

If You're Thinking of Living in: Manhattan Beach

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May link recalls her first trolley rides to Manhattan Beach with her mother in 1912. For five cents, they took hour-long trips from working-class Williamsburg to the Brooklyn enclave of millionaires' mansions.

"We were poor visitors who walked over a bridge from Sheepshead Bay to the waterfront where guards stood on the esplanade," said Mrs. Link, who finally moved there in 1935. "To the east was the Blackstone Hotel and its private beach and lagoon. To the west was Brighton, where we walked along a wooden boardwalk full of honeysuckle."

The mansions and hotels are gone, but the pedestrian-only Ocean Avenue Bridge, built in 1880, remains, as does the sense of quiet and clean sea air that sets the mile-long peninsula fronting the Atlantic Ocean apart from its neighbors to the west and north, Brighton Beach and Sheepshead Bay.

Manhattan Beach has about 2,400 homes that range in price from \$200,000 to over \$1 million, said Jon Sobel a local broker. Most are sited on streets bearing mostly British names - Dover, Exeter and Falmouth - that run alphabetically west (Amherst) to east (Quentin).

Some homes have private wells and pools, most have lawns and garages and all are within eight blocks of the beach. Renovated bungalows - some with driftwood exteriors, others resembling chalets - appear on east end streets and Tudors, center hall colonials and contemporaries on ocean blocks. There are several 100- by 100-foot lots, and one house on Falmouth Street even has an elevator.

Three six-story apartment houses were built before zoning was tightened after World War II. There is a 38-unit rental on Falmouth Street, a 49-unit rental on Oriental Boulevard at Coleridge Street and a 66-unit co-op on Shore Boulevard. Some summer rentals are available.

Today, the well-to-do, predominantly Jewish community includes a recent influx of Syrian and Russian Jews. Most residents have one or two cars and depend on nearby Sheepshead Bay and Brighton Beach for shopping, libraries, movie theaters and restaurants.

Among its residents over the years have been the Modells, who own the sporting goods chain; the Streits, who make kosher food products, and the late New York State Supreme Court Justice Samuel Leibowitz, who as a lawyer in the 1930's defended the Scottsboro Boys and as a judge presided at the Murder Inc. trial. Among politicians now living there are Representative Stephen J. Solarz and State Senator Donald M. Halperin.

On West End Avenue are three synagogues, the Conservative Temple Beth El, the Orthodox Manhattan Beach Jewish Center, which also runs a yeshiva, and Shaarei Torah. St. Margaret Mary Roman Catholic Church, which serves a mainly Italian congregation of 200 families, is on Exeter Street.

The two-story Public School 195, at Irwin Street and Hampton Avenue, is undergoing a \$15 million, 20,000-square-foot expansion that will include a new library, a 350-seat auditorium, two classrooms, a dining area and a gym. With over 80 percent of its students scoring at or above average in reading, said Robert J. Radday, deputy district superintendent, it ranks third in District 22 and second in math, with over 90 percent of the students scoring at or above average. Citywide, it ranked 36th in reading out of 619 schools last year.

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A private school founded in 1938, Coleridge School-Byron Campus, has been housed since 1970 in a former mansion on Shore Boulevard between Ocean Avenue and Falmouth Street. Its front porch, adorned with gargoyles and lions, overlooks Sheepshead Bay. It has about 90 children in nursery school through fourth grade; . Happyland Manhattan Beach Day School for pre-schoolers, is on Exeter Street.

Nearby public schools include Reynolds Junior High School in Sheepshead Bay and Mark Twain for the Gifted and Talented in Coney Island. Residents say the most popular public high schools, both in Midwood, are Edward R. Murrow, which specializes in communications, and Midwood, which offers an enriched program in humanities and the Medical Science Institute.

In 1956, Robert Moses, as New York City Commissioner of Parks, made the 1,300-foot-long, 450-foot-wide private Manhattan Beach public. But he was unable to turn the 67-acre easterly end of the neighborhood into a park, and in 1964 what was formerly Oriental Point became Kingsborough Community College. (The point had been squared-off with landfill from the Empire State Building in 1931.) The college offers My Turn, whose director, Barbara Ginsberg, says it is the largest college program for the elderly in the country. Its performing arts center presents films and indoor concerts and, in the summer, outdoor band concerts.

"The air is beautiful," said Bernice Greene-Fleischer, who grew up in the neighborhood and is now president of the Manhattan Beach Community Group, a 49-year-old civic association. "When you come off the Belt Parkway you can smell the difference. In the spring, winter and fall there's nobody here. It's you and Ishmael. It's your beach."

Manhattan Beach is also one of the safest areas in the borough. "It's a gem in the rough," said Capt. Anthony Ottomano of the 61st Precinct. Burglaries and car thefts are the chief complaints and, to help prevent them, there are community-financed private patrols.

Perhaps the area's biggest problem is its popularity with outsiders in the summer. To ease congestion, streets are off-limits to parking on weekends during summer months. Instead, about 950 cars squeeze into a parking lot, which charges \$4.25 a day. About eight extra patrolmen and some mounted officers, go on duty during peak season.

Prof. John B. Manbeck, founder of the Kingsborough Historical Society, who teaches journalism at the college, said Austin Corbin, a banker and president of the Long Island Rail Road, put the neighborhood on the map when he bought 500 acres of marsh land, called Sedge Bank, in 1877 for about \$16,500 from descendants of its original British patentees. He named it Manhattan Beach and built a railroad spur to connect it with the rest of Brooklyn.

In 1878, he opened the 353-room Manhattan Beach Hotel with former President Ulysses S. Grant in attendance; two years later, President Rutherford B. Hayes attended the opening of Corbin's 480-room Oriental Hotel on the peninsula.

Among hotel regulars were Diamond Jim Brady, August Belmont, William Vanderbilt and Winston Churchill's grandfather, Leonard Jerome.

Racetracks were nearby in Sheepshead Bay, Brighton and Gravesend. Other attractions eventually included a bathing pavilion with caged canaries; concerts at an amphitheater by John Philip Sousa, who composed the "Manhattan Beach March," and elaborate fireworks re-enacting events such as the Battles of Moscow and Trafalgar.

In 1910, laws against betting shut down the racetracks and the Manhattan Beach Hotel was torn down a year later. The Oriental, whose wood was used for the boardwalk and bungalows of Rockaway Point, came down in 1916. By 1924, the rail service ended.

Falling on hard times, Corbin's son, Austin Jr., sold his holdings in 1904 to Joseph P. Day, a developer who in 1907 began building year-round housing, installed sewers and ran electric wires underground. He also kept the area going as a resort.

Day sold the Manhattan Beach and Oriental Point Baths to the Government as World War II began, and 10,000 members of the merchant marine and Coast Guard were stationed there until 1945.

Gazeteer

Population: 8,000 (1990 estimate).

Median household income: \$75,000 (1990 estimate).

Median house price: \$400,000.

Median two-bedroom rental: \$600.

Distance to midtown Manhattan: 12.5 miles

Rush-hour commutation to midtown: 10 minutes by bus to Sheepshead Bay or Brighton Beach station, then one hour by D or Q subway train.

Government: City Councilman, Samuel Horwitz, Democrat.

World War II Compound: Fenced-off military housing for 72 families on Quentin Street remains as a reminder of World War II, when members of the Merchant Marine and Coast Guard were stationed in Manhattan Beach. Maj. Richard A. Vargas, the informal "mayor" of the Department of Army compound, said it had been scheduled to close this year. But on Oct. 1 it will be transferred to the Department of Transportation's Coast Guard exclusively, whose personnel will move in gradually as the 48 multiservice families now living there leave.

Photo: A home on Ocean Avenue. All homes in Manhattan Beach are within eight blocks of the beach. Shore Boulevard looks out on Sheepshead Bay. (Barton Silverman/The New York Times); Map of Manhattan Beach

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