

SFGATE

Some Things Need Remembering; Come to Alcatraz

By Jon Carroll
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Everyone knows that Alcatraz is a jewel in the middle of the bay. We know it has stunning views and an amazing set of old buildings, haunted by yesterday's grief and rage. We may even have spared a moment for the inmates and guards trapped together on that rock, embracing their common isolation.

But, you know, we're jaded. We don't go. It's a hassle, what with having to reserve the ferry way in advance. And it's a tourist thing. That's when we go to Alcatraz — when visitors are here from out of town. And we join the polyglot hordes of tourists marveling at the routine beauty of San Francisco.

Alcatraz is a moneymaking machine. A lot of that cash goes to the [National Park Service](#), so that's a good thing. There are individual entrepreneurs cashing in on the bonanza, too. Not that I resent it; good things are worth paying for. But it ain't a cheap trip, even if you restrain your wilder impulses.

There's a weird moment when you're standing in line for the ferry. The line goes through a photo station, and every group has its photo taken, no explanations offered. It was sort of like suddenly being at a Soviet border station. I thought maybe it was a security thing. But I'm never cynical enough. All those photos are available for purchase, from \$20 up. Sophia really wanted one, so we bought it. Ka-ching.

About Sophia. She's a 10-year-old girl, Tracy's Little Sister, as in the Big Brother-Big Sister program. She has an unusual name, so to preserve her anonymity I will call her Sophia — which is 2014's most popular female baby name. She is bright and talkative and charming, and I was interested to see what she made of the whole thing.

Because there's more than just the prison on Alcatraz just now. The Chinese artist [Ai Weiwei](#) has placed an installation there — an installation that he will never see. He cannot travel outside the country. In 2011, he was held in secret confinement for 81 days, presumably for his dissident views and his artwork expressing those views.

The exhibition is, not surprisingly, a meditation on freedom and captivity. The irony of placing these pieces in an old prison is obvious but still powerful. Words absolutely do not do it justice. It has to be seen in situ; you have to let it sink in.

It's useful to stand and stare at the water in between visiting the various sites. Seagull cries and lapping waves are a great backdrop for melancholy reflection.

Sophia is not big on standing and staring. She's a kinetic personality. The artworks fascinated her. How could they not? The first room contained a giant dragon kite, scrolling across the ceiling of the room, almost motionless but entirely dynamic. She took a lot of photos. When we got to the room with images of political prisoners (rendered in Lego blocks), she slowed down and looked at the individual faces.

"Are they all in jail?" she asked. "I think so," I said. "Although some of them may be dead." She looked at the faces again. Then she looked up at the broken windows that lined the room. There were lots of visitors in the room, but everyone was talking quietly, as though in a sanctuary.

Sophia caught the solemnity. She too was quiet, although always on the move. Sophia is African American, and she already knows about imprisonment. She already knows about prisons. Many of the faces on the floor were black. I did not speak about that; I was frankly unsure about how to approach the subject. My knowledge, my understanding, is incomplete. It seemed better to let her absorb it on her own, create her own relevance. For her, it brought memories of her father, who has been in Africa for many years. She talked about it a little.

But Alcatraz is also a joyous place. The feel of the wind, the sunlight through the large windows in many facilities, the vista constantly surprising. Sophia bounced along the paths, looking for stuff suggested in a useful brochure for kids put out by the Park Service.

"We have to find the white flowers," she said, and we all dutifully looked.

Sophia was duly creeped out by the solitary-confinement cells, but also reacted to the atmosphere in the room, which was festive. People took pictures of their families standing around in the cells, and they laughed as they did so. I won't even try to unpack that particular dynamic. Maybe it was the exhilaration of freedom keenly felt.

We got to the dining hall, which had been fitted out with racks of postcards. Each postcard was addressed to a political prisoner somewhere in the world. Sophia took her time with the postcards. Her mouth was set in a serious line as she wrote.

Alcatraz had become, maybe will continue to become, a mechanism for remembering.

"Then you keep moving round, I suppose?" said Alice. "Exactly so," said the Hatter: "as the things getjcarroll@sfchronicle.com.