

The CIVIC Citizen

The Council for International Visitors to Iowa Cities

Thanks to those who responded to the question in the previous newsletter about American volunteerism. Its origins seem to be a matter of ongoing debate, yet to be resolved.

This newsletter is about one international visitor (we had six total) in February. Following are the words of Paul Cullen, a journalist with the Irish Times:

"I knew I was headed for the Midwest when the air hostess on the flight from New York handed me a copy of 'Guns & Ammo'. Every European likes to think that the middle of America, the bits we seldom get to visit, is full of rifle toting, God-fearing U.S. patriots. Now I was on the way to Iowa and about to find out whether this was true.

I'd been to New York, which I know 'isn't really America', and Washington, where everyone assured me that DC wasn't really America either. Then there was Buffalo in upstate New York, but that was under several feet of snow so it was really hard to tell either way

But what did people tell me when I got to Iowa City? You guessed it, this wasn't really America either, I was told. Too many students, too many migrants from other parts, too liberal to be considered representative. Real America is 'out there', they said, jabbing their fingers vaguely in the direction of out-of-town.

Now I think that maybe there is no single Real America, as Europeans like to suppose. Instead, there is a kaleidoscope of 'real' cultures, different but overlapping, and together forming a society much more diverse than we imagine from across the Atlantic.

Back at home in Ireland, we get our images of the U.S. from Hollywood, CNN, the music industry. The warp and weft of American life, the ordinariness of everyday existence is only superficially portrayed. We think of America in caricatures because we are fed caricatures - sorry George Dubya!

I came to Iowa as a participant in the State Department's International Visitor program, the lucky recipient of an invitation to see things at first hand, and perhaps dispel the caricatures. I had only visited the U.S. on two previous occasions a long time ago, so I knew my notions needed updating. This is, for obvious reasons, a fascinating time to be here. Everywhere, Americans want to know my view on President Bush and his plans for war with Iraq. A gulf has opened up between the U.S. and Europe and I feel relieved that I'm not French at this time. The tone of debate in Washington strikes me as very angry and the political spectrum is shifted to the right compared to what you find in most European countries. I was surprised at the lack of enthusiasm for the war, which seemed to conflict with the sentiment you heard on TV chat shows. But then maybe I wasn't in the real America.

But as ever it is the small things that shape one's view of a country as much as the larger affairs of state. Americans are far more polite than they are given credit for, I find, quite apart from the generous hospitality that has been lavished upon me during this visit.

Other things I like are: your bookshops, sometimes complete with bars or coffee shops (in spite of Amazon); the provision of public drinking water in so many places; the lack of fencing around so many houses; and the relative unpopularity (compared to Europe) of mobile phones and text messaging.

On the downside, I'd have to mention: the decay of so many downtowns in U.S. cities; your preference for gas-guzzling auto-monsters; processed food and its inevitable toll on so many bodies; and your television.

I never did get out-of-town in Iowa. By the time you read this, I'll be in California. I'm hardly likely to find the real America there. But isn't it the trip rather than the arrival that counts?"