

Cost of attending the Ljubljana Conference

by Alistair Reeves, with thanks to Mary Smith, Almudena Pardo, Neil Fisher, Diana Raffelsbauer and Ingrid Edsman

'Ljubla...where?' was in the minds of many of those who came to the most recent EMWA Conference in Ljubljana. It may be a little off the beaten conference track (which doesn't necessarily mean that it was expensive to get to, as we shall see), but after making the effort, I hope all those who attended were as charmed by Ljubljana and Slovenia as I have been over the past 10 years. Our five freelance cost-trackers from different countries were obviously pleased to have visited Ljubljana and Slovenia, although their opinions on whether the conference offered value for money differ. Here they tell us about what they spent to attend the conference.

All agree that EMWA events should not be missed because of the valuable content of the high quality educational programme; themed seminars; plenary lectures; other professional development events; and the unique networking possibilities. But they do have some interesting suggestions for reducing costs—and not only for freelancers. As for the London conference, some considered the registration fee is too high, but most felt that the workshop fees offered good value.

Their expenditure is summarised in Table 1 and excludes 'lost work' costs, because opinions are divided: some colleagues do not regard the time spent at training events as 'lost' and say it is calculated into their rates (like holiday), while others cannot help thinking about what they might have been earning had they not attended!



Mary Smith, England

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My journey started at the 27th EMWA conference held in London in November 2008. As I live in West London, only 4 tube stops from the venue in Kensington, how could I not attend? I paid for attendance, EPDP enrolment, and 3 workshops, and thought no more about it. Little did I realise that I would become hooked and find myself attending conferences much farther afield.

As a freelance editor and writer, I have to pay my own costs. This was fine for the London conference, where my greatest expense after the conference fees was my tube fare to the venue, but was somewhat different for Ljubljana.

My first step was to find the cheapest flight—not British

Airways but EasyJet, not Heathrow (my 'local' airport) but Stansted. This may have been a false economy, as I hadn't factored in the additional costs of travel to the airport, placing a bag into the hold, and excess baggage on the return journey (yes, I went shopping).

As I couldn't justify the cost of staying at the conference hotel, despite the preferential rate, my next step was to source a hotel. My requirements were for a cheap and cheerful hotel with clean rooms in a central location. Having spent a large part of my misspent youth roaming around Asia, I am used to finding the best value options. My preferred source of travel information, Lonely Planet, came up trumps with Hotel Emonec, which did exactly what it said on the tin. Situated just off Presernov trg, the hotel couldn't have been more convenient for the conference venue, or for sightseeing (and shopping) when not attending workshops.

Food was largely taken care of with breakfast at the hotel and lunch at the conference venue. Dinner was easy to find and relatively cheap at the cafes by the river.

Even with these savings, it was an expensive trip, particularly with the £/€ exchange rate this year.

Do I think it was worth the cost, even taking into account lost earnings? The answer has to be 'Yes'. To have continuing professional development resulting in certification, while meeting some great people and staying in a beautiful city is not to be sneezed at. The workshops were all excellent, well thought out, and well presented. I learned a lot and enjoyed myself.

That said, the EPDP is an expensive exercise due to the amount of conference attendance needed to earn the certificate, and I have now realised the true cost of the programme. I attended 3 workshops at the London conference and 4 workshops in Ljubljana (the maximum for each conference). This means that, assuming all goes well with the post-workshop assignments, I will only need 1 more workshop credit from the next conference. It will be an expensive workshop, unless I decide to re-enrol in the EPDP, in which case the cycle of conference attendance, with the associated expenses, starts all over again. Perhaps the Education Committee could look at this issue so that those of us who pay for ourselves can complete the programme across 2 consecutive conferences, thus providing better value for our money.

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I have started to save for the next meeting, although having just tallied the cost of attending the Ljubljana conference, I may have to wait for another one in London. As you will see from the attached photograph, I have been on short rations since my return!



Almudena Pardo, Spain

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I am a freelance medical writer, with a focus on manuscripts, based in Madrid. This was my second EMWA annual conference. I do think registration is very expensive at €550. It includes the opening lecture and welcome buffet, neither of which I attended, and brunch for the days of the conference, in which, again, I was not interested. A ‘no-meal’ option could be offered to provide a better price for people who, like me, are only interested in the workshops. Thus, if I was going to spend all that money, there had to be some ‘extra appeal’ to attend. I searched Ljubljana on the Internet and it looked like a beautiful city in a “mysterious” country (at least from my point of view) and not too touristy; the perfect vacation spot for my husband and me. Therefore, I took the conference as a chance to get to know this new and interesting place. I am enrolled on the advanced EMWA Professional Development Programme (EPDP), which requires credit for any eight advanced workshops to obtain the EPDP certificate. One can only take four of these workshops per conference and last year I only took three, since by the time I registered all others were full. Knowing that I would have to register for a third conference, this time I again took only three morning workshops to have the afternoons off, and one extra day to spend with my husband.

My trip started by taking the metro to Madrid airport and then a flight to Ljubljana via Prague. From Ljubljana airport I took a shuttle bus to the hotel. I did not stay at the conference hotel but at another very close by which, at €104 per night (including an incredibly huge and varied buffet breakfast) had the best cost-value rate I could find. This was a non-refundable rate, which was the same for one or two people. I ate lunch and dinner at different restaurants in the city, which I enjoyed very much. Since dinner was the only meal I actually ought to have been paying for, I have to say it was not expensive at €12–15. I tried to book the EMWA excursion, which included dinner, to the Postojna caves but ‘fortunately’ it was already full. Instead, I ended up taking the regular bus from Ljubljana bus station to Postojna (€6 each way) and from there, I had only a short walk to the caves (entrance ticket €20). The bus ride was beautiful and it was exciting to go the “local” way, and the caves were very impressive; it would have been a shame not to visit them when in Ljubljana. Of course, having my husband there made all these things much more enjoyable.

Even though I complained about the registration fee, I do think that the cost-value of the workshops is about right. I learned something in all of them and was so into them that time flew by and they seemed really short. The pre-workshop assignments not only ensured that I prepared properly for the workshops, but were also a way to start learning on the corresponding subject, and I’m sure that the post-workshop assignments will help me to use and retain what I learned. I attended the Mediterranean Editors and Translators Association 2007 Meeting in Madrid, and although it was much more reasonably priced, for the most part, the workshops suited editors’ and translators’ needs and not those of writers (except for one statistics workshop similar to the one offered by EMWA). Overall, I find EMWA workshops more focused on what we writers do. As a conference venue, Ljubljana was probably convenient for company employees whose expenses are paid, but for freelancers it was a hard place to reach (not too many flights and none of them direct). However, I found a good compromise by making it a vacation spot as well.



Neil Fisher, England

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“You’re always like this after a conference,” my wife said after I’d been yapping happily to her for an hour. “You always come back buzzing!”

And it’s true. I’ve been going to EMWA conferences on and off—I’ll get back to that later—since 1996, and at every one I’ve learned a lot, met great people and loved the social events. For me, as I suspect for most freelancers, EMWA conferences have clear therapeutic benefit. Don’t get me wrong! I enjoy my work, which is frequently stimulating and rewarding, and for me the benefits of freelancing far outweigh the drawbacks; but deadlines are often tight, the days long and weekends short, there’s no career progression as such, and no-one to chat to at the water cooler. In most cases we don’t have a water cooler either.

EMWA is the clear antidote. Most obviously, the training program can help us expand what we do or point our careers in new directions, but the conference itself provides more: a supportive network of enthusiastic and knowledgeable peers you learn from, share experiences with, and make you proud to be a medical writer. How do you put a price on that?

My journey to this year’s spring conference started in London, with the cheapest air option, from Stansted, UK: unassigned seating and non-reclining seats, but I figured that I could cope with that for a short flight. I booked a minivan shuttle from my home in west London, the most convenient option, and arrived at Stansted in plenty of time. What I had overlooked, and this may get some heads nodding, is that the airline I used charges extra for

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checked-in luggage. This increased the cost of my return flight by around 20%. Nevertheless—including the costs of a minivan shuttle from Ljubljana airport to my hotel and back, and the return train to central London from Stansted—what I spent on transport was very reasonable and a relatively small fraction of what I spent overall.

For accommodation I stayed at the less expensive branch of the conference hotel. The advantages in using conference accommodation, of course, are that you are close to the meeting and likely to meet other writers. At the Vienna conference I stayed at a cheap place 20 minutes' march from the venue and felt rather cut off from the herd; but a four-star hotel is certainly a luxury for me and took a considerable bite out of my wallet this time round. When I booked the Ljubljana conference I was working 12-hour days and didn't have the time to scavenge lunch let alone research Slovenian hotels. I am sure that many freelancers would appreciate being offered the choice of discounted rates at a cheaper hotel in future. For the next conference, though, I'll make sure I'm organised well ahead of time. I will miss the four-star breakfasts though...

Accommodation, however, was only half the cost of the training I booked. Workshops are the *raison d'être* of EMWA conferences, and I figured that since I was going I may as well attend as many as possible. As usual, they varied in quality from excellent to outstanding; all were delivered with enthusiasm and passion—but are they good value? To decide that, I need to make some sort of comparison. The closest competitor to EMWA, in terms of training, is the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA). There are certainly all kinds of confounders, but at last year's AMWA annual conference (held in October in Louisville, Kentucky), the cost of a workshop was in the approximate range of €39 to €84. This was substantially cheaper than seminars and workshops at EMWA this year, which ranged from €50 to €210. AMWA registration costs were also less than half EMWA's (€259 vs. €600 for regular member rates).

There are all kinds of problems with a comparison like this. Here are just a few. It may be unfair to compare US and European costs. I haven't been to an AMWA workshop, so I've no experience of their quality (although I have been told that they are good), and have no idea if AMWA workshops provide for non-native English speakers, European guidelines, and so on¹. I would also add that even though flights to the States are fairly reasonable at the moment it's still a long haul for just three days of workshops. However, if we are simply comparing workshop and registration costs, I would have to conclude that AMWA are providing better value. That, together with the lack of a more affordable hotel option, led me to decide, if only to play devil's advocate, that EMWA conferences don't provide value for money.

As an independent delegate, money, or the shortage of it, was the main reason why I didn't attend EMWA between the Henley conference in 1999 and Vienna in 2007. The costs, not forgetting lost earnings, are considerable. This raises all kinds of questions of how—or if—EMWA could be made cheaper. Although this is not the place to discuss them, I will mention that last year I attended a one-day workshop on publication planning, organised by NetworkPharma, which cost me exactly nothing. This was managed through sponsorship.

However, as I said before, an EMWA conference isn't just about the training, it's also the interaction with other medical writers during workshops, over lunch, and at the excellent and value-for-money social events. It's the networking opportunities with potential collaborators and clients. It's the reconnection with fellow freelancers, the meeting with friends, the infectious enthusiasm you pick up from the atmosphere around you—and you simply can't put a value on that.

See you in Frankfurt!



**Diana Raffelsbauer,
Germany**

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I am in the third year of my freelance medical writer career, and this was my second EMWA conference. I live in a small town called Giebelstadt in Northern Bavaria, Germany, not far from Frankfurt am Main. The German railway (DB) offers very cheap

train tickets to certain European countries. After having compared the price of the 'DB Europa-Spezial Slowenien Ticket' (€78 for the round trip) with a Lufthansa flight (approx. €700), I decided to go by train.

I took the night train from Würzburg to Ljubljana, which allowed me to save two nights at the hotel. I usually fly to meetings and had never travelled on a night train in my life, so I was very excited about this new experience. As the train got stuck 100 km away from Ljubljana for 4 hours, I enjoyed some extra hours of sleep. I also slept away the two-hour delay on the trip back, and woke up right near Munich.

I did not stay at the conference hotel. By booking a single room for two nights at a three-star hotel, I not only saved €80 per night, but also used the 15-minute walk for additional sightseeing along the beautiful river promenade. I went on the guided walking tour and had dinner in the Poet Presern room at the Restaurant Sestica. However, I resisted the temptation of the banquet: "Why spend money to 'see'

¹ AR: AMWA Workshops have a pre-workshop assignment, but no post-workshop assignment. The accent is clearly on the needs of those working in North America. Advanced workshops are open only to those who have earned AMWA core certificates or have a minimum of 5 years of experience in the topic covered by the workshop (parallel foundation and advanced certification is possible with EMWA). Each AMWA registrant may take a maximum of 3 credit workshops per conference, 2 of which can be advanced workshops (with EMWA, 4 can be taken per conference, with no restriction on the type).

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Table 1 Cost of attending 28th EMWA Conference, Ljubljana, Slovenia, May 2009

Cost item	€ ^a									
	Mary		Almudena		Neil		Diana		Ingrid	
	England		Spain		England		Germany		Sweden	
Travel	Taxi/train to + from Stansted airport, flight, taxi share to LJ, taxi from LJ, hold luggage charge	370	Subway to + from Madrid airport, flight, shuttle to and from LJ airport	290	Shuttle to Stansted airport, flight, shuttle to + from LJ, hold luggage charge, train home	260	Train to + from LJ, couchette, taxi in LJ	125	Bus to + from Stockholm airport, flight, taxi to + from LJ airport	400
Accommodation	Not CH, 4 nights	255	Not CH, 4 nights	420	CHL, 4 nights	450	Not CH, 2 nights	150	CH, 4 nights	625
Conference and workshops ^b	4 F	1090	3 A	1180	4 F, 2 A	1420	4 F (1 UA)	1045	4 A, 3 S	1620
Meals and refreshments	Did not attend CB	85	Did not attend CB	80	Attended CB	120	Did not attend CB	30	Attended CB	110
Social events	None	0	None	0	2 events	80	2 events	45	2 events	145
Total	1800		1970		2330		1395		2900	

^a Amounts are rounded to the nearest €5.^b Includes the registration fee of €550 paid by all.

LJ = Ljubljana; CH = conference hotel; CHL = less expensive branch of conference hotel; F = foundation; A = advanced; UA = under assessment; S = seminar; CB = conference banquet

all those delicious dishes that you are not allowed to eat while you are on a diet?", I thought.

I spent three days (May 27–29) in Ljubljana and attended four workshops. Three of them were very good, but the fourth was rather disappointing. I raised my 'yes/no' cards during the annual general meeting, although I unfortunately did not have the time to read the last report with the attention it deserved. I attended the freelance business forum led by Alistair Reeves and Sam Hamilton, where some new ideas on how to better achieve our goals as freelancers were suggested. All in all, I spent approx. €1,400 on the conference. If I had taken the Lufthansa flight and had stayed at the conference hotel for 3 days, I would have paid approx. €2,300, which is a high sum for freelancers.

Does EMWA offer good value for money? I think the registration fee is high, but the price for foundation workshops is reasonable, for instance in comparison with offers from a private academy in Germany that charges €800 for one workshop of 8 hours. The EMWA conference offers a unique opportunity to meet freelance medical writers from all over Europe and overseas, to establish new contacts with potential clients from the pharmaceutical industry and the contract research organisation environment, and to build your own network. For these reasons, as well as for the high-quality training offered, it is beyond doubt worth attending. Therefore, I look forward to continuing to widen my network in November 2009 in Frankfurt, where I intend to complete the credits required for obtaining my foundation EPDP certificate.

**Ingrid Edsman, Sweden**

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My conference expense account started ticking on January 30 when the spring conference registration opened. Since I started attending EMWA conferences in 2007, I've opted for an all-inclusive approach and I decided to follow that approach for the Ljubljana meeting as well. That meant registering for four workshops, three seminars and three social events with the choice of workshops based on interest rather than credits, even though I'm aiming for a certificate. The workshops that particularly appealed to me at this conference were all on the advanced level, so I incurred the maximum workshop cost. I also signed up for a number of free-of-charge events: the Annual General Meeting, the Freelance Business Forum, plenary lectures, and the Welcome Buffet. A full educational and social schedule indeed!

In early February, I made arrangements for transportation and accommodation. I booked a reasonably priced air ticket on the Internet and for convenience I decided to stay at the conference hotel. I had e-mail correspondence with the hotel and booked a room at the Grand Union Executive. I also arranged for a taxi pick-up at Brnik Airport. After all these registrations and reservations, my bank account was slightly strained, but it recovered after a couple of transfer payments. With such an extensive schedule, at least I knew

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that I wouldn't have the time to spend more money in Ljubljana.

March and April passed. In May I busied myself with the pre-workshop assignments. On May 26, I boarded the airport coach, which stops one block from where I live, and at Arlanda airport I got on a direct flight to Ljubljana. Once there I had five wonderful and intense days at the conference with interesting workshops and seminars, enjoyable social activities, stimulating meetings with old and new friends and colleagues, some minor food shopping at the market (I managed to squeeze it in!), and all this in a lovely and picturesque setting.

I think EMWA combines the best of two worlds: training tailored to the needs of medical writers and great networking opportunities. With this in mind and considering comparable educational costs in Sweden (between €400 and €900 a day), I definitely think that the spring conference offered good value for money. It certainly made an imprint on my bank account, but I got 'bang for the buck'! I'll be going to EMWA events in the future and, my financial situation permitting, I'll continue on the all-inclusive track. As I am an early planner, I'm eagerly awaiting the information about the autumn conference in Frankfurt. See you there!

Suggestions for cost reduction that the EC might consider

- A 'no reception, no meal' option to keep registration costs down.
- Relaxation of the rules for the EPDP certificates so that they can be completed in a shorter time.
- Negotiation of cheaper conference rates at cheaper hotels than the conference hotel.
- Sponsorship of workshops.

Alistair Reeves

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Confused about open access?

Peter Suber has just published an informative article titled 'A field guide to misunderstandings about open access'¹ in which he sets out and explains 25 misunderstandings about open access. One of the most common misunderstandings even has a name 'gold fever': to overlook green open access, which is open access through repositories. Gold open access is open access through journals, regardless of the journal's business model. Other misunderstandings relate to a view that top quality research is not published in open access journals or that they skimp on the peer review process or that all open access journals charge publication fees.

1 <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/04-02-09.htm>

From ghostwriters to ghost journals

Testimony given in an action brought by a patient against Merck in Australia revealed that Merck had paid Elsevier to print several issues of a journal which they titled *The Australasian Journal of Bone and Joint Medicine*. The journal, which was apparently produced for advertising purposes, contained articles favourable to Merck products and closely resembled a peer review journal. Its pages contained no indication of its association with Merck (*The Scientist* News Blog at <http://www.the-scientist.com/blog/print/55671/>).

Following an internal review Elsevier has announced its intention to provide guidelines for its pharmaceutical services divisions when producing reprints, article compilations or custom publications on behalf of pharmaceutical companies.

Conflicts of interests

Conflicts of interest have been in the news over recent months. The nosiest of the news has doubtless been *JAMA*'s run in with Jonathan Leo [1] who wrote a letter to the *BMJ* [2] about an undisclosed financial conflict and omission in a paper published in *JAMA* to state that psychosocial intervention was as effective as taking the drug. The somewhat unfriendly reaction from *JAMA* followed by the edict that those who raise such issues with the journal's editors in future are to keep mum until the journal has completed its own investigations [3] have for some been hard to reconcile with its reputation as a flagship of publication ethics.

Then there was the case that questioned intellectual conflicts of interest. If you make an independent analysis of a drug does this mean that you have an intellectual bias that precludes you from sitting on an advisory panel for the FDA? This was the point raised by Lilly when they telephoned the FDA. Days later Sanjay Kaul was told by the FDA that his invitation to sit on a panel to discuss Lilly's drug prasugrel had been rescinded. Heartwire has published a roundup of these cases and asked various opinion leaders for their views [4]. The conclusion that Heartwire came to was that although hardworking physicians and researchers are drowning in conflict of interest paperwork the only way forward is ever-more disclosure.

1. For Jonathan Leo's perspective see http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/leo_statement_for_WSJ.htm
2. For the *BMJ*'s perspective see Hopkins Tanen J. *JAMA*'s new rule on whistleblowers' silence during investigation creates controversy. 2009;338:790
3. For *JAMA*'s perspective see http://jama.ama-assn.org/misc/jed90012pap_E1_E3.pdf
4. <http://www.theheart.org/article/963203.do>