

# NORTH BEACH

**T**here's no longer a beach in North Beach. The finger of the bay that gave the neighborhood its name was filled in the late 1870s. Sheltered by Telegraph Hill on the east and Russian Hill on the west, North Beach is a sunny, self-contained enclave with its own inns, restaurants, theaters, shops, coffeehouses, churches, sidewalk cafes and bocce ball courts. Despite every kind of counter-cultural incursion (bohemians, beatniks, flower children, yuppies, Chinese newcomers), it remains a microcosm of Italy. There are various approaches to North Beach from downtown.

You can walk the 10 blocks from Union Square; catch a Muni 30- Stockton bus that cuts straight through Chinatown; or ride the Powell-Mason cable car from Union Square, disembark at Union Street and walk one block east to Columbus Avenue, the area's aptly named main stem. From Fisherman's Wharf the Muni 39-Coit bus will take you to the top of Telegraph Hill. It's all downhill from there. At North Beach's heart is **Washington Square [1]**, a quaint pentagonal park ideal for sunbathing and snacking. Its core is adorned with a statue of Benjamin Franklin, donated to the city in 1879 by Henry Cogswell, a dentist who struck personal gold fitting the mouths of pioneers with gold teeth during the Gold Rush era. Washington Square also plays host to periodic

free arts shows (all artists present) conducted by the Artists' Guild of San Francisco. The twin spires overlooking the square belong to the **Church of Saints Peter and Paul [2]**. The spiritual home of San Franciscans of Italian ancestry nowadays offers mass in Italian, English and Cantonese. It is also known as the "fisherman's church," a reference to the livelihood of many of its parishioners. Back at the square, Telegraph Hill looks like a pastel layer cake with a big white candle on top. "Telegraph" stems from the semaphore used in the 1800s to signal the approach of sailing ships off the Golden Gate to the settlement below. For a close-up, station yourself at the southwest corner of Union and Stockton Streets in front of the Fior D'Italia restaurant and board an eastbound Muni 39-Coit bus. It will carry you to the base of the "candle," **Coit Tower [3]**. This 210-foot column was built in 1933 with a bequest for the city's beautification from Lillie Hitchcock Coit, an eccentric fire buff. It contains a public elevator and murals by 30 Depression-era artists. The spectacular view from the summit is presided over by a statue of Christopher Columbus, installed by the Italian community. Each October, the community honors its hero with a series of events culminating with a lively parade through the neighborhood. Cross the parking plaza in front of the tower and proceed to the "Greenwich" sign behind the statue. The red brick staircase leads down past cliff-dwellings and a crenelated, wood restaurant, Julius' Castle, to **Montgomery [4]**. The street here is a picturesque cul-de-sac divided into two levels. Follow the lower left (eastern) side to the **Filbert Steps [5]**, worth exploring in both directions. The stairs descend into a leafy "island-in-the-sky," the Grace Marchant Garden,

bordered by pre-earthquake cottages. They ascend to a landscaped row of balconied apartments in the 1300 block of Montgomery. The 1936 Art Deco building at 1360 Montgomery is where Bacall hid Bogart in the 1947 movie, "Dark Passage." Continue up Montgomery, exploring Alta Street and Calhoun Terrace, both of which drop away to sparkling views of the bay and the Financial District. Retrace your steps to Union and stroll two blocks down (west) to Grant. This corner, framed by a venerable Italian meat market, Italian bakery, pizzeria and Chinese beauty parlor, mirrors the neighborhood's Marco Polo mix. Turn left (south) along Grant's 1400-1200 blocks, the stronghold of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and other legendary "beatniks" during

the mid-1950s. Today, old-time service outlets share streetfront space with funky shops, cafes and watering holes. Where Broadway and Columbus merge, turn left and gaze at a fascinating **mural [6]** on the outside wall of a restaurant. It is considered a microcosm of life in San Francisco. Continue down Columbus for a look at such hallowed North Beach hangouts as Tosca (242), where cappuccinos and juke box sounds flow. Across the street stands Vesuvio (255), the storied saloon with the faded "We are itching to get out of Portland, Oregon!" sign; Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore (261); and Molinari (373), the consummate Italian delicatessen. At Columbus and Vallejo you'll find Rossi's Market, where the produce positively glows, and St. Francis of Assisi Church, the first Roman Catholic parish church in the city. The Columbus-Green inter-

section is known as "restaurant gulch." (There are at least 25 Italian-accented eateries in Columbus' 300-500 blocks and Green's 500-600 blocks). Club Fugazi at 678 Beach Blanket Boulevard (Green Street) is the home of the city's longest running musical revue (since 1974), the madcap "Beach Blanket Babylon." The interesting **North Beach Museum [7]** occupies the upper level of the Bay View Bank branch at 1435 Stockton. There you can visualize North Beach of the early century through an excellent collection of vintage photographs. By now you're well-acquainted with the Beach's finer points and ready to wander at will.

**Distance: 18 blocks.**

