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## The Iowa aura

### In Fairfield, you can't help picking up the maharishi vibes

By Josh Noel, Tribune Newspapers

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FAIRFIELD, Iowa — I spent two days in this little town hemmed in by farms and on both days became strangely sleepy about 3 p.m. Like, oppressively I-could-sleep-now-and-not-wake-up-until-the-morning sleepy. I attributed the weariness to the usual: not enough rest, early-morning runs, the oh-so-taxing life of a travel writer. Then I mentioned the phenomenon to a local. A knowing smile spread across her face.

"People say that all the time when they come here," said Valerie Barnard, a slim 63-year-old who has lived in Fairfield for 14 years. "It's just your metabolism lowering because of all the vibes."

Yes, the vibes.

Fairfield, you see, is not just any friendly southeastern Iowa town of 9,200. It is a friendly southeastern Iowa town of 9,200 that is a big part of the transcendental meditative universe. Twice a day, hundreds or thousands of locals meditate at precisely the same time — many of them assembled in a pair of golden domes on the city's north edge — with a belief that their communal effort can resolve crime, illness and international conflict. Therefore: the vibes.

How Fairfield, the site of Iowa's first state fair, in 1854, came to be an unlikely meditative center dates to the late 1950s, when Maharishi Mahesh Yogi started the transcendental movement as a means to reach spiritual balance and peace. The phenomenon quickly went global, catching on with 1960s counterculture and, in 1973, birthing Maharishi International University in Santa Barbara, Calif. A year later, the school moved to Fairfield to take over the campus of the recently defunct Parsons College. MIU since has changed its name to the Maharishi University of Management.

Just another small Iowa town until then, Fairfield slowly morphed into a TM (as practitioners call it) destination. On its face, Fairfield still looks like any small Iowa town. The usual chain businesses sit on the town's periphery, and at its heart a grassy square is ringed by Midwestern charm: the candy store, the barbershop, the pizza place.

But then you start to notice the wrinkles: the health store selling pills labeled "Stress Free Body" and "Stress Free Mind"; the plentiful ethnic and vegetarian restaurants; the organic-coffee shop; the larger-than-small-town-average health food store. And why do the people look so healthy and aglow?

That's when it becomes clear that this is not just any Iowa town. Estimates say a quarter to a third of the population practices TM — including, these days, the mayor — and the experience is there to be had by visitors: private tours of TM hot spots, ayurvedic spa treatments and private lectures about the movement (where, if you ask enough questions, you'll hear about the initiation fee; I was quoted \$950). TM has come into vogue more than once, especially in the late 1960s, when the Beatles championed the movement. But never mind.

"Every time a story is written about us, you see the Beatles in it," said Livia Cole, a 39-year-old TM practitioner who has lived in Fairfield for 13 years. "Who cares? We are so much more than that. Scientists do it, politicians, artists. It's not a hippie thing."

I met no better example than Art Frank, 64, a retired engineer who was one of Fairfield's original TM settlers. We met at the Fairfield farmers market minutes after he had arrived in a shiny new BMW from his current home in Trenton, N.J. As we ate plates of freshly made Indian food, my surprise (which was unfair, I admit) must have been obvious: a meditator of more than 40 years drove here in a shiny new BMW?

"I'm an engineer, and I have a master's degree from an Ivy League school," Frank said. "I like my new car. I like to meditate, too."

We discussed the calming benefits for a while — of meditation, not the car — then he suggested I wade in.

"You should try a shirodhara," Frank said of a treatment that is essentially pouring a steady stream of oil on the forehead. "It helps balance the mind."

Mind balance always sounds good, so I made a reservation at The Raj, the ayurvedic hotel and spa a few miles north of town that is known to host the occasional celebrity client.

The next morning, I met a man in his mid-20s named Jai at The Raj's men's treatment wing in what looked like a low-lit seventh-grade science classroom; small gas burners sat beside old pots and large silver bowls. The bandanna-wearing Jai led me to a dressing room and instructed me to strip to my underwear, wrap myself in a white sheet and affix blue hospital booties to my feet.

He returned a few minutes later to lead me to a room down the hall and described the experience ahead, which he promised would be "hypnotic": For 30 minutes, he would gently stream warm olive oil back and forth across my forehead.

"You'll follow it with your mind's eye," he said.

I climbed atop a 3-foot-high wooden table. Jai placed a warm towel over my eyes and, in a few minutes, began running the stream across my forehead, temple to temple. All I heard for the next half-hour was my breathing and the birds chirping softly outside. Life's busy thoughts faded as the oil rhythmically fell, but I remained conscious enough to suspect the procedure would be closer to relaxing than day altering.

When Jai quietly announced he was finished and I tried to move, the shirodhara's power became evident. My body had turned heavy and my jaw slack. Calm sat behind the eyes, and I struggled to lift myself. I couldn't say if my mind was healed, but as usual, in Fairfield, I was ready to sleep.

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If you go

Getting there

The closest major airports are in Des Moines and the Quad Cities, both of which are about 110 miles away.

Eating

Revelations (112 North Main St.; 641-472-6733; [revelationscafe.com](http://revelationscafe.com)) is a go-to spot for meditators — or anyone who wants fresh, tasty food and three stories of books (including plenty of self-help titles). For a town of this size, downtown is teeming with quality, no-frills ethnic food, including Indian, Thai and Turkish. For finer dining, consider Top of the Rock (113 W. Broadway; 641-470-1515; [topoftherockgrill.com](http://topoftherockgrill.com)) and Vivo (607 W. Broadway; 641-472-2766; [vivofairfield.com](http://vivofairfield.com)).

Staying

There are a few B&Bs in town and the Fairfield Landmark Inn (115 N. Main St.; 641-472-4152; [fairfieldlandmarkinn.com](http://fairfieldlandmarkinn.com)), which costs about \$55 per night. The heart of the TM action, though, is The Raj (800-248-9050; [theraj.com](http://theraj.com)), a rather simple ayurvedic hotel, restaurant and spa that sits a few miles north of Fairfield in the TM-founded "town" of Maharishi Vedic City (though be warned: There's nothing else to do there). At The Raj you can get just a room (\$108 per night, plus tax) or intensive therapy for whatever ails you, from the half hour nervous-system-balancing shirodhara (\$125 for 30 minutes) to a "rejuvenation package" (\$660.80 per day, minimum three days). Also near Vedic City is the Rukmapura Park hotel ([rukmapuraparkhotel.com](http://rukmapuraparkhotel.com)).

To do

If interested in TM, visit the Maharishi University of Management (641-472-7000, [mum.edu](http://mum.edu)). A tour of Vedic City and local TM hot spots can be booked through the Raj.

More information

[travelfairfieldiowa.com](http://travelfairfieldiowa.com); [tm.org](http://tm.org)

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