

Past President's Message



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I trust that the year has begun favourably for you all, and that your plans are going well for attending IPS 2008 in Chicago in June. It's going to be a great conference! Can it really be almost two years since IPS 2006 in Melbourne?

In the previous issue, I mentioned my visit in October 2007 to the observatory at Pulkovo, near St Petersburg in Russia. Of course, this is an observatory, not a planetarium, but whenever I visit such places it makes me realise even more how our profession does not just involve what we do under the dome: we are communicators of astronomy, and bringing the excitement of what happens at the world's observatories to our audiences is greatly enhanced by visiting such places.

Mikhail Propenko from the St. Petersburg Planetarium kindly organised my visit there, and we were assisted by Mikhail's wife Yulia, whose interpretation skills are excellent (although Mikhail's English also is good!

It was well worth looking around Pulkovo. It was established in 1839 by Friedrich George Wilhelm von Struve (1793-1864), also simply known as Wilhelm Struve, a German whose name is famous in astronomy. Struve had

been director of the Dorpat Observatory in Estonia from 1817, but from 1834 onwards he became involved in the construction of the Pulkovo Observatory, and was its director until 1862 when his son, Otto Struve, took over that position.

I felt a degree of sadness while walking around Pulkovo. The observatory was destroyed by the Germans during World War II, and its museum display includes dramatic photographs and drawings of the ruins. There is even a section of the observatory's roof containing a multitude of holes created by shrapnel. Fortunately, the objectives of its two early refractors—the 76-cm and Struve's original 38-cm—had been removed prior to the bombing and were saved from destruction.

What exists on the site today is, therefore, an observatory reconstructed since the war. The largest instrument on the site is a 65-cm refractor, which is still in use.

The main building contains a meridian line running right through its centre. This meridian was formerly the standard meridian for Russia.

From a distance, Pulkovo looks impressive. Unfortunately, however, there are signs of a lack of funding for proper maintenance, and Pulkovo astronomers would agree. Today, Pulkovo's domes appear a little "tired," and appear to need some sprucing up.

However, Pulkovo is still an active observatory in the sense that there are several research programmes, and the enthusiasm of the staff is very much still present. I was also taken to the observatory's radio astronomy site, a few hundred metres from the main op-



The gravestone of F. G. W. Struve, the first director of Pulkovo.

tical observatory buildings. There, one finds a radio dish that is not in use, and an interesting array of radio reflectors that operates as a transit instrument for observing the sun at a range of wavelengths from 4 cm to 21 cm.

All in all, it was a wonderful visit!

Next: England, Greece

Following my visit to Russia, I made a brief trip to England to speak at the presentation—by Sir Martin Rees, Astronomer Royal—of the 2007 Grote Reber Medal to Professor Govind Swarup of India.

After my England visit, I was off to Greece for a most interesting conference: the IAU-organised conference titled "Communicating Astronomy to the Public."

There were over 200 people at the conference, including several IPS members. It was held at the Eugenides Planetarium in Athens, which is directed by our colleague Dennis Simopoulos. It all went splendidly and there were very many speakers covering a broad range of subjects related to the communication of astronomy. Particular emphasis was, of course, placed on the upcoming Internation-



One of the domes of the Pulkovo Observatory. All photos by Martin George, unless noted.

al Year of Astronomy in 2009 and there were special sessions relating to this topic. Catherine Cesarsky, IAU president, was in attendance throughout the conference.

While all the presenters were excellent, several talks stood out to me. As just a few examples, Kevin Govender's presentations on communicating astronomy in South Africa served as an excellent illustration of the state of astronomy in Africa and the connections between astronomy and the African people; former IPS President Jim Manning gave a most interesting presentation on the activities of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, of which he is now the chief executive officer; Janice Harvey and Antonienta Garcia spoke about the AURA-GEMINI observatories in Hawaii and Chile, respectively; and David Malin gave an excellent presentation titled "The Importance of the Public Talk."

The conference included a visit to the Athens Observatory, not far from the centre of Athens, which was established in 1842. The original 1842 building now houses a most interesting museum, still under development, of astronomical and timekeeping equipment and literature. This building originally housed a 16 cm refractor. The other building houses a 40-cm refractor built in 1902 and which is still in use for public demonstrations.

The Athens Observatory is located not far from the Acropolis and has a fine view of it; as the twilight set in, conference delegates were found to be crowding in front of the observatory to photograph the superb scene with the buildings of the Acropolis lit up.

Today, the Athens Observatory is part of the Institute of Astronomy and Astrophysics of the National Observatory of Athens. Outside Athens, the observatory also has a 62.5-cm refractor at the site known as Penteli and a 1.2-m Cassegrain at Kryoneri in the Peloponnese.

On my way home, I made a brief stopover in the USA to visit Santa Barbara, near Los Angeles, which has a planetarium in its Natural Science Museum that I visited on a previous trip. This time around, I was invited to speak at a public evening at the Westmont College, an impressive educational facility with a fine 50-cm telescope. The subject of my talk was astronomy in Australia, and following this was a public astronomy night for which several local amateurs also brought along their instruments. I'd like to express my great thanks to Michael Sommerman from Westmont College for extending such a welcome to me and for the opportunity to also promote the IPS and the planetarium world in general.

A New Facility in Macau

November saw me make a brief trip to Hong Kong, mainly in order to visit Macau and meet up with the staff of the Macau Science



The author with Mr Chee-kuen Yip at the offices of the Macau Science Centre. Photo: Hong Pan Sio



An IYA 2009 session at the conference in Greece, with IAU President Catherine Cesarsky as the chair.

Centre, which will incorporate a planetarium. In particular, I spent time with Mr. Chee-Kuen Yip, with whom I had been in contact for some time in order to follow developments there. Their science centre and planetarium are still in planning and will form an exciting complex not far from the centre of the city. It is being built on reclaimed land. The main building will be of an innovative cone-shaped design and will contain a central atrium with science exhibits around its exterior.

The planetarium, Macau's first, will be in a building separate from the main science centre and adjacent to a new conference centre, and will have an impressive dome visible from a great distance.

I was pleased to be able to give two talks to the staff: one about the IPS, and another titled "Planetariums of the World."

Our discussions continued over a delight-

ful lunch not far from the current offices of the planetarium staff. I am very grateful to Mr. Yip and all of the staff for their assistance, and look forward to visiting them again in the not-too-distant future!

After my visit to Macau, I made a point of visiting the Hong Kong Space Museum, which houses the Hong Kong Planetarium. It's always a great pleasure to visit this most impressive facility, which is located near the southern tip of the Kowloon Peninsula, immediately opposite the famous (and very high class) Peninsula Hotel. My time there was made most enjoyable by Mr. Ki-Hung Chan, the curator of exhibits, who kindly showed me around. An exciting future development for Hong Kong is a new observatory complex in the eastern part of Kowloon, which is currently in planning. I hope that on my next trip to Hong Kong I shall be able to make a visit to the site. ☆