

TWIN CITIES  
**METRO**

**COMO PARK**

By JOHN PAUL BURGESS

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**F**ew places can boast a more family-friendly atmosphere than St. Paul's Como Park neighborhood, with its tightly knit community of residents.

For six years, Heather Alexander and her husband, Matt, have lived in a spacious one-and-a-half story Como Park home with a picket fence. They almost moved to Bayport, but Heather and Matt instead decided to remodel their home and remain in the area where daughters Lena and Lily (and dog, Penny) benefit from what Heather calls the low-density living and community feel of the neighborhood. With the fourth lowest crime rate of St. Paul's 17 neighborhoods (according to a 2005 crimereport), as well as kidfriendly entertainment, the area is a haven for families with children. In Heather's 12-house half-block alone, there are 25 kids, almost all of whom are 10 years old or younger, and most of whom attend the award-winning Chelsea Heights Elementary School.

Median house price in the neighborhood as of last year was \$216,250, but available housing is somewhat scarce, as many residents with growing families, like the Alexanders, are choosing to remodel instead of relocating.

You don't have to live in the neighborhood to enjoy Como Lake and the surrounding park system, which includes a public pool, golf course and picnic areas, and the COMO PARK ZOO & CONSERVATORY. The free zoo has been operating in one form or another since 1897, when three deer were donated to the city and fenced into a pasture in the park. More than 100 years later, with bigger fences, more animals and a gift shop, the park has undergone various renovations. It recently opened its first new exhibit in more than two decades, Tropical Encounters, incorporating plant and animal life native to tropical ecosystems. Also relatively new is Como Town, a smallscale amusement park for youngsters ages 1-12 with rides and Putt'er There Golf, a mini-golf course with all the bells and whistles—that is, windmills and water obstacles.

Follow Midway from Como Park toward Snelling, and you'll drive straight into Great Minnesota Get-together territory, the MINNESOTA STATE FAIRGROUNDS, home of the fair from late August through Labor Day weekend. The fairgrounds aren't always all food on sticks and large, corn-fed livestock. Throughout the year, other events take place on the premises, including the Minnesota Horse Expo (April 27-29 this year), the Living Green Expo (May 5-6) and several large antiques shows. This month, the place will be stuffed to the rafters with deer, weaponry and clowns, with the Minnesota Deer Classic, Weapons Collectors Show/Sale, and the Shrine Circus.

Como Park is also home to several great small shops. Adjacent to the residential one-ways off Midway are the FIGHTING IRIS and JAVA TRAIN COFFEE HOUSE, a set of locally owned interconnected shops. The hip design, including a large-scale graffiti mural outside the Java Train, sticks out of the landscape of beige to light-beige chimney-topped homes in the area. Stop in at the Java Train and sign the guest book while perusing the selection of soups, sandwiches, coffees and Izzy's brand ice cream. Then get your caboose next door to the Fighting Iris for a dozen roses or to sign up for a studio class taught by owner and accredited florist Christine Finnegan.

Just on the fringe of the neighborhood (and technically located in Falcon Heights) is the COFFEE GROUNDS, your quintessential neighborhood place. Providing a venue for community groups and organizations to meet up, and renowned for its never-a-cover policy for musical performances, the Grounds is "its own entity," says current owner David Lawrence. "It's bigger than myself and will go on serving the community even after I'm gone."

The Como Park neighborhood offers some unique choices in traditional and comfort grub. The closest thing to a supper club is the Como Lakeside Pavilion, which houses the BLACK BEAR CROSSINGS ON THE LAKE, a banquet-style eatery. Try the neighborhood staple NELSON CHEESE AND DELI. Owner and amiable, all-around nice guy Mike Greenheck describes its specialty simply as "great lunch, fast"; the deli is committed to using "as many natural ingredients as possible," and boasts cookies baked on-site. The quality shows: Regulars line up out the door on some lunch breaks. Also in the business of satiating hunger is MAC'S FISH & CHIP'S, a small diner specializing in the delicacy that is haddock and fried potatoes. +

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