

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) at the Pigeon Point Light Station

A. Lighthouse Questions

1. How old is the lighthouse?

Light house construction was begun in 1871. The lighthouse was completed and the Fresnel lens first lit on November 15, 1872. How old does that make the lighthouse?

2. How tall is the lighthouse?

It is 115 feet from the ground to the top of the tower and 100 feet from the ground to the focal point of the lens. The focal point of the lens is about 150 feet above sea level.

3. Can we go inside the lighthouse? Are there tours of the lighthouse?

We used to offer public tours of the tower. The lighthouse was closed to the public following an event in December 2001, when two sections of the upper iron belt course broke off from the tower. Because the belt course functions like a rubber band, holding the tower together, the damage represents a major threat to the structure.

4. Do you have any plans to restore and reopen the lighthouse?

State Parks' partner, the California State Parks Foundation, is spearheading a multi-million dollar fundraising campaign to restore the tower and once again open it to the public. Initial steps preparing for the restoration have already begun. (Note: This answer will change as restoration efforts progress.)

5. Is the lighthouse used any more? What is the light on the outside of the tower?

The lighthouse is still an "active aid to navigation" operated by the U.S. Coast Guard using an automated aerobeacon on the outside of the lantern room. The beacon, like ones used to warn aircraft away from tall buildings, uses the same flash pattern as the original lens—one white flash every 10 seconds—and can be seen as far as 24 miles out to sea. Automation took place in 1972—100 years after Pigeon Point lighthouse first began operations.

6. Does the Fresnel lens still work?

Yes; and we light it every year for the lighthouse's anniversary celebration, held on the Saturday closest to November 15th—the date in 1872 when the lens was first lit.

7. When is the anniversary lighting this year?

It is generally held on the Saturday closest to November 15, the actual anniversary of the first lighting.

8. Did the keepers live in the lighthouse?

No. They lived in keepers' quarters. The early lighthouse keepers lived with their families in a Victorian-style house located where the hostel bungalows now stand. The bungalows were built by the Coast Guard in 1962 for the last keepers.

9. What are the keepers' quarters used for now?

A hostel, open to the public.

10. Where are all the pigeons?

Pigeon Point was not named after the bird "pigeon," but after a ship, the clipper ship *Carrier Pigeon*, which wrecked on the point on July 6, 1853. The lighthouse was built to help prevent the many such accidents that occurred in the 1850s and 1860s.

B. Natural History Questions

1. Can you see whales here? When are they around?

Pigeon Point is a great spot for watching gray whales particularly when mothers and calves are migrating north from Baja California to the Bering Sea in the spring—April and May. Other whales, particularly humpback, can be seen occasionally throughout the year.

2. What's the plant with the thick leaves and pink and yellow flowers?

These succulent plants are commonly known as "ice plant." The plant with the yellow or light pink flowers is a native of South Africa. The fruit of the plant is high in vitamin C and 18th and 19th century sailors ate the fruit to prevent scurvy. A similar succulent, also called "ice plant" or "sea fig," is a close relative but has deep magenta flowers, is more diminutive, and spreads less aggressively. The two species hybridize throughout their ranges in California.

3. What are those black birds on the rocks with the long red beaks and red rings around their eyes?

Black Oystercatchers. As suggested by the name, they eat shellfish—although not usually oysters. They stab open bivalves (such as mussels) and chisel or pry clinging mollusks (such as, limpets) off rocks during low tide. They do not migrate, but stay close to their nesting area. They may use their nest—a scrape on a gravel beach—for more than one year.

4. What are those black birds with the red feet and white patches on their wings?

Pigeon Guillemots. They forage in shallow near-shore waters for small fish, mollusks, and crustaceans, and nest in crevices in the rocks at the end of Pigeon Point. The pigeon guillemot uses its wings to swim while searching for food—it seems to be flying under water.

Both parents feed their chicks, bringing them an average of 16 loads a day, one fish at a time. Chicks eat the fish whole, head first. They gain weight rapidly, tripling their weight within 10 days.

5. What's the stuff on the rocks that looks like palm trees?

It is seaweed commonly called "sea palm." It grows best on wave-beaten rocks, out of the way of grazing sea urchins. Unlike most algae, it is an annual, which means that the plants live for only one year. After they reproduce, they die and are replaced by the next generation.

6. Where is the best place here for tide pooling? How do you get to tide pools?

Just to the north (left from the parking lot to the first turnout/parking area) is an easy access to a good tide pool area.

7. Where are the elephant seals?

The best place to see them is at Año Nuevo State Reserve, about 8 miles south on Highway 1.

8. Are they there now?

There are usually some animals there all year round. Breeding/pupping season is December to March and you need reservations. The rest of the year, there are often young males hanging around and summer is molting season. It's about a three-mile round trip hike from the parking lot and visitor center so wear good shoes and take water.

9. Do you see seals/sea lions here?

Yes. We often see California sea lions and harbor seals off the point.

10. Is that (bone) a part of a whale? What is that bone?

That is the top of a gray whale skull.

11. When is high / low tide?

If you don't know, suggest that they ask the store keeper. The tides are usually posted on the door of the Keeper's Store.

12. Where can we see redwoods around here?

They can be seen at Henry Cowell State Park on Hwy 9 in Felton, Memorial Grove on Pescadero Road, or Butano State Park on Cloverdale.

Logistical Questions

1. Do you have bathrooms?

Yes, near the front entrance.

2. How do you go about staying at the hostel? Do you need reservations?

The hostel welcomes walk-in guests, but advance reservations are recommended. You can make reservations at the office, by phone, or on line. The hostel office is open from 7:30 AM to 10:30 PM daily. (Hand them a brochure, if you have one.) Each cottage has two dorm rooms, one for men and one for women, with six bunks each. There is also a “family room” with a double bed and a bunk, a kitchen, and a living room.

3. Where can I get gas?

The closest is south on Highway 1 about 2-3 miles.

4. Where can I get something to eat?

South on Hwy 1 is the Gazos Grill, 2-3 miles; or the General Store at Costanoa, about 5 miles. North on Hwy 1 to Pescadero Rd, then 1 mile to Pescadero, is Duarte's Tavern at the main intersection of town and two small grocery stores.

Miscellaneous Local Interest Questions

1. How do you get to Mavericks?

Maverick's is off the point north of Pillar Point Harbor, just north of Half Moon Bay. Turn left off Highway 1 on Capistrano and head toward the point with radar towers on it.

2. Will it be this foggy, windy, cold (freezing) all day?

The weather here is very changeable, so it is best to dress in layers and be prepared for anything. There tends to be a lot of fog in the summer and it can be cool and windy all year round.

3. Where's the restaurant with the bar that was saved from the fire?

Duarte's Tavern in Pescadero.

4. How far is it to...

Davenport?	17 miles
Santa Cruz?	28 miles
Monterey?	70 miles
Pescadero?	8 miles
Half Moon Bay?	21 miles
San Francisco?	50 miles

5. Why can't my dog be here when I'm a CA taxpayer?

State Parks wants all its visitors to have a quality experience. Some people are intimidated by dogs, even friendly ones, particularly in the limited space of a park such as Pigeon Point. Dogs reduce the amount of wildlife that visitors are likely to see. Also, dog waste along trails is unsightly and a potential health hazard. You can walk your dog nearby at Bean Hollow State Beach, 2.5 miles north of here.

6. Do you sell batteries/film?

No, only disposable cameras.