



The luxurious Raj Health Center and Spa offers popular day and in-residence treatments for the prevention of disease, preservation of health, and promotion of longevity.
Rick Donhauser

Om on the Grange

They're Seriously Meditating In Fairfield, Iowa

By [Gary Lee](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

Sunday, November 12, 2006; Page P01

It was late afternoon in Fairfield, Iowa, and townsfolk were preparing for the daily ritual.

Marie-Helene Tourenne, who serves up sublime French fare at the Petit Paris restaurant, removed her apron, left the coq au vin to simmer and exited the kitchen. Lonica Halley, co-owner of Natural Selections, a shop offering organic goods, left the store in the care of her assistant. Even Ed Malloy, the amiable silver-haired mayor, ended a meeting and strode out of his conference room.

The three joined a flow of more than a thousand people headed about a mile north of town to the Maharishi University of Management (MUM) and its pair of golden domes, 25,000-square-foot structures that rise above the rolling farmland's barns and silos. There, the pilgrims sat on mats, chairs or the hardwood floor with their backs to a massive altar, facing eastward toward a blank wall. For 20 minutes they remained motionless, in silence.

Five o'clock is meditation time in this town of 9,500, about 100 miles southeast of Des Moines.



Meditate on this: Individuals can calm the mind and body at the Maharishi University of Management, a Transcendental Meditation center founded in 1973 near Fairfield, Iowa. (Ken West)



MAP: Nathaniel Vaughn Kelso
The Washington Post

While other '70s-era spiritual movements are fading, Transcendental Meditation -- or TM, a relaxation and awareness technique using carefully calibrated breathing methods -- is thriving here. Besides the MUM campus, practitioners can pore over meditation literature at 21st Century Books. They can visit Maharishi Vedic City, a model town founded by TM followers just outside Fairfield. Or they can shop at Thymely Solutions, which specializes in homeopathic remedies, and other boutiques started by meditators.

Fairfielders on different sides of the meditation divide, uneasy with one another in the early years, now appear to commingle easily. TM followers point to the ascendance of Malloy -- now serving his third mayoral term -- as a sign of their acceptance. Most non-meditators agree.

By Malloy's account, TM disciples make up a quarter of Fairfield's population. While some prefer to stay in their homes or offices for the exercise, a growing number take part in the group sessions, which are also held at 7:30 each morning. (Iowans aren't alone: According to TM spokesman Bob Roth, the number of those who practice it nationwide is about 5 million and rising.)

Whatever venue they use for their focused relaxation, Fairfield's meditators insist that this town should be near the top of every traveler's destination list, above all for the sense of peace and positive spirit that meditation brings it.

Camille Jorgenson echoed the kind of endearment most locals hold toward the place. A 40-something meditator who moved here in the early '90s, Jorgenson co-owns a company that imports gourmet organic products from Italy and elsewhere. "The power of group meditation makes this one of the most positive-spirited places I know," she said. "Everybody should have the opportunity to see it."

* * *

I made a trip to Fairfield and Vedic City last month to do just that. Although not a meditator, I wanted to see how these two tiny dots on the Midwest map became a center of meditation. The answer, it turns out, was simple.

The movement's Iowa roots go back to 1973, when TM founder Maharishi Mahesh Yogi started a university in Fairfield. Though many questioned whether it could survive, today MUM (where mediation is a required subject) is a thriving campus, 850 students strong and best known for its computer science and sustainable development programs.

In 2001, Vedic City was founded by meditators four miles north of Fairfield; it now attracts several thousand curious travelers a year, according to Fairfield tourism officials. "City" is a bit of an overstatement: Organized around 10 circles, it's a scattering of New Age wooden buildings that extends across a bit more than a square mile. Rooms at the Raj, a health spa, and the Rukmapura Park Hotel have been set aside for meditation.

The town applies Vedic principles, traditions dating to ancient India that are designed to bring peace, prosperity and spiritual well-being to those who practice them. TM is one of the best known Vedic traditions. But it also pertains to a style of architecture in which the placement of a building and its rooms are oriented in relation to the sun's movement. All of Vedic City's 200 or so buildings, including office buildings and homes for its 200 to 300 residents, were built using those guidelines. Food growing, education and other aspects of life also have been aligned with the principles of Veda, the holy scripture of Hinduism.

To an outsider, TM seemed intangible and a bit cultish at first. After observing the group meditation session at MUM, I met on campus with Roth and Norman Zierold, another spokesman for the TM movement.

"[It's] not hard or complicated," Roth said. "It's a deep-breathing technique that helps relax the body and mind. When people really get engaged in it, many of them want to change other aspects of their lives, such as diet. But TM doesn't require that." It calls only for practitioners to meditate for 20 minutes twice a day, he explained. The training can be received from specialists in almost any American city and costs \$2,500, including four days of lessons and follow-up consultations.

As I explored the area, the odd marriage of TM culture and folksy Midwestern mores made for some amusing scenes. In a breakfast stop at Revelations, a popular cafe in Fairfield, a couple of farmhands sipped black coffee and discussed plans to repair a broken tractor. At the next table, two women debated whether reiki therapy might deepen their meditation experience.

But the alluring aspects of this place eclipsed the quirks. Fairfield, whose low-rise buildings are concentrated around a sprawling green square, was easy enough to explore on foot. The town's galleries (there are more than two dozen) and boutiques drew me in and kept me occupied for hours.

The most accessible venue for viewing the gamut of visual art offered is 1st Fridays Arts Walk, an open-air display of paintings, live music and street theater staged around the town square every month. Even the brisk winters don't stop the show.

Unable to visit during that event, I picked up the flavor of it pretty easily during a hop through some of the galleries. The best: the Fairfield Arts Association, a gigantic space that regularly exhibits shows from the most accomplished painters and sculptors in the area; Americus Gallery, featuring Monet-like landscapes of France and Italy by the owner, Christopher Edward Kufner; and Icon Gallery, run by local art aficionado Bill Teeple, which hosts shows of big names from across the country and abroad.

Later, in a makeshift theater near downtown, I caught a performance of the Encore Players' "Musical of Musicals," which cleverly riffed "Oklahoma!," "Mame" and other well-known Broadway shows. Between the paintings and the show, the artistic talent here was impressive, high-spirited -- and a happy surprise.

* * *

To see Vedic City, which is ungated and open to the public, you can book a guided tour in Fairfield or pick up a map and do it yourself. When Roth offered to show me around, I jumped in his Jeep for a firsthand look.

It was a Sunday, so we stopped for the weekly brunch offered by Dean and Christine Goodale on the hilly lawn of their Vedic City organic farm. The all-you-can-eat gourmet spread, including stuffed crepes and house-made fruit tarts, is served, weather permitting, on picnic tables for \$15 a head. There I met architect Jonathan Lipman, who moved from Washington and now designs buildings in Vedic style here and in other parts of the country. He walked me through the basic idea behind Sthapatya Ved, the Vedic components of building design.

The key is to align all rooms to take full advantage of the sun as it moves overhead, he explained. The kitchen is usually best in the southeast corner; the living room should face west; and the master bedroom should be in the southwest corner.

Interested to see these rules applied, I was delighted when Jorgenson and her husband, Chris, invited me to visit their home, a spacious one-story structure with sweeping ceilings and vast open areas. "It sounds like a cliché," Chris Jorgenson said, "but living in a place like this makes you feel healthier and more balanced."

Beyond their living spaces, Vedic City residents are big on healthful foods. A Vedic City ordinance bans the use of chemicals in plant production; most of the produce is grown by a few organic farms.

I visited one, a 12-acre sprawl of vegetables perched on a hillside, and Steve McClaskey, the horticulturalist who runs the farm, guided me around. In the outdoor garden and adjacent greenhouse, there were vines hanging heavy with cherry tomatoes, clusters of broccoli and rows of Swiss chard. With this heavy accent on healthy living, it's no wonder that Mother Jones magazine, the bible for the ecologically minded, earlier this year named Fairfield among the dozen best places to live that you've never heard of.

Back in Fairfield, I met with Malloy and asked how his town had merited such a distinction. He cited the unusual mood of tolerance for diversity, the heavy support for the arts and the myriad small businesses. "If small-town America has a future," he said, "it's going to look something like this."

It sounded like the kind of thing a mayor would say.

But as the day wound down, I paused to look at the town square with its gazebo, at a nearby row of ethnic restaurants, at a woman dressed in a bright blue sari walking past. Perhaps there was something in the mayor's words, I thought.

And then, suddenly, a parade of cars started moving past in the direction of the golden domes. It was meditation time again.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/10/AR2006111000463.html>