



# slocity weekender

## Looking for a Light

Text and Photos by Ruth Ann Angus

Since the 1800s, lighthouses have been a romantic part of the American coastline as well as necessary navigation aids. Early sailing ships didn't have the luxuries of protected harbors or a friendly light to show them the way. Many foundered offshore of both coasts.

The Central Coast had its share of shipwrecks too, and a number of light stations were erected to light the way for ships coming to the area. You can tour several of these facilities thanks to local lighthouse keeper organizations.

Before the light at Piedras Blancas was erected, sailing ships had to rely on sighting the three white rocks off the point of land north of San Simeon to keep them from going aground.

The lighthouse was completed in 1875. Originally, the structure was 115 feet high and sat 150 feet above low water. The top was removed in 1949 after being damaged in a storm, leaving the lighthouse at its current height of 74 feet.

The first-order Fresnel lens that once occupied the missing lantern room came from France and is now on display in downtown Cambria in front of the Veterans Hall. An automatic electric drum aero-rotating

beacon with a 36-inch lens was installed atop the lighthouse by the Coast Guard.

under age 16 are free.

Take a drive up north to Pacific Grove and visit the oldest active

lighthouse on the West Coast, Point Pinos Light. The third-order Fresnel lens has been guiding ships since 1855. A whale-oil lantern was the first light source, and then lard oil and kerosene were used. In 1915, electric light was installed. Now a 1000-watt bulb is amplified by the lenses and prisms, producing a beam that can be seen 15 miles out to sea. Docents provide interpretive tours of the facility Thursday through Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m. Call (408) 648-3116 for more information.

Closest to home is our own gem of a lighthouse. Built in 1890, the Point San Luis Lighthouse rests atop a headland on the outer grounds of Diablo Canyon Power Plant. The site includes the original Prairie Victorian keeper's dwelling and light tower, horn house or steam whistle



lighthouse on the West Coast, Point Pinos Light. The third-order Fresnel

For many years, the light station was closed to the public and was the site of extensive marine research projects. In October of 2001, the Coast Guard turned over the lighthouse to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. The Piedras Blancas Light Station Association was formed and, in association with the Bureau, began restoration of the lighthouse to bring it back to its former glory.

Tours are offered every third Saturday of the month at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. by reservation only. They originate at the Visitor Center at Hearst Castle, from which tour groups are taken to the lighthouse by bus.

Tour reservations can be made by contacting the National Geographic Theater at Hearst Castle, Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at 927-6811. Tours are priced \$15 for adults age 16 and older. Children



lens has been guiding ships since 1855. A whale-oil lantern was the first light source, and then lard oil and kerosene were used. In 1915, electric light was installed. Now a 1000-watt bulb is amplified by the lenses and prisms, producing a beam that can be seen 15 miles out to sea.

Docents provide interpretive tours of the facility Thursday through Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m. Call (408) 648-3116 for more information.

The Point Sur Light Station perches on a rugged rock that juts out into the Pacific Ocean in Big Sur. This lighthouse, the only complete turn-of-the-century light station, is part of Pt. Sur State Historic Park. The stone structure still guides ships with its automated light.

Point Sur Light came into being 118 years ago; families lived at the light station from 1889 until 1974. Guided tours are held on Saturdays at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., Sundays at 10 a.m., Wednesdays from April through October at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., and Thursdays from July through August at 10 a.m. Groups

building, coalhouse and oil house. All are now being restored by the Point San Luis Lighthouse Keepers, a nonprofit group that is returning the station to its historic appearance.

Restoration of the lighthouse exterior is nearly complete, and work on the interior is ongoing. The San Luis Obispo de Tolosa Chapter of the Questers furnished both the parlor and the kitchen with period furnishings.

Plans are to eventually have van tour groups come to the lighthouse, and the Keepers are working with PG&E, the Port, and the County to allow access. The biggest stumbling block is the road up to the lighthouse, which is in serious disrepair and requires a substantial sum of money to bring it up to safe traveling standards. Fundraising projects are always in process.

For the present, the only access to the light station is via a long hike on the Pecho Coast Trail. Permission is required from PG&E by calling 541-TREK. ❖

