

Hearst Castle – a legacy of a media giant for all to bask in

By Kathryn Reed

SAN SIMEON – Clearly, I worked for the Hearst Corporation in the wrong era. Well, come to think of it, I don't think any of William Randolph Hearst's employees were ever invited to his castle, so I guess it didn't really matter when I worked for the Examiner and Chronicle.

But what is so great is that his mega-estate on the Central Coast is now a state park, so even the grunts (or former as the case may be) in the Hearst empire can visit and not be thrown out. The family gifted the property to the state in 1958.

I have always heard wonderful descriptions about this oasis on a hillside five miles from the ocean. But in many ways, superlatives would lessen the true grandeur of this architectural wonder.



The Neptune pool at Hearst Castle makes one want to take a few laps.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

After all, this is a Julia Morgan designed Mediterranean-style estate that took 26 years to build.

She had the foresight to use reinforced concrete in this seismically prone area.

The Neptune pool is probably one of the most photographed entities of any state park. With cushy chairs near the pool, it is easy to fantasize about what life was like in the first half of the 20th century as Hollywood's elite flitted about.

While the structure is all Morgan, the décor represents Hearst's eclectic tastes – from 15th century choir stalls, to tapestries also centuries old, to using paper napkins and having ketchup and mustard bottles on the table, to somewhat tacky furniture coverings.

The “big house” contains 115 rooms in 69,000-square-feet of space. Three cottages would have provided privacy for his many guests – many who hailed from Hollywood. Thirty fireplaces helped keep the ocean chill away. An elevator could take people between floors.

To manage his media empire Hearst had 100 telephones installed at the castle so he could talk to editors wherever he was on the estate. He also had each of his papers flown in daily so he knew exactly what was going on. Obviously, this was long before the days of cell phones and the Internet.

At one time this working ranch had 250,000 acres associated with it. Plus, there was a menagerie of exotic animals that would have rivaled the best zoos of the time or even today.

The gardens are lush. Being on the coast, flowers are vibrant this time of year. And varieties that are never seen in the mountains fill the landscape.

Three tours are available. The one we went on was described as the best for first-time visitors. At a cost of \$25, it is well worth it. But what is also great about the park is the visitors center has a ton of displays and information if people don't want to take the ride to the top of the hill to tour the castle.

A 40-minute movie at the visitors center sets the stage for what visitors will see. It explains why the media mogul chose San Simeon as his home even though his business interests were nowhere near there. The film delves into Hearst's upbringing, his marriage, children and mistress.

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