

Cliff House & Sutro Baths

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Golden Gate
National Recreation Area



Victorian Cliff House, 1896-1907 (GGNRA, Park Interp, 80-63)

The Cliff House

Since 1863, visitors have been attracted to the western shore of San Francisco to refresh themselves at the Cliff House. There have been three different Cliff Houses, each with a story of its own.

Original Cliff House (1863-1894)

The first Cliff House was a modest structure built in 1863, and enlarged in 1868. The guest register bore the names of three U.S. presidents as well as prominent San Francisco families such as the Hearsts, Stanfords and Crocker. Patrons would drive carriages across the dunes to Ocean Beach for horse racing and recreation. In 1881, the

Cliff House was bought by Adolph Sutro, a self-made millionaire, philanthropist, and later mayor of San Francisco. A few years later, Sutro and his cousin began construction on a railroad that would later bring the public to this seaside attraction. On Christmas Day, 1894, the first Cliff House was destroyed by fire.

Victorian Cliff House (1896-1907)

Sutro spent \$75,000 to rebuild and furnish the Cliff House in grandiose style. Opened in 1896, the Victorian Cliff House stood eight stories tall, with spires and an observation tower 200 feet above the sea. It was an elegant site for dining, dancing and entertainment. At ground level, there was a large dining room, parlor, bar, numerous private dining rooms and kitchens. Upper floors offered private lunch-

rooms, a large art gallery, a gem exhibit, a photo gallery, a reception room, parlors and panoramic views from large windows and an open-air veranda. This was the most resplendent of all the Cliff House buildings, but it was to be short lived. Surviving the 1906 earthquake, the grand structure succumbed to a raging fire the following year.

Today's Cliff House (1909-Present)



Today's Cliff House, circa 1940 (San Francisco Historical Center, San Francisco Public Library)

Sutro's daughter Emma built a third Cliff House, which opened in 1909 and is largely the building that exists today. It was neoclassical in design and carried on the tradition of sumptuous dining. World War I and the Great Depression took their toll on the area, however, and the Sutro family sold the Cliff House in 1937 to other operators. The Cliff House was remodeled several more times before the National Park Service acquired it in 1977 to become part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Start in 2002, the Cliff House underwent a two year rehabilitation to return it to its neoclassical design. An adjacent Sutro Wing was added at that time to improve access to ocean views, allowing diners and visitors alike to continue the long tradition of enjoying the magnificent Pacific from the Cliff House high above Seal Rocks.

Swimming at Sutro Baths



Above: Sutro Baths Main Entrance, circa 1900

(Marilyn Blaisdell Collection)

Right: Sutro Baths Interior, looking south, circa 1900

(California Historic Society, FN24140)

The concrete ruins just north of the Cliff House are the remains of the grand Sutro Baths. In 1881, Adolph Sutro bought most of the western headlands of San Francisco and made his home there. Fifteen years later, Sutro Baths opened to a dazzled public at an estimated cost of over \$1-million. Spread over three acres, the Baths boasted impressive engineering and artistic detail.

A classic Greek portal opened to a massive glass enclosure containing seven swimming pools at various temperatures. There were slides, trapezes, springboards and a high dive. Together the pools held 1.7 million gallons of water and could be filled in one hour by high tides. There were 20,000 bathing suits and 40,000 towels for rent. Balmy temperatures and abundant plants enhanced “California’s Tropical Winter Garden.” The Baths could accommodate 10,000 people at one time.



Entertainment

Sutro’s dream was realized as San Franciscans streamed to the Baths on one of three railroads connected to the city. An amphitheater, seating up to 3,700 people, provided a variety of stage shows. Three restaurants could accommodate 1,000 people at a sitting. There were natural history exhibits, galleries of sculptures, paintings, tapestries and artifacts from Mexico, China, Asia, and the Middle East and the Middle East, including the popular Egyptian mummies.



The Last Years

For all their glamour and excitement, the Baths were not commercially successful. Sutro’s grandson converted part of the Baths into an ice-skating rink in 1937, a task expanded on in the early 1950’s by new owner George Whitney. Sutro Baths never regained its popularity and the ice-skating revenue was not enough to maintain the enormous building. In 1964, developers bought the site with plans to replace the Baths with high-rise apartments. A fire in 1966 quickly finished the demolition work, but the apartment scheme was never realized.

The Baths became part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in 1973. This area is popular today for the scenic and recreational values recognized by Adolph Sutro. Please use caution as you explore the remains of Sutro Baths and coastal rocks and try to imagine a day at Sutro’s over 100 years ago.



Conversion to an ice-skating rink, circa 1937

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