Ambassadors, barbecues, baseball and the civil war

A review of the professional development course on American culture and language organized by the US region of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC).

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The US region of AIIC organised a course on American language and culture from June 27 – July 1, 2005 in Washington, D.C. I was overwhelmed by what the course had to offer and would like to share some of my impressions with you.

A total of 19 conference interpreters from seven countries attended the workshop. The fact that AIIC offers such courses is certainly an added incentive to join, especially for young colleagues. Apart from the seven colleagues from my own country, Germany, most of the participants came from other parts of Europe, as well as two colleagues from Brazil. In addition to French, German became a type of second lingua franca on the margins of the workshop. Although this may not seem ideal when attempting to achieve total immersion in American English, it did prove helpful on a number of occasions in that it enabled us to put across our new impressions more directly. And many impressions there were! Especially for those of us who were visiting this huge country for the first time. Let’s face it, very few people go the States for the food. Then there is the hazy, hot and humid summer weather in Washington (which you can’t feel on TV or on the radio!). And what a shame the air conditioning is turned up so high that it’s always freezing indoors!

A military ceremony for U.S. soldiers killed in action during World War II left a lasting impression on me. It goes without saying that attendance at this evening event, which included the national anthem and a good bit of emotional hype, was optional. In fact, this was the only “dose” of patriotism we received over the course of the week. Clearly, this was because our American colleagues (who, incidentally, bent over backwards for us, both on the spot and behind the scenes) are after all conference interpreters, and therefore by definition not inclined to adopt exaggerated feelings of nationalism. It was also thanks to the excellent quality of the speakers, many of whom had an international background and were able to present their country and fellow-Americans in a refreshing, unbiased manner sprinkled with a touch of irony.

The workshop was held at the administrative building of the Organisation of American States, a really central location close to both the World Bank and the White House. We had absolutely no problem getting around, since the organising colleagues not only made our hotel arrangements, but even provided us with metro passes!
American mentality and U.S. history were a particular focus of the workshop. We touched on a whole variety of topics including American identity, relations between blacks and whites, education and the legal system. We attended lectures throughout the day, spiced up with hands-on events. The “sports vocabulary” section focusing on baseball included a trip to a baseball game. (And guess who got the tickets for us: our American colleagues! Wouldn’t it be nice if all conference organisers showed such organisational talent?). The lesson in baseball theory beforehand gave us the necessary savvy to follow the game. The same applies to the legal system where practical aspects outweighed theory. Judge Joan Zeldon met our group in the District Court, reported on her day-to-day work and answered our questions, followed by a discussion with two court interpreters from Washington. As this introduction did not take up too much time, we still had an opportunity to attend a number of public court proceedings, following in the footsteps of John Grisham.

The hands-on aspect to complement the truly magnificent speech by Saul Lilienstein on the history of jazz was a jazz concert in the legendary Blues Alley. Our attention then turned to the U.S. political system. Former Ambassador George Moose gave a brilliant lecture on what would normally be a dry subject: “Inter-Agency Policy Making” – which we then experienced live on a sightseeing tour of Washington.

Of course a week is not much time to study a country’s language and culture – a truly vast area. But our colleagues managed to pack even more cultural items into our very busy schedule. These included Prof. Weaver’s lecture on American identity which touched upon specific practical and sociological aspects of particular interest. He described the American mentality as being completely forward-looking – a quintessence if there ever was one! It is certainly easier to overcome (or tolerate?) the impression that Americans are isolated from Europe and European political events if you become more involved in the complex features of federalism in the U.S. And this is exactly what we did with the help of David Munger’s 3-hour presentation on “State versus Federal Government” together with Rufus Philips’ (from Georgia!) speech on the Civil War.

The series of lectures was rounded off by Prof. Ribuffo’s brilliant presentation on “Religion and Politics” (he read out his speech which was full of ingenious religious allusions in an American context – a nightmare for any interpreter!), a vivid insight into the American health care system (“A recent visit to my internist”), quick stops at the National Gallery of Art (early American art) and the Library of Congress, and an open-air concert with musicians from Tennessee at the well-known Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts.

For most of us, one of the special highlights was a barbecue at the lovely home of one of our local colleagues. Spare ribs with a view of all the capital city’s monuments and memorials – American hospitality at its best!

Last but not least, let me stress how excellently everything was organised and how hospitable all our colleagues were. We all felt very much at home in a most pleasant atmosphere and with a great group of colleagues. A very big THANK YOU once again to all of you who worked so hard both on the spot and behind the scenes. Our thanks go out in particular to Marilda Averbug, Peter Motton, Karin Ruckhaus, Idette Swetye, Estela Zaffaroni, Stephanie van Reigersberg and many more!
THE BOTTOM LINE: This very intensive seminar was a great success!

Moreover, the price was reasonable ($620, i.e. about €500). Even considering the high cost for accommodations in Washington, it was excellent value-for-money in view of the educational and amusing information and insights we received in such a constructive atmosphere.

Perhaps this is something we could use as an example to follow?

A major advantage for myself – a younger colleague and pre-candidate, with a type of observer status in AIIC – is the fact that this workshop really reflected the international character of our association in a very positive way. Can any other professional association really claim that its U.S. chapter organises such high-caliber training courses?

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