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Chronicle reporter is on top of the Sutro Tower story



Pete Kiehart, The Chronicle

It's high time for reporter Carl Nolte to take a 40th-anniversary walk on the steel beams at Sutro Tower's pinnacle.

By Carl Nolte

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It takes seven minutes to ride to the top of Sutro Tower, a creaky, clanking ride to the very top of San Francisco on the occasion of the tower's 40th anniversary. The first television transmission from the tower was July 4, 1973.

You step out on a catwalk painted a color called aviation red on the sixth level of the three-legged tower, close to 1,700 feet above the city. Only the antennas, reaching up into the blueness of the sky, are higher.

It is the highest point in San Francisco, and the view is stunning, as you might expect, like the view from the more celebrated Eiffel Tower. The city is laid out at your feet - the buildings, even the so-called skyscrapers, look like toys up here in the sky.

From Sutro Tower you look Mount Tamalpais in the eye; look out to the Farallon Islands rising out of the ocean; look north to Mount St. Helena at the head of the Napa Valley;

south to the Santa Cruz Mountains, black against the horizon. To the east, Oakland and the hills beyond, Mount Diablo standing clear against the summer haze from the Central Valley.

The famous hills of San Francisco look like sand hills dug by kids at the beach. Mount Davidson, tallest hill in the city at 928 feet, looks small and a bit odd. It is half wooded, like a bald man with a beard.

Towering above S.F.

The tower stands atop 834-foot-tall Mount Sutro. The tower itself is 977 feet above the top of the hill for a total of 1,811 feet above sea level. By comparison, the top of the tallest antenna on the Empire State Building is 1,454 feet above the East River.

More than 820,000 people live in San Francisco, but the city is surprisingly quiet when heard from above - only the siren of an occasional fire engine, and the sound of the wind.

The afternoon wind was gentle on a day last week, but the tower gives off small sounds - creaks and snaps. The handrails on the catwalk tremble slightly. No matter how imposing they look, all steel structures move.

The tower was engineered with big earthquakes and strong winds in mind.

"This tower is designed to withstand a wind of 125 miles an hour," said Eric Dausman, the general manager for Sutro Tower Inc., which owns the tower. "It was designed for a thousand-year earthquake. Bigger than 1906."

It is surprising how much open space there is around the bay, and surprising, too, to realize the way the region is surrounded by water. The colors are vivid in early summer: The cities are white, the hills dark green, and the bay, the ocean and the sky bright blue.

40 years of operation

Sutro Tower is not open to the public, but a reporter and photographer were invited up in the tower to commemorate its 40th anniversary. The first transmission from the tower was a bright day for local television.

It is not difficult to get close to the foot of the tower - there is a reservoir and jogging path near the top of Mount Sutro. A narrow road through dark woods - La Avanzada Street - leads to a locked gate and the tower compound, which is surrounded by a chain-link fence.

The transmitters and working area for the tower tenants are in a concrete building set in one of the tower's three legs. The building is solid as a bunker; inside, electrical equipment whirs like a fan.

"There is 3 1/2 million pounds of steel in the tower, set in 15 million pounds of concrete," said Paul Haines, the transmission supervisor for KQED, the public television station.

Every system in the tower, Dausman said, has a backup system. There are backups to the backups. A million people, he said, receive the tower's TV signals, which reach out for 120 miles. Eleven television stations and four FM radio stations broadcast from the tower. There more than 180 other users, from taxicab dispatchers and emergency services to the FBI.

Riding to the top

All the facts and figures are impressive, but nothing really prepares you for the ride up the western leg of the tower in a tiny elevator, built for two people. The reporter and photographer and an escort squeeze inside; three's a crowd.

The elevator rumbles and clanks, like the Tunnel of Love ride at an old-time amusement park. Elevator passengers get a good look at nuts and bolts and steel beams.

At the top, swing back the gate and step out. The flooring is open, like a lattice, and under your feet is nothing but air.