

Study tours broaden the farming horizons

SECTION 1 OVERVIEW

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There were plenty of cotton growers involved in the Greenmount Travel 2007–08 Study Tour program. South America was the flavour of the year in 2007 and there was also plenty of interest in Europe and in Vietnam. In 2008, the Scandinavian tour was described by someone who should know as “...the best trip ever.” And two groups took an adventure to the dark continent — and returned to tell the tale.

Scandinavia

As hard as we tried, attempts at a sincere sharing of the disappointment our many German and Scandinavian host-farmers felt at “only getting around eight tonnes this year”, were pretty feeble. To put you in the picture here – I’m not talking about the eight tonnes of wild boar, cabbages or even salmon, our farm study tour group managed to consume in three weeks – it was the eight tonnes per dryland hectare of winter wheat our hosts were lamenting.

Apparently there was a ‘drought’ in northern Europe for a week or two causing this dip in average yields. A nine or ten tonne result is more the norm for the better farmers, not to mention a very good profit at current grain prices. Anyway, our hosts from Berlin

through to Oslo put on a brave face and extended wonderful warmth and hospitality as they introduced us to their various farms and technologies.

After three weeks of perfect sunny days, which ...24▷



How to grow, and keep healthy and weed-free, high-yielding cereal crops – a talking point at the Bayer trial sites in southern Sweden, just across the bridge from Copenhagen. Note the 2008 Cotton Industry Service to Industry Award winner, Glen Fresser, taking a keen interest.

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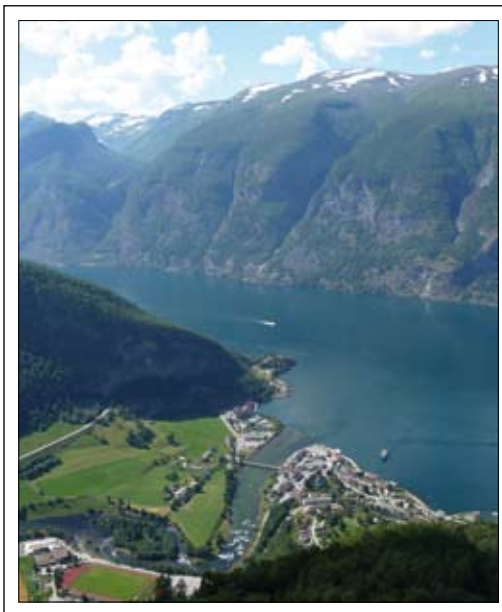
<23...BROADENING THE HORIZONS

showed off the magnificent scenery, villages and cities of Scandinavia to perfection, group members began to wonder if they were experiencing global warming first-hand.

But for most, it turned out to be just an extended hot flush brought on by chatting with the impossibly beautiful, friendly and svelte Scandinavians.

Fears of global warming were further dispelled by those intrepid group members who travelled 'way up north' into the Arctic Circle to inspect their taxes and grain levies at work at the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. Here, millions of crop seeds from around the world are being securely stored deep within a frozen mountain 1000 km north of the Norwegian mainland.

Warm in the knowledge that we are involved in a very worthwhile global project, we welcomed the chill from countless majestic glaciers as our exploratory ship carefully navigated its way around polar bears and the biggest Arctic ice cap for many years.



The majestic Norwegian fiords are home to salmon farms and gob-smacked tourists.



The peasant hats didn't fool anyone in Vietnam.

African Safaris

As long as you're not trying to make a living off the land in Zimbabwe these days, our 2008 Southern Africa farm study tourists discovered that agriculture is indeed alive and well in the region.

Apart from inflicting a crushing defeat on the Wallabies at Jo'burg, South African farmers have also enjoyed the increase in world commodity prices, particularly for grains. Although input prices have also risen – amidst an often strained relationship with government – there is a ready access to a large and relatively inexpensive pool of farm labour.

But across the border to the north and into Botswana, the relationship between farmers and the government is very different. Our group found a tremendous illustration of this at Pandamatenga, a region 100 km south of Kasane and the mighty Zambezi river.

Pandamatenga has been the focus of a government-initiated food production project. The government has constructed a nine strand electrified fence which encloses around 30,000 hectares of black-soil plains, interspersed with sandy ridges. You could be forgiven for thinking you were west of Moree except for the fact that the fence is there to keep elephants and buffalo out rather than a few roos.

The farmers – most of whom are ex-pat South Africans bringing with them considerable farming expertise – have leasehold title to the land and enjoy a very 'exceptional' Exceptional Circumstances arrangement with the Botswanan government.

Encouraged by the government, the farmers concentrate on human food crop production, particularly sorghum and corn, destined for the domestic market. The land lease repayments and annual farm operating costs can be lent to the farmers through government loans. But if there is a climatic, disease or other pest-related cropping disaster, 80 per cent of these repayments are 'forgiven' by the government.

Not a bad arrangement when you consider that not only is this a reliable summer rainfall area, there are government plans to make the region even safer with the piping of irrigation water from the Zambezi to Pandamatenga.

2007 tours

South American sojourn

South America has always been a popular destination and our 2007 tour was no exception – in fact interest was so strong that the first tour set down for July was full-up by the end of January '07. So as not to disappoint anyone, we put together a second tour, which followed the intrepid trail blazed by the first group, only one week later.

This was our third tour to this amazing continent in 10 years – and with time spent in the wilds of Chile, Patagonia, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Peru (not forgetting five minutes in Paraguay as we inspected the giant Itupu dam near Iguassu Falls) – it was a very comprehensive trip.

We saw some great farms, met some incredible farmers and consultants and did our best to eat our



We carefully navigated around the polar bears.

way through their magnificent livestock. We cooled our heels on advancing glaciers, enjoyed high pressure showers at Iguassu, had the wool cover our eyes in the Argentine Pampas, mingled with drug-lords in Rio and had our collective breaths taken away at La Paz and Machu Pichu.

It won't be long before we again visit South America — in 2009 in fact.

Kicking goals in France and Germany

As a rugby supporters' tour it was disappointing. But as a farm study tour, it was a great success. This was the France/Germany 2007 study tour in October which enabled interested passengers to take in the finals of the Rugby World Cup. If only the Wallabies had listened to the advice from the rugby experts (everyone) on the Greenmount Travel tour, things may have turned out a little differently.

Soenke Rabe, our German guide, has some fantastic contacts in Germany and put them to good use to give us a great insight into German (and European) agriculture ... and wild boar eating.

Paris was great before we headed for new agricultural experiences in south-west France.

Visiting Vietnam

Twelve intrepid agriculturalists ventured into the green green fields of Vietnam for 12 days. Arriving in Ho Chi Minh City, which the locals still call Saigon, our first stop was the Chu Chi Tunnel complex. The war in the jungle encroached on our senses as we tramped in the pouring rain, complete with AK 47s firing in the background.

A visit to the Mekong Delta was a gastronomic delight and the return to Saigon via fast boat dodging the heavy barge traffic was exhilarating – but more thrills were to come as we crossed the street from the wharf to our hotel in peak hour Saigon traffic.

Cruising scenic Halong Bay by junk was also on the agenda after which we headed to Hai Duong and the Food Crops Research Institute. Australian researchers are involved here through an ACIAR project.

In Hanoi we inspected the processing of cotton from the raw product through to retailing.

Plans for 2009

Plans are well afoot for a number of major agricultural study tours in 2009.

US and Canada

The first cab off the rank will a trip to the US and Canada, leaving at the end of June. Incredibly, this will be our first major trip to North America in 11 years.

In the US there will be farming in California, Nevada, Kansas and Missouri as well as visits to Monsanto in St Louis and grain merchants in Chicago. The spare time will feature such notables as Yosemite, Death Valley and the Grand Canyon.

In Canada, there will be plenty of time spent on the prairies and an unforgettable weekend at that amazing event — the Calgary Stampede. Then some time to relax, visit the Rockies and maybe finish with an optional Alaskan cruise.

South America

South America is hugely popular with Australian farmers and after four trips to this great continent over the past decade, we just had to put it on the agenda again.

If you haven't been to South America before, start making plans.

Eastern Europe Big Farms

And the Big Farms Eastern Europe trip is sure to be very popular. The old communist collective farms are now in private hands and are becoming productive and the scale of operations is mind boggling.

Keep an eye out for the ads for these tours or call Lloyd O'Connell or David Dowling on 07 4659 3555 for more details as they come to hand.

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The animal "pests" in African farming present their own unique challenges.



Machu Pichu leaves a lasting impression on all visitors.