

Lawrence

magazine



THE SPIRITUAL SISTER CITY

With a little meditation in the heartland, a rural town in southeast Iowa transforms into a cultural and educational center





It's the First Friday Art Walk in Fairfield, Iowa, and the town square is hopping.

There are approximately 10,000 people in Fairfield, and it seems a good portion of them are gathered around this quintessential Norman Rockwell town square, with old trees, a grassy park and a central gazebo. A blues band plays, and a few local groups sing. Food vendors are set up along the sidewalks. We get in a line for barbecue and sit on a park bench to eat and listen. A couple begin to dance in the grass, oblivious to the passing crowd. After a few minutes, we watch as a half-dozen children join the dancing.

Later, we're told that there are often upwards of 2,000 people at Fairfield's First Fridays. Even taking into consideration that there are out-of-towners, like us, who have come in for the event, that's a pretty decent showing.

Fairfield, like Lawrence, is a university town. And there are many ways in which it is similar.

Fairfield has 20-plus galleries and was a *Smithsonian* choice for "20 Best Small Towns to Visit in 2013." Fairfield claims to have more restaurants per capita than

San Francisco (but that's where the per capita comes in). Still, one does not necessarily expect to find Thai, Indian, Ayurvedic Indian, Turkish, Mediterranean, sushi, and Mexican—all with a big emphasis on vegetarian—in rural Iowa.

Nor does one expect to encounter a plethora of gay couples, many older, holding hands as they stroll the galleries.

But then, Fairfield is no ordinary Iowa town—nor is its university ordinary either. Not since the Maharishi and his followers arrived.

His Holiness Maharishi (pronounced "Ma-har-shi," not "Ma-ha-ree-shi") Mahesh Yogi, who died in 2008, was known as the founder of Transcendental Meditation, or TM. The Maharishi University of Management was founded in 1971 in California, but soon relocated to Fairfield when a campus became available after an older college closed its doors. For the past 40 years, the Maharishi University of Management has expanded its programs to include undergraduate and graduate degrees, all accredited, in sciences, arts, humanities and management. At the core of each academic sequence and program is a commitment to consciousness-based education: All learning starts within the student—within the individual's unique ability to seek knowledge and understanding.

It's a very diverse campus, with students from all over the world. The campus is entirely smoke-free and carbon-neutral, and all menus are vegetarian and organic. There are no pesticides, no toxic fertilizers, and the dining hall grows much of its own food. Students almost all exercise daily. With little drinking, and minimal obsessions with video games and TV, it tends to be quiet at night. More tea ... fewer bars.

Though it is voluntary, almost everyone at the university practices Transcendental Meditation, a twice-daily ritual that, staff quietly explained, fosters focus, energy and creativity. It's not a religion or philosophy. TM can be integrated into one's religion or spirituality, whether Christian, Hindu, etc. But followers

believe that the consistent individual practice of TM will alter one's brain, and can expand one's ability to focus, learn and be creative. They say it can reduce stress, anxiety, disease and addictions, while improving memory, maturity, self-worth, emotional stability—and one's GPA. More significantly (and this is where some might say it gets woo-woo), they also contend that the collective practice of TM can impact the world, reducing negativity (violence, accidents, unemployment, inflation, etc.) and promoting all the variables that we seek for improved quality of life.

In 1980, the Maharishi Patanjali Golden Dome of Pure Knowledge was built on campus as a massive palace for group TM practice. Since genders are separated during meditation, a parallel dome for women soon followed.

I was allowed entrance, not during meditation time but in a break in the middle

of the day. Visualize a huge space, with an arching wooden beamed ceiling rising to a central glass tower. The floor is covered with foam mattresses, pillows and blankets—whatever it takes to be comfortable. Here, hundreds come twice daily to leave behind all the chores and distractions of ordinary life and to focus on something intangible, internal and yet cosmic.

TM may not be a religion, but practitioners can be fervent.

I briefly listened in at a conference for educators on learning to integrate meditation into school curricula, or “consciousness based education.” The research findings were compelling: Kids who learn to meditate experience lower stress, and are more focused, less distracted and more optimistic. And that’s just the start. So, I wondered, what is the big block to school districts all over the country making use of an easily accessible, no-cost and easily mastered tool?

Maybe it’s the picture of the Maharishi ... and then trying to explain to all the parents what’s going on in the classroom.

Sometimes a journey provides answers, and sometimes it just stirs up a lot more questions. This trip was the latter.

There is a different energy in Fairfield. It isn’t a Pleasantville, no tinge of Stepford. We overheard spirited arguments in coffee-houses (but about sustainability issues). We attended a fine play in a theater tucked above a restaurant. If we’d stayed longer, the salsa lessons and pottery classes looked appealing. Life there has the same challenges and struggles as life everywhere.

And yet, it’s hard to meet so many happy people, people who appear content and satisfied, and not wonder if they may have something. I was intrigued. Definitely skeptical, especially when it comes to their big picture, but intrigued. I sensed a similar attitude from Fairfield residents who weren’t part of the TM crowd. You would think that the exotic nature of the school might increase the normal town-gown tension that is part of any university town ... but I didn’t see it.

It’s been approximately 40 years since Fairfield has been charting a unique course. “There are the ‘meditators’ and then those of us who were here before,” one local explained. “New folks move here for the lifestyle. But it’s been good for Fairfield.”

One final image: It is reported that hundreds of Indian monks, living on farmland outside Fairfield, spend all day meditating and directing their collective energy towards peace. I’m a perennial “doubting Thomas,” and nobody would confirm this legend. But as legends go, it’s a nice one. And the thought of all that focus—allegorical or real—being directed towards a goal I embrace gave me a tiny, delicate, sliver of hope.

And I haven’t felt hope in a long time. **LM**

PLAYING TOURIST?

← Time your Fairfield visit for a **First Friday Art Walk**. More than just a gallery stroll, although there are about 25 galleries and artsy-shops, it’s a town festival with live entertainment and a theme that changes by the month. FYI: The \$1-a-minute shoulder-and-back-rub at the massage booth is well worth every penny.

← To get a feel for the **Maharishi University of Management**, swing by the **Argiro Student Center** to collect brochures and visit the bookstore. Be sure to lunch in the student cafeteria and feast on the “all you can eat” salad bar, sandwich bar and vegetarian/Indian hot dishes. What I found most intriguing about the dining hall was that I didn’t see a single person wearing headphones or playing with a screen of any sort. Everyone was engaged and talking. With each other. Face-to-face.

Visit the **Vedic Observatory**, featuring a variety of large concrete and marble astronomical instruments that perfectly reflect the movement of planets and stars.

← Do the Saturday morning **Farmers Market** in season, in a park by the courthouse. I found some lovely earrings (only \$5), as the market features craft vendors as well as produce.

Maharishi Vedic City is a small ‘burb’ of Fairfield built on the Maharishi Sthapatya Veda architecture, which, I was assured, fosters peace, prosperity and happiness. It does look different from traditional neighborhoods, as all homes face east (not each other) to receive the life-supporting rays of the rising sun, and they share other design features as well.

Check out the **Abundance Ecovillage**, a grouping of about 20 homes that function entirely off the grid, exemplifying the potential for self-sustainability as well as Vedic principles of architecture.

← Fairfield’s **Carnegie Library** holds the distinction of being the first Carnegie Library in the U.S. built outside of Pennsylvania, one of the original prototypes for the thousands that followed.

The **courthouse** is a very showy example of Richardsonian Romanesque architecture, with bas-relief sculptures on the walls.

Thirty minutes away in Eldon, artist Grant Wood made famous what is now called the **American Gothic House**, and tourists go to strike a pose.

Tour the **Cedar Valley Winery** in Batavia, about 10 miles west, and the **Maasdam Barns**, a reclaimed draft horse-breeding farm.

← A **16-mile trail** loops around the town and links parks and nature preserves.

The Raj is a very upscale (think Oprah-esque) Ayurvedic health spa, with the whole works as far as services, including massages and body cleansing.

← But the best part of Fairfield is **the people**, so plan to relax, sit outside coffee houses and chat with whomever is at the next table. You’re sure to learn something new.

