

An extraordinary meeting of minds

Planetary scientists from both sides of the Atlantic met in France to talk about worlds near and far. But this was no ordinary congress, as **James Lancaster** discovered...

Nantes, recently cited by Time magazine as ‘the best place to live in Europe’, must have felt like the centre of the universe when the world’s leading planetologists convened in the city for the 1st EPSC-DPS Joint Meeting – a unique collaboration between the European Planetology Network (EPN) and the Division for Planetary Sciences (DPS) of the American Astronomical Society.

France’s sixth largest city became the staging post for an exploration of life’s big questions by those scientists tasked with explaining how planets come into existence and what sustains them. It is a multi-disciplinary science and the topics

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discussed were varied and multitudinous.

Although based in Washington, DPS decided to hold its 2011 congress in Europe (20 per cent of its members hail from outside North America). Meanwhile the EU-funded EPN – having held its first four planetary science congresses in Germany – had begun

to venture further afield, staging its latest meeting in Rome, Italy. When it became clear that both organisations’ stars would align in France – with just two weeks separating their events – the case for a meeting of minds became compelling.

Backed by their members, EPN and DPS decided to create a joint event, under the auspices of the Laboratory of Planetology and Geodynamics (LGP Nantes), at Nantes University. The five-day meeting, in October, was born out of initial discussions between the congress centre La Cité, a German professional congress organiser Copernicus and Nantes University, in February 2009. The talks were spearheaded by Olivier Grasset,

local project manager and deputy director of the Nantes Laboratory of Planetology and Geodynamics, who was to become the guiding star throughout proceedings.

So, what happens when two scientific bodies collide? In terms of numbers, the event was a resounding success. Organisers

had cautiously hoped for 800 delegates. In the end almost double that amount (1,535) turned up, with the biggest single delegation from America (550). What’s more, over 1,700 abstracts for oral presentations and posters were submitted for the meeting. But there were some key cultural differences that had to be overcome along the way.

Says Grasset: “Americans prefer plenary sessions, whereas Europeans prefer parallel sessions, so we were a little bit worried about that. We had to find a compromise, and flexibility was needed at all levels. On this matter, La Cité Nantes Events Center, and the planners, were marvellous.”

The result was a congress that felt distinctly interactive in style, boasting an extensive mix of talks, workshops and poster sessions which managed to cater for both preferences. The meeting covered the entire scope of the planetary sciences – from geophysics to space missions – in conference rooms named, inevitably perhaps, after the eight planets of the solar system (from the 800-capacity ‘Jupiter Auditorium’ to the more intimate 30-seat ‘Moon Room’).

This was not a typical congress on any level.

From the start it was decided that it was going to be a special meeting, one that involved the whole city, and all age groups, one that looked outwards rather than inwards. Organisers wanted EPSC-DPS 2011 to be about star gazing, not naval gazing. This

ary



Left A 12-metre tall elephant walks guests to dinner
Top and below Exhibits in the 'Planetary Voyages' exhibition



event was to fire the imagination.

To that end LGPNantes' scientific expertise, combined with the technical know-how of La Cité's production team, combined to create the 'Planetary Voyages' exhibition, which was open to the public and helped turn the congress centre into an 'ephemeral academy of sciences'.

Some 14,000 visitors, including 2,000 school-children, had the opportunity to meet experts in planetology, astronomy and science history. They were shown models of space probes and had the movement of robots on Mars explained to them. They were able to observe astronomical phenomena, the launch of micro-rockets, the inflatable planetarium and the CNES Spatiobus.

History and imaginary worlds were brought to life through old navigation instruments and artefacts relating to Jules Verne's futuristic work. There were also 24 conferences open to the public, thanks to the corporation of Nantes University, Nantes Métropole, the Pays de la Loire Regional Council, the Loire Atlantique County Council, the CNES (the national centre for space studies) and the CNRS (the national centre for scientific research). These boasted the presence of some of the world's top scientists, such as Jean-Loup

Chrétien, the first Western European to go into space in 1982.

But the best was saved for delegates to enjoy during a quite spectacular gala evening. After a cocktail party in the 'Machines de l'Île' gallery among giant marine creatures fashioned from wood and iron, a 12m-high elephant walked the delegates along the banks of the Loire river where dinner was served aboard the Nantilus.

"We got so many positive reviews," said Grasset, with barely concealed glee. "This huge elephant walked with us along the harbour! It's something the participants will never forget. Jim Green, director of the Planetary Science Division at NASA emailed me to say he would certainly be willing to come back for another joint meeting."

Mario Ebel, conference manager, at German PCO Copernicus, was full of praise for Nantes.

"It was a wonderful experience and a great pleasure for us to be in Nantes. The excellent support during the EPSC-DPS Joint Meeting 2011 was absolutely outstanding. The meeting would not have been such a great success without the excellent services delivered by La Cité. We would definitely be delighted to return to Nantes."

Where in the world...

(did the delegates come from)?

United States	555
France	302
Germany	168
United Kingdom	77
Italy	69
Japan	61
Spain	43
Belgium	33
Austria	26
Netherlands	26
Russian Federation	23
Switzerland	19
Finland	16
Canada	15
Portugal	12
Poland	10
China	9
Czech Republic	8
Brazil	6
Israel	6
Republic of Korea	6
Australia	5
Hungary	5
Slovakia	5
Sweden	5
Chile	4
Taiwan	3
Holy See (Vatican City State)	2
Puerto Rico	2
Uruguay	2
Argentina	1
Bulgaria	1
Colombia	1
Denmark	1
Romania	1
Greece	1
Mexico	1
Morocco	1
Norway	1
South Africa	1
Ukraine	1
United Arab Emirates	1