

It has taken me a couple of weeks since returning from Slovenia to absorb my experiences of the WRTC and to put my thoughts on paper. My wife, Diana, and I remained in Europe after the end of the competition and played tourist until that Friday. We rented a car and drove into Austria on Wednesday, and then over into eastern Slovenia and Croatia on Thursday.

Those travels, coupled with a minibus tour we took to Venice on Tuesday, enabled us to enjoy some new experiences and to visit several places for the first time. The whole WRTC Slovenian experience was terrific, and I'll never forget it.

The contest week really began for me at the Frankfurt airport when John, K4BAI; Bob, K4UEE; and I met for the flight to Ljubjana.

We were impressed with the efficiency of the military pick up support at the Ljubjana Aerodrome, and it was exciting to see the banners and promotional signs for the WRTC as we approached Bled.

Diana and I had been in Athens, Greece the week before on a business trip that had come up at the last minute, and I had missed the announcement of the results of the station location draws the week before. Alan, N3AD, and I had received e-mails from Ducan, S52DG, one of our four station hosts, welcoming us to their station.

The WRTC headquarters office at the Hotel Astoria was well organized, and the dispersal of the bags with the information and tee shirts, maps and additional materials was efficient. Alan and his wife, Gloria, showed up at the headquarters about the same time I did—one day earlier than originally planned—with a rental car that was packed to the gills. We were all there.

The initial gatherings around beers at the outside hotel tables were high energy and charged with excitement, and it was nice to see many old friends and to meet many, many new ones.

Bled is such a pretty location that it took my breath away. The lake, the island, the castle and the mountains reminded me of my boyhood home in the Appalachian Mountains in southern West Virginia.

The week was well planned, and the competitors' meeting was very interesting. It was clear that people had thought of a wide range of questions regarding things we had not considered. The Slovenian Contest Club handled things well, and their judgement call about off-

times policy was well received.

Later, Alan and I set up his radio in his hotel room and soon discovered that the CW keying cable did not key the radio. The internal wiring had broken and was in bad shape. I hadn't brought my extra cable. The pressure was on.

Jeff, N5TJ, and Dan, K1TO, gave us an extra resistor and NPN transistor so that we could make another one if needed, but we didn't have the wiring diagram. Fortunately, John, VE3EJ, had an extra CW keying cable. Needless to say, we certainly appreciated everyone's generosity!

We had several small things to resolder and repair, and having the 220 V to 110 V transformer we brought along to run the soldering iron off of sure came in handy, even if it did weigh 12 kg!

One particularly exciting moment occurred when we plugged in my six-position ac power strip. It had oversurge protection MOVs in it, and they apparently didn't like 50 Hz power! They exploded with a tremendous bang, blowing the circuit breaker and shutting down the power to the room. It took four hours for the electrician to arrive. He was a ham, and he secretly explained to us where the breaker box was so that we could reset the breakers if we tripped them again.

Luckily, Alan's ac power strip worked fine, so at least we would have one working strip for the gear. While we were waiting for the electrician, we had set up the station on a table out in the 4th floor corridor of the Park Hotel. We received quite a few strange looks from the other hotel guests that passed by.

When Alan's wife Gloria returned to their hotel room, she nearly fainted when she saw it totally covered from one side to the other with radios, supporting gear, a laptop, cables, a monitor, soldering equipment and the big transformer.

Another unsettling moment for us was when we discovered that we had forgotten to bring an adapter for connecting an external keyboard to the laptop. Thanks to S53R and S59AA for helping us find not just one, but two of them! All-in-all, that day was unnerving!

The Pileup Tape Competition was held in the Bled Festival Center, a very nice facility. The process for conducting the competition was well done. Nervous energy was in the air by then for sure.

When Alan and I had the chance to meet the host group and our judge in a nearby ice rink over beers and a meal, it was really exciting. Our judge was the

well-known Montenegrin tester, Ranko, YT6A. The hosts were two brothers, S52DG and S52LD, and their two good friends, S52QM and S52MW.

On Thursday, the opening ceremonies were quite impressive to us all, and everyone enjoyed the procession, the speeches, the dancers and the whole affair. Later, at dinner that night, the atmosphere turned a bit more serious as the week was moving on, and the time to drive to the stations was approaching the next day.

Our hosts had built a station on an 850-meter hilltop close to a very small village named Golica (pronounced Go-leech-ah), about 10 km from Zelezniki. That 10 km does take a while to drive however! It's nearly straight up, and the narrow road soon becomes gravel.

There is an electrical power line to the station—the ten houses that make up the town of Golica are only a kilometer away—so no generators are needed. The station was well designed with good electrical grounds and a terrific view of the valley below and beyond to the Austrian alps about 40 km away. There is a clear shot to the northwest (USA and Europe) and to the east.

One of the several stunning churches located in Slovenia is on a nearby hilltop about 100 meters higher than the station's position, and the carillon bells late at night and early in the morning are surreal sounding due to their clarity and loudness in the high mountain air.

The station is located in a container building about two or three meters wide by five or six meters long. A Slovenian army tent had been erected 30 meters away for us to sleep in. We were excited and ready to set up the station, but Ducan (pronounced Dushan), S52DG, politely requested that we first take a drive to meet the parents. "It will just take a few minutes," he said.

The meetings were terrific, with each of the three stops featuring a nice spread of white wine and some varieties of fruit juice, usually homemade, plus some killer good pastries and cookies. All of the parents were really nice and would not consider "no" a reasonable response when they offered their specialties. No one spoke a word of English, but there was a lot of serious smiling, grinning, gesturing and laughing, and things went swimmingly.

We got a chance to visit the home stations of the four hosts, as the hilltop station was fairly new, and all had main-

tained stations at home as well.

After three hours or so of the home tours, we were on our way back to the hilltop, but we had one more stop to make—lunch with the mayor of the region around Zelezniki.

The mayor is a nice man—he spoke some English—and Alan and I had a wonderful meal including veal and mushroom sauce, a terrific treat. We were presented gifts including the lace doilies and small cakes for which Zelezniki, a town of 5000 residents, is famous.

Zelezniki translates to “Iron City” in Slovenian. It has a history as an iron center that goes back 1000 years. The original iron metal smelter still stands in the town center.

By this time, we were anxious to set up the station and confirm that everything worked, plus we wanted to get on the air with our S5 portable calls.

The hosts told us that the weather forecast was dreadful, with a major cold front from the northwest dropping into Slovenia Saturday during the contest. The forecast was for very bad storms, with severe weather possible. Things looked bad. So the whole group drove back up to the hilltop dwelling on this news.

Since we were the closest station to Bled, about 50 minutes away, and since Ranko had his family with him, he returned to Bled Friday night.

The 1000 W transformer was running the station on 110 V quite well. There were a few RF feedback issues, but when we grounded all the equipment, that went away, and we appeared to be set. The hosts left, and we were sitting at an outside table eating a late snack right at dusk. Only the two of us were there.

Honestly, it was so beautiful that I half expected to see Julie Andrews walk up over the hillside to our meadow in the fading light, an orchestra to appear out of the thick woods nearby, and for Julie to launch into “...The hills are alive with the sound of music!” What a memorable scene. We completed setting up the station by about 9 PM.

Later, shortly after we got on the air, my KC CW keyer (to be used along with the keyboard) suddenly went berserk and would not send. A check of its small power supply showed that it was putting out only 7.8 V dc with the 50 Hz supply, and the spec on the keyer was 8-15 V. We swapped in another 13 V dc supply and it worked fine. Out came the soldering iron again and a spare male RCA plug was installed on some wire. We connected this to the 13 V output on the back of my FT-1000MP. All that took another hour to fix, with some additional angst,

so by then it was 11 PM Friday night.

We taped a Great Circle map, our band plan and an ITU chart to the shack walls, and were finally ready! Both of us got on the air and worked some people, and the station seemed to get out well. It was time to force ourselves to get some sleep.

About 12:30 AM I headed for the tent. I lay there listening to the sound of Alan working people on SSB. About 1:30 AM, I walked back through the meadow to the station building and told Alan it was important for both of us to get a decent night's sleep. He finally came to the tent and immediately fell asleep with a serious case of loud high altitude snoring! So now *he* was asleep, and *I* was the one still awake!

It was hot Friday night before the weather front moved through, but the tent—at an elevation of 850 meters—was comfortable.

We both woke at sunrise—about 5 AM local time Saturday. We tried to nap a bit more but were soon up. It was hard to believe that this was the actual day the contest would begin, only a few hours from that time. For the past several years, I had hoped and planned for this day, and now it was here!

The carillon bells were serenading us with great church bell music, and the overall setting was fantastic. Soon, our wonderful station hosts arrived with a big continental breakfast that included terrific mocha coffee and home baked breads.

We spent the morning meeting quite a few of the townspeople from Golica and Zelezniki who had driven or walked up the mountain the see “the Americans who are going to represent our area” in the international competition, according to the newspaper interview with Ducan, S52DG. Apparently we were the first Americans to be in the area, and therefore we were quite a novelty.

As 1200Z approached, Ranko returned from Bled, the townspeople left, the hosts retreated to the tent, and we got ready to go.

Ranko opened the sealed envelope and revealed our call, S563X, which I could not pronounce. Each letter and number requires a wide variety of facial muscles to say, and the whole thing was, and still is, difficult for me. But since Alan was going to do the SSB and I the CW, it didn't matter that much—Alan had no problems pronouncing the call. We programmed the call into the laptop and, at 1200Z, the magical bell rang!

We started out on 15-meter SSB, but with no results at all! Finally we got one answer to our CQs, but it was clear that

we could not run SSB at that time. We switched to CW, and had a good first hour.

The contest was a blur. The weather front hit Saturday night, and it rained all night steadily until Sunday morning—ten hours straight.

We suffered through S9 rain static for hours on end. The temperature dropped sharply, and we had to keep our shack door closed to keep warm. The cold weather clouds raced up from the valleys and across our hilltop. We did poorly on our mult plan, and we were unable to generate any decent phone rates. All-in-all we were very disappointed (and would like a replay), but such is life.

Shortly after the contest ended at 1200Z Sunday, my wife, Diana, arrived from Germany at Ljubjana, where our hosts met her at the airport. Gloria Donziger came up to the site, our host families brought their kids and parents, and all of us became one great big family.

A “combi” vehicle, big enough to carry all the radio gear, was there, and we packed up the station and loaded it on board. Goodbyes were made, and down the mountain we went, on our way to a wonderful restaurant on another high hilltop nearby.

Ducan, Borut, Tomasz and Neyo insisted on treating us all to a final great meal and we were able to wrap up the contest and be driven back to Bled.

Sunday night was fun, but the scores indicated that we had not reached our goals, and we were worried about that.

Monday brought the group excursion to the Postoina Caverns and the proscutto ham place on the bus tour, the closing ceremonies and the top three team awards and concluded with the final supper gathering in the ice rink.

On our Tuesday minibus trip to and from Venice, I got to know Gary, VA7RR; Gedas, LY3BA; and Eric, K3NA, a lot better. We talked about the contest almost the entire way there! Gary and his wife and Diana and I did the gondola ride together, and it was fun. What a week!

I speak for Alan in offering our sincere thanks to the SCC Organizing Committee—they did a first-class job. The gracious hospitality of the station hosts was a common theme among all the teams, and our hosts were simply wonderful. I believe that lifelong friendships were made.

Future WRTCs will have a high level of overall competence to match based on the Slovenian WRTC in 2000. Thanks to the competitors and judges for the collegial atmosphere. This was an experience of a lifetime!

73, Jim George, N3BB/5 ■