

# San Francisco's Angel Island



**VISUAL TRAVEL TOURS**

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# Tour Summary

Angel Island State Park is the largest island in the bay, known as the “Jewel of the San Francisco Bay.” This grassy, woodland-covered mountain island is an adventure lover’s delight, filled with multi-use trails and historic buildings. Ferries arrive daily, or visitors may take their own boat. Once here, tour the historic Immigration Station, decommissioned army forts, the Ayala Cove, or climb to the summit of Mount Caroline Livermore. Overnight camping is permitted. Docent-led nature hikes and historic tours are available. Tram tours circle the island for those unable to walk far. Come over and visit Angel Island!

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# Faces of Angel Island





Nearly every visitor to Angel Island State Park takes one of several public ferries to arrive on the island. The shortest trip is from the Marin County town of Tiburon, where the ride is only 10 minutes from dock to dock. All aboard!



Nearly dead center of the San Francisco Bay is majestic Angel Island, offering spectacular views of the city skyline, the east bay, and the Marin Headlands, including Mount Tamalpais.





Angel Island is said to offer the best panoramic views in the bay area, including this view out to the Pacific Ocean past the Golden Gate Bridge. On this tour we'll go around the island, and to the top, to show

you some of the best places for viewing the  
incredible sights.





Directly across the Raccoon Strait from the town of Tiburon is Ayala Cove, where we will start our tour of the island. The cove is the main ferry port and has a gift shop, bike and Segway rentals, a restaurant and bar, and plenty of picnic tables for the multitude of day-trippers.



Also in Ayala Cove is a State Park Visitor Center featuring interpretive displays, a bas-relief map, and excellent exhibits explaining the long history of the island.



The first effort to turn the island into a public park was in 1947, after the federal government declared it surplus property. Small parcels of land were acquired, but the real change came in 1962 when the Nike missile base on the south side of the island was deactivated and the Army moved out for good. In December of that year the

entire island was turned over to the State of California for park purposes, with the exception of 2 Coast Guard stations.





A vast network of hiking trails was established around the island, along with the renovation of many old Army roads that were converted into multi-use trails and roads.



In October 2008, a massive wildfire consumed nearly 50% of Angel Island. In this photo taken 6 months later, vegetation had returned to the burned-out areas rather quickly. Even the scorched trees show

some signs of recovery. We'll discuss the fire in the third chapter, when we ascend to the top of the island.





As our docent guide explains, the summit was renamed Mount Caroline Livermore in 1958, in honor of the dedicated Marin County conservationist who led the

campaign to create Angel Island State  
Park.



The island is alive with history: 3,000 years ago the Coastal Miwok Indians fished and hunted here. Later it was the first anchorage for Spanish explorer Juan Manuel de Ayala, who named the island. After that it became an expansive U.S. Army post, and a processing station for new immigrants arriving on the west coast.



Angel Island is also known for its pristine sandy coastline. People with their own boats can sail right up to the shore, and picnic on several beaches. We'll explore the

many recreational uses of Angel Island in the following chapters.



In the final chapter we will take a look at the newly-remodeled Immigration Station on Angel Island. While often called the Ellis Island of the West, this was in fact quite different. Today, most visitors find the station a quiet refuge for reflection.

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# Tips

- The entire Angel Island State Park has been reopened, including all trails and camping, after the massive October 2008 wildfire. Visitors are encouraged to stay out of the burned area because there are still hazards. Additional information may be obtained by calling the Ranger Station at (415) 435-5390.
- 90-minute docent-led tours of the Immigration Station are given twice daily Wednesday through Sunday. Reservations are required; call (415) 435-3522, or visit the website [www.aiisf.org](http://www.aiisf.org).
- Another fine docent-led walk is called the “Angel Island Wildflower Ramble,” which occurs every Sunday. For reservations call (415) 435-3522. The tour follows a wide array of footpaths all the way to the summit, then back to Ayala Cove, a circuitous loop.



- Personal bicycles may be brought to the island on the ferry and used on designated roads. Bikes and Segways can also be rented in Ayala Cove. Dogs are not allowed. Roller skates and skateboards are prohibited. No wood fires are allowed but there are designated barbecue and picnic areas available for walk-in use. A few campsites are also available for reservation. Call the Ranger Station at (415) 435-5390 for more information on camping permits.

- Hiking trails, fire roads, and the Perimeter Road provide easy access to the whole island, including many breathtaking views and almost all the historic sites. Tours are available at some of the historic sites, especially on weekend days during the high season from April to October.

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# Ayala Cove





For those without a boat, access to Angel Island is by public ferries from San Francisco, Tiburon and seasonal service from Oakland and Alameda. In Tiburon, look for the signs leading to a pedestrian walkway to the wharf.



The pier is easy to find. Let's board the first morning ferry from Tiburon to maximize our time on the island. We'll be crossing the Raccoon Strait, one of the deepest parts of the San Francisco Bay.



It's only a 10-minute ferry ride to Angel Island, and you will likely make some friends along the way. This service is the last family-run public ferry route in the bay area.



Blue & Gold Fleet operates out of San Francisco, Alameda and Oakland, offering passage to Ayala Cove and sometimes to Fort McDowell. For all ferry routes it is important to note the limited weekday service to Angel Island during the winter.





Yachters may spend the night on their boats by renting a buoy from the Harbor Master in Ayala Cove.





This is a picture of all the overnight campers returning to Tiburon on the first morning ferry.



The first stop outside the ferry pier is the gift shop. It is a good idea to pick up a map or study the different routes around Angel Island.



A large and clean bathroom facility is the next building we pass on the shore of Ayala Cove. The building may also be used as a changing room for those who intend to swim.



Bicycles can be rented on the island, or personal bikes can be brought along on the ferries for a nominal extra fee. There is an entire dirt track system of fire-break roads specifically devoted to mountain bicycle traffic. Foot trails and the road to Mount Livermore are closed to bicyclists for safety reasons.





A concessionaire operates the tram service during the spring, summer, and fall, with a limited schedule in the winter. For organized groups the trams can be rented any time of the year.



Another concessionaire offers Segway rentals, lessons, and guided tours of Angel Island.



Yet another concessionaire operates a snack bar, outdoor cafe, and the Cove Cantina offering alcoholic beverages.





The Harbor Master at Ayala Cove allows small watercraft operators to dock in one of the open slips for day-use.



The beach at Ayala Cove is sandy and protected from the afternoon wind that regularly blows in from the ocean through the Golden Gate. Children enjoy the shallow water, which rarely has any waves.



In August 1775, Spaniard Juan Manuel de Ayala brought his sailing ship San Carlos into the San Francisco Bay. He anchored in what is today called Ayala Cove. His mission was to develop an accurate description of the area so future Spanish ship captains could navigate the hazards of the bay.

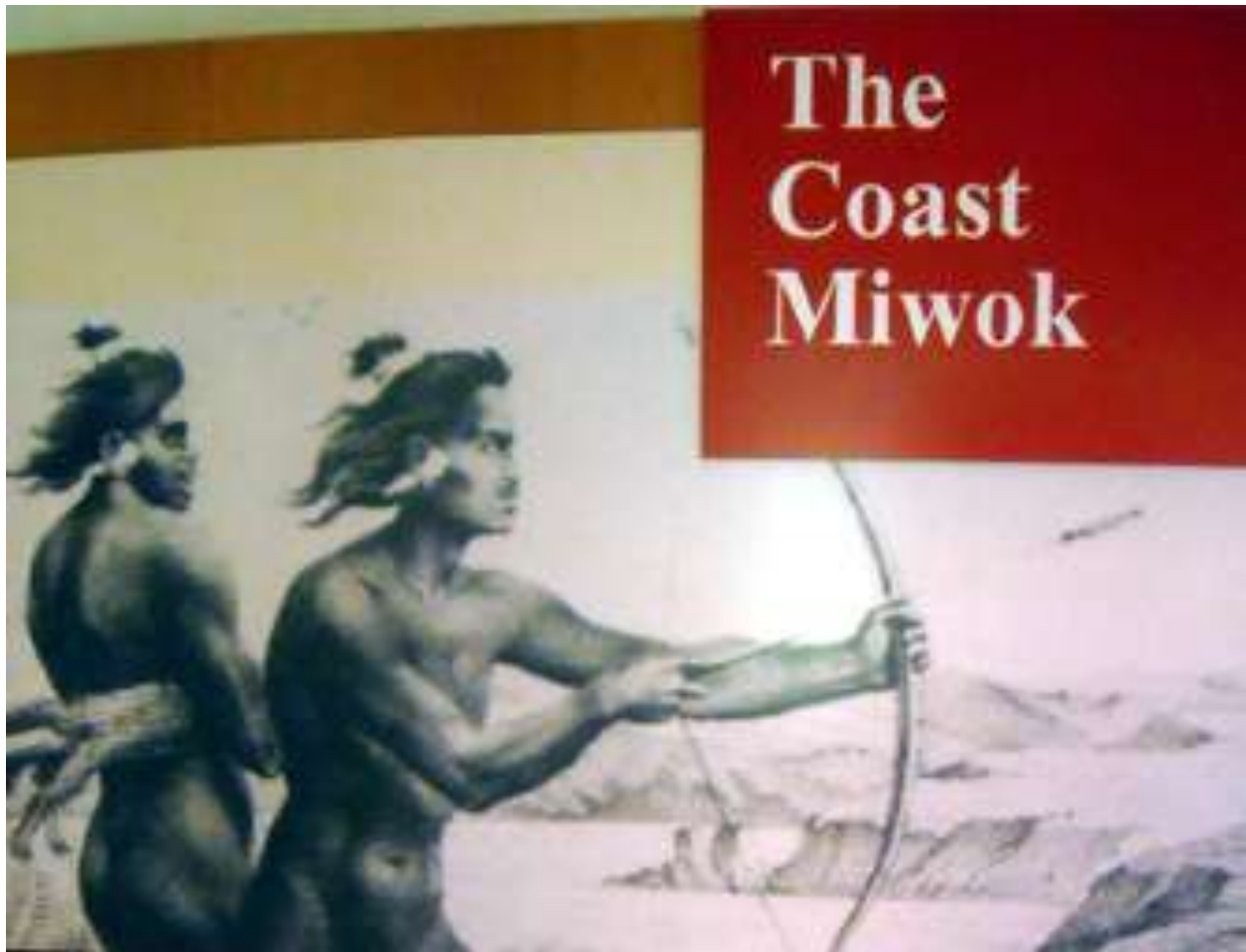




Ayala's pilot, Don Jose de Canizares, explored the region in a smaller craft, occasionally going ashore and making surveys. He created the first maps of the now world-famous bay area. When the San Carlos was at anchor, Ayala christened the island "Isla de Los Angeles."



The Visitor Center is located slightly uphill from Ayala Cove. It reveals the story of the many visitors and occupants of Angel Island. Let's go inside.



Coastal Miwok Indians, who lived in what is now Marin County, reached the island in boats made from tule reeds. Some of these boats could carry 8-10 people.





Miwok Indians established camps at what we know today as Ayala Cove, Camp Reynolds, Fort McDowell, and the Immigration Station. We'll visit these locations in the last 2 chapters.



During the Civil War, with concern mounting over threats to the bay area from Confederate naval forces, the federal government established several garrisons on Angel Island.



Angel is the largest island in the San Francisco Bay, and naturally has an interesting maritime history.



Lighthouse enthusiasts won't be disappointed either. There are 2 active Coast Guard stations on Point Stuart and Point Blunt. It is Sunday at 10:30am in the Visitor Center...





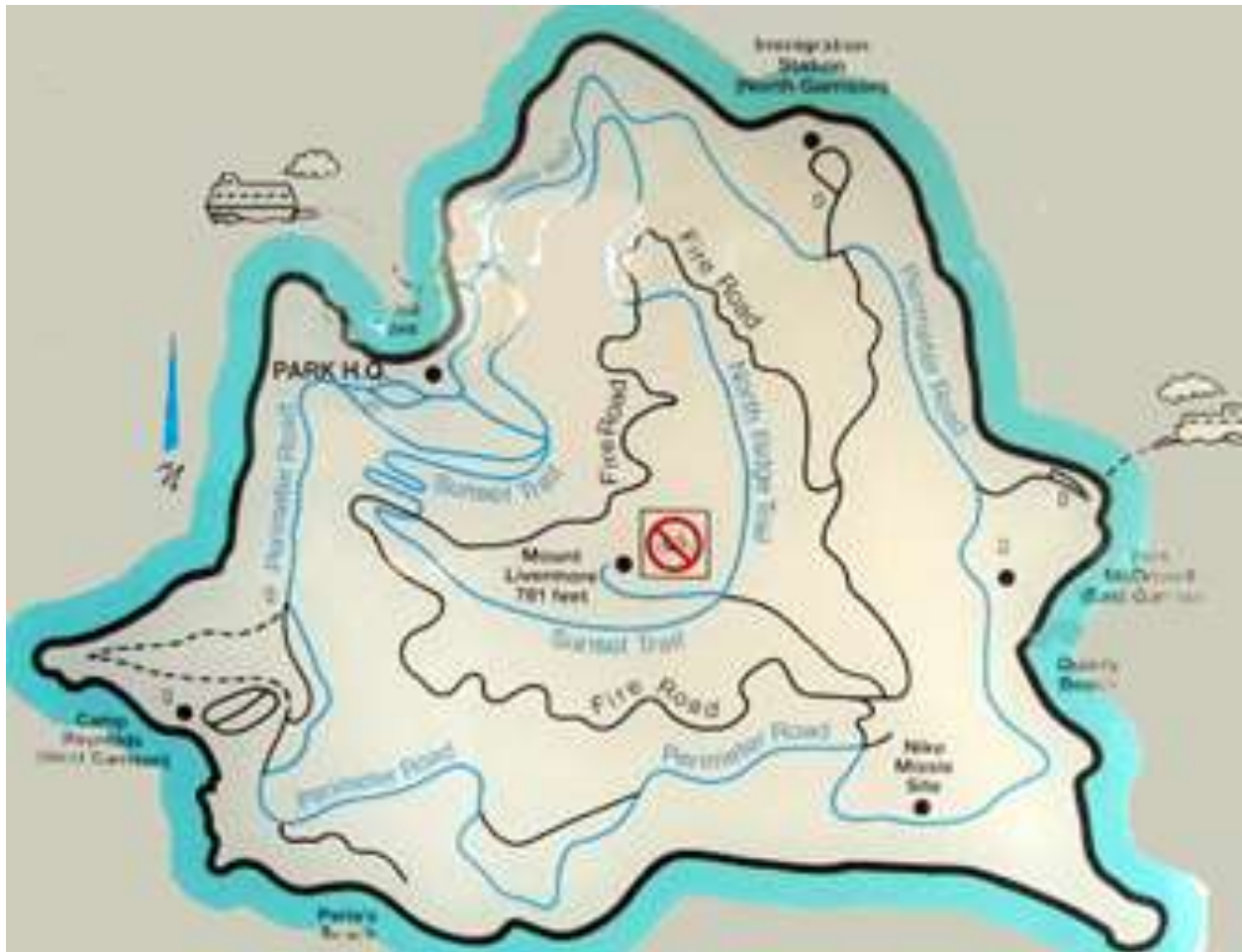
...time to meet our docent who is going to take us on an interesting nature walk to the summit of Angel Island in the next chapter. Lace up your hiking boots and let's go!

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# Climbing Mt. Livermore







We will follow our guide out of the Visitor Center at Ayala Cove and head uphill. Where the road behind the Visitor Center meets the Perimeter Road, take note that this is also the intersection for the pedestrian path called the Sunset Trail. This is the trail we will take to the summit of Mount Livermore.



Angel Island is fairly easy to navigate because foot trails and fire roads circle the entire island. The climb to the 788-foot-high summit of Mount Caroline Livermore is for hikers only. Let's get started!



The Sunset Trail gains elevation fairly quickly and it is not long before you will be rewarded with spectacular views of Ayala Cove.





Special caution should be used on the Sunset Trail in the vicinity of the bluffs, which tend to erode easily. The main trails are well-marked, with fences near steep drop-offs. The trails are designed to avoid most hazards, including the poison oak that is native to the region.



About halfway along the Sunset Trail, our guide stops to discuss the huge wildfire that swept over half of Angel Island for 3 days in October, 2008.



A fast-moving brush fire atop Angel Island shot flames high into the air. The fire glowed so brightly on the first night that it could be seen for miles around the San Francisco Bay by residents in several counties.





The fire was so hot it burned trees right down into the root system, leaving behind only charred pits where the trees used to stand.



Half of the oaks, pines, manzanita and brush that covered most of the island like a green cloak were gone. Most noticeably, Mount Livermore, the island's highest point, was stripped bare of its leafy crown of trees and vegetation.



An all-out attack by firefighters managed to save the island's 120 historic buildings, preventing the blaze from becoming a real disaster. Only 2 minor structures were damaged.





The spring of 2009 revealed shoots of green emerging as the vegetation began to recover, but it will be a few years before the island regains its vibrant, full-forested appearance again.



While the flames reached heights of 25-30 feet, 40 campers were evacuated on the first night, with no injuries reported. The fire was extinguished 3 days later. Human error was blamed, likely started at the campsite called East Bay.





Just below the summit there is a small natural pond. Our docent guide, who has been leading trips around Angel Island for decades, never knew the exact location of this pond until after the fire.



Our guide tells us there are some wildlife experts who say the fire was good for clearing the dense underbrush. With the inspiration of the vegetation making a comeback, let's make our own final push to the summit.



As we finally reach the summit it is hard not to be impressed by the amazing views in every direction. Some argue that the summit of Mount Livermore is the finest 360-degree panoramic view in the bay area, because it is completely surrounded by water.





The top of the mountain features several terraced areas with picnic benches. Most hikers prefer to have their lunch up here, to spend more time taking in the smashing views!





The highest point on the island, almost exactly at its center, is Mount Caroline Livermore at 240 meters. The island is almost entirely in Marin County, although there is a small sliver, less than 1%, at the far-eastern end which extends into the territory of San Francisco County.



Mount Livermore is named for Caroline Livermore, an early pioneer in the Marin Conservation League. She was instrumental in convincing state and federal officials to make Angel Island a state park.



The top of Mount Livermore was replaced in 2002 and the island is now 16 feet taller than in recent years. The Army shaved the peak off for the Nike missile base in the 1950s, flattening the top of the island.





As we head back down, the summit path drops back to the confluence of the Northridge and Sunset Trails and the path to Perimeter Road, which is below the mountain-biking fire trail.





We'll take the Ida Trail down to Perimeter Road where we can access all of the decommissioned Army garrisons in the next chapter.

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# Decommissioned Forts





Since the American Civil War, the U.S. Army has used Angel Island as a location to train troops and help protect the bay. The Army left in 1962 after closing a Nike missile battery.



The first Army base on Angel Island was constructed in 1863, where we will start our tour of decommissioned bases along Perimeter Road. Camp Reynolds was renamed the West Garrison in 1900, when the entire island was designated “Fort McDowell.”





After the Civil War, Camp Reynolds became an infantry camp. It served as a depot for recruits and a staging area for troops being deployed to fight in the 19th-century Indian Wars.



Many former Army buildings remain boarded-up and abandoned. Almost all have smashing views overlooking the San Francisco Bay.



Camp Reynolds is mostly defunct of activity today. Some of the newer bases on the eastern side have been restored for modern use, where we will go now.



Before we get to the East Garrison we'll stop and explore some of the bunker complexes. Artillery batteries were built near Camp Reynolds at the points called Stuart, Knox, and Blunt.





The great fear before the age of radar was an unexpected naval force suddenly turning up at the Golden Gate and attempting to conquer the bay area. Fortunately, there has never been a naval invasion of the San Francisco Bay.



The strategic location close to San Francisco and other bay area cities allowed a steady flow of supplies, yet it must have seemed lonely and remote to the troops.



As we round the corner to Fort McDowell, or the East Garrison, we'll notice that decrepit buildings are not exclusive to Camp Reynolds.



When we get closer, we see there are some fully restored buildings being used as homes by park staff and other employees.





Most of the homes are designed in the Mission Colonial style. These are private residences so it is respectful to keep some distance.



Fort McDowell is sited on a peninsula called Quarry Point. On the south side of the point is Quarry Beach.



On the north side of Fort McDowell is another Visitor Center and another ferry terminal.





In 1900, a detention camp for soldiers returning from the Spanish-American War was established at Fort McDowell.





Many buildings are sealed off to the public, like this stairway to nowhere. Let's continue north along Perimeter Road. We are now about 3/4 of the way around Angel Island, on our way back to Ayala Cove.



Fort McDowell was a busy base in its heyday, acting like a small city. It also functioned as a discharge depot and quarantine station for outgoing and incoming soldiers.





During WWI, Fort McDowell served as a recruitment and replacement depot, and a discharge point for troops returning from the war.



Angel Island was an embarkation point for troops headed to the Pacific theater in WWII. It also served as a processing facility for prisoners of war.





Some buildings in Fort McDowell are abandoned and decommissioned, but visitors are allowed to independently explore the ground level.



It is easy to get a vicarious feel of what it would be like to be alive and working in these buildings during the Army years.



Offices, homes, barracks, and prison cells were all a part of Fort McDowell. The California State Park system does a great job of allowing visitors access to

decommissioned buildings that are deemed safe.





This chapel at Fort McDowell has been restored and is in use today.

We'll follow Perimeter Road to our final destination in the northern part of the island.

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# Immigration Station





As we traveled around the island we noticed many stone walls and fine works of masonry, now unused and in a state of deterioration.





About halfway around the island we also saw a defunct stone-crushing machine. But who were the people who worked these machines and set the stones? Certainly the soldiers had a hand in the construction, but there is another side of Angel Island we'll discover in this final chapter.





At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, millions of people immigrated to America in pursuit of a better life. On the East Coast, most of the "huddled masses" were greeted by the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. As we enter the Immigration Station we'll learn that the only similarity between Ellis and

Angel Islands is that they were processing stations on islands.



On the West Coast, between 1910 and 1940, most non-white immigrants were sent to the wooden buildings of Angel Island. These steps into the detention center provided the last glimpse of freedom before an unjust incarceration.



These immigrants were Europeans, Canadians, Mexicans, Central and South Americans, Russians, and in particular, Asians. In a dark chapter of California history, Asians specifically were singled out and detained here for weeks, or sometimes months, without a fair trial.





During this period of great migrations, the Asian immigrants would be met with a reception quite unlike that given to European immigrants on the East Coast. The reasons for their incarceration have their roots in prejudice, racism, and ignorance.



The main detention center building was going to be torn down in 1970. It was only the discovery of Chinese carvings on the wooden walls that saved this building. The writings were by prisoners who longed for freedom and family, or bemoaned the unjust conditions thrust upon them, including forced labor.



None who were detained here could forget how, when they arrived in San Francisco, the passengers were separated by nationality. Europeans or travelers with first or second-class tickets would have their papers processed onboard the ship, and then be allowed to disembark immediately.



Asians and a few other immigrants, including Russians and Mexicans, as well as those who needed to be quarantined for health reasons, would be ferried to Angel Island for processing. Many would remain against their will, with no crime committed, for many months. More than 97% of the



immigrants processed on Angel Island were Chinese.



Detention barracks were built for Chinese and Japanese men and women. Because of restrictive exclusion laws, the Chinese were detained the longest. Some of them

carved poetry into the barrack walls to voice their opinions or lament their fate.



As we wander around the refurbished buildings of the Angel Island Immigration Station we see how the area has been meticulously restored to preserve this moment in history. A museum has been established in the barracks that includes a re-creation of one of the dormitories, and



also highlights some of the poems that were carved into the walls.



Indeed, the Immigration Station was a small city within the larger confines of the Army garrisons. This water tank shows how self-contained this guarded camp was when it was operational. Restoration work on the station was completed in the spring of 2009.



Today, most visitors to Angel Island find the station a quiet location for reflection.



This marble statue is a memorial to all the prisoners of the Immigration Station, especially the Chinese. They were specifically targeted for incarceration



because of the Chinese Exclusion Laws that were in effect from 1882 to 1943.



Also onsite is a small, quiet beach, a perfect place for small children to play. Near the shore, in 2006, archeologists discovered a shell mound, rock-lined ovens and baking pits, that pinpointed where a Native American fishing village once stood.



For thousands of years the Huimen, a Coastal Miwok group, lived here. Abundant food sources, proximity to fresh and salt water, and a natural landing area for reed boats made this protected cove one of the best places to live on the island.



It is about time we leave the gated confines of the Immigration Station and head back to Ayala Cove. We don't want to miss the last ferry back!





Beautiful vistas of the Raccoon Strait greet us as we make our way past Point Campbell, the northernmost site on the island. The Perimeter Road will connect to hiking trails and a road leading down to the cove, completing our circumnavigation of Angel Island!



It is time to board the ferry for our trip back to Tiburon. What a day!



With so much to see and do on Angel Island, it may be necessary to come back on another trip... Bon Voyage to the Isle of Angels!

We gratefully credit Gordon Burgett for some of the photographs in this tour.

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# Maps



## Internet Link to Interactive Map

<http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?hl=en&ie=UTF8&msa=0&msid=115812661471561779365.00046ac43d73c0b00cf02&ll=37.874311,-122.38512&spn=0.072358,0.163593&z=13>

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# **Author Biography**

Brad Olsen is a Contributing Editor for World Explorer magazine and has written several guide books. His seventh, "Sacred Places Europe: 108 Destinations," was released in March, 2007. The second edition of "Sacred Places North America: 108 Destinations" was released in 2008 and won the "Best Travel Guide for Planet Earth" Award in 2010. Brad's commentaries have appeared on National Public Radio, CNN and the Travel Channel. He enjoys extended global travel (particularly to exotic locations), and public speaking on the subject of sacred places.

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Sailboat  
Family Fun In Las Vegas  
Gateway To Yosemite  
Mardi Gras In Shreveport & Bossier City,  
Louisiana  
Moravia, The Gem Of The Czech Republic  
Quebec City: Canada's Charming Nouvelle  
France  
Sacred Places Of Portugal  
San Francisco's Academy Of Sciences  
Surf's Up In Santa Cruz  
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# Publisher

Published by Visual Travel Tours, Santa Barbara, CA, USA.

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