

## **2008 UTC European Creative Writing Trip**

*This trip was led by faculty members Rick Jackson and Sybil Baker.*

The recent annual UTC Creative Writing trip to Europe was led by award-winning writers Rick Jackson and Sybil Baker of UTC's English Department. A total of thirteen students were given the opportunity to broaden their artistic and cultural horizons, to see their writing in a different context, and to apply their experiences directly to their writing.

These are some of the reasons why the UTC writing program is internationally known as one of the very best in the country. Stanley Plumly, a major poet and critic from the University of Maryland, calls it a "graduate program disguised as an undergraduate program". Visiting writers for the program's Meacham Writers' Workshops have included Pulitzer prize and National Book Award Winners from around the country, winners of other major prizes and fellowships, writers from Israel, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Britain, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Germany and Hungary. 25 former students from the program have published over 35 books, and every poetry student in the last 25 years has won several major poetry Fellowships to MFA programs, a record unequaled in the country. The faculty themselves have authored over 20 books and chapbooks and have won Guggenheim, Fulbright, NEA, Tennessee Arts and other fellowships for their writing and teaching.



In total, the group visited four countries—Switzerland, Slovenia, Croatia and Italy. In Switzerland, the students stayed for five days in an exquisite mountain village called Leysin, about an hour southwest of Montreux and Lake Geneva, at an international boarding school that had a stunning view of the Swiss Alps. Here, the UTC students conducted five days of successful writing workshops with the international students. These workshops culminated in a Friday night poetry reading, which was attended by the entire school.



During this time in Switzerland, the group also visited the village of Gruyere, and sampled some of the famous cheese there. Other highlights included Montreux, the famous jazz festival town on Lake Geneva, as well as Chillon Castle, the venue for Byron's narrative poem, *The Prisoner of Chillon*. Lord Byron's signature was carved eerily into a pillar in one of the dungeons of the castle.



After Switzerland, the group traveled to Slovenia, where a boarding house in a historical, culturally-rich area called Skocjan acted as the base camp for the writing students. The Skocjan village was an interesting location because it is literally built on small slices of land that arch over about three miles of underground passages and subterranean caves that are more than 300 feet deep and extend for 30 miles into Italy.



Along with New York poet Bill Rasmovicz and distinguished Slovene writer Izhtok Osojnik, Dr. Jackson and Ms. Baker conducted a series of very successful cross-genre writing workshops in some of the little churches that surrounded the village. According to Emilia Philips, one of the students on the trip, “The workshops were very constructive. I was amazed at the quality of the work that all the students presented. We were able to remove ourselves from the distractions of everyday life and explore the countries as well as our own creativity”. Students were also able to meet one on one with Jackson and Baker for personal consultations on their work.

While in Slovenia, the group visited the imposing Predjamska Grad, built within the mouth of a yawning cave. The students also saw the famous white Lippizaner horses, as well as the seaside town of Koper, where they read their poetry at the university. A real highlight of the trip was the Burja Bar boat trip from Koper to Piran. The trip took about two hours each way and offered some amazing ocean views.



Two of the other interesting places were Ljubljana, the capital city, and the Soca Valley. Ljubljana offered a cosmopolitan atmosphere, as well as the iconic Dragon Bridge over the Ljubljanica River and the stunning Ljubljana Castle, which survived the large earthquake that struck the city in 1895.

To get to the Soca Valley, it was necessary to navigate the narrow, winding roads that Ernest Hemingway once drove as an ambulance driver. At the Kobariski Museum, the curator took great lengths to explain Hemingway's involvement in the war, as well as the various ramifications of the Italian and Austrian battles in the area. The students were urged to imagine the savageness of the winter mountains during the various battles. After the museum, the students took another winding road down the Tolminska Gorge to Dante's cave, the place where the poet supposedly became inspired to create *The Divine Comedy*.

The next country on the trip was Croatia, which meant changing money to a different currency. While all the other countries used the Euro, the Croatian Kuna was still used here—which was interesting because it was only re-introduced in Croatia in 1994, as a political statement. The students enjoyed seafood in the tourist town of Rovinj, known in Croatia as the 'blue pearl of the Adriatic'. One of the most refreshing things about the EU is that the border controls between countries are relatively non-existent. The freedom that comes with not having to deal with immigration officers certainly helps palliate the pain of crossing international borders.



In Italy, we first visited Aquileia, an ancient Roman port with archeological remains dating back to 180 BC. The mosaic Roman floors and the mosaic floors in the ancient church. The students then took a train to the fabled city of Venice, where they experienced a large number of tourists, bustling street life and big city energy. Some of the students especially enjoyed seeing the thousands of canals and gondolas that give Venice its reputation.

After buying lemon gelato, we casually strolled from the train station across the Rialto Bridge toward the city's tourist attractions. Although we were only in Venice for one day, we managed to visit the awesome church at the San Marco Piazza, as well as experience the optical illusion at the Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari church, where Titian's Assumption can be seen in such a way that it appears to grow more distant as one tries to approach—which can be seen as a metaphor for the idea that sinners cannot get to heaven on their own. Finally, on the way back to the train station, the students visited Byron's house, cantilevered over one of the canals, and it was easy to imagine the forlorn lover swimming three miles each way to the Lido to study Armenian in a church.



The final destination in Italy was Verona, where the students saw the quaint balcony at Juliet's house. They also strolled the banks of the River Adige, as romanticized by the contemporary poet James Wright. The group left Verona late that evening and drove up to Zurich to catch the plane back to Atlanta.

In general, some of the educational highlights of the trip were the writing workshops that the students took part in every second night. The quality of help and advice that the students offered each other, as well as the extreme dedication to their work, were some of the things that were really impressive.



The group leaders would like to thank the Olsen Law Firm for acting as a major sponsor for the trip, as well as for sponsoring the Meacham Workshops. The UTC Creative Writing trip to Europe was an astounding success in terms of broadening the horizons of these young peoples' minds and exposing them to different cultures and ways of life.

*This article was written by Rowan Johnson.*