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TRAVELLERS BEHIND BARS

Visiting Jails, Penitentiaries and Prisons

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11 OCT 2013: The jig is up. I must confess. In 1971 some friends and I were in the town of Midland, Ontario, about 2 hours north of Toronto. We thought we would spend the evening in town, but lacked the resources to do so. We asked at the

police station and they suggested that we could spend the night in the jail but they would have to lock us up, two per cell, for our own safety.



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The next morning, one of the ‘guards’ presented us with a ‘vagrancy notice’, signed his name as “Occifer Smith”, and released us on our own recognition. I’ve now be clean for 42 years. But in my dark past, I did spend this one night in jail!

As a “faux jailbird”, I can treat the situation lightly, but incarceration itself is no laughing matter. It is, however a fascinating subject for many people♦including travellers♦and constitutes a curious, compelling and intriguing niche market that embraces visits to prisons, jails, gaols and penitentiaries around the world and has grown to include museums, hotels and restaurants, all reflecting the theme of imprisonment, confinement, punishment, segregation and thoughts of meagre rations of bread and water.

From a psychographic perspective (to answer the

question “Why?”) it may be for that vicarious adrenaline-rush (I want to see and experience something that is normally forbidden to the public) or humanitarian reasons (let’s see how they use to treat prisoners and how the penal system has changed since the old days); it could be the tough-love-syndrome, where kids are brought on tours to emphasize the consequences of bad thoughts and bad deeds, or it could be the reality-television-syndrome, where people go out of their way to collect bragging rights to travel tales that somehow enhance their own status. (e.g. those T-shirts that say “I spent time in Alcatraz). (See also [Dark Tourism](#))

And along the same lines, it could simply be for a photo opportunity of the traveller behind bars. (and yes, I’ve done that too).

But in addition, travellers interested in architecture, history, sociology, penology, immigration (Scottish stone masons were brought to Canada in the early 19th Century for their skill in working with limestone, of which the original prison was built), and even those interested in movies and television (e.g. The Green Mile, The Birdman of Alcatraz, Oz, Orange is the New Black) are fascinated to confront the realities of prison life.

On September 30th, 2013, the infamous Penitentiary in Kingston, Ontario (nicknamed KP, for Kingston Pen) closed and the United Way charity arranged for several weeks of tours of the Victorian-era maximum security facility. 9000 tickets were sold-out in a matter of days, with three of those places saved for me and my companions on October 02.

Our tour was led by Charlene, a correctional officer who had worked in KP and would be moving on to Millhaven, a newer facility located several miles away.

The tour was an eye-opener. The original penitentiary (the name refers to offences against the church but now means a 'house of correction') was built in 1833-34. We entered through the North Gate, which is the symbol of the prison, gathered for a short introduction and then proceeded to see the PFV (private family visiting area) where the conjugal-visit cottages are located.

Passing the 1862 Bell Tower, we saw the main cell blocks and the original site of "the digger," the old underground segregation unit, before going indoors to see the 'dissociation' unit, the area where the 1971 riot began, the shop dome (work area) including a fantastic free standing limestone staircase, the Aboriginal grounds (a secured area where aboriginal prisoners could conduct ceremonies), the exercise yard surrounded by glistening coils of razor wire, the barred windows of the psychiatric unit, and the beautifully maintained green grass areas leading back to the North Gate.

When I worked as a tour guide in the 1970's, we would pass Kingston Penitentiary, talk about the history, the limestone walls and the riot, and then move on

Across the street is the Museum, which includes historical displays ranging from prison cells to Victorian methods of prisoner restraint, some of which were used well into the 20th century.

In my travels, I've lined-up with people from around the world to visit notorious prisons including:

- Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin. Infamous as the venue where leaders of the Irish rebellion were imprisoned with some being executed by the British
- Tower of London, UK. Anne Boleyn, Sir Walter Raleigh, the two Princes, Guy Fawkes, Lady Jane Grey, and Rudolph Hess were confined to jail cells in the Tower.
- Robben Island, Cape Town. The most famous prisoner was Nelson Mandela. Now former inmates lead tours and tell stories that are both sad and courageous.
- Acre Prison, Israel. Four members of the Irgun were hanged by the British in 1947, which led directly to the famous prison break, best portrayed in the 1960 movie, Exodus, starring Paul Newman, Eva Marie Saint and others.
- National Museum of Colombia in Bogota. The building served as a prison from 1874 to 1946. The cells are now archways separating the art gallery rooms and exhibit halls
- The Don Jail, Toronto. Opened in 1865 and officially closed in 1977. The tour included the indoor gallows, last used in 1962.

Other options for prison-curious travellers?

Restaurants, for example

- The Lockup, Shibuya and Shinjuku, Tokyo

- The Jail, Mumbai
- Devil Island Prison Restaurant, Taipei
- Cobourg Jail Restaurant, Ontario
- Restaurant Da Emma (formerly Montreal's first prison for women)
- The Great Escape Restaurant, Salem Massachusetts (located in the old Salem Jail)

Hotels, for example

- Ottawa Jail Hostel, Ottawa, Canada
- The Four Seasons, Istanbul (former Ottoman prison)
- Liberty Boston Hotel (former Charles Street Jail)
- Jailhouse Inn, Preston Minnesota (former Fillmore County Jail)

News Update: October 1, 2013. [The London Telegraph](#) reported that "Britain's biggest prisons could become boutique hotels and luxury apartments under new plans to reform prisons".

Prison and Crime-themed Museums can be found in many major cities around the world. One of the best is the FBI Museum in Washington D.C.

Prison Tours are another one of those seldom-articulated interests of travellers. If you are using a check-list of niche interests when you interview your clients, you might want to add crime, prisons, jails and penitentiaries to the list. Some travellers want to intentionally surrender themselves to being behind bars and as a travel agent, you can be their willing accomplice.



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Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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