

## What's up elsewhere leave your preconceptions behind...

Most interpreters are shameless appropriators and adapters of other folks' ideas. The Innovation in Cultural Heritage Interpretation project (ICHI) gives professionals interpreting Scotland's inheritance the opportunity to carry out this benign scavenging in other parts of Europe. Michael Hughes describes one such trip.

In 2007 a group of us went to Eastern Slovakia. We were encouraged to leave preconceptions behind and to absorb and enjoy a wide range of established, developing and potential tourist attractions, including museums, skansens<sup>1</sup>, medieval towns, nature reserves and forests, customs and crafts and a vineyard. We experienced what the attractions had to offer as visitors and also talked to custodians and managers.

This was all set up by a small to medium-sized enterprise (SME) called Krajina, which is passionate about developing sustainable tourism within Eastern Slovakia, and selling it to the rest of the world. Miroslav Knezo, Krajina's managing director and our tireless guide and walking encyclopaedia, had an apparently inexhaustible supply of useful contacts. Miro arranged for us to stay in a monastery, interview the head of culture in a major region and eat traditional food in a private house.

There isn't room in this article to describe our experiences and insights in detail, but you can read about what we took back to apply to our work at home at <http://arch.blogware.com/blog/ICHI/ICHI2007Slovakia>

Here, I'll just give you a couple of snapshots from my notebook which I hope will convey something of the qualitative aspects of the exchange.

### Religious Tourism

On Easter Sunday, we attended two services. The first was at 5.00am in Stropkov at the church attached to the monastery which was our home for the week. This was a very moving experience, first walking round the Church in the dim pre-dawn light, listening to the local mistle thrushes trying to compete with the service, which was sung unaccompanied in Slovakian and Old Church Slavonic by the entire congregation.

### Nature and Countryside

I asked Miro whether Slovaks were interested in nature. "Yes very much so, but unlike in Scotland, the interest is very much tied to hunting and fishing which are very popular and carefully regulated and managed. Also harvesting - firewood, fungi and berries like wild raspberries". We were invited to join the Stropkov Touring (i.e. hiking) Club on their Easter Monday picnic. On a wonderfully sociable day, I was struck by how good it was to be in a part of the world where people are trusted to use forests in ways that are natural to a species that were hunter gatherers yesterday,

archaeologically speaking. Could this be a model for community use of the large areas of new forest being created in Scotland? Could they be places where our children learn naturally but responsibly how forests can provide food, firewood, freedom and fun?

### **Interpretation in Slovakia**

ARCH is not trying to change how interpretation is done in Eastern Slovakia. In fact, they challenged us to consider that they might actually be doing it better than we were in the UK, where a good deal of interpretation has arguably become institutionalised, produced to a set formula by consultants to meet an organisation's requirements.

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*Michael Hughes is a freelance interpreter, based in Fife  
[michaelrhughes@f2s.com](mailto:michaelrhughes@f2s.com)*