

>> U.S. West Coast

# To the Lighthouse

**"Every evening, half an hour before sunset, the keepers provided with a lighting lamp will ascend to the lantern of the tower and commence lighting the lamp, so that the light may have its full effect by the time twilight ends."**

**-Instructions and directions to lighthouse and light-ves-  
sel keepers, 1871**

Story by Tony McNicol

Photographs by Mattias Westfalk





It's 6:00 A.M. and lighthouse keeper Jim Kinbrell hands us two steaming mugs of coffee. It is lighthouse keeper's coffee, he tells us—strong coffee, as pitch black as the predawn. We step outside and instantly the dewdrops gather on our clothes and hair. The lighthouse is close by. Four beams cut through the mist from the lantern room, home to the impossibly beautiful lens with its 97 individual prisms. It is a golden Fabergé egg in a giant glass nest.

As we stand and watch enchanted in the misty morn, it is easy to understand why so many people are drawn to America's lighthouses. There are perhaps 600 lighthouses in the U.S., some 70 of them on the West Coast. Though almost all active lights are automated and most keepers retired, many lighthouses have found new missions as museums, youth hostels and hotels. There are even lights available for long-term rental. Most are easily accessible by car and many in spectacular locations. They make an ideal theme for a road trip. Our journey for this article took us more than 2,100 km from San Francisco to Puget Sound north of Seattle.

Jim Kinbrell has been the custodian of Point Cabrillo Light Station since 2001. During that time he has over-

seen the renovation of the station's buildings and its launch as a bed and breakfast. "I just took my first vacation in six years," says Jim, a youthful and enthusiastic 62-year-old. "I plan to stay here a long time. I want to see all the other structures done so that we have the most complete lighthouse station in the U.S."

Work to build Point Cabrillo began in 1908, just two years after the San Francisco earthquake. It was built to protect ships carrying housing timber from nearby forests to the devastated city. Jim explains how a century later four restorers spent four months returning the 1909 keeper's house dining room to its original glory. They used blown-down Douglas fir and counted the rings to ensure the wood was within three years of the correct age. The room (where each morning a sumptuous breakfast is served to guests) is the pride of the light station.

### **Beauty and Isolation**

Heceta Head Lighthouse is said to be the most photographed lighthouse on the Pacific Coast. It is easy to see why. Perched on a headland north of the town of Florence, Oregon, it boasts a powerful first-order lens visible up to 40 km out to sea. Only the curvature of the earth limits the light. But its beauty is matched by isolation. In early years supplies came by ship. Goods would be pushed into the water then dragged up the cliff, as Heceta Head had no dock—and that only if the weather was suitable. The equally arduous alternative was a journey to the next town. Though it is only a short 15-minute drive to Florence now, light-keepers faced a five-to-seven hour trek before the coastal highway was built.

Like Point Cabrillo, Heceta Head has been lovingly restored and offers bed and breakfast accommodation. The B&B is in the stunning 1893 Queen Anne-style assistant light-keeper's house. (Sadly, the head light-keeper's house was sold for \$10 in 1940, then torn down for lumber.) The sturdy Douglas fir beams of the remaining structure barely stir, even in the strongest winds.

"They built these houses to last," says Jack Armer, the lighthouse's avuncular caretaker and carpenter. Armer specializes in carpentry from the 1800s and made the exquisitely wrought mahogany headboards in the bedrooms. Each took two and a half weeks to carve. The U.S. Lighthouse Service brought in carpenters from as far away as Chicago to complete the original \$80,000 complex, says Armer.

Most keepers were proud and conscientious. At least in the early years, pay was good—a solid lower middle-class wage. For some keepers, notably in California during the Gold Rush, the pay was excellent. But the notoriously strict U.S. Lighthouse Service expected much in return,



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including the highest standards of maintenance and cleanliness. White-gloved inspectors would arrive without warning. There are tales of keepers and their families turned out on their ear for such unpardonable misdemeanors as leaving washing on the floor.

In 1995, when the U.S. Forest Service advertised for people to run a B&B at Heceta Head light station, Mike and Carol Korgan were chosen from some 500 replies. Today their daughter Michelle and her husband run the B&B. Part of the money from the B&B is put into a restoration fund. Some \$60,000 to \$80,000 a year is spent on projects to improve the lighthouse—hence the stunning, perfectly restored interior. The food is equally splendid. “We are pretty sure that we are going to stop at a seven-course breakfast,” says lighthouse staff member Kim Wright.

### **“Terrible Tilly”**

By no means every lighthouse was as picturesque or as welcoming as Heceta Head. The loneliness of the life could have a terrible effect on keepers and their family. In her fascinating account of lighthouse lives, *Guardians of the Lights*, Elinor De Wire relates how the keeper of Maine’s Seguin Lighthouse murdered his wife because she could only play a single song on the piano.

Perhaps with such incidents in mind, several particularly challenging lighthouses were designated “stag



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## Eternal Light

Augustin Fresnel spent much of his life in anonymity supervising road construction for the French government, but as the inventor of the Fresnel lens (pronounced “Fre-nel”), the physicist and engineer’s name is forever linked to lighthouses.

Fresnel discovered that by combining many individual pieces of glass, even the insubstantial light of an oil lamp could be refracted into a powerful beam. His lenses were produced in six sizes or orders. The most powerful first-order lenses might contain more than 1,000 individual prisms and pieces of optical glass—with the result that a single light could be seen by ships up to 42 km away.

There are two main types of Fresnel lens: drum lenses, and bull’s eye lenses. The former were stationary, but bull’s eye lenses rotated using various mechanical systems. Each light’s unique pattern was determined by the number of bull’s eyes as well as by the rotation speed. With a chart showing the location and pattern of nearby lights, a ship’s pilot could plot a precise and safe course.

Before electricity, a crank and weight were used to turn the



stations”—only men allowed. One was the station unaffectionately known as “Terrible Tilly,” Tillamook Rock Lighthouse. The station is indeed built on a rock, an austere outcrop of basalt marooned within sight of—but quite far from—the Oregon shore. Even when viewed from the shore in spring sunshine—as we did—the lighthouse looks foreboding, and the winter storms on the rock are legendary. There is a story of how one group of four keepers was so affected by the constant onslaught that they resorted to passing notes across the dinner table in place of speaking.

Along with loneliness and storms, another ever-present threat was fire. There are many examples of lighthouses catching fire, particularly in the days when oil was used to fuel the lanterns. The hundreds of prisms in the lighthouse lenses also had the potential to start a fire, much like a magnifying glass lighting tinder. For that reason, cautious

keepers draped a cloth over the lens during the day.

Still, careful precautions were not always enough to prevent mishaps, and the consequences of fire in such an isolated location could be tragic. De Wire tells the story of Albert Joost who inadvertently started a fire while working on repairs at the Southampton Shoal Lighthouse. His clothes caught fire, and he was horribly and mortally injured. Before Joost was evacuated to the hospital, his final words to his terrified wife were to light the beacon at sunset and look after the station.

### **Reversal of Mission**

One of the northernmost lighthouses on the West Coast offering accommodation is Point No Point, in Washington. The lighthouse is on Puget Sound, a short drive north of Seattle. Sea lions swim just meters from the beach by the lighthouse, and the winds must make it an

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lens. One of the keeper's most important responsibilities would be getting up in the night to reset the mechanism. There are stories of drowsy (or possibly bibulous) keepers positioning their cot directly below the descending weight. A solid nudge in the chest would get them up to keep the light rotating.

Since the lenses were expensive and utterly essential to a lighthouse's operation, extreme care was taken over their maintenance. Before electric bulbs replaced oil lanterns, removing smoke and grime from the lens was a never-ending task. Keepers would remove rings and other metal objects to avoid accidentally chipping the glass during cleaning.

Although glass lenses are no longer made, Fresnel's technology is still very much in use. Modern automated lights still have Fresnel lenses but are made from sturdy plastic, and with minimal maintenance they provide the same brilliant performance. Smaller Fresnel lenses can be found in a myriad of everyday applications: overhead projectors, traffic lights, stage lights, camera focusing systems and bicycle lights. Fresnel lenses are even used in solar generation to concentrate light onto solar panels.



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excellent location for kite flying. Point No Point takes its somewhat tongue-in-cheek name from Lt. Charles Wilkes, who named the tiny spit on which it lies in 1841. Viewing it from his ship, he originally overestimated its size. The equally modest lighthouse’s first beacon was a kerosene lantern on a pole.

But from such humble beginnings, the light is now the proud home of The United States Lighthouse Society. After 23 years of being based in San Francisco, the organization recently took ship to Point No Point, where they maintain a research library of thousands of books and documents. There are files on all the lighthouses in the U.S.A. and many abroad, too. “We have the largest collection of lighthouse documents and books; perhaps second only to the national archives in Washington, D.C.,” says Point No Point keeper and society executive director Jeff Gales.

Who better to ask about the special appeal of lighthouses than Gales? He says that the U.S.A. has thousands of lighthouse fans. Many are interested in the remote locations, he says; some in architecture, some in the technical aspect of the lenses. “Who doesn’t like lighthouses?” he asks.

Today’s lighthouse keepers are mostly lighthouse aficionados like Jeff Gales; technologies such as GPS navigation, electronic beacons and plastic lenses have relegated the old custodians to the history books, and with them

their arduous, dramatic and sometimes monotonous lifestyle. The last lighthouse to be automated in Washington State was at West Point—not far from Point No Point across Puget Sound. It was scheduled for automation in 1979, but keeper Marvin Gerber fought to have the lighthouse manned at least until its centennial in 1981. The redoubtable lighthouse man celebrated the event by climbing atop the lighthouse and dousing it with a bottle of champagne.

Lighthouse fans might understand something of how he felt. “The rescue of our historic sentinels is a symbolic reversal of mission,” writes lighthouse historian De Wire. “Lighthouses were built to save people, now people are saving lighthouses.”



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### Places to Stay

Point Cabrillo Light Station  
[www.pointcabrillo.org/](http://www.pointcabrillo.org/)

Heceta Head Light Station  
[www.hecetalighthouse.com/](http://www.hecetalighthouse.com/)

Point No Point Light Station  
[uslhs.org/index.php](http://uslhs.org/index.php) (United States Lighthouse Society)

