

"Excelsior District"



Editors' Profile

EXCELSIOR BRANCH
SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Excelsior

VERTICAL FILE

REFERENCE

The Excelsior is to the Marina District what Che Guevara is to the Queen of England. In this refreshingly real-life section of town there are no Starbucks, no Noah's, no juice joints, no boutiques with overpriced gadgets. People work hard, play hard, watch their backs, and raise families in the Excelsior. The boundaries are McLaren Park to the east, the city line to the south, and Highway 280 to the west and north.

This is one of the city's best places to find affordable housing, with single-family homes priced less than \$250,000. As young couples and families search for affordable homes in San Francisco, and as the police presence in the area grows, there seems to be a sense of renewal in the air here.

The area received its name from the Excelsior Homestead Association in 1869. Mexican cowboys used to drive cattle up the grassy slopes of the now-vanished San Jose Road for the Bernal family, one of the first to settle in this area. Like many districts in San Francisco, the Excelsior was formed by land speculators who gambled on large population growth as San Franciscans sought to escape the congested city center. The Excelsior became a haven for residential development and Mission Street served as the residents' commercial corridor.

Mission Street remains the main drag and it's wonderfully noisy and obnoxious. Crime here is about average for the city, but higher than the Bay Area in general. After dark be careful along Mission Street and avoid McLaren Park.

Latin culture dominates this multicultural community. Next to the Salvadoran-owned grocery you're likely to find a Vietnamese restaurant across the street from a Chinese-owned laundry, and so on. In nearby Crocker-Amazon playground, Hispanic kids play baseball while Irish guys play soccer in the next field.

The produce markets, butcher stores, and live seafood places season the air with complex aromas. Locals drop in on old-time coffee shops, hair salons, hardware stores and bakeries. There's even a Woolworth's tucked away between the fast-food chains, locksmiths, and shoe-repair stores.

In another charmingly unpretentious aspect of this neighborhood, the east-west streets are named after nations of the world--Brazil, France, Italy--while the north-south streets are named after major international cities.

Cruise Mission Street to get a sense of the area's food, shopping, and night life. For authentic Mexican food, try La Taqueria Menudo on Mission near Brazil Street. If biker bars are your thing, visit Alex's Place, where motorcycle cops roar up to chat with the locals. Several clubs cater to the large Hispanic population. Check out El Tapatio for the closest thing to a Mexican disco.

Mariachi music blares from open doorways and side streets here. It is

occasionally drowned out by Camaros and El Caminos thumping by with enough decibels to make your dentures rattle. For the best selection of African-American figurines and assorted knickknacks, luggage, and toys, try the funky Lucky Imports at 4564 Mission. For a large selection of fun and basic women's footwear, check out Farrah's Shoes.

Step back in time at the Granada Cafe, under the same family ownership since it opened in 1945. Located at 4753 Mission, this place is the land that time forgot, with its family-style Italian dinners and endearingly dreadful landscape paintings on the wall. Where else in the city are you going to find pot roast, veal scaloppini, and chicken cacciatore and a waitress named Maryanne?

To get a true sense of life here, head east off Mission onto one of the streets named after a country. At the corner of Mission and Russia streets, check out the faded "Waiting for the 52" mural dedicated to the people of the Outer Mission by the Excelsior Youth Club. Another cool mural can be found on the south-facing wall of the Cleveland School at Persia and Moscow streets. It's one of those psychedelic, Aztec-warrior, tree-people images that stays with you.--Chris Rivers

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