

2010 IFAJ report | By: Matthew Cawood |

Winner of the 2010 Farm Writers Star Prize for Rural Writing in NSW & the ACT

I've written about agriculture on and off for 20 years, and I've never written about flowers. I haven't even visited a flower farm. In Belgium in April 2010, I saw more flowers, in more fantastic arrangements, in a few hours than I have ever seen before, and ever expect to see again.

With dozens of other ag writers, all of them as boggled as myself, I was on a tour of the Floralties, the world's biggest indoor flower show. I was at Floralties as part of the annual International Federation of Agriculture Journalists' (IFAJ) Congress, and I was in Belgium thanks to the hard work of Farm Writers and their generous sponsorship of the state Star Prize for Rural Writing.

(I was only **just** in Belgium. As I walked out of Brussels airport, it was closed due to the Eyjafjallajökull volcano eruption. I was the only Australian that made it to the congress.)

The ability of the IFAJ meetings to push you completely outside your own box makes these events worth fighting for.

Before the Floralties and its 2.2 km of footpaths, every metre offering a new astonishment, we visited the Flemish Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research (ILVO). We were shown some of the azalea breeding work—you 'ain't ever seen azaleas like these—and talked with one of the pioneers of biotechnology, Professor Marc Van Montagu, who lamented the fact that a technology created in Europe had:

- a) been banned from Europe, and
- b) been priced and regulated out of the range of all but the wealthy.

Somewhere in between, I found myself savouring coffee and good fortune in a cobbled outdoor café in the centre of historic Ghent, in company with a couple of Dutch journalists and a Canadian. That night, we all dined sumptuously on Flemish cuisine, accompanied by a startling good jazz trio. Just another day at an IFAJ get-together. The next day, we would look at hands-on aspects of Belgian agriculture, and finish similarly well wined and dined.

Belgium was my third IFAJ congress courtesy of Farm Writers—I visited Japan in 2007 and Austria in 2008—and each has given me new perspectives on my profession.

As well as presenting cultural highlights of the host countries, IFAJ organisers take their guests off the beaten track, to give an insider's look at the farming and agricultural research of each country. As with flowers in Belgium, I gained new insights into horticulture and bio-energy in Austria, and all things rice in Japan.

As importantly—especially for someone who lives and works in the middle of nowhere, as I do—the ability to catch up with other members of our niche profession

is gold.

Everyone, it turns out, is struggling to communicate the same things, to the same sort of audience. In the subtle differences between countries lie new ideas, and a more generous perspective on the challenges of Australia's own farm sector.

Social media can help transfer these ideas, but as medium Facebook isn't a patch on a table full of good food, potent Flemish beer (13 per cent alcohol, anyone?) and jazz. The IFAJ congresses have been the highlight of every year I've had the fortune to attend. If anyone is wondering whether the congresses are worth the time and bother ... don't wonder. Pull out every stop to get there.

Again, my sincere thanks to Farm Writers. I'm richer for your initiative, and I hope I've managed to communicate that in my work.

Note to contestants: The Farm Writers Star Prize award provides travel and IFAJ congress funding, but around the congress you can make your own arrangements. Before the Belgian congress I looked at Australian beef exports into Europe with MLA: afterwards, I visited the Somme battlefields around Anzac Day. Both yielded good copy for Rural Press, and enduring memories for me.
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