

## **Reflections on the IFAJ Congress 2008**

At any of the annual International Federation of Agricultural Journalists (IFAJ) congresses, there's a good number of participants who choose the event as the focal point of their annual holiday. Many have been doing so for a decade or more. It's not hard to see why. What other holiday provides such a balanced view of another country, from the high cultural points to the muddy farm, for such a reasonable sum?

You get to see what the tourists see, plus a more under-the-hood view of the country. As agricultural journalists, you are presumed to have an interest in food (and rightly so, in my case) so the best of the nation's cuisine is put before you. And to make the experience complete, you share the experience with a couple of hundred people who share similar professional interests and are only too happy to engage in that media vice, talking shop.

Agricultural journalism and associated professions don't have a secret handshake--or I haven't been told about it--but it is a rarified field of endeavour, attractive to people who must acquire a lot of specialist knowledge but never quite shake the mud off their boots. In my experience, the lifers among us don't quite fit the mould that creates other journalists and communicators. Maybe it's the association with dirt. An IFAJ congress provides the opportunity to mix with a big group of people who have made the same arcane career choice as yourself, in an exotic setting.

Thanks to the NSW Farm Writers Association and the generosity of sponsors John Deere, I was fortunate enough to attend the 2008 congress in Austria and Slovenia. It was my second IFAJ congress; my first, another trip enabled through NSW Farm

Writers, took me to Japan in 2007. Both experiences enlarged my view of the world and, I hope, my professional capabilities. I'm infinitely grateful for the work that went into making both these trips possible.

For an Australian journalist working almost exclusively with extensive agricultural industries, Austria and Slovenia are not the best place for pertinent copy. The tiny farms of these countries, massively subsidised on the Austrian side, still struggling to emerge from the dead hand of communism on the Slovenian side, offer little in the way of learning for the Australian farm sector. But the congress and the subsequent tour were rich in experience. Here's some of my impressions, a shotgun mix that is indicative of the real-life IFAJ congress experience:

- \* Austria looks so much like a calendar photo, it hardly seem necessary to pull the camera out. I felt I'd seen it all before: the mountains, the dairy cattle on immaculate pastures, the windowsill geraniums, the candlelit tables on cobbled streets. But seeing it first-hand beats flicking through a calendar on the 'loo.

- \* So many familiar faces from Japan! Dutch, Swedes, Norwegians, Americans, Canadians, Irish, Scots and English. And one of the most familiar faces of Australian agricultural journalism, Neil Inall, like me on his second IFAJ congress.

- \* The realisation, during the formal part of the congress, just how seriously Austrians take their agriculture. It's not just something responsible for a minor part of GDP. Unlike Australia, with its everything-goes cuisine, Austrian cuisine is directly linked to individual regions, even valleys, and the history of farming there. Farming is thus intertwined with Austrian culture and fervent

national pride. If only it were so here in Oz.

\* A superb dinner in a vast open-air courtyard within a grand schloss, or castle. Lining the gallery around the courtyard, what must have been 300 mounted deer heads, most of them tiny. After dinner, the highly entertaining spectacle of a pack of strapping big Austrian men in lederhosen leaping around slapping their thighs in traditional Austrian dance. A sight never, ever, to be seen in Australia.

\* No farmers visible in the Austrian fields during the day. The action begins at 5.30, after the farmers have presumably got home from their day job, torn off their ties, and wheeled the Deutz and trailer out of the shed.

\* Straight over the Slovenian border with Austria, weeds! Had begun to doubt their existence in Austria, but there they were, flourishing away from the Austrian mania for tidiness.

\* The realisation, in Slovenia, of how Soviet rule had punched the "pause" button on the clock of progress, so that next to one of the most technologically advanced and efficiently-run countries in the world, another country could still be struggling toward modernity. Running, actually; the Slovenians have a mighty pride and drive to catch up with the rest of the Western world.

\* Sitting under a restaurant awning, a few metres from the Adriatic Sea, lunching with a Canadian ag communications lecturer and journalist Owen Roberts (a few days earlier elected secretary-general of the IFAJ), discussing how the rundown in extension services in our countries put the spotlight on journalism to fill the gap.

\* Waiting for flights over a late lunch in a dark old pub in lovely downtown Ljubljana, discussing Europe's agricultural challenges with the speech writers for EU agricultural commissioner, Mariann Fischer Boel.

\* The business cards added to my tray; the occasional email in my inbox advising me of events, triumphs or births that I would have been otherwise unaware of; my own occasional outbound emails, seeking advice on an angle that I have no hope of chasing down on the internet.

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I can't get to the IFAJ 2009 congress in Texas, with or without the generosity of John Deere. But I'll be back for more. For someone in the business of communicating agriculture, there is truly nothing like it.

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