour brings this reality home as visitors transit the cells and other facilities where men slept, exercised, ate and participated in industries. The process also created a gift store that is more meaningful and more authentic by using it to display artifacts alongside their accurate reproductions to enhance the experience in the moment and into the future. The cumulative effect of the revamped tour and store on Alcatraz is certain to educate, entertain and enthrall The Rock's expected 1.3 million annual visitors. **M** 

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## Museum-style Artifacts Become "Hero" Products at Alcatraz

Capitalizing on its own celebrity, the main gift shop on The Rock features quality, Alcatraz-centric merchandise that is either a direct reproduction of items from its most famous period in history, or inspired by those items. Almost all of the 50 artifacts that lend the gift shop its museum-style ambiance are the actual items used by prisoners or correctional officials. However, a few, like the *Popular Mechanics* magazines, are the same as the originals that are still in the FBI crime files.

Among the 35-or-so items that have been transmuted from artifact or "evidence" to quality merchandise are reproductions of Alcatraz salt and pepper shakers, tin cups, forks and spoons (note the lack of knives). There are memo pad-style books with pictures and reproductions of actual documents, along with stories from correctional officers. Card decks feature a different infamous prisoner for each suit while teaching prison slang (like a lifeboat would be called a parole, a fresh fish is newly arrived prisoner). A set of three magnets complete with fake hair depict the profiles of prisoner dummies used to fool guards during a daring escape attempt in 1962 (which was the basis for the Clint Eastwood movie "Escape from Alcatraz").

Also reproduced for the gift shop are the unique Alcatraz prisoner caps, correction officers' (guards') lapel pins and badges (with the permission of the bureau of prisons). There are "Wish you were here" decals and pennants from the 1950s, stickers with the Rules and Regulations, a mug-shot box that contains 35 different pictures and records of famous or significant inmates, a re-creation of the type of harmonica allowed for entertainment, an address-style book with tabs that catalog each of the 14 escape attempts, a pelican cancellation stamp of the style used at the U.S. post office on Alcatraz, and lenticular postcards like the one showing Al Capone one way with a cigar, hat and smug civilian look – and Al Capone inmate number 85 the other way.

While one of the artifacts — and its commercial reproduction — is a hollowed-out book for contraband, it is the real books and authors of Alcatraz that are probably the biggest hit. Nearly every day of the year, the author of an Alcatraz-related book holds court in the center of the main gift shop. Among the authors are former prisoners, correctional officers and their family members. Titles range from Jolene Babyak's (daughter of a guard) "Eyewitness on Alcatraz" and "Birdman: The Many Faces of Robert Stroud" to Darwin Coon's (former inmate) "Alcatraz: The True End of the Line" and Indian Joe Morris' (Native American island occupier) "Alcatraz Indian Occupation Diary."

Of course, there are dozens more books, reproductions and Alcatraz-inspired items available at the new gift shop. But beyond sales success, these items are sure to garner the ability to generate cash that will be poured back into the efforts to maintain and continue to restore The Rock.

