

The Development of Agri-tourism on Organic Farms in new EU countries – Poland, Estonia and Slovenia

Report of a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship 2006

Carolyn Wachter



Carolyn Wachter
Fellow 2006
Winston Churchill Memorial Trust



The Development of Agri-tourism on Organic Farms in new EU countries

Acknowledgements	2
Introductions	3
Poland	4 - 8
Estonia	9 - 12
Slovenia	13 - 19
Conclusions	19 - 21

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for generously funding my seven week study tour to Poland, Estonia and Slovenia, and especially for allowing me to complete the tour in two phases.

The following deserve a special mention and thanks for their help, support, patience and linguistic skills:

Poland:

Peter and Eva Stratenwerth and their colleagues at Ziarno
 Sir Julian Rose and Jadwiga Lopata ICPPC
 Dr. Barbara Szymoniuk, Technical University of Lublin
 Andrzej Lachowski

Estonia:

Kaidi-Mari Liping, Siksali Development Centre

Slovenia:

Dr. Martina Bavec and her colleagues at the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Maribor, especially Marina Koren
 Polona Rebic of the Department for Organic Farming Inspection
 Davorin Koren and his family, Triglav National Park

Special thanks are also due to the organic producers that I met and stayed with in these countries, who were warm in their welcome and very patient in response to my many questions.

Finally, my thanks go to my employer, Organic Centre Wales, based at the Institute of Rural Sciences, University of Wales, Aberystwyth. Dr. Nic Lampkin, the Director has been consistently supportive of this study tour and I am grateful to him and Dave Frost who were my referees and also my colleagues who handled the work in my absence.

Introduction

My aim of my Fellowship was to establish whether agri tourism in these countries differed from provision in the UK and whether our producers can learn from their examples of good practice. My choice of topic was influenced by a number of factors:

I have been involved in the organic agricultural sector in the UK for many years, which has resulted in a keen interest in all things organic and with a personal preference for organically produced food. Currently, I am employed with Organic Centre Wales¹, funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, where we work with 700+ organic producers and processors throughout Wales.

Agri tourism together with sustainable/responsible tourism is the fastest growing sector in the European and global tourism business. In Wales, at least 150 organic producers are involved in some form of agri-tourism offering accommodation and meals with local and/or organic produce and frequently providing employment opportunities for local people. Indeed, farm buildings on my own 8.8ha smallholding, 15 miles outside Aberystwyth, have been converted to self-catering accommodation.

Welsh farmers have been extremely fortunate during the past four years, for in parts of Wales where GDP was 75% or less than European average, they have been offered the opportunity to benefit from Objective 1 and other grants. These have included refurbishment of original farm buildings, processing and marketing local produce, utilising local produce in tourism, training in hospitality and quality schemes and quality breeding of indigenous stock.

The producers in the new EU countries, however, unlike their Welsh counterparts, had received no significant financial support but many have already enthusiastically adopted agri-tourism, providing meals made from local, authentic produce, frequently relying on traditional recipes handed down from parents and grandparents and encouraging domestic and international visitors to enjoy traditional and local produce.

The common factors between these countries is that they all joined the EU in 2004 and were subject to differing Soviet influences. Beyond that, it is invidious to make comparisons between these culturally and economically different countries. Therefore I intend to present each country and what I found in order of my visit, and attempt to summarise some key points, and allow readers to draw their own conclusions

Finally, in the knowledge that I intended to travel alone, I felt that European cultural similarities might provide familiar benchmarks and I hoped that my knowledge of German might compensate somewhat for my lack of Polish, Estonian or Slovene languages.

¹ Organic Centre Wales, www.organic.aber.ac.uk

1. POLISH TRIP 8th – 28th May

The largest of the new EU entrants in 2004 with 39m people and a total land area of 31m ha. Agriculture represents 16.2m ha, about 51% of total land area, the fourth largest in EU. Criticised by the EU for a lack of strategy within its agricultural sector, employing approx 20% of the workforce, the average size of conventional farm is approx. 7ha. Under the Soviet regime, collectivisation of land was not imposed largely due to resistance by the Catholic church.

Rural tourism has been encouraged by the government since 1990s when 600 farms offered accommodation "holidays under the pear tree". This has risen to 8,200 farms offering a total of 90,000 places to guests throughout Poland².

One organisation, the Polish Federation of Rural Tourism, consists of 53 local and regional associations, promoting about 120 'Hospitable Farms' classified either as Working Farms, Idle Farms, or Rural accommodation, and providing training and promotion. Some organic farms are included under this Hospitable Farms scheme.

Organic development in Poland 2000-2004³:

	2000	2004
Average size of organic farms - hectares	19.7	22
Total organic area - hectares	25,000	82,730
% of Utilisable Arable Area (UAA)	0.14	0.51
Number of organic farms	1,311	3,760
% of total farms	0.07	0.20
The Action Plan for Organic Farming has been in the process of preparation since 2005		

The main promoter of tourism on organic farms in Poland is ECEAT (European Centre for Eco-Agri Tourism)⁴. Founded in 1993 as a pilot scheme, it became an NGO and supports small-scale ecological, organic and traditional farms, preserving natural landscapes and the traditional way of life of rural people. Originally with 16 farms from southern Poland, there are now about hundred farmers all over the country. Many of these farms are also involved in visits from school children, money from which contributes to the farm income.

In 2001 ECEAT Poland was the winner of 'Tourism for Tomorrow' competition, sponsored by British Airways, as the best organisation promoting tourism responsible for the environment. Now an international organisation ECEAT develops and promotes tourism that supports organic agriculture, sustainable land use, nature and environmental protection, rural development, and the protection of cultural heritage and landscapes. ECEAT International is an association serving as an independent, impartial umbrella organisation for national ECEAT organisations in European countries. The 2004 edition of Holidays on Organic Farms in Poland lists 70 farms throughout the country. This listing guarantees a minimum standard of accommodation, although farmers are encouraged to keep their traditional facilities and ensure that any improvements are made in an ecological style.

² Michael Jeziorski, Warsaw Voice May 2005

³ Figures for Poland, Estonia and Slovenia were obtained from "Further Development of Organic Farming Policy in Europe, with Particular Emphasis on EU Enlargement" QLK5-2002-00917 D13: Final report on the development of OF in CEE Accession States with national country card. Andrea Hrabalova, Jitka Handlov, Kamila Koutna, Ivo Zdrahal: Research Institute of Agricultural Economics Czech Republic December 2005

⁴ http://www.eceat.nl/home_en.htm

My brief stay in Warsaw introduced me to the strength of the Polish people, for the faithful rebuilding of the Stare Miasto (the Old Town) is an inspiring testament to Poland's efforts to reconstruct itself after the war. In 1944, the Nazis tightened their grip on Warsaw and almost the whole of the city's population participated in the Warsaw Uprising, attempting to liberate the city and ensure the emergence of an independent Poland. This failed on both counts, but it infuriated Hitler, who ordered the total elimination of the city, with the result that 85% of the town was destroyed, and at the end of the war 850,000 of the city's population were dead or missing. The act of re-building the Old Town, complete with Baroque palaces took 10 years.

I ended my stay in Warsaw with a brief tour to Lazienkowski Palace, built in the 1700s, with magnificent gardens, and oak-lined promenades and pathways. Trying to quietly photograph a red squirrel, I was surprised when it audaciously ran up my trouser leg, hopefully in search of food - I needed to move on

I had heard of the work done by Ziarno⁵, based on a farm 80 km west of Warsaw and in Poland, I was fortunate to observe visits to the farms by children from local primary and secondary schools. An ecological and cultural association, Ziarno was formed in 1995, although its roots go back to 1987 when an organic farmers group, Ekoland, was formed. The farm and centre is based at Grzybow where Peter and Ewa Stratenwerth live with their family and some of their co-workers.

A variety of programmes are run by Ziarno including educational workshops on organic farms; annual culture and art festivals; Youth Together Coalition with other organisations in the community; and finally, Rural Education Centres for a Sustainable future, developing a module of adult education in rural areas in Central and Eastern Europe (of which the Field Studies Council in North Wales is a partner)

My visit coincided with a group of 30 seven year olds from a school in a nearby town, who arrived at 10 am and started their day with black bread, cheese, jam and apple juice, all from the farm and received with some apprehension. Peter Stratenwerth introduced the farm by drawing pictures and then led the children to the fields. Here, they ran around, picked dandelions, took apart ears of rye, examined manure and grass under a microscope, and best of all, looked at the dairy cows and played with the baby goats.



After lunch of spaghetti and mince, the children had workshops of traditional paper cutting, working with bees' wax and bread making in the bakery where the children proudly took home their result. These children, engrossed for seven hours on an

organic farm, were offered a wide range of educational experiences, from new food to contact with animals where health and safety did not appear to be highly regulated. Ziarno receives £6 per visit per child for these events, and this pays Peter and his team who organise these workshops. They currently have about 3,000 guests per annum, the majority of whom are children. Since 1998, they have also organised seminars and training for other organic farmers on how to run educational workshops on their farms.



⁵ Ziarno, Grzybow 1-2, 09 533 Slubice, Poland. www.ziarno.org.pl

Additional income off this 15ha farm comes from soft cheese produced from the cows' and goats' milk, together with the bread made from cereals, mainly rye grown on the farm and made in the bakery, and then sold in Warsaw shops and street markets.

The train journey from Warsaw south to Krakow transformed the landscape from the flat arable land of the north into the Beskidy mountains, the foothills of the Tatras and I spent a weekend in this ancient capital of Poland and the only city to avoid serious damage in WWII. Listed by UNESCO as one of the world's most significant historic sights, the city is a visual treat. Dodging tourists, Kazimierz, the Jewish quarter was fascinating and where I met Polish hospitality and attended concerts at the Centre for Jewish Culture.

The proximity of the camp at Auschwitz to my next destination was too close to ignore. My diary entry of the visit reads "Shoes – half a barrack – a whole room, full of shoes – another full of combs, brushes, shaving brushes – another of pots and pans, cooking utensils – another of suitcases and bags - a case full of spectacles – they were the possessions of the unwanted, poor and dispossessed - tragedy is piled on tragedy in every room. But the birds **do** sing, the sun **does** shine and thousands of young and old visit this awesome place".

Wadowice, the birth place of the old Pope John Paul was the stop for the next bus – preparing for a visit for the new Pope Benedict with bunting and new paint, this small but important town reflects the Polish population's continuing commitment to the Catholic faith.

My destination was the farm of Helena and Szczpan Master, a 5ha farm in Lekawica, similar to many of the small farms in Poland, made up with approx.10 strips of land, on which they grow wheat and rye for bread-making, and cut fresh forage for the stock. All their animals were tethered in the barns - one milking cow and a white goat share a stall, one goat with two female kids in another. One pig and about 10 piglets, three rabbits and three horses, which drive the cart and also work the land, as well as the tractor.

In addition to tourists, they also have school visits, and again, I was fortunate to be present at one of these events. 20 seven year olds arrived with two teachers at 10.0am from a private catholic school in Krakow. Over juice and cake, introduced the farm, made butter in the churn and started the bowl. The children went off to see the animals - fed the goats, milk the long-suffering animals and admired the pig. Szczpan children out in the cart with two of the drawing the cart, whilst the others tried turning the mill stones, grinding the wheat into flour.



Helena yeast in the tried in vain to took six horses their hand at

In the afternoon, the 12-13 year olds arrived and Szczpan explained various implements on the farm, and ways of building roofs, and more about wildlife habitat to the older children. Their teacher said that these visits were very interesting, and the children enjoyed the experience, with special emphasis on organic food and production. Again, income from these visits is worthwhile and supplements other income from the farm, including butter, cheese and other produce sold in the shops in Krakow. But the long-term future of this farm maybe in question. Januta the daughter will take over the work of her mother, but she is currently working in the local health service. One of their two sons is working in the UK, the other is studying locally as a vet but is not optimistic about the future, doubting that there will be sufficient visitors to support the farm.

My next visit was to Jadwiga Lopata, the staunch and tireless defender and supporter of small farms in Poland. The creation of an organisation International Coalition to Protect the Polish Countryside (ICPPC)⁶ in 2000 was born out of ECEAT (see above), and “is a leading voice in raising public awareness of the importance of the small family farm, in creating an ecologically sensitive, long-term solution which avoids the destructive consequences of current CAP policies” and the Directors are Jadwiga and Sir Julian Rose, an organic farmer in the UK



With support from 18 other countries, their ‘Charter 21 - Countryside Manifesto for 21st Century Poland’ has gained support from many quarters. At their educational centre at Stryzow, near Krakow with their ecological buildings, renewable energy and water treatment systems, ICPPC offers one day residential courses and lectures and conferences, all demonstrating ecological ways of living and ways of protecting the cultural and biological heritage of the Polish countryside.



Their courses include organic farming, ecological building, renewable energy, and ecotourism which includes traditional dishes and food production.

In July 2004 the board of ICPPC decided to launch a national campaign to highlight the dangers of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) for the Polish countryside and to press for as many areas of Poland as possible to be declared GMO free zones. By July 2005, every Province in Poland had declared itself as a GMO Free Zone and then the Polish Government banned the import and planting of all GMO seeds. As of May 2006, Poland is the only country in Europe to take this decision. Following this initiative and in conjunction with others, the Polish Senate and Sejm (Upper and Lower houses) have now passed an Act on animal fodder. This Act, passed on July 22nd 2006, " bans the production, the putting into circulation and the use of genetically modified fodder and genetically modified organisms destined for fodder use in animal feeding."

Booked through ECEAT, my last visit in the south of Poland was to the farm of Helena and Franciszek Kobiela and their 29 year old twins, Kasia who works part time whilst doing a Diploma in Tourism and Gregorsz, who works full time, with their parents on their 5 ha farm close to the Babia Gora National Park.



Stock on the farm consists of 4 cows (Kasia has regularly milked cows since she was eight) pigs, rabbits and chickens and a working horse, for which they produce rye, oats and wheat. They offer tourist accommodation, throughout the season, and have approx. 25 visitors per annum, and in the past ECEAT have been very helpful to them. For her Diploma, Kasia has been looking at how farmers in the area are managing with the new EU regulations – her farm receives both the Organic Farming Scheme payment and the equivalent of £600 pa Single Farm Payment. They also receive funds from the Polish government, supporting farmers who rent out more than one room for tourists and also offering produce off the farm. The future for this farm is secure as Gregorsz will take over after his marriage, but Kasia is uncertain as to where her future lies.

The bus journey from the south up to Lublin close to the eastern border, took me to one of the least populated and least known parts of this vast country, its agricultural plains punctuated by remote villages and small towns. Lublin itself has a wonderful Stare Miasto

⁶ International Coalition to Protect the Polish Countryside www.eko-cel.pl

(Old Town) reflecting its importance in the 16th century, when the Polish and Lithuanian nobility came together and the Union of Lublin created the largest mainland empire in Europe, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Poland's eastern border was moved after WWII, thereby losing many of its historic links and important towns like L'viv, which are now in the Ukraine.

My visit to Lublin was prompted by a paper which I found on the internet, by Barbara Szymoniuk and Stanislaw Walukiewicz entitled 'Setting up rural clusters in Poland', which was given at a Conference in 2004.

Now based at the College of Enterprise and Administration in Lublin, Dr. Szymoniuk started the EU-funded project 'Ecological Food Valley' in 2005 which is designed to promote organic agriculture and food supply in the Lubelskie region.⁷ This area is low in environmental pollution and 380 new organic farms were registered in 2005, an increase of 97% since 2004. The aim of the organisers is to develop an economic cluster, a network of co-operating producers, companies, local authorities and knowledge centres, as well as social institutions and organisations, to support organic farming, sales of organic products, keep people in the rural regions and of course, to encourage tourism.

A group of agri tourism providers already exists in this corner of Poland, called the Lubartow Land, where the lakes, enormous forests and cultural monuments like the Zamojski family museum provide an ideal tourist environment.

One of the tourist providers in this area, Teresa Korniak Jarzyna, with whom I stayed, recently won a prize in the annual Green Summer Award. This competition organised in conjunction with tourist organisations and governmental departments for rural development is promoted on Polish radio and offers prizes for a variety of categories. Teresa and her family, especially her nephew, were very kind and hospitable, the bees provided wonderful honey and Teresa's traditional pierogi, made from locally grown buckwheat had quite rightly won many prizes.



My final stop in Poland was back to Warsaw, where I was fortunate to attend a conference on Processing and Marketing of Organic Food run by EkoConnect,⁸ a non-profit making organisation founded in 2003, their aim being to link-up and support people and their activities for the sustainable development of organic agriculture in Central and Eastern Europe. Introduced by the Polish Minister for Agriculture, it was supported by Ekoland⁹ one of the farmers' organisations, the Polish state advisory organisation, and the Organic Retailers Association. The Conference was well attended by 150 people from 11 countries, and the atmosphere was upbeat and optimistic about the future of the organic sector, and for me a positive note on which to end my stay in Poland.

⁷ Strategy for Organic Food Valley: www.dolinaeko.lublin.pl

⁸ EkoConnect: www.ekoconnect.org

⁹ Ekoland: www.ekoland.org.pl

2. ESTONIAN TRIP: 29th May – 5th June

The Republic of Estonia was regarded as one of the best-prepared countries for EU membership - a Baltic state together with neighbours Latvia and Lithuania, it was praised for the modernisation of its administration. With a population of 1.36m and an area of 45,000 sq. km of which 10% consists of 1,520 islands and 37% of agricultural land, the reform of the agricultural sector following collectivisation under the Soviet regime presents problems and in the south east, approx. 20% of the arable and grassland remains abandoned. Organic agriculture has significantly increased during the last 15 years with organic farmers now receiving area subsidies but an underdeveloped market continues to exist.

Organic development in Estonia 2000 - 2004

	2000	2004
Average size of organic farms - hectares	42.74	56.81
Total organic area - hectares	9,872	46,016
% of Utilisable Arable Area (UAA)	1.0	5.9
Number of organic farms	231	810
% of total farms	0.58	2.25
The Action Plan for organic farming has been in the process of preparation since 2004		

The capital of Estonia, Tallinn was my first stop, and a mix of different eras and influences - a Hanseatic city from the 14th and 15th centuries, the wooden suburbs from Tsarist times, and the new city with glass skyscrapers from the 1990s. The Old Town is a jumble of medieval walls and turrets, spires and winding, cobbled streets, with magnificent churches and two cathedrals, the 19th century Russian Orthodox Nevsky and a Lutheran cathedral of 1233.

Two museums in Tallinn are worth a mention, the Museum of Occupation and Fight for Freedom is dedicated to the 52 years between 1939 and 1991 when the country was occupied by the Germans and then by the Soviet Union. It is a stark reminder of the 200,000 people killed, disappeared or deported during that time.

The Estonian Open Air Museum, at Rocca al Mare is a short bus ride from the centre on the Baltic shore, with wonderful examples of vernacular architecture. My visit coincided with a 'Home Tourism and Handicraft Fair' with exhibits offering cultural, national, ecological and adventure tourist



attractions. Dancing displays, tourist providers, traditional food with families enjoying a variety of meat dishes, smoked and dried fish and smoked cheese looking like spaghetti - and not a chip or burger van in sight!

Rural tourism in Estonia is promoted by Maaturism,¹⁰ the Estonian Rural Tourism Organisation, a non-profit making organisation set up in 2000. With 326 members they represent 45% of the total accommodation providers, only five of whom are organic farmers.

¹⁰ www.maaturism.ee

Võru County was my destination in the far south east of Estonia and one of the most underdeveloped areas with high unemployment. My trip was organized by Kaidi Mari Liping, who accompanied me and whose fluent English was extremely useful. She formerly worked with Maaturism but with her husband now runs Siksali Development Centre, a non-profit making organization, supporting local people to find new ideas and alternative economic opportunities. Tourism is one of these, and as the county is very flat with hard winters, all year round tourism is possible, including cross-country skiing events. Also ideal for arable production, organic farmers in Võru represent 10% of the total number of organic producers in Estonia.

Our first visit was to the local Plant Production Inspectorate one of the organizations who carry out inspections and offer advice and information for organic producers in their area. As in every other country in the EU, organic farms are inspected at least once a year, and throughout Estonia in 2004, a total of 1490 inspections were made, at a maximum cost to the individual producer of 8000 EEK (£350).

The organic 85ha of Roosu farm, with barley, rape, summer and winter wheat and oats, together with a clover crop and some fallow land belongs to Aivar Rosenberg, 20km north of Võru town and is run by his son. The cereal crop is sold to an organic farmer on the Latvian border, but he hopes that the market will improve, together with the prices. He has weed problems, managed by an Einbok weeder, but is pleased with the biodiversity which is monitored by the Centre for Ecological Engineering at Tartu who are also impressed by his bird and earthworm populations.

The farm is just one of his enterprises, but his energy and enthusiasm are largely directed to his work in the community. This Soviet built block, was once the school he used to attend as a pupil, where he then worked as a janitor and then with credit from the local bank, bought at an auction and now runs it as holiday accommodation and a village community centre. With a village shop, post office, internet access, karate, folk dancing classes and cultural events, this building is a real centre for the tiny community.



Advertised by Maaturism as suitable as for family holidays as well as training and company events (very common in Estonia) canoe and boating camps, they take about 3,000 Russian children per annum from the north east of Estonia in groups of about 25. As they speak Russian in their homes, they come to Roosu to practice their Estonian, play games, use the boats, enjoy the sauna and the countryside. For this, Aivar is paid by both the EU and the local community and for this and other work he has been awarded the Order of the White Star, bestowed on Estonian citizens who work for the community.

One of the neighbouring farmers, Urmas Tubis is also organic, with their house and workshop in the building formerly used to house 200 dairy cattle in Soviet times. Now they have 7.7 ha of mainly blackcurrants, which they hope they will sell on the local markets along with the wood products that Urmas makes. Cleverly utilizing old silage clamps, they have created protected beds for 1,500 young plants, which they then plant out.



The old family farm was built in 1926, but possessed by the Communists and then bought back by his wife's parents in 1960.

Close to the forest, we visited a recently erected memorial to the Forest Brothers, who fought against Soviet rule during the invasion and occupation during and after World War II. As Stalinist repressions intensified, residents hid from the authorities, using the wooded countryside as a natural refuge. The memorial honoured a battle in 1946 where the Brothers held out against 200 Russians, but knowing that they would be overpowered, they shot themselves, rather than be arrested.

Jõeniidu Holiday house is run by the extended family of Kalju Mangli, at Trolla close to Lake Vaskna. With 90 ha, 60 ha of which are forest, he was formerly a dairy farmer but with the collapse of farming in the 1990s, largely due to the economics of milk collection, he worked in the forestry and now only has five goats for milk and meat. With two holiday houses and a sauna, he built the first in 1997 and won a prize for his promotional material in 2003, the other house was finished this year. He rents the houses out for 210 EEK per night (£8.50) and hopes for more visitors this year to cover his costs. His neighbour, an uncle is the blacksmith but many houses in the village are empty, people having escaped from the communists and not returned. He feels people do not work together any more, are more envious and want more money – after the war, he says, everyone was equally poor.



Our visit to an organic farm at Hartsmäe was brief but informative. With 76 ha of which 30 are arable with 3 ha potatoes, the farmer has two milking cows, seven sows and a Duroc x Wild boar. Organic since 1992 he gained certification in 1994, and belongs to the Estonian Meat Ecological Association, but due to local abattoir facilities, he sells his piglets farmers. He keep some cereals for pig sells 6-7 tonnes to other farmers and his tonnes per annum to bake bread, which together with soft cheese to tourist markets, both locally and in Tallinn.



the lack of onto other feed, but he wife uses 3 she sells providers and

Vaskna Tourism Farm is another successful example of farm diversification. Margid and her husband who previously worked in the forest, bought 15 ha in 1993 and initially converted one barn. At first they made as much money from their first two visitors from Germany as they did from raising a calf to cow, so they extended the barns to accommodate Swedish and visitors from other countries. Now, the local farmers work together, and Margid buys in



local and organic produce from Hartsmäe, together with local craft products which she sells to visitors. In 2000 they finished their new rooms and hope to cater for those companies who still continue to organise 'away days' for their staff.

Their future plans include the conversion of their heating system from electricity to wood. Margid has been on training courses with the Estonian Farmers Union to Denmark, and she is positive about the future of their business, which employs both her and her husband fulltime, in addition to local workers.



Arossa Villa¹¹ has been a successful tourist enterprise since it started providing accommodation in 1998 with awards for best tourism provider received in 2001. Sleeping up to 40 guests, this handsome villa, 9 km away from the town of Võru offers many

facilities to company groups, families and individuals. Arossa Villa is run by Tiit Soosaar and his wife Külli and the success of their enterprise relies on the beauty of the countryside, organic food from the nearby farmland and good quality of service.

Tiit has enthusiasm for an ambitious vision to convert Võru into an ecological county, combining organic agriculture, alternative energy, tourism, and alternative building styles. The proposed pilot project offers the possibility of replacing conventional foods with ecological ones, seeking to reverse the current dietary trends and improving the



health of the people, especially in the towns.

Ten of the 148 watermills in the area have already been restored and the utilisation of traditional farm buildings for tourism have created a positive energy.



Tiit acknowledges that organic production has grown fast in some parts of Estonia, largely due to EU support, but he feels that growth may be restricted by lack of processing facilities (currently only 11 processors are registered in the whole of Estonia). Although there are a number of potential processors in Võru the regulations regarding the processing of organic and conventional produce in the same unit, may discourage interest in this area.

With the proximity of the Farmers Union, the University and the Estonian Plant Inspectorate at Tartu, Tiit believes that resources are available for the training of farmers and this should be continued and improved for producers and processors, perhaps resulting in a network of demonstration farms. The encouragement of farmers to set up co-operatives and the drawing up of farm business plans would also be advantageous.

He has already approached local officials with this visionary project, but is aware that it needs to be re-worked in conjunction with those working in the organic industry, scientists and advisors, before it can be presented at national level. A working group needs to be established in order to co-ordinate the ideas, especially those for state and private financial investment. Similar projects have been well established in other EU countries, and hopefully Tiit will get the recognition and support that this ambitious Võru pilot deserves.

11

www.arossa.ee

3. SLOVENIAN TRIP 4th – 25th September

Slovenia shares similarities with Wales both with a total land area of about 20,000 km², a population of 2.0m and an agricultural GDP of 3.6% in Slovenia, and a population of 2.5m and 1.8% agricultural GDP in Wales. In 1948, Slovenia managed to retain its independence and President Tito distanced himself from the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, industry was nationalised, private ownership of agricultural land was limited to 20 ha and a planned central economy put in place.

Slovenia is a wonderful example of ecological and landscape diversity and currently has almost 11% of its territory protected by various restrictions. The Triglav National Park is included in a cross-border cooperation project, to develop common and sustainable interregional development. This Interreg project entitled Eco Regio, Bio Alpe Adria¹² offers the opportunity to work together with Carinthia-Kärnten in Austria and NE Italy to develop common marketing strategies.

Organic development in Slovenia 2000-2004

	2000	2004
Average size of organic farms - hectares	8.77	14.58
Total organic area - hectares	5,440	23,023
% of Utilisable Arable Area (UAA)	1.07	4.69
Number of organic farms	620	1,568
% of total farms	0.72	2.03
Action Plan for Organic Farming accepted by Slovene Government, November 2005 -		
Projected increase in organic farms 2015 ¹³ –		
15% of all farms organic		
20% of UAA organic		
10% share of organic food on market		
Increased number of tourist farms from 33 to 120		

Tourism is recognised as one of the main areas of great opportunity for Slovenia's economy and The Association of Tourist Farms of Slovenia and the Slovenian Tourist Board¹⁴ provide excellent publicity material for their tourists and providers, especially the “Next Exit” series. The website is very easy to use and the organic farms easily identified by the inclusion of the Biodar trade mark¹⁵. Out of 110 farms listed in their 2005 ‘Friendly Countryside’ price list, 33 farms are organic.



85% of tourism in Slovenia occurs in the west of the country and a leaflet produced in conjunction with an organisation in Carinthia/Kärnten in Austria, promotes tourism on 15 organic farms in Slovenia and 11 in Kärnten. Entitled Urlaub am Bio-Bauernhof (Holidays on Organic Farms) this excellent leaflet is promoted through the tourist agency.

Biodar is the striking and easily identifiable trademark for organic products which meet the standards of the Union of Slovenian Organic Farmers Association. Eight farmer and/or producer groups belong to this Association totalling 1,100 producers, who get a magazine

¹² Bio Alpe Adria www.bioalpeadria.info

¹³ Dr. M. Bavec, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Maribor, May 2006 www.fk.uni-mb.si

¹⁴ www.slovenia.info

¹⁵ Biodar, Union of Slovenian Organic Farmers Associations www.zveza-ekomet.si

three times a year, for which they pay 8,000 SIT (approx £23). Only about 200 producers who sell direct to the consumers take the opportunity to use the Biodar label, but despite this it is widely seen throughout the country. Inspection and certification of organic producers and processors is carried out by three inspection bodies: Institute for Inspection and Certification of University of Maribor (IKC), Institute for Inspection and Certification in Agriculture and Silviculture and Bureau Veritas Slovenia.

Maribor, in the north east of Slovenia was my destination, my itinerary organised by Marina Koren, of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Maribor¹². The Faculty started in 2006 with the first generation of their study programme on organic farming and here.... “ organic agriculture is an integral part of the Rural Development Programme, bearing significance not just in agricultural economic terms and social significance, but also with the aim of preserving farms in less favourable agricultural areas, and extending the food processing industry to include organic products. It is also hoped that through the connection with tourism, organic agriculture will be placed amongst the latest development trends of the 21st century”

Matjaž Turinek was my guide, currently studying at Maribor but in 2004, was an Erasmus student at the Institute of Rural Sciences, University of Wales at Aberystwyth, so his English was excellent. His parents have a 5 ha farm, renting another 6 ha on which his



father grows traditional varieties of spelt wheat and other crops including buckwheat, millet, einkorn and maize. His mother is in charge of processing all the produce grown on the farm for selling at Maribor and Ljubljana markets – maize into



polenta, spelt wheat into bread, einkorn into pasta, pumpkins into oil and apples into juice, jams and vinegars. His father collaborates with the University who buy his Texel rams and also monitor his traditional Styrian hens. Previously, they hosted visits from schools, but owing to lack of time, now just offer open days to local people and neighbouring farms. Matjaž hopes that in the future, he will be able to reintroduce hives of bees that his grandfather used to have, and also take advantage of the EU processing grants now available for under 35s.

Our next visit was to Ron and Zinka Metz who together with her parents are the third generation of her family on this small 15ha farm and living in the 250 year old farmhouse. With an additional 9 ha which they rent, they grow and process spelt wheat, oats, buckwheat, beans for drying, apples into juices and vinegars for sale on the markets. Ron and Zinka were both new to farming when they came back from the USA to this farm 8 years ago, but Ron came second in the



national Slovenian sheep shearing competition, and aims to come first this year! They are also optimistic about processing and selling their goats' milk into soft cheese.



Marina and her colleague accompanied me on further visits, starting in the north east on the Croatian border with Mr Pukšič, who has family farm of 5ha of arable land on which he grows beet, white cabbage, paprika and cucumbers. He has 4 ha of meadow and 1ha of vines originally started by his



Previously a pig farmer, Mr. Pukšič is a thoughtful man and became a vegetarian and converted to organic production 8 years ago. He has invested in a new processing unit, for both his vegetables and those of other producers. Initially, he sold his produce to Mercator¹⁶ one of the largest retailing chains in South Eastern Europe and the leading retailing chain in Slovenia, but he was so unhappy with prices, that he now only sells direct to consumers, via the internet and at markets. He also grows 0.5ha of spelt wheat, which he makes into about 100 pillows per annum, and also makes bread from the flour. Having no stock he relies on green manures and works with the University on fertility and other trials.

A farm in the first year of conversion was our next stop where the Kosec family formerly milked cows, but now are breeding young stock for sale to other organic farmers. They also have traditional, dual purpose horses, and the son is considering agri tourism on their farm in the future, possibly using the horses as a tourist attraction. Goran Šoster, President of the Society of Organic Farmers in North East Slovenia is a neighbour and was also a visitor on the farm. Whilst the organic market in Maribor was the initiative of Martina Bavec and Neva Poštrak, Goran's organisation provides the awnings and trailers, with their distinctive sunflower logo for which the farmers pay 8,000 SIT pa.



His organisation also offers advice and information to 177 farmers, some who offer educational visits for schools and others providing tourism. Goran also works with other cross-border and interreg projects.



Radikon farm on the Hungarian border is the biggest organic asparagus producer in the area with 1.5 ha of their 7ha farm down to old varieties of green and white asparagus, planted 8 years ago. They also considered selling to Mercator, but because of the prices, now rely on the markets of Maribor and Ljubljana and sell to good local restaurants. An experienced producer of 20 years, he was previously growing under an Integrated Pest Management system, but Martina Bavec of the University suggested he go organic in 2000 and he has not regretted his decision. Other crops include carrots, beetroot and covered crops, as well as cereals, some of which go to the pigs and chickens, but he also grows triticale and clover, both red and white, which he prefers, for fertility building.



My last producer in the area was arranged with Polonca Repic, who heads the Department for Organic Inspection¹⁷ and we visited Marja Cojhter with 7 ha of fruit and vegetables, a small wood, pasture for her four sheep and a vineyard, her small farm 450m high above Maribor. With the help of EU money, she has just converted part of her house into three flats for tourists. Finished to a high quality with hand made wooden furniture, she is under pressure to finish them as soon as possible, to provide accommodation for Slovenians living just across the borders in both Italy and Austria (Carinthia) The Tourist Board will check them, but although she sometimes gets help from her daughter, she is aware that it is a lot of work. She has one flat just for women, with no cooking facilities, and is looking forward to cooking for them thereby providing a real break! With her beautiful garden with lots of herbs she also processes fruit and fills her stall on the market with jams, vegetables, dried fruits, and oat milk.



¹⁶ www.mercator.si

¹⁷ www.kmetzav-mb.si Dept. for organic farming inspection

All the producers that I visited were very busy preparing for the markets in Maribor and Ljubljana on two consecutive days, and I very much appreciated the time they gave up to talk to me. I was very pleased therefore, to see them doing a brisk trade at the markets to both tourists and local people.

Ljubljana is a beautiful city with narrow streets in the old town, baroque churches, palaces and small bridges over the River Ljubljanica - "a little Prague without the tourists or the hype". My visit coincided with an Ecofest, designed to bring organic food and farming closer to the public. This is the fifth year that this event has been organized by Anamarija Slabe and her colleagues at the Institute for Sustainable Development¹⁸, in



conjunction with other organisations sector. This popular open market in the famous Three Bridges had and other stands promoting household goods and There was music,



working in the organic main square close to the about 70 stalls, producers organic cosmetics, organic tourist farms. workshops for children and

during the previous few days in Ljubljana, public presentations had been given on organic food and farming, organic living and animal health.

Opposite the open farmers' market, in the small shops under the Plečnik Arcades, some organic cheese, bread and meat was also available

The Institute of Sustainable Development is also involved with other organic projects in and around Ljubljana - working with local farmers, providing support for market initiatives, working with local schools, working with young farmers in Candidate Countries, but of most interest to me, working with ECEAT, promoting tourism on certified organic farms. They have been actively involved in organic tourism since 1999 and in 2003 they developed a national project EcoAgroTourism (implemented by the financial support of the Delegation of European Commission in Slovenia) dealing with development of green tourism in rural areas. It also included also an intensive 5-day training course for organic farmers involved in tourism on farm.

The final two weeks of my trip to Slovenia were spent in and around the Triglav National Park.¹⁹ Twinned with the Snowdonia National Park in North Wales, the first proposal for the Park dates from the year 1908 and in 1981 was finally enlarged to its present 838 km². Named after Mt. Triglav (2864m) the mountain way of life was first mentioned in 1178 on the slopes of Mt Krn (2244m) with the inhabitants grazing pastures in the high mountains and establishing seasonal hamlets. One of the oldest activities is mountaineering and the famous Slovene Alpine Society was established in 1893. Today, the Alps are very popular with tourists and are traversed by alpine paths with 32 alpine houses and huts. Remains of burial-grounds, strongholds, fortifications and paths are still very evident, following one of the bloodiest battle-fronts in WW1 along the Soča river, when the warring countries of Italy and the former Austro-Hungary suffered about 1m casualties. No account of this period is apparently more vivid than that written by Ernest Hemingway in Farewell to Arms (1929) as he was wounded during one of the battles, whilst driving an Italian ambulance in 1918.

¹⁸ Institute of Sustainable Development, Ljubljana www.itr.si

¹⁹ Triglav National Park: www.tnp.si

The organiser of my visits to the farms in the area was Davorin Koren who works full-time in the Triglav National Park (TNP) as an advisor for additional activities on farms. He and his family live in Zvanc family farm at Dreznice Ravne, 600m on the slopes of Mt Krn, above Kobarid with a fine view of the Soča valley. A small farm of 8+ ha, they have 15 goats, 15 sheep and 2 dairy cows, which were spending the summer up on the high pastures, the cows and sheep coming down in October but the goats staying up until the snow comes. A total of 36 dairy cattle belong to 20 farmers in the village who share the high mountain pastures, and take it in turn to milk and make cheese in a dairy in the mountains, but with both conventional and organic milk, the cheese cannot be marketed as organic. With relatively little organic processing in Slovenia, there are no local slaughtering facilities for organic cattle and whilst derogations are possible for farmers over 1,000m there is little demand for organic meat in this area.



The family have one well appointed by the Tourist Board. However, with Sanija as a part-time pharmacist in up with their family of three small little spare time for the family to Davorin's mother prepares produce for their family and occasional paying guests. The boys' school at Dreznice, is part of the International Eco Schools²⁰ programme for environmental management and sustainable development, where they use fresh produce for their school lunches, and recycled materials where possible



tourist apartment graded with Two Apples Davorin working full-time in the Park and Kobarid, the majority of their time is taken boys and the farm, and there is currently concentrate on providing for visitors. traditional dishes from their home-grown

Davorin's sister, Lidija runs a very successful campground that can accommodate 200 visitors at a time, eight kilometers from the farm on the banks of the Soča River, just by Napoleon's bridge outside Kobarid. Opening every year on the 15th March and not closing until the 1st November, she offers excellent facilities with showers, play areas, mountains including some from the the winter months, she she is full throughout the successful.



and a shop selling local and organic produce, producers I had visited in the North East. During travels to tourist fairs in other countries, and as season, her promotion is obviously very



My next visit was to Čadrg, a small alpine village in the hills of Tolmin (700m) on the edge of the Park where cheese making has been a traditional activity for many generations. Badly damaged in the earthquake of 1998 and supported by the TNP the village embarked on a project to revitalise their community. Four of the dairy farms and one farm with goats converted to organic agriculture and then they renovated the cheese-making dairy. They received 83,000€ from the Tolmin community, \$10,500 from the Henry Ford Community and 94,00€ from the EU and support from the TNP and other organisations has been invaluable. Another step in the revival of the village was an invitation to the Don Pierino organisation which runs communities for



addicts, to set up a house in the community, a move which was financially supported by Karitas, a charitable organisation of the Roman Catholic Church in Slovenia.

I was fortunate to stay in Pri Lovrču, the new, very well furnished apartments, of Marija Bončina who is the project co-ordinator and the energetic force behind the project. Previously farmed by her father until he died 12 years ago, Marija, her husband and three boys returned to the family farm, which consists of 25 ha, but with the other farmers, a total of 100+ ha of pasture is available to the 40 Slovene cows in the village.



Marija's middle son, Eric, speaks excellent English, and explained that together the farmers usually have between 4-500 litres/day with 10 litres making 1 kg cheese. Washed daily, it matures for four weeks, and sells at 8-9€ per kg with quark, a soft cheese type product, selling at 4-5€. There are three cheese makers amongst the farmers and the responsibilities are divided up, dependant on the amount of milk each farm produces. The organic hard cheese, named Tolminc, is marketed under the organic label Biodar and sells well to those visitors who stay in the village and also to tourists in the markets.



Eric was enthusiastic about the way the farmers work together and says that the revival has encouraged the young people to stay. In 1965 over 300 people lived in the village, but now only about thirty and the 10 young people who remain have a real commitment to carry the co-operative ideals forward. Two years ago, it was decided to create a new water supply, which had to be dug by hand and he says that all the members of village worked together, creating 3 km of new water supply, now running free of charge from the mountains and not via the water authority.

News of the regeneration of this extraordinary village has spread far and wide much of it due to the work and support of the TNP together with Marija's energy and enthusiasm. Following the donation from the Henry Ford Foundation, the King of Sweden visited in 2004 and Marianne Fischer Boel, the European Commissioner in 2006.

A Gostilna, an inn or restaurant, called Psnak, was my next stop inside the Park in the Radovna Valley, 17km from Bled. The farm, with 50 ha of wood and 14 ha of grass, has 20 cows, six pigs and two horses. The restaurant was run by previous generations of the family, but currently Tanja cooks the meals and her husband runs the farm.



He and Alojz, her father in law, used to work fulltime as bearers in the mountains, but when helicopters took over from the horses, they became redundant. Alojz keeps many hives of bees and in the Slovene tradition,

illustrates the hives showing the lives of mountains and also book explaining the visitors.



with pictures the bearers in the sells a small picture traditions to the

The family decided that extending the house into tourist apartments would provide a financial future for their family and they built the apartments in 1999 with credit from the bank, which has been financially very difficult. The Gostilna is very busy from May to October with both locals and visitors, and Tanija produces all the food herself, processing the milk from the cows into soft cheese and butter, picking fruit for jams and honey from the bees, together with salami and meat from the six pigs and other animals. Their son has just completed a food technology course and continues to help on the farm, but their daughter has recently married and is busy helping out on her husband's farm.

They converted to organic production in 2000, which they didn't find too difficult, because they were always committed to the philosophy, but although the subsidy is useful they find the paperwork onerous. Tanija feels that the restaurant is already very busy but as they aren't able to provide organic ingredients throughout the year, they don't promote the farm or restaurant as ecological. She feels it is more important to concentrate on doing what they do well and continue to make steady progress in the future, and is confident that being in the Park will make a significant difference to their business, protecting both their farming future and tourism.

My last stay in the TNP was at 1070m in the mountains above Lake Bohinj, at Gorjup, the highest working farm in the area. Angela and Anton Soklic own 6ha with a further 6ha rented land. They moved in after a lot of refurbishment three years ago, and immediately offered tourist accommodation, which has gone very well in the last two years. Angela says she was originally a 'city girl' and had to learn rural skills from her husband, but she is an excellent cook and with her interest in traditional recipes serves wonderful Slovenian food with the organic produce from their farm. With 10 goats, two cows, three sheep, two turkeys and chickens, they converted to organic in 1999 and Angela is optimistic about the future of their tourist business and the provision of authentic Slovenian recipes, as she hopes that one of her two sons will take over the business in a few years.



An hours' walk led me to Zajamniki, a collection of 25 wooden shingle houses, at 1200m. Mainly summer houses for those who live in the towns, there was a herd of cows roaming the village, with all the beautifully cultivated gardens protected by fencing. The cheese maker, who makes the cheese during the summer months in the mountains, sells cheese and schnapps to the visitors.



My last visit in Slovenia

was to the magnificent Lake Bohinj, 4.5km long and one of the main starting points for climbing Mt. Triglav. The small town of Bohinjska Bistrica is a centre for activity holidays on and around the lake.



With wonderful views of both mountains and upland pastures it was beautiful place to end my trip in this lovely country.



4. CONCLUSIONS

I have had a wonderful opportunity to visit some extraordinary hard-working organic producers, engaged in apparently successful businesses, providing a variety of accommodation and produce to visitors and tourists. However, my visits were brief but despite occasional language difficulties, it has been possible to draw some conclusions.

- Figures from the three countries clearly show that organic production has increased, largely encouraged by EU financial support.
- Tourism on organic farms would also appear to be flourishing, especially where there is a very active organic sector. In Poland this is supported by ECEAT, Ekoland and other organisations and in Slovenia by Institute of Sustainable Development, the Faculty of Agriculture at Maribor University, the TNP and the tourist board. It is only in Estonia, where there is little visible evidence of tourism on organic farms being promoted with a consequent low profile.
- The quality of provision that I have experienced has generally been excellent. Traditional buildings have been adapted and extended, and sometimes at significant personal cost, to provide quality accommodation.
- The majority of the produce available was produced and processed on the farm. The increased opportunities for selling organic and processed products, which included the collection and drying of wild plants and herbs to visitors was acknowledged and welcomed.
- Co-operation amongst the producers in all three countries exists, especially with regard to the selling of produce to tourist outlets. However frustration is expressed by various organisations, suggesting that much more could be achieved if producers worked more willingly together.
- In the UK, the growth of the organic food market, particularly of baby and childrens' products, has resulted in more families interested in taking their holidays on organic farms. There seems no reason to believe that this trend will not be reflected in the new EU countries, and that they will new destinations for foreign tourists. The accommodation provided is generally of a sufficiently high standard to attract such visitors.
- The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation Sustainable Development Department²¹ states "*.....there is a recent growing awareness that a reserve/park increases "green" tourism opportunities and that visitors are increasingly sensitive to quality, both in ecological and gastronomic terms. This trend favours organic farmers because they can easily meet these new tourists' demands*". This is strongly borne out by the Triglav National Park in Slovenia, where one of their Advisors, Davorin Koren has successfully encouraged many of the farms in the Park to convert to organic production. Those producers perceive their relationship with the Park as an essential part of their future survival.

²¹ The Sustainable Development Department of The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) 2004
<http://www.fao.org/sd/>

- The educational activities carried out on Polish organic farms were excellent examples of diversification, which rewarded farmers for organic farming and conservation practices. The ‘light touch’ of Health and Safety regulations in Poland enables the children to have significant physical contact with the animals, which clearly give both pleasure and educational experience. The same ‘light touch’ also applies to the provision of refreshments on farm for children and adult visitors.
- All the organic farmers were registered with a licensed certification body, but where the labels and/or trademarks of ECEAT and Biodar were prominently displayed on both produce and house signs, the organic identity was reinforced.
- However, whilst the organic farms I visited were all working farms, there can be some confusion for tourists as to the definition of ‘farm’. In Poland, the Hospitable Farms²² organisation lists three categories: Working farm – operating with profits from plants and animals; Idle farm – neither cultivates land nor breeds animals; Rural accommodation – rooms rented by retired farmers or those who transformed their farms into agri-tourism accommodation.
- Traditionally, it has been the role of the women on the farm to receive the guests and provide for their needs during their stay, but visitors are becoming increasingly demanding and standards are rising.
- Unless the income received from their tourist activities is sufficient, some of the younger farmers’ wives may choose to supplement the farm income and pursue their careers with local part-time jobs if available. They may choose to keep whatever free time they have available for their children and extended families, rather than spent it on cooking, cleaning and providing a friendly service to visitors!
- The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) state *“Conversion to organic management in agricultural areas and the development of connected activities such as tourism are increasing. When farms are organically managed, they increase the motivation for tourists’ visits..... eco-organic tourism offers opportunities for rural economies and sustainable tourism”*
- From what I have seen this is borne out by most of the small organic farms I visited. Tourism and the provision of organic produce makes a significant contribution to both the economy of the farms and their communities and undoubtedly this will continue to expand in the new Member States and elsewhere, thus increasing the competition in the tourist market.
- On a very different, but personal level, in each of these countries I was made aware of the scars of recent history inflicted by conflict. Auschwitz and the rebuilding of Warsaw in Poland, in Estonia the story of the Forest Brothers and tensions in Tallinn over a war memorial and in a remote Slovene valley, a memorial to a village razed to the ground in WWII and a poignant museum in Kobarid to WWI. I was grateful to be reminded of our freedom and democracy, which we take so much for granted.