

A couple of trips off the old bloc

By Brian and Lloyd O'Connell

For most of us brought up during the Cold War, the former Soviet Union and its satellite states were “the vodka swilling enemy”. A dangerous enemy but, as the propaganda would have it, a not very sophisticated enemy.

These countries were the home of the inefficient collective farm and the state set quota that was never to be realised — and



Short Australians or tall Uzbek cotton?

vodka. Access to this part of the world was restricted and travel difficult, with few of the facilities the average tourist has come to expect. Some tourists of my recent acquaintance expected flushing toilets and even toilet paper. They soon learnt that when you are on the run, so to speak, in a foreign land and opportunity knocks, you take it.

We found on our *Australian Cottongrower–Australian Grain* farm study tour earlier this year that opportunity is knocking across the farmlands of Eastern Europe. Farmers the world over are the epitome of pragmatism — they take what comes along in terms of weather and politics and get on with it. And with the very vital assistance of many interpreters, we communicated well and laughed a lot with our Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, Czech and Uzbeki farmer hosts.

It's amazing how well you begin to understand Russian — and even speak it — after seven “just being polite because it's the local custom” vodkas.

Despite our readily acquired fluency, the concept of ‘auto-steer’ can be difficult to get across when you are talking farming to a man who owns a donkey. The idea of signal from a ‘sputnik’ being used to steer machinery took a while to take hold; was



Mosque repairs underway in Samarkand.

initially greeted with polite scepticism; and then with great excitement. I am not sure what the donkey was going to make of it.

Educational travel is not just about a multitude of medressehs, mosques and mausoleums — although we saw a few. Nor is it just about colossal castles, cathedrals and kremlins — although we saw a few of these as well.

We believe it's also a matter of “getting to know your enemy” — or should that be “competing supplier into the world commodity market” — or maybe “potential buyer of technology and finance”.

And these farmers are keen. They are still in transition from state ownership of the land and machinery, centrally determined planting decisions and market controls — but they are getting there. And when they do, watch out!

Many of them are sitting on a magnificent asset that we can rarely match. And I am not just referring to the stunningly attractive women in Russia and Ukraine here — although it's hard not to think about them just a little bit. It was more their beautifully rich soil, good enough to eat, and comparatively predictable moisture, courtesy of a regular blanket of snow.

These farmers want know-how, they want technology and they want finance — in fact, they are desperately seeking joint venture partners. Now you may feel that you don't have a lot of spare cash and time

70 ▷

to invest in a collective (co-operative) about 300 km to the southeast of Kiev. But there are many Germans and French who do. And they are once again streaming across the border — but this time with convoys of farming, rather than fighting, machinery.

So, what does this mean for us? Well, in the parlance of the Cold War, the Russians are coming! And they've got with them the



Our touring coach gets some steam up.

Germans and the French and, before long, all of the EU.

This will be a formidable alliance that will be very good at producing a wide range of agricultural commodities. They will be formidable competitors with easy access to a huge sophisticated market.

CALYPSO CROPPERS

Another group of intrepid 2004 farm study tourists checked out conditions on the other side of the old Soviet bloc. Cuba is about the last bastion of soviet-style communism — and agriculture — on the face of the Earth. And like just about every other ideologically engineered society with agrarian socialism at its core, it's the farm sector that tends to carry much of the burden of this idealism.

After hitching its star with the Soviet Union and sugarcane production for nearly 50 years, Cuba was the one left out in the cold when both of these declined.

Cuba is a nation of highly educated, relatively well cared for and incredibly friendly people, living in an economy where \$25 Australian dollars per month is the average wage. And this is the same if you're a doctor or a bus driver.

A lot of the blame for this very poor economy is justifiably sheeted home to the



Threshing rice, Cuban style.

US-imposed trading blockade. The biggest and richest economy in the world is just a Susie Moroney swim away to the north — but they can't trade with the US.

Very fortunately for Cuba, and particularly for Cuban agriculture, there is tourism. The collective farms we visited were doing pretty well, and hoped to do a whole lot better in the future, supplying the tourist hotels throughout Cuba.

72 >

Apart from the odd hurricane blowing through the country each September (just after the Australian farm study tourists have breezed through), the climate and soils of Cuba would lend themselves to most farming endeavours.

But as we have found in Eastern Europe, and other centrally-controlled economies, the potential offered by the natural environment is a whole lot removed from what happens on the farm.

Speaking of potential, we were particularly buoyed by our visit to CIMMYT in Mexico. More than 90 per cent of our Australian wheat varieties today can be traced back to CIMMYT origins. This world-class research and cereal breeding organisation has recently developed new wheat varieties by back-crossing to 10,000 year old plus, wild grass relatives.

These 'synthetic' wheats have tremendous drought, heat and disease tolerance and promise fantastic yield increases on our current varieties.

A full body search by (female) CIMMYT staff meant that we couldn't bring any of this wondrous seed home with us. But rest assured, many bread wheat varieties derived from this very promising synthetic



They say Ukraine soil is good enough to eat — our group about to put this to the test.

material are going through final stages of evaluation in Australia and will be hopefully released over the next few seasons.

The group also inspected cotton production in the Mississippi Delta. Delta Pine extended their famous southern hospitality — washed down liberally with catfish strips and ribs — and showed the group through their impressive research headquarters. The current price might not be too flash or controllable, but we know that thanks to the high standard of international cotton research, we will continue to have a good handle on the production side of the equation.

STAYING AHEAD OF THE PACK

Although Australia is relatively well placed in terms of research, technology and political and economic stability, we are not that far clear of the international pack that we can afford to relax.

As our study tours underline, we must become better at doing what we already do well; we must not be content to produce just a commodity with little to differentiate it from that supplied by our competitors; and we must do it in an environmentally and economically sustainable manner — and we must learn how to produce vodka. 🍷