

Comrades on Farms study tour

By Lloyd O'Connell

Travelling through former Soviet countries can never be described as dull. Challenging maybe — exhilarating, thought-provoking, exciting and diverse certainly, tiring occasionally — but never dull. Just ask any of the 46 intrepid travellers on the recent 2003 Australian Grain/Cottongrower Farm Study Tour. For more than three weeks this 'premium selection' of grain and cotton industry representatives took it upon themselves to peek boldly behind the old iron curtain and gauge for themselves what made the agricultures in the region tick — or not tick.

The tour embraced Turkey, Uzbekistan, Russia, Ukraine, Hungary and Croatia. Rumour has it we were actually in Bosnia–Hercegovina as well — but only for about the time it takes to drink a customary vodka shooter with our new found farming friends in that part of the world.

Most of the touring party have lived the better part of their lives in the Cold War era (this is not strictly true as there were one or two people during some of the more hectic stages of the tour, who claimed closer association with WWI).

After a lifetime of highly censored and selective news reports, a steady diet of John Le Carre novels, Rambo and James Bond movies, and stories of grain gluts, famines and other purges, it is no surprise that the former Soviet Union countries would hold so much collective intrigue for a group trying to make a living out of agriculture on the opposite side of the world.

I'm sure there were many more questions raised



The 2003 touring party on the shores of the Plitvice Lakes in Croatia.

than answered on the tour but one thing is abundantly clear. The natural resources of the region in terms of soils, water supply and rainfall, are in such quantity and quality that they're not really limiting factors in agricultural production.

Given the right management, these resources can produce anything — which we occasionally saw. But we saw many more examples of an inefficient use of soil, water and climate leading to under-performing crops. This is not to criticise the many individual farmers and researchers we were very fortunate to meet on our travels.

Invariably our hosts were dedicated, hard-working and wonderfully hospitable agriculturalists trying to work within the remnants of a failed political system called Soviet communism.

The left-over and very dated infrastructure, land tenure system and machinery is more than enough impediment to efficient agricultural production. But add to that the continuation of heavy government involvement in all facets of agriculture, from input costs through to product pricing, and you've got a difficult system to work with.

In future issues we will explore in more detail some of the highlights and mysteries of this intriguing part of the world.

FOOTNOTE: The 'Comrades on Farms' Study Tour was hugely successful. Because numbers were limited, some people missed out on the tour. Greenmount Travel is looking at running another study tour with a similar itinerary in 2004.

If you are interested, give Judy a call on 07 4659 3555 to express your interest. More details will follow in future issues.



The tram ran on time in Istanbul.



Checking out producer prices in the Tashkent spice bazaar.



The Uzbeki superannuation plans were a real mouthful.



Case IH are behind a very impressive model cotton and grain farm in Uzbekistan where they are implementing soil and water conservation techniques.



A visit to the Vavilov Institute in St Petersburg to see the world's largest crop plant germplasm collection was a highlight.



Goondiwindi farmers Graham and Janet Schramm in front of the symbol of Soviet communism — the Kremlin.



Prof. Marta Birkas showed us how to run some Hungarian dirt through our fingers.