

Siem Reap, Cambodia

January 2015

Spring Bee Epistle 2015

For those of you who aren't on the adventures of bee boy list here's a brief rundown on my winter sojourns – I plan on being back in Fairbanks about the 1st of March as I have a presentation on “Overwintering honey bees in the Interior” to give at the Sustainable Agriculture Conference (Google this for more info) being held at the Westmark (I think) from March 3-5. I'll be answering my phone, checking the mail and hoping the house didn't freeze up (and my truck starts).

Greece - wonderful food, good wine and a conference on “The History of Beekeeping in the Med”. In keeping with the theme of the conference I traveled to several of the islands in the Cyclades group checking out the last remnants of traditional Greek beekeeping. The indigenous bee (*Apis mellifera cercropia*) was pretty much wiped out by the Varroa mite in the late 70's (no resistance) since that time they've been supplanted by *A.m. macedonica* (some of the Macedonian genes are reputedly in our “Russian” bees) and several other races, basically mongrelizing the bees with foreign imports- this is happening all over the world. There are a few die-hards (perhaps I should use the term “traditionalists” as they're not stubborn, they just want to keep the culture alive) who have eschewed the Langstroth box and keep them in traditional clay pots but not many. I was fortunate enough to go along with some other bee geeks to see the old ways and sample some of the famous Greek thyme honey. The Cyclades Islands are pretty bleak, wild thyme being their major honey source.



Traditional hive on Andros



Syros, the conference venue



A “selfie” with Erica verticilata a fall honey source in the background.

Turkey (now early November) - after a month of ferry hopping through the Aegean Islands, trekking in Crete (best food on the trip), moaning about the heat (80°F), visiting the ancient Minoan city of Knossos and visiting museums, I found myself in Fethiye (took me as long to learn how to spell it as it did to find it on a map), Turkey a few days before the “4th Annual Pine Honey & 20th Annual ApiSlava Honey Conference” I had to spend 4-5 days in cheap digs so I could afford the conference- everything was included so I gained back all of the kilos I’d lost trekking in the heat. Other than jumping off a 6,000 foot mountain (with a paraglider and a pilot), enjoying the “warm” Mediterranean sun (everybody was winging when it got to 75°) and enjoying Turkish coffee there were two Turkish delights – one was a chance to see Pine Honey production (I’m writing an article for American Bee Journal) and the other is what I’m calling the “barrel hive”. I was completely awestruck by this hive- it produces (if the bees are willing) round combs about 9” across which, when full, weigh 1.3 KG (about 2.86 pounds). If you’re handy with a table saw and figuring out how to cut the proper angle on the proper number of boards (when I try I’m using 2X4’s) you can go to the web site (kovansan.com.tr) or send me an email and I’ll send some more photos. They are about \$60 in Turkey so you can either pop over and buy some or get ready for shipping rate-reality.



I can't wait to try to
off a mountain again!



build one or jump

Now it's on to **Tanzania** (plane rides get VERY long) where it was Apimondia 1st African Bee Conference (brought my bee veil but still haven't used it) and an insight into the confused spectrum of beekeeping in Africa. It was entertaining; the traditional tree-hanging bark hives versus the "we need to modernize" crowd. All I came away with after 3 days of confusion was some good Italian friends, a confirmation that African food is terrible (further reinforced by eating experiences in Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Egypt), and some new insights into stingless beekeeping- African style (my previous experience is in India and SE Asia). I set foot at the base of Mt. Kilimanjaro, got a clever t-shirt advertising local Kilimanjaro beer (if you can't climb it- drink it) and thoroughly enjoyed all the conference schmoozing.



No, I never saw any animals but did get some cool t-shirts.

I'd lined up some volunteer work in **Myanmar** (Burma) with the USAID Farmer to Farmer (F2F) program so it was another long plane ride from Tanzania to Doha to Bangkok then on to Yangon. I've been going to Myanmar for 15 years doing bee stuff –I've seen a lot of changes but, as the French say "Plus ça change, plus ils restent le même chose (the more things change the more they stay the same)". They still extract sugar water from the wussie 4-7 frames in the brood nest and call it honey (23-25% moisture level), their colonies are weak (4-5 frames covered by bees), dump Chinese-labeled chemicals in the hive which they have no idea what they are or even if they are needed, and leaving the drums of honey out in

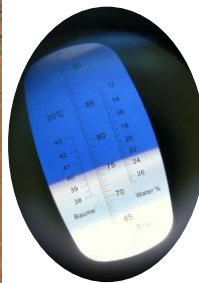
the baking sun where temps push 100° F. Oh well, at least there was air-con in my hotel room. I gave spiels on “bees make honey, boxes don’t”, Integrated Pest Management (IPM), and honey quality control but it hasn’t changed in 15 years; why start now? I still love the place and the people.



Above- 40-50 colonies are plopped down alongside the road (if it was Africa they'd be gone in the morning); their pollen traps consist of an entrance grid (5mm) which scrapes off the pollen, it rolls down the porch, drops to the fertilizer bag on the ground (which is wet from morning dew) and is collected “sometimes”. These colonies were all starving and didn’t need the added stress of pollen collection! Below- How NOT to do bees; all of the frames from the brood nest are shaken free of bees, brought to a central extracting point, spun in a hand-crank (“we extract high moisture honey because only a few larvae spin out when it is real liquid”)



22.7%
moisture!

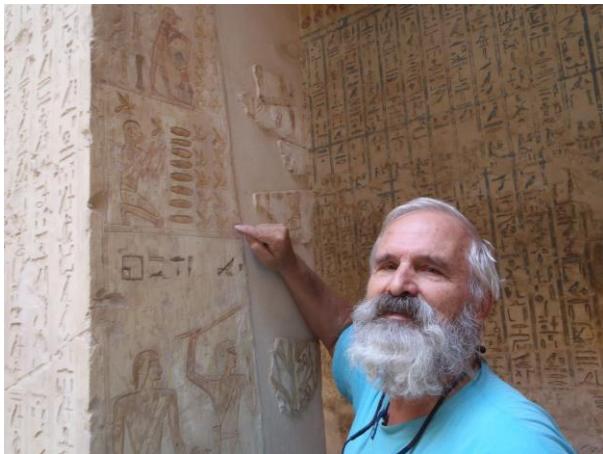


	Date	Batch	Time		Temp (°C)	Wear Coat %	Task	Raw Qty (Drams)	Responsible By	Remark
			Loading	Unloading						
Night	10.12.14	1	3:20	6:15	41.7	19.2	1	9		22.2%
		2	7:10	10:00	41.7	18.8	1	9		22.6%
Day + Night	11.12.14	3	11:00	2:00	41.7	18.8	1	8		22.3%
		4	3:00	5:30	41.7	18.9	1	8		22.8%
		5	6:15	9:00	41.7	19.2	1	8		22.6%
		6	9:45	12:00	41.7	19.1	1	8		22.6%
		7	1:00	4:00	41.7	19.3	1	8		22.6%
		8	5:00	7:30	41.7	18.9	1	5		22.6%

Never let the honey exceed 40°C!! – Right drums sit in the sun swelling from fermentation. HMF is going through the roof!



Wringing my hands and pulling out tufts of what little hair remains I boarded a flight for Cairo, **Egypt**. Same song, second verse, accompanied by the morning call to prayer at 0500- no sleeping in on this job! Egyptians (and beekeepers in general) are prone to equate the number of colonies with beekeeping acumen. NOT! One of my spiels is “bees make honey, boxes don’t” it holds true for Alaska, Egypt, Burma- all over the world. You must have STRONG colonies to garner a honey crop (weather and other variables are in the mix too). To me beekeeping is defined as the ability to manage a colony of bees to obtain the maximum adult foraging population at the beginning of the nectar flow or pollination requirements. Learning what a strong colony of honey bees looks like is perhaps the number one thing to be gained from observation and experience. I’m supposed to be going back in mid-February for some more training but as always I’ll believe it when they send the plane ticket. What’s Egypt without the pyramids and a few tombs? Perhaps only bee geeks can understand my passion to see the Tomb of Pabasa with its 3,000 year old hieroglyphics depicting BK in the old days and then see the same style from a contemporary BK who has 1,000 mud hives with the local *Apis mellifera lamarckii* – be still my beating heart!



Right – the ancient Egyptians shaved their heads so the bees wouldn’t tangle in their hair; I grew a beard so I’d fit in in the Middle East – Osama Bee Laden?

Then there is drifting across the Nile Valley and the Valley of the Kings in a hot-air balloon, the compulsory camel ride at the pyramids, and overcrowded apiaries in which there was barely room to turn around- just as bad as the traffic in Cairo.



Hot-air balloons at sunrise Valley of the Kings, and an old dried up beekeeper whose smoker went out. Below camels are nasty brutes, and they slobber like you wouldn't believe; below left barely room to turn around.

Among the other attachments are the 2015 price list (not changed much) and the order form – please use it; it's a giant pain to get a check that just says “bees” in the memo line- need to know queen type, size package and preferred arrival date.



SEE YOU IN MARCH! Stephen

