

A Day Fit for a President

By Mel Lavine

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Some of our friends fancy sailing on cruise ships. Over time we contracted a case of cruise ship envy. Luckily, a ship was at hand, in Jack London Square. (Full disclosure, a noble friend, perhaps taking pity, made us a present of a couple of tickets (\$80 apiece, box lunch included) aboard the U.S.S. Potomac, Franklin Roosevelt's famous yacht.

For Roosevelt, during the Depression and World War II, cruising down the Potomac into the sea was the perfect escape from the heat of Washington and the telephone. He loved the water – an exuberant and skilled sailor since childhood. His notion of paradise was “sitting on the deck in an old hat shading his head from the sun, a fishing rod in his hands,” as Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote in “No Ordinary Time.”

Our destination aboard the president's yacht last week was Angel Island, the largest island in

San Francisco Bay. It was a day fit for a chief of state. The water was smooth, the sun strong, fanned by a welcome sea breeze.

Angel Island figures prominently in the history of California. For thirty years – from 1910 to 1940 – Angel was the major entry point for perhaps 100,000 Asians and others from Pacific lands. Some refer to it as the West Coast's Ellis Island. But that's a wild stretch.

Ellis Island in New York Bay, was the principal immigration center in the U.S. from 1892 to 1943. Its history is gilded as a haven for 17 million, mostly European immigrants. Angel Island's story is not so pretty.

Many of the immigrants – mostly Chinese – were not welcome. Exclusion laws kept them and other Asians penned up in overcrowded and filthy barracks until their cases were decided. Most gained entry into the U.S. but others were turned away and sent back to the poverty and disorder from which they'd fled.

Some of the immigrants held captive put their rage in words carved on the barrack walls. One translated "poem" says, in part:

“Detained in this wooden house for

several tens of days

because of the exclusion laws.

It’s a pity heroes have no place

To exercise their prowess.”

Angel Island was also where detained civilians were held during World War I and World War II. It was also where prisoners of war were confined in World War II. During the Cold War, the island was the site of a Nike missile base. But today its 740 acres are a beautiful state park. I must add the views on the trip over and on the return aboard the Potomac – seascapes of San Francisco and the Marin hills are astonishing. The same goes for the sail under the new Bay Bridge under construction.

Who needs a cruise to the Riviera when you have it as good in your own backyard?

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