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Transcendent City



inside the meditation capital of the
midwest.

by dan hyman. photographed
by logan clement



Transcendental Meditation practitioners in Fairfield meditate twice daily in one of two Golden Domes of Pure Knowledge.

A flatbed truck whizzing around the town square kicks up dust on Burlington Avenue. A repairman with his morning coffee in hand tosses a smile my way. All cornstalks and cool spring breeze, Fairfield, Iowa, wouldn't seem unlike any other Midwestern city, ones such as Pleasantville, Swan, or Oskaloosa, which dot the map from here to Des Moines.

And then they come into view.

The Golden Domes of Pure Knowledge: Orblike, almost shimmering, vaguely extraterrestrial in appearance, 25,000 square feet each. "Your imagination could go wild," says local resident Kathy Petersen, who has lived in the Fairfield area for nearly 35 years, with a laugh. "Like, 'What do they *do* in there?'" The reality, it turns out, is not a whole lot: Twice daily, hundreds of people meditate together under the domes. Silence. Concentration. Transcendence. This is Fairfield, epicenter of the spiritual practice and ever-growing global movement known as Transcendental Meditation.

"I haven't really come across a place like this anywhere else."

—Fairfield resident Lauren Webster

"I haven't really come across a place like this anywhere else," says 26-year-old New Orleans native and current Fairfield resident Lauren Webster of the approximately 9,500-person town that, in addition to housing the aforementioned twin Maharishi Golden Domes, is home to the Maharishi University of Management (MUM), a school at which the principal mission is to provide a "Consciousness-Based education" and Transcendental Meditation is part of the daily practice and core curriculum. To that end, all first-year undergrad students are required to take "Science and Technology of Consciousness," or Transcendental Meditation 101, if you will, during which they learn the technique and traditions surrounding the practice, as well as explore its theoretical foundations. Students can further

immerse themselves in all things meditation by majoring in, say, Maharishi Vedic Science, which, among other big-ticket subjects, aims to help them understand how they can maximize personal growth and contribute to world peace.

Every year, hundreds of new faces from roughly 85 countries pour into the small town, and, according to Webster, who recently completed her MBA at the university, almost all are here on a quest for some form of self-enlightenment. "It's a safe haven for a lot of people to just come and get themselves together," she says. "A lot of people here were lost and are searching for something. Being here you're able to develop things about yourself and find what you're looking for." It's a sentiment echoed by MUM film professor and



Houses in Maharishi Vedic City all point east, a principal tenet of Maharishi Vastu Architecture.

“That it’s in middle-of-nowhere Iowa is pretty weird...and pretty special”

—MUM professor Amine Kouider

former student Amine Kouider, a native of Algeria. On a recent spring morning the 29-year-old sits in the university’s Arts Center and recalls his own journey halfway around the world to his current home in Iowa: “Most people here have this desire to better themselves and find out who they are,” he explains of Fairfield’s gravitational pull. “That it’s in middle-of-nowhere Iowa is pretty weird.” He smiles. “And pretty special.”

TM, as its practitioners call it for short, has been in the public arena since roughly the late 1950s. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, an enlightened teacher from India, began touring the world and speaking to the practice’s profound personal benefits. Charismatic and soft-spoken with an almost divine presence, Maharishi, whose followers often refer to as an “enlightened master,” quickly attained something like celebrity in the late ‘60s—if largely because TM began

attracting famous followers including the Beatles and Mick Jagger. The practice only got trendier in the ensuing years as stars latched on to its hip cachet. Everyone from Jerry Seinfeld to Jim Carrey to David Lynch to Ellen DeGeneres professes a deep dedication to TM.

But what exactly does TM entail? As Maharishi, who passed away in 2008 at age 90, taught, meditating twice a day, specifically while reciting a mantra one receives when learning the practice, allows the mind to settle down to quieter states and ultimately transcend thought itself. According to a recent survey, nearly five million people have learned TM. And of those practitioners in Fairfield specifically, many are millennials who have either been born and raised with TM or chosen it as their path. To know what’s it like being a young person entrenched in the TM life-

style, I’ve come to the right place.

Spend enough time in Fairfield and you’ll hear the words “consciousness” and “transcending”—or some iteration of them—repeated with great frequency. It’s because people such as Niloofar Mofrad, a 24-year-old Iranian student at MUM who says TM saved her mother from depression and finds it acts as a means of “self-nourishment” in her own life, truly swear by these terms. They will tell you that achieving a greater sense of consciousness and transcending to a deeper physiological level turns off the static in their brains. It gives one access to a more unfiltered creative well from deep in the recesses of the mind. But it’s not a religion, Mofrad and others explain. (Although any confusion on the subject is understandable: Inside one of the Golden Domes, I spot what looks a lot like an altar with images of Maharishi.)

How TMers ended up in Fairfield is more a matter of timing than anything. Founded in 1971 and originally based out of an apartment complex in Goleta, California, the leaders of what was then known as Maharishi International University—it was renamed in 1995—were looking for a permanent home.



Students at Maharishi University of Management mediate as part of the curriculum.



A Maharishi mantra greets you at university buildings.



There is a certain meditative serenity in the Fairfield area.



University scientists study the effects of TM on the brain.



Sustainability is at the core of Maharishi University of Management’s mission.

In 1974, after Parsons College, once nicknamed “Dropout U,” shuttered, Maharishi U moved in. Not surprisingly, the arrival of the ‘Roos (short for “Gu-Roos”), as the locals called them, was met with some skepticism. “People in town were wary of us,” recalls Petersen, who moved to Fairfield in 1981, of the early years. She says that times and relationships within the community have changed, not least of which because of the creation of Maharishi Vedic City, a small residential community established in 2001, where she now serves as city clerk. The modern homes in MVC all face east and have a golden roof ornament called a kalash at the top—both core principles of Maharishi Vastu Architecture. More than anything, having a town to call their own, Petersen says, gave credence to the meditators’ long-standing presence in the community. “Now they view us as a real city,” she says.

Some of the younger meditators don’t quite see community relations with such rose-colored glasses. “From the residents of the community’s perspective, there’s still a very big problem,” says Webster, whose master’s program included a community outreach project. “They think everyone associated with the university is elitist or thinks they’re better than everyone. There are still those things that exist that create that separation. A lot of residents don’t even feel like they can walk on campus.”

If the TM community feels closed off, it’s perhaps because, for many followers, membership unites them in a society of like-minded seekers. They call their global meditation family “The



Inside the Golden Domes, where meditators sit for their daily transcendence.



Maharishi Mahesh Yogi is a familiar face in Fairfield.



Maharishi Vedic City was founded in 2001.

Movement” and view Fairfield as its home base. It has a profound impact on many people’s lives. Kelsey Latta, a 24-year-old Seattle native whose parents’ divorce ripped her apart during her teenage years, came to Fairfield three years ago with her dad on a visitor’s weekend. As soon as she stepped out of the van that took her from the airport to the campus, she says, “I just had this feeling I was going to be here.” Nic Emery, a twentysomething student enrolled in the David Lynch Masters of Fine Arts in Film program, will tell you he’s here in Fairfield as part of a “spiritual awakening.” Eva Saint Denis, a 21-year-old former model from Southern California and recent MUM grad, says she came here because she wanted “more depth” in her life and “to be around authentic people.” Kusum Purohit came from India to study sustainable fashion and says her combination of meditation and design is about “cherishing yourself more than the clothes.” Gabrielle Sleiman, 19, moved to Fairfield with her mom five years ago and finally feels like she belongs. “I was this weird little girl who meditated at home by herself,” she recalls of her life in Canada. “Moving here I was like, ‘Yay, I don’t have to hide it anymore.’ I’m not the only weird little girl.” Kouider puts it more bluntly: “It’s the misfits and the black sheep all in one place.”

With a downtown full of organic food stores, Ayurvedic health centers, and vegan bar-restaurants like The Arbor

Bar (which doubles as a performance-art venue where patrons get onstage and recite beat poetry about inner spirituality), Fairfield feels not unlike a small-scale version of larger, typically liberal hippie towns like Boulder, Colorado, or Santa Cruz, California. But it’s the full-bore openness and acceptance of others here—each person has a genuine interest in learning about and interacting with one another—that some locals will say makes it special. Craig Pearson, executive vice president of MUM, says a common phrase you’ll hear Fairfield residents relay of the city’s appeal is “I feel the love.” It all makes you stop and wonder why meditating makes people seem, well, nicer. Are they blissfully zoned out? Hardly, says Pearson, surrounded by pictures of Maharishi in a conference room at the Argiro Student Center. They’re just in a higher state of consciousness. “When you’re in an environment where there’s a lot of transcending going on,” he says, “people’s true human values come out.”

To be clear: TM is in fact not a religion. At least not by standard definition. But Fairfield’s meditators, like many religious organizations’ most devoted members, largely interact only with one another. Despite its friendliness, the entire community can feel like a bubble. This is most clear when speaking to high school students at the private Maharishi School of the Age of Enlightenment. Here, students begin practicing walking-meditating as early as kindergarten and learn



A local scout troop visits the Maharishi Vedic Observatory, a one and one-half acre open-air observatory of masonry sundials.



From left: Niloofar Mofrad, Kelsey Latta, Eva Saint Denis.



MUM PhD student Brian Glassett.

“I’d look online and be like, ‘Wait a minute? Not everyone’s meditating?’”

- 11th grade student **Gevene Rodriguez**

more traditional sit-down meditation in fourth grade. Teachers use TM as a tool to “turn their attention inward and be more aware of themselves.” Most critically, they aim to make sure students can directly relate whatever they’re learning to their own life while stressing consciousness in the teaching methodology. “My whole life I’ve been a part of this community without even knowing it,” admits 11th-grade student Gevene Rodriguez. “I’d look online and be like, ‘Wait a minute? Not everyone’s meditating?’” Rodriguez’s parents want her to be a TM teacher after college. “They say it gives you lots of opportunity,” she says. “They always say, ‘It’s in your dharma.’”

Misunderstanding and social judgment by outsiders can be a common side effect of growing up in Fairfield. “I went to a writing conference about two years ago,” 12th-grade Fairfield native Anna Unger recalls, “and this girl came up to me and was like, ‘Oh my god, I hear you guys float in the air and pray naked to the moon.’” Unger laughs.

“You have to explain you’re a completely normal person; you just do this extra thing for 40 minutes out of your day.”

Some fellow Fairfield dwellers might also need convincing. Sitting outside Cafe Paradiso one afternoon, former meditator and university employee JP gets to talking. “Do I think it’s a little cultish?” he says when asked about TM’s insular relationship to the surrounding community. “For sure!” Nahshon Yisreal is a Chicago native who is about to graduate from MUM and is working on a social-media app, he says. Despite having lived in Fairfield for nearly four years, he still sometimes finds it a strange and confusing place. “It’s definitely weird here,” he says. He’s quick to add, however, that for young self-starters like him, Fairfield is “an entrepreneur’s paradise.” Not only are there a plethora of creative types in these parts, but also a large number of “rich-ass people who want to throw you bread.”

Yes, like many large-scale organizations, TM and its community of practitioners have a lot of money. According to some estimates, the movement has an annual income of \$20 million. Want to learn TM? As per several websites, the cost is approximately \$1,000 for a series of four sessions. With its devotees constantly preaching its benefits, however, couldn’t one of them teach an eager student, like, say, a journalist, out of the goodness of their heart? Not

quite. TM’s official website says 100 percent of the TM course fees “support our educational and charitable initiatives,” and to that end, according to native Fairfield residents and husband-and-wife couple Tasha and Jeremy Jones, money would have to be involved if one wanted to learn.

When asked, the young adults in Fairfield will admit that life outside the small town can seem somewhat inviting. Rodriguez is not sure yet if she plans to stay in Fairfield post-high school graduation. “People get jittery here,” she admits. “I need to experience something bigger.” Kenzie Wacknov, 24, grew up here and says she rebelled against TM in her teenage years, but after leaving for college in Berkeley, California, she was drawn back to Fairfield one year later. It was comforting, she says, to be back among her kind of people. “There is something that I don’t want to take for granted here,” she offers.

Unger, like Rodriguez, is ready to leave Fairfield next year when she heads off to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. But does she think she might eventually come back and make her permanent home in this unusual Iowa town?

Yes, she responds without hesitation. “It’s part of who I am.”

