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From the Editor-in-Chief

We were invited to visit Slovenia and cover a monolith chromatography course that BIA Separations holds every two years during the summer. And while I consider myself a reasonably good student of geography, I had to admit that I didn't know anything about Slovenia, let alone where it was located. I assumed it was part of the former Yugoslavia, and having followed the dissolution of this country in the '90s, I assumed it must be a land of great tragedy with thousands of undiscovered land mines and bombed out buildings, plus UN peacekeepers riding around in Humvees. So I had to ask myself: "What am I getting myself into?" A quick Google search identified a vibrant country of about two million people that was indeed part of the former Yugoslavia, and that it was on the Adriatic Sea with Italy to the west, Austria to the north, Hungary to the northeast, and Croatia to the east and south.

The capital, Ljubljana, offers a good airport, but it ended up being less expensive to fly into Venice, which was about two hours from our destination via the autostrada. Then arriving early to learn more about the country, we decided to explore the mountains to the north, which are a continuation of the Alps. We found a rich history, beautifully maintained roads, breathtaking scenery, plus some of the most hospitable people I've ever encountered in international travel. Everywhere we went we saw sports enthusiasts hiking, biking, and hang gliding, as well as rafting on some of the most pristine, Robin's-egg-blue rivers I've ever seen. And concerning the break from Serbia, which was the dominate faction when Yugoslavia dissolved, Slovenia prides itself on having an eight-day conflict in which only eight Slovenians died.

And then there was the Adriatic coastline of Slovenia with sailing and water sports of every description, plus resort hotels and casinos in the city of Portorož where a three-day portion of the overall symposium was held. But what made everything even better, Slovenia is part of the Euro zone, so we were able to use Euros in both Italy and Slovenia. Remember the days when you returned from Europe with five or six currencies, of which the coins couldn't be exchanged and are probably still in your dresser drawer?

The first portion of the monolith course was held at the new manufacturing building that BIA Separations had recently completed in Ajdovščina. This relatively small town is in a valley surrounded by mountains but conveniently located just minutes from the motorway ("avtocesta" in Slovene). As you

might expect, the CEO, Dr. Aleš Strancar, also lives here where he grows grapes and makes wine. This €22 million facility was truly state-of-the-art, but with a heavy emphasis on ecology. The designers maximized the use of windows and solar panels, plus geothermal energy to heat the building. And every eco-friendly feature I've ever seen had been incorporated to minimize the use of electricity and water, to the point that the building can sell electricity back to the grid at certain times of the year.

Then concerning the symposium program, it featured talks from all over the world including a number of chromatography's best known names. And even though the material centered on the products produced by BIA Separations, there was plenty of chemistry and chromatographic technology to satisfy anyone in downstream processing. I learned that the best applications for these monoliths were with larger proteins and particles, with the consensus being that plasmid DNA purification was probably the best. However, virus purification and removal was a close second, and very large proteins like IgM's and conjugates were gaining ground. But then, my old friend Pete Gagnon, who also uses the technology in a capture and flow-through mode, proposed that using monoliths for any application was "...like losing your virginity. You can't go back to the way things were before."

There were many comparisons made to membrane chromatography, which is possibly the closest product in its pore structure and mode of action. But then I learned that other monolith products are available from a Thermo Fisher Scientific acquisition company known as Dionex.

So there you have it. Slovenia is a wonderful place to visit where many of the people speak several languages, including English, and the costs for hotels and food are quite reasonable. In addition, it has beautiful mountains and the Adriatic within easy driving distance from any part of the country, and a culture with a great work ethic and history that is very accommodating to visitors. We'll definitely return to Slovenia and, I hope to stay even longer.



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