



The best of the Midwest

The scenic Loess Hills in Western Iowa (main picture)

PHOTOGRAPH: IOWA TOURISM OFFICE

The Midwest states of the USA offer a smalltown adventure for language students and a great opportunity for those keen to study hard and immerse themselves in local life. **BETHAN NORRIS** reports.

When international students are choosing where to study in the USA, language schools located on the east or west coasts are often at the top of the list. Yet schools situated in the Midwest states, in the very heart of the USA, say that students who do venture into these less well known areas generally do not regret their decision.

Jasmine Jia from Wisconsin English as a Second Language Institute (Wesli) in Madison, WI, describes Wisconsin as “sublimely beautiful”, and adds, “Even Americans are fairly stunned when I take them around the state, surrounded as it is by Chicago, two Great Lakes, the Mississippi River and full of some of the grandest natural [areas] in the country.” International students are often so enchanted by the area that, according to Jia, “Many students plan to stay here for one session but stay for five and then bawl their heads off when they leave.”

Susan Greer from the Center for English Language Training (CELT) at Indiana University in Bloomington, IA, points out some of the advantages that encourage international students to head for the US heartland. “The cost of living in this part of the country is lower than that on either coast or in the large cities, and the presence of Indiana University means that there are many cultural advantages easily available here that would otherwise only be found in larger cities at a much greater cost,”

she says. “Traffic is quite light here, so that we enjoy clean air and a generally quiet environment, and crime rates are very low, so this is a very safe place to live.”

As well as offering a quieter, and possibly more studious, environment, language schools in less well known locations can also offer an intense immersion experience for students wanting to learn English. “Minnesota is an excellent place to study because, unlike on the coasts or in larger metropolitan areas, there are few people who speak any other language but English,” relates Sheila Hoffman-Hicks from Global Language Institute in St Paul, MN. “It is certainly a benefit for those who are really motivated to learn and use English. In

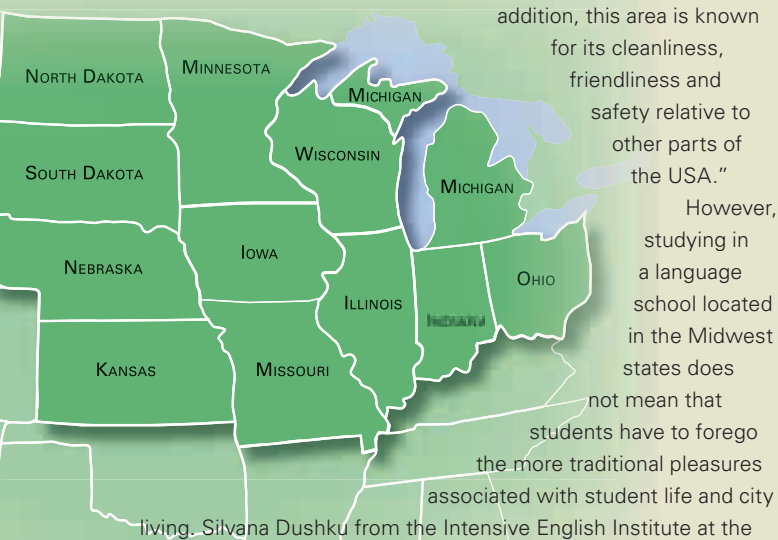
“On a school trip to the St Louis Arch, a disabled IEL student was told he couldn’t go to the top because he was in a wheelchair. His international classmates politely notified the attendant they weren’t going without him. They formed a chair with their arms and carried him to the top.”

Silvana Dushku, Intensive English Institute, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL

Chicago skyline, Illinois
Known as the Windy City, Chicago is situated on the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan, which provides a great recreation area in the heart of the city



PHOTOGRAPH: ILLINOIS BUREAU OF TOURISM



addition, this area is known for its cleanliness, friendliness and safety relative to other parts of the USA.”

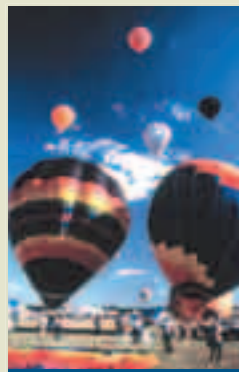
However, studying in a language school located in the Midwest states does not mean that students have to forego the more traditional pleasures associated with student life and city living. Silvana Dushku from the Intensive English Institute at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana points out that Chicago, the USA’s third-largest city, is only 200 kilometres from their school and is a popular excursion for international students. “Once in Chicago, students can head over to the top of the Sears Tower or the John Hancock Building to capture the beauty of the city and the lake on their cameras,” she says. “Navy Pier and Lakeshore Drive, Millennium Park and Michigan Avenue appeal to those who love to walk around and get snapshots of the city buzz.”

In the twin town of Champaign-Urbana itself, roughly a third of the population is made up of students – attracted by the worldwide reputation of the University of Illinois – which means that student-centred activities feature pretty heavily in the entertainment on

offer. Dushku calls it “one of the most wired towns in the world”, which “glows with intellectual and cultural life”, and adds, “Champaign-Urbana provides a wealth of multicultural experiences, including delicious ethnic food, world-class music and theatrical performances, exciting sports events and, above all, the chance to make friends from all over the world.”

The fact that many English language programmes in the USA are attached to large, well known universities is an added attraction for international students. At Indiana University CELT, Greer observes, “The presence of the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, one of the foremost music schools in the USA, means that students have easy access to cultural events such as opera, ballet, concerts, recitals, travelling Broadway productions, etc, many of which are free or available at special student prices.”

Indiana’s strong connection with all types of music can also be seen in the



Battle Creek Balloon Fest, Michigan
 With just 13 pilots during the inaugural festival and well over 70 hot air balloonists now taking part each year, the annual Balloon Fest attracts over 25,000 visitors and counting

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHIGAN.ORG



Agent viewpoint



"Students that opt to live and study in the American Midwest are more discerning in their tastes as they are looking for a 'different' study abroad experience. The low cost of living is a definite incentive while also the Midwest has a reputation as offering quieter, more spacious surroundings – perfect for a newcomer to the United States who really wants to study English. For many, the vision of studying on a green, wide-open college campus

with birds chirping encapsulates the perfect study abroad experience. Many Midwestern college campuses bring to life such a vision. And as there are fewer non-native English speakers living in the Midwest, students will be forced to use their new English skills outside of the classroom. Homestay options are plentiful and, with accommodations bigger in size, students enjoy a comfortable living environment that fosters total immersion."

Tomoya Okumura, ApplyESL.com, USA



"Our students have said they enjoyed the opportunity to mingle with local citizens in the Midwest, who welcomed them with friendly acceptance. During the daytime, students use various campus facilities or participate in various activity clubs [outside of lessons]. In the evenings, they go to local drama and musical productions, sports events and, of course, local restaurants and pubs. Depending on the state, they also enjoy sightseeing, hiking, skiing or

whatever else the local surroundings have to offer."

Julia Hong, Uhak.com, Korea

"Students enjoy the Midwest because of the friendly environment, lower cost, fewer Chinese, outdoor activity opportunities and traditional American culture. Midwestern schools pay attention to student needs and help them assimilate into the local culture."

Brian Hockertz, Oh! America Education Consulting Centre, Taiwan

collection of music festivals that take place in the state every year.

"There is the Lotus festival of music, which brings musicians from all over the world to perform," says Greer. "[Also] the Early Music Festival, which showcases music and original instruments from the 18th century and earlier, and the Bill Monroe Memorial Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival [a country music festival that has been in existence since 1967]."

In Minnesota, Hoffman-Hicks points out the thriving cultural attractions that can be found throughout her state. "The Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St Paul in Minnesota are home to world-class culture," she asserts. "After Broadway in New York, it has the most theatre seating in the USA. We have many excellent museums, one of them ranked in the top 10 in the world. The Twin Cities are also home to the Mall of America, the largest shopping centre in the country. It is large enough to have an amusement park inside, complete with roller coasters and Ferris wheel."

The Midwest also offers the chance to experience a way of life that is not found elsewhere in the USA. In the states of Iowa and Illinois in particular, international students can learn about a particularly unique way of life that has been practiced unchanged for centuries. "Twenty miles to the west [of the University of Iowa] are the Amana Colonies, a group of seven towns with over 475 historical sites and buildings, including five museums" says Jenna Hammerich at the ESL Programs Office at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. "The colonies were founded in the mid 1800s by German immigrants escaping religious persecution [and are now] a National Historical Landmark." She adds, "Kalona, an Amish community of 2,500, sits 20 miles to the southwest and welcomes visitors to its museums, shops, wineries and festivals."

In Illinois too, Dushka says that the nearby Arthur and Arcola Amish communities – some of the largest in the USA – "can be a surprising discovery for students". She adds, "These communities are distinguished for their handicraft and culinary art."

Many inhabitants of the Midwest are proud of their pioneering and rural ancestry and in Nebraska, international students can learn about this important part of US history on a trip to the Pioneer Village and Stuhr Museums, which offer "a hands-on living history of rural America", according to Corliss Sullwold at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Other excursions offered include trips to Kansas City and Omaha as well as the Great Platte River Road Archway monument, which marks an old pioneer wagon trail and commemorates the 250,000 men, women and children who made the journey from Missouri to the west coast between 1845 and 1860.

The River Platte was an important navigational guide for the early pioneer families and also plays

an important role in a modern natural spectacle, according to Sullwold. "Every year approximately 500,000 Sandhill cranes, 90 per cent of the world's population, converge on the Kearney area, which attracts visitors from around the world," she relates.

The vast beauty of the US interior is something that many students find

Pumpkin farm, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin
Pick-your-own farmyards are a common sight in Wisconsin, and farm shops offer everything from squash, pumpkins and corn to raspberries, apples and cranberries



PHOTOGRAPH: WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM

impressive and exploring the natural attractions is a popular pastime. Hoffman-Hicks says that their school offers an array of activities that take advantage of the different seasons. Rock climbing is offered in the more temperate months, while winter sport activities such as skiing and ice skating are arranged in the winter, "especially for students who have never had experience in the snow", she says. "Ice fishing can also be fun – even just walking on a frozen lake if you've never done it before can be exciting!"

Having a go at unusual outdoor activities can be a good way for students to experience the local way of life and also integrate with local people. Jia remembers a story of one of their students who unwittingly got involved in a local "paddle and portage event" in Madison, WI. She recounts, "The poor guy had to paddle a canoe across two of our city's lakes, then in the middle lug the thing up and over the crowning downtown hill!"

Students at the Career English Language Center at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI, also get to witness the more light-hearted side of local life. "The Do Dah Parade is especially fun," says Laura Latulippe at the centre. "Groups in the community organise to participate in the parade. Each entry begins with a ridiculous premise, for example, one group paraded pushing lawn mowers and another did a military-like drill with brooms."



Kreycik Riverview Elk Ranch near Niobrara, Nebraska

This working ranch offers a covered-wagon ride through bison, elk and deer herds. Nearby is the Niobrara State Park, offering river rafting and horse riding

PHOTOGRAPH: NEBRASKA DIVISION OF TRAVEL AND TOURISM