

Orientation for Slovak and Czech Local Government Officials

Overview

Now that we have finished the selection process for cities for this program, we want to provide you some information to use in planning your trip to Iowa and Washington, DC. We will provide you with a folder of information upon your arrival, including a schedule for your daily activities, phone numbers for people to contact you, etc. If there are other questions you have before leaving, please send them to us through Luba Vavrova on the Slovak side or Jana Voldanova on the Czech side. We are looking forward to a productive program.

Travel information

The grant we have from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. State Department pays for the following expenses in connection with your visit – visa costs, air travel to the U.S. from your point of departure, e.g., Bratislava/Vienna or Prague, accommodation, meals, travel in the U.S. and some professional expenses associated with your visit. We will also purchase a health insurance policy for you to use while in the U.S.

We will buy the air tickets here and send them by express mail to the coordinators in Bratislava and Prague after the airline arrangements are firm. The Slovak and Czech groups will travel separately, leaving by air on March 9 and returning on April 7. The second group from each country will leave from the same cities on March 26 and also return on April 7. When you check in on March 9 or March 26, be sure that Des Moines (DSM), is listed as your final destination on your luggage.

The travelers from Prague will probably go through passport control at JFK airport in New York City and then change planes again in Cincinnati, OH, before arriving in Des Moines, Iowa. You will have to hand in (or re-check) your luggage with the airline after you go through customs in NYC. The Slovak group will probably fly directly from Vienna to Dulles airport in Washington (IAD) where they will go through passport control. They will also re-check luggage and go first to Chicago (ORD) and then to Des Moines. We will meet your flights in Des Moines and take you to Ames by van where you will stay at the University Inn (tel 515-232-0280) for the first three days of your stay.

Other information about expenses

For each day you are in Iowa the money available for meals is \$26 per day. This is the same amount that university employees get when they travel around Iowa and is quite sufficient. Because expenses are higher in Washington, DC, the money available there is \$40/day. It's quite common to conduct business with colleagues at breakfast or lunch. Most of the time, your hosts will expect each person to pay for her/his own meal (go "dutch treat") although people may sometimes offer to "treat" guests in restaurants. You may also be invited for meals in American homes. (See information on gift-giving for

information on what to bring on these occasions). You will be living in hotels or motels with restaurants and shops located nearby.

The U.S. Program

We are preparing a schedule listing all of the joint activities, which you will receive after arrival in Iowa. From March 9-12 there will be orientation activities in Ames, where Iowa State University is located. For more information about ISU, please check out our website (www.iastate.edu). Also useful for you will be the website for the city of Ames (www.city.ames.ia.us). From March 12-29, representatives from the six Czech and Slovak cities will be living and working in six Iowa cities.

According to our grant, the main reasons for your visit are 1) to “network” with officials in similar sized U.S. cities about their experiences with economic development and related topics of mutual interest and 2) to work on an economic development project with U.S. colleagues at ISU. That means living during the work week in their towns, working with U.S. city government officials in their offices during the work day (8am - 5pm), and attending various community meetings with them. Each weekend we will bring everyone back to Ames to discuss “lessons learned” and engage in group cultural activities. When the second group arrives on March 26, we will bring the second official from your city to join you in your American host city.

Then, on April 1-2 we will have joint seminars to work on your city’s project and to meet with officials about regional and state-level issues concerning U.S. cities. On April 3 our group will travel to Washington, DC, for the final part of the visit, which will include discussions with U.S. government officials, meetings with congressional officials about how U.S. cities get funding from the national government, and meetings with Slovak and Czech embassy officials before the groups leave directly for home on April 6.

Communications

Because of the difference in time – Iowa is 7 hours behind central European time – and because you will be moving between different locations, contact by telephone and fax with your offices back home may be difficult for you to arrange. So, we strongly recommend that you open an international email account that you can use to send and receive messages from people at home. Our people use ***www.hotmail.com*** or ***www.yahoo.com***, which are both free services, when they travel overseas but you may know about other services available in Europe that you can directly access over the internet.

Iowa Population & Culture

Some of the names of our cities (e.g., Des Moines, Dubuque, Marquette, etc.) -- especially along the Mississippi River which is our eastern border -- will show you that French explorers were among the first European visitors to what is now called Iowa. Other city names, e.g., Fort Madison, Ft. Dodge, etc. indicate the presence of the U.S. Army from the beginning of the 19th century. However, most of Iowa was settled by people from northern and central Europe only from the middle of the 19th century. Specific countries which contributed to Iowa’s current population in large numbers

include Germany, Ireland, UK, former Austro-Hungarian empire, Norway, and Denmark. Many of the people, including a sizable population from the Czech lands, came directly from these countries and began farming in late 19th century and just before World War I. Others relocated to Iowa from other parts of the U.S. further to the east.

People living in small and medium-sized cities in Iowa and nearby states such as Minnesota and Wisconsin spend free time in activities related to family, community, and church-related organizations. You will probably get invitations to attend local churches and school events, attend community clubs, etc. and meet many people who have traveled to Europe and other parts of the world. Quite a large percentage of Iowans has had higher education, including university and community college. You will probably see that people support quite high (for the U.S.) levels of governmental services, particularly for education.

Religious affiliation is largest for Lutheran and Catholic churches along with some smaller Protestant denominations not so well-known in Europe, such as Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, etc. Small populations of Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, and other religious adherents can be found mostly in larger cities, especially the hometowns of the big universities in Ames, Iowa City, and Cedar Falls. Small populations of African-Americans and Native Americans can also be found, along with an interesting community of Amish people in east central Iowa. These people originally came to the U.S. from Switzerland and Germany in the 19th century and live apart from most of the population by choice today. They have special schools for their children and are very productive farmers living according to their religious teachings without electricity or driving cars. We have heard that people from similar groups are living in modern-day Slovakia, including some quite near Seneca.

You will also see populations of recent immigrants, including people from Mexico and central America working in the food processing and construction industries in Iowa. Some, like the Bosnian and Somalian populations in Des Moines have come as refugees from war in their countries. Others, including people from south Asia and the former Soviet Union, are working in high-tech businesses in our big cities and university towns.

Some additional information about life in Iowa

Now a few words about cultural practices from the U.S. perspective. We will also have a presentation on this topic by Andrea Siebenmann (aja7man@hotmail.com), a Slovak woman now living in Iowa during the orientation program on March 10. Slovak participants are also encouraged to contact Honoria Balogh (honoriam@iastate.edu), also living in Iowa, by email with specific questions. Czech participants may contact Libuse Bohuslavova (jindra.bohuslav@email.cz), our colleague at Západočeská Univerzita in Plzeň, who has also participated in ISU projects.

Gift-giving – If you are invited to someone's home, it is polite to bring candy, wine, or flowers. You can choose buy these items at most big supermarkets. It is also good to bring some photos of your city and your family to show your hosts.

About time – If you are invited to attend a business meeting or a social event, it will usually start at the appointed time. Visitors notice that most Iowans work hard and at a fast pace. Like most Americans, they are also quite time-conscious. You may have heard a favorite American expression, that “time is money.”

American homes – You may be invited to spend the night in an American home while you are living in your host city. This can be a very good way to understand American values and culture. You’ll see that most Americans live in a single-family home of wood construction. Each adult and many teen-age children will likely have jobs outside the home. Because the weather in late spring and summer can be quite stormy, most Iowa families have a special “family” room along with guest bedrooms on the lower floor where many family events are held. This is also the areas where they will stay during the strong thunderstorms that come in the summer. However, you will not find this kind of weather while you are visiting Iowa.

More about Weather – In March you can see temperatures as low as 0 on the celsius scale and it could go as high as 20 C when we are in Washington, DC. Snow is possible in early March but not likely.

Money – As described in another part of this paper, most of your expenses will be covered by our grant (including some cultural activities) and you will get dollars to pay for meals and food. However, it is recommended that each person bring some money for the trip (\$150 is suggested) in case you are delayed in the airport en route. As soon as you arrive in Ames, we will give you the per diem money to use for food and other personal expenses. While you are here, you will need to pay in dollars in the stores and restaurants.

Credit cards are widely accepted, e.g., Visa, Mastercard from European banks. It is also possible to use credit and debit cards to get dollars in banks and at automatic bank machines (ATMs) to pay for gifts and other personal items purchased to bring home. There will also be time for shopping in Iowa, on trips to cultural attractions, and while you are in DC.

Some tips about food – Don’t be surprised if people eat a light lunch in the middle of the day. Except for business lunches, we usually have our big meal at home with our families at night. Iowans drink a lot of coffee during the day but it is usually much weaker than you are used to. People also drink a lot of water with their meals. When you eat at a restaurant, the waitress will bring you water with a lot of ice. However, you can ask her for water without ice if you prefer. Many people drink iced tea, so be sure to say “hot tea” if that is what you prefer. Meals in restaurants usually have quite large portions so it is quite polite to ask for a box to take extra food home. That could provide you with another quite good meal if you are staying in a place with a microwave oven!

Beer and liquor – Business meetings usually include coffee or tea and, sometimes, pastries. However, you will probably not find your American hosts offering toasts with liquor in city offices. No liquor can be served in offices at our university, for example,

according to state law. Bottled water is often available but water is drunk directly from the tap in offices, homes, and restaurants and is quite safe. Beer, wine, and liquor is not often drunk at business lunches but is more common after work at dinners in restaurants and at homes.

Smoking – This is a big difference from European practice. Smoking is not allowed in most public buildings and only in special areas of restaurants in the U.S. If you want to smoke in your hotel room, please let us know and we will try to arrange reservations for some smoking rooms. Otherwise, the best plan is to go outside of buildings for smoking.

What to wear – Business clothes are quite similar to what you are used to in your own country, except that in Iowa we are generally more casual. Men wear suits and ties in the office. Women wear dresses or pantsuits. Women visitors may want to bring a dress or suit especially for receptions or orchestral performances, but normal business dress is also appropriate for that.

Iowa's Economy

The name of our state comes from a Native American Indian word that means “land between two rivers.” European settlers quickly saw that it is especially fertile farm land and that contributed to our reputation in the 20th century as a national and international food producer. You’ll see that most Iowa farms are family-owned corporations. They specialize in growing corn and soybeans. In addition, many farms concentrate on hogs and cattle. These farms are highly mechanized and are quite large. As the farms have grown in size, population in rural areas has decreased and the small towns have also lost population since not so many local services are needed to support the population. Also, small-town stores face big competition from nearby shopping centers and superstores like Wal-Mart and K-Mart.

Until recently, the predominant part of Iowa’s population has been rural (i.e. living on farms) or living in towns and cities under 10,000. Now a larger percentage than before lives in suburbs of larger cities. Compared to other states, our population is not growing very much and people worry about a “brain drain” since many talented young people leave the state after graduation from high school or college. So, our state and city officials are actively concerned about diversifying our economy from overdependence on agriculture and ag-related manufacturing and food-processing (e.g. manufacture of agricultural machines,) into services (such as insurance, computer applications, high-tech, etc.).

One strategy that Iowa cities use is to work closely with the big three public universities in the state, including Iowa State University to create new business and economic development activities. Smaller cities look to locally-based technical community colleges which offer two-year programs and work closely with local businesses to provide needed workplace skills needed by employees.