

Field report visit Death Row, Polunsky Unit September 2024

Personal matters:

My visit to the Polunsky Unit was a positive experience. Of course it's not nice and of course you can't forget where you are. But: the guards were always very friendly - from making the appointment to arriving in person, they were nice and helpful (if you are too!). I found the visit itself incredibly enriching and valuable for both of us. The next visit is being planned...

Personally, I would have appreciated a personal exchange with someone who has already made this trip. A friend of my friend kept answering my questions. Because I know how much respect and anxiety can be associated with this trip, I am happy to make myself available as a contact person. You can contact me at any time by e-mail: jeigenmann@gmx.ch.

Appointments can be made:

Appointments must be made by telephone (tel. no. +1 936-967-8082) from 20th of the previous month. In other words, I wanted to go in mid-September and was able to make appointments from August 20. You can't go before then, even if you're coming from far away and have to organize flights etc.. So you book a bit "out in the blue". Say that you would like to make an appointment for a visit. You are forwarded to the "visitation". The lady wants to know who you want to visit (please give your name and TDC number). She checks whether you are on the inmate's visitor list (if you are not on it, there is no visit!). If everything is in order, the appointment or appointments can be arranged.

Prisoners may be entitled to a "special visit", i.e. two appointments of four hours each can be arranged. In my case, it was Tuesday and Thursday. The day before the visits (in my case Monday and Wednesday) I had to call at 1pm to confirm the appointments. Important: only after 1 pm - you're not ready before then :-).

Admission and security check

There is only one path leading to the parking lot from the main road. There is a guard post on the right-hand side. Do not ignore him! He wants to know who you are visiting (he will pass this on directly via radio). He also wants to check the car: You have to open the hood and trunk yourself, he may also look in the glove compartment and on the back seat. As soon as he says the ok, you can drive into the parking lot.

Then go to the main entrance. You can take coins (max. 35 dollars) for the snack machines - preferably in a transparent plastic bag, your car keys and your passport. NOTHING MORE! Especially no bags, cell phones, banknotes, etc.

There are yellow boxes either under the canopy or inside on the wall. The security check is similar to that at the airport. Put everything (change, car keys, ID, jacket) in the yellow box and place it on the small table in front of the X-ray machine. Take off your shoes and place them next to it. The officers may want to know what type of visit you are making (regular visit, special visit, legal visit). The passport will probably be handed over directly by the officers. Walk through the detector as instructed, then turn your trouser pockets inside out and show the soles of your feet. Put everything back on and take it with you. Straight ahead is an automatic door that opens for you. Go through, there is a switch to your right. The lady there checks once again that you are on the list of inmates and that everything is in order. She gives you back your ID and encloses a slip of paper the number of your allocated seat. She also opens another automatic door and you come outside again. Straight ahead is a large gate (chain-link fence), which opens automatically, but you have to close it yourself if no one else wants to go through. Walk straight ahead to the next building. These doors are open, go in, there is a counter on your right. Show the slip of paper, hand in your passport (it will be kept there until you). Then go left down the corridor to the next automatic door. Go through, turn left through the next automatic door and you are already in the visitors' room. There is a desk straight ahead - give the officer there the white slip of paper - she will then you to go to the appropriate seat. Your friend will either already be sitting there waiting or you will have to wait a little longer for him. I have experienced both on two visits.

The visit:

Just enjoy your time together :-). It's always too short either way. Take a thin

jacket with you. I found it cool/cold in the visitors' room.

Shortly before the end of the visit, you are told how much time is left. At some point, you will be asked to end the conversation and leave.

Output:

Same way back - don't forget to ask for your ID again. Don't just walk through everywhere, always ask if there is anything else to check or if they want to see your ID again.

On the exit: Be sure to stop at the guard post again and ask if he wants to check anything else or if everything is OK! Don't just drive through!

Snacks for your friend:

There are several snack machines in the visitors' room and your friend will be happy to get a snack or two. Before my visit, I was told that I wasn't allowed to touch anything from the vending machines that was intended for him. However, I was told that I could get everything myself and put it on the table by the vending machines - the officers then want to pack it themselves. The inmate is not allowed to take any of it into the cell - so ask him early enough if he wants anything. You are only allowed to buy something for him once during the visit, so try to remember his wishes :-). You can something for yourself at any time.

Changing banknotes into coins turned out to be difficult. I went to various banks and petrol stations in Livingston and practically got burned everywhere. I then paid for everything mostly in cash and always asked if I could have the change in coins. That way I was able to get a bit of money together. I had the most success at Walmart (there was also a bank there that changed me 2 x 10 dollars) and at Starbucks. Someone gave me the tip to try a car wash - but that never happened.

Organizational matters:

It is advisable to hire a car at the airport in Houston. As you are not allowed to take a cell phone with you to the unit, it is difficult to organize a cab after the visit. I personally had a good experience with the rental car (booked through sunnycars - all insurances are included). I stayed one night near the airport (arrived late) and for the week at the Americas Best Value Inn in Livingston. Not upscale, but cheap and close to the unit (less than 10 minutes by car). Also close is the Motel 6 and the La Quintana. There are also many offers on Airbnb.

There's not much going on in Livingston itself. Lake Livingston State Park is super beautiful and well worth a visit (beautiful hiking trails). A trip to the Nasa Space Center is also recommended.