American food is the pits, but Columbus' air is clean and its bathrooms — well, they're beautiful. Taiwanese students who visited Columbus for three weeks to learn conversational English (Could ya? Would ya? Gotta go.) gave Columbus and Ohio better-than-passing grades for their air, bathrooms, roller-coaster rides, shopping bargains and manageable rush-hour traffic.

The 19 students learned English in the classroom and on tours. They saw sights from Sea World to Riverfront Stadium; hiked through Highland Park Metro Park, ice-skated, bowled and took art classes. They visited Ohio's Center of Science and Industry, Columbus City Center and Toys 'R' Us; climbed through Olentangy Caverns; attended the Jazz & Rib Fest; pedaled canoes; and saw Trecumsh." The golden rule from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.: Speak only English.

"I think I learn many things," said Sandra Ou, 22, a college senior majoring in English literature. "Before we come here, we have image of America: In Downtown, I think I could see many tall buildings and people dressed nice. Here, I don't think it is very tall and the people are very casual."

"In Taipei, everything is such a rush — so many people, so many cars. I stand on the street — oohh. In America, it is so relaxed; I like this."

The students, ages 8-25, all study in Taichung. They arrived in the heartland this month to see how Middle America lives and works — through Camp English America. On Tuesday evening, they flew to Los Angeles to visit Disneyland and Universal Studios; they will return today to Taiwan.

Columbus residents Steve and Melissa Friede launched Camp English America this year at Ohio State University. The total cost for each student: $3,500 to $4,000.

The camp offers Taiwanese students an intensive course in oral English — led by teachers certified in English as a second language — and exposure to the homespun appeal of Columbus and Ohio.

California has similar camps, Mr. Friede said.

"They (Taiwanese) think America is L.A. and New York," he said. "They're missing the best part. We want to show them what is good in America. What they see in the movies is what they believe — that every American carries a gun and there are shootouts at every corner."

In 1992 and 93, the Friedes backpacked for 11 months through Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia, and spent a year teaching English in Taiwan.

They conceived of the camp last year in Taiwan. In January, Mr. Friede, 27, returned there to recruit; his wife, 26, joined him for two months in the spring.

"The hardest part was convincing the parents," Mr. Friede said.

A friend acted as translator. "It's really hard to sell the Midwest," Mrs. Friede said. "Ohio — where's Ohio? Ohio is a great place, but people want to go to California. Once you get them here, it sells itself."

The Friedes promised parents that their children would be safe and would get a more realistic view of the United States — not
just the neon of New York or the glitter of Hollywood.

The Friedes' commitment to teaching English swayed Ou to travel to Columbus. California camps, she said, are less interested in that goal.

"They play too much," she said. "They practice Chinese to each other."

Taiwanese are used to a hectic schedule: They attend school 11 months a year from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and 7 a.m. to noon Saturdays. Their test scores determine the university they attend and the subject they study.

The Friedes taught them about "free time" — and encouraged them to play.

"Teacher (in Taiwan) won't allow us to have picnic, fun," said Amy Show, 13. "She just want us to study. The only thing I do is study, read, watch TV, listen to music. I think, maybe when I go back to Taiwan, I'll be a more relaxed person."

Even with the busy classroom and road schedules, many camp participants suffered bouts of homesickness — for their family and a bowl of real rice.

The fastest cure was a call home.

By consensus, the trip's biggest drawback was the cuisine.

"Food very bad," said Nicky Chun, 12. "Hot dog the worst."

The food improved — slightly — when the students learned about seasonings and sauces: French toast, for instance, takes butter and syrup (a revelation to Nicky, who ate it dry), and ham sandwiches are better with mayonnaise or mustard.

The students sampled a Chinese restaurant, but the fare didn't sate their appetite for the real thing.

"It was like Chinese food made for American," Ou said. "But after so much American food, it was good."

Amy was the lone dissenter. She liked American fare — and ate a hamburger or steak at every opportunity.

"My parents don't let me eat them because those things make you fat," she said. "At home, my mother cooks vegetables and things that are good for you."

Despite feeling homesick at times, Nicky, who didn't know any-one at the start of the trip, will return home with fond memories — and three OSU T-shirts.

He enjoyed the learning, the video games and the bowling — as well as the rolling countryside.

"America is beautiful," he said. "No dirty towns."

The most beautiful part?

"The bathrooms," he said. "Hotel bathrooms very clean, not dirty."

In Taiwan?

"So-so."