

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD



SHUTTERSTOCK / JACEK_KADAJ

TIP: OSLO

JET-SET STOP

Once red-light, Thieves Island is now red hot. Urban renewal has turned the notorious site where thieves were hanged and prostitutes roamed into the city’s most hip and happening neighborhood, a 15-minute walk from downtown. The bridge-connected islet, framed by the Tjuvholmen canals and Oslo Fiord, is home to the Renzo Piano-designed Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art (pictured above) and Tjuvholmen Sculpture Park, both exhibiting challenging, cutting-edge works. Flanking them are The Sneak Peak, a nearly 300-foot glass lookout tower that’s open to the public (about \$3.50), tony art galleries and shops, good restaurants, and The Thief, a chic and artsy boutique hotel that pays the world’s highest insurance for a hotel art collection. It draws jet-setters from rock stars to royalty, but anyone is welcome to tour the public spaces and admire the works loaned from the Astrup Fearnley or owner Peter Stordalen’s private collection. Or dine in the hotel’s Fru K restaurant in view of Andy Warhol’s “Ladies and Gentlemen.” www.tjuvholmen.no/english/

HILARY NANGLE



nary skills during new interactive cooking classes at three Davis Square restaurants: Posto, The Painted Burro, and Rosebud American Kitchen & Bar, all part of the Alpine Restaurant Group. Learn how to properly brine and smoke pork chops and create a classic mint julep from Rosebud chef John Delpha, April 25; and make guacamole, salsa, tortillas, and fish tacos (pictured) with a margarita on the side from Joe Cassinelli, executive chef of The Painted Burro and Posto on May 16. Other classes highlight shareable summer dishes, like Posto’s wood-fired pizza and bruschetta, and barbecue techniques and favorite dishes. Cost: \$55 to \$250 for one to five classes. 617-776-0005, www.eventbrite.com (look up Alpine Restaurant Group in Somerville)

THERE

TAKE AN EXCLUSIVE TOUR OF A WEST COAST CASTLE Hear about police raids, bones buried in the garden, and other historical tales during guided tours of Sam’s Castle in Pacifica, Calif., about 15 minutes south of San Francisco. The century-old castle, built by former congressman Pete McCloskey’s grandfather, Henry Harri-

son McCloskey, has served as a speakeasy, a brothel, US Coast Guard barracks, an artist’s workshop, and a private home. Now, visitors can enjoy special monthly tours of the 24-room landmark led by “Sam’s Castle” author Bridget Oats. The April 19 tours include a walkthrough with the castle’s interior designer. The 30- to 90-minute tours also run June 20, July 12, Aug. 15, Sept. 12, and Nov. 28, among other dates to be announced. Leave your high heels at home to help preserve the wood floors. Price: \$25 per person. www.sammazzafoundation.org

EXPLORE THE INSIDE PASSAGE BY TUGBOAT Hop aboard a classic restored tugboat and explore British Columbia’s Inside Passage on new expeditions that launch this year. The boutique ship Swell, owned by Canada’s Maple Leaf Adventures, will take up to 10 passengers on journeys up the Inside Passage to Alaska, Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands), and Canada’s Great Bear Rainforest starting in May. Before her conversion to a passenger vessel, Swell plied the historic Inside Passage for 92 years as a working tugboat and 10 years as a fishing and dive boat. Now it offers trips that focus on wildlife and islands and other areas not accessible by ferry. The 80-foot wooden boat has private en suite staterooms, an open

wheelhouse, a hot tub, zodiacs, kayaks, a gourmet chef, a naturalist, and wilderness guides. Rates: \$2,100 to \$7,000 for all-inclusive five- to 12-day trips. 250-386-7245, www.mapleleafadventures.com

EVERYWHERE

A RUGGED AND SENSIBLE TRAVEL BACKPACK The Thule Paramount 29 Flaptop Daypack perfectly suits those who like to compartmentalize their travel gadgets, documents, and paraphernalia. This stylish and well-thought-out bag comes with a padded and zippered laptop sleeve for quick access to your computer, a cushioned inner tablet pouch, and a slim pocket in the top flap for holding boarding passes and other travel documents. A small padded pocket under the flap holds sunglasses and the front pocket fits an 8-inch tablet. Another front pocket has little sleeves and zippered pouches for stashing your wallet, snacks, and business cards. Other top features: The bag has top and side zippers for accessing the main compartment and a water- and abrasion-resistant bottom panel, so you can set the daypack down on rough or wet terrain without any worry. \$149.95. 800-238-2388, www.thule.com

TIP: SAN FRANCISCO

GARDENS GIVEN LIFE ON ‘THEROCK’

Alcatraz derives from the name Spanish explorer Juan Manuel de Ayala gave to one of the three islands in San Francisco Bay, “Alcatrazes,” probably referring to the “strange birds” or “pelicans” he saw on it. Its strange name (its meaning still debated) is appropriate, given The Rock’s unique history as a federal penitentiary, but as our guide noted, some of the island’s truly unique artifacts are its gardens and the stories behind them.

Twice weekly, docents lead garden-themed tours of Alcatraz, introducing visitors to the beauty on this beast. By chance, we disembarked the Alcatraz Cruises ferry just minutes before the free tour was departing, alerted to it by the National Park Ranger during the overview briefing.

Our guide, docent Dick Miner, held our attention for an hour as we padded along the switchback road to the island’s summit, detouring occasionally to restricted areas. He regaled us with stories, weaving in the island’s history as he dished about the inmates and residents who created and tended the gardens.

Fort Alcatraz, built in 1850, morphed into a military prison in 1861. Despite the lack of topsoil and water, gardens have graced The Rock since the mid-1860s, when the military began importing soil to create a more comfortable life for those stationed here. In the 1920s, prisoners planted trees, shrubs, and seeds as part of an island-wide beautification project with the California Spring Blossom and Wild-flower Association.

When Alcatraz became a penitentiary in 1934, it was all about containment and punishment, but families lived on the island and raised their children with some sense of normalcy. “They knew where the bad guys were, so they never locked their doors. They were more anxious in the city,” Miner said. Kids who grew up here, he added, recall it as a magical place.

When the penitentiary closed in 1963, the gardens lost their caretakers. For 40 years, they were neglected and left to Mother Nature’s whims. In 2003, the Garden Conservancy joined with the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the National Park Service to restore and preserve them.

As we walked, Miner began filling in the blanks in the island’s gardening history. Credit Freddie Reichel, secretary to the first federal warden, for preserving the gardens created by the military prisoners. “He didn’t know a lot, but he knew the gardens should be preserved,” Miner said. Reichel consulted with horticulturists, seeking advice for maintaining the gardens and adding new plants. In 1941, he recruited Elliot Michener, a counterfeiter transferred to Alcatraz after an attempted escape from Leavenworth, to help with the task. Michener had no gardening experience. Everything he learned came from information on seed pamphlets.

Miner guided us into a restricted area, pointing out the Bardou Job, a rare hybrid

tea rose now known as the Alcatraz rose. Heritage roses grow throughout the island, but this one is “a real treasure,” Miner said. It had disappeared in its native Wales and was considered rare to extinct. The rose was adjacent to the island’s composting center, which Miner, “the Worm Man of Alcatraz,” designed. Passion edging his voice, he explained the process of making dirt from island waste — not just any dirt, but Marin County Fair ribbon-winning dirt.

Back on the main road, Miner stopped midway up the hill adjacent to the stone wall edging it. Cannonballs originally topped the military-built wall, but Mrs. Swope, the first warden’s wife, had them replaced with planters, now filled with ivy leaf geraniums (ruins pictured below). “Look,” he said, inviting us closer. “These are the secret gardens. Unless you look over the wall, you don’t see them.” He opened a chain, and we descended a stone stairway to explore these gardens, created



in foundations of the former Officers Row.

We stopped again at the warden’s house ruins. “Michener developed a special relationship with Mrs. Swope, later becoming her houseboy,” Miner said. It’s alleged, he added, that Mrs. Swope baked fudge for Michener to smuggle into his cell. “a real no-no, as that was something the guys would kill for.”

From the lighthouse, we followed the West Road, pausing to view snowy egrets nesting in a thicket. At the road’s end, Miner pointed to a stairway rising through terraced gardens to the prison’s fortified recreation yard. Inmates would descend these steps en route to the industries building. “The rule of thumb was that you couldn’t plant anything big enough to hide behind,” Miner said. It was the only garden most inmates saw. Those who worked in it were allowed to bring cut flowers into their cells. “They would sacrifice drinking water to do so,” Miner said.

Before releasing us to climb the steps and explore the inside, Miner circled back to Michener, who appreciated the freedom the gardens afforded him, Miner said. When he was released after nine years tending them, he became a landscaper in the outside world. “He was of the few redemption stories out of Alcatraz.”

HILARY NANGLE

HERE

CELEBRATE PATRIOTS DAY ON THE SLOPES You can sit around waiting for your crocuses to blossom, or you could make the most of this crazy winter with a final hurrah on Patriots Day at Bretton Woods, where you can ski or snowboard all day for \$17.76. This special price, which applies to ages 5 and older, gains you access to New Hampshire’s largest ski and snowboard area, with its 62 trails, 35 glades, and amazing views of Mount Washington, on the last day of the season, April 20. You’ll also get a voucher for a free lift ticket good for a day on the slopes anytime next season through Dec. 18. Leave a little time for a zip-line adventure through the canopy, and snow tubing beside the nearby Omni Mount Washington Resort. 603-278-1000, www.brettonwoods.com

EXPERIMENT WITH GLOBAL FLAVORS IN SOMERVILLE Take your taste buds around the world and hone your culi-



CAPTURE LIFE’S IMPORTANT LITTLE MOMENTS Logitech’s palm-size Bemo video camera isn’t for recording your child’s entire soccer match or a full ski run, but rather game highlights and fun snippets of action. The easy-to-use, grab-and-shoot device comes with just two buttons: an Off-On switch and a record button that works even if you’re wearing bulky gloves. To capture 720-pixel video, depress and hold the record button for up to one minute. Transfer your video snippets to your Bluetooth-compatible iOS device using the Bemo app, and then edit them, add music and filters, and stitch them together into a masterpiece before sharing them on social media. Also use the app to start recording remotely. Back up your videos before uploading them to the app, since material edited out of the clips is gone forever. The rugged little water-resistant device hangs around your neck using an elastic cord, or clips onto a shirt or jacket. (It does not stand up or attach to a tripod for recording.) \$114.77 at Amazon.com. 646-454-3200, mybemoco.com

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