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Unique experiences abound in Iowa community with extreme meditation focus

By MARY BERGIN

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Second in a series of unique Midwest getaways in rural (less than 10,000 population) areas.

I dunk a wedge of focaccia into the day's soup — Bogota potato, spiced with a mild curry — at Revelations Café and Bookstore, while assessing the pulse of this unusual community, sandwiched within the many cornfields of southeast Iowa.

References to health, wellness and Ayurvedic products pop up on signs and storefronts throughout Fairfield's town square. The businesses face a tidy gazebo, in a park where yoga classes meet on summery Saturday mornings. In abundance — for the community's size of 9,500 — are jewelers, clothing boutiques, health product shops and ethnic eateries.

Abundance EcoVillage, a subdivision, is dedicated to energy and natural resource conservation (through wind and solar power, harvested rainwater, Earth Tube technology for ventilation and other like-minded efforts). Among the first dozen houses is Sweetwater Luxury Bunkhouse, four bedrooms of off-the-grid lodging for travelers.

Fairfield's Go Green plan — fueled by an \$80,000 state grant to collect data, create a sustainability guide and hire a program coordinator — aims to make the community a nationwide model of sustainability by 2020.

What inspires these projects and gives the area a global reputation? Look just outside the city limits, to the Maharishi University of Management, open since 1971 and now offering a four-year bachelor's degree in sustainable living.

The school — in Iowa because of inherited land — led to establishment of Maharishi Vedic City, where about 1,000 people live a systematic manner and as a part of the Global Country of World Peace, which pursues a loftier goal: to unite all nations through ancient Vedic principles that include TM, transcendental meditation.

All house entrances face the east. Gardens contain no synthetic pesticides or fertilizers. Large-group meditation happens twice daily.

TM also is at the core of business and spirit at The Raj, a medical spa that since 1993 has aimed to rid patients of environmental toxins and enhance mind-body connections.

Customers arrive from all continents and include filmmaker David Lynch, rockers Donovan and Mike Love (of the Beach Boys). A one-week detox program costs about \$4,750, but some stay longer or spend \$595 for just one day of treatments, classes and lectures. An initial consultation is \$150.

Pulse diagnosis reveals levels and locations of toxins, blockages, digestive and metabolic weaknesses. These factors, body type and basic Vedic rules (such as rise early, exercise in the morning, be in bed early and make lunch your biggest meal) dictate the course of individualized treatment.

"We are not a luxury spa — we don't have a swimming pool here," notes Graciella Zogbi, on-staff Vedic health educator and music therapist.

She says the program allows "profound detoxification, rejuvenation and balance" when following "the same authentic Ayurvedic treatments used on the royalty of ancient Vedic India."

This involves oil enemas, vegetarian meals, no alcohol or drugs and 2.5 hours of daily spa services (such as massage, light beam therapy,

trickling herb-infused oil onto the forehead, detoxing from shoulders to feet in a chamber of steam).

Some patients yearn to ward off the effects of aging. Others fight the pain of fibroids or infertility. The Raj makes no guarantees but suggests that any condition — allergy to ulcers — can improve or vanish, when accompanied by permanent lifestyle and diet changes.

She believes perfect health is a matter of choice and, similarly, "if you want societal peace, you start with individual peace" of mind through TM, "which helps us naturally and spontaneously want to do good things for our body."

Additional Facts

Check it out

- ◆ What: The Raj
 - ◆ Where: 1734 Jasmine Ave., Fairfield, Iowa
 - ◆ Info: www.theraj.com, (800) 248-9050
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