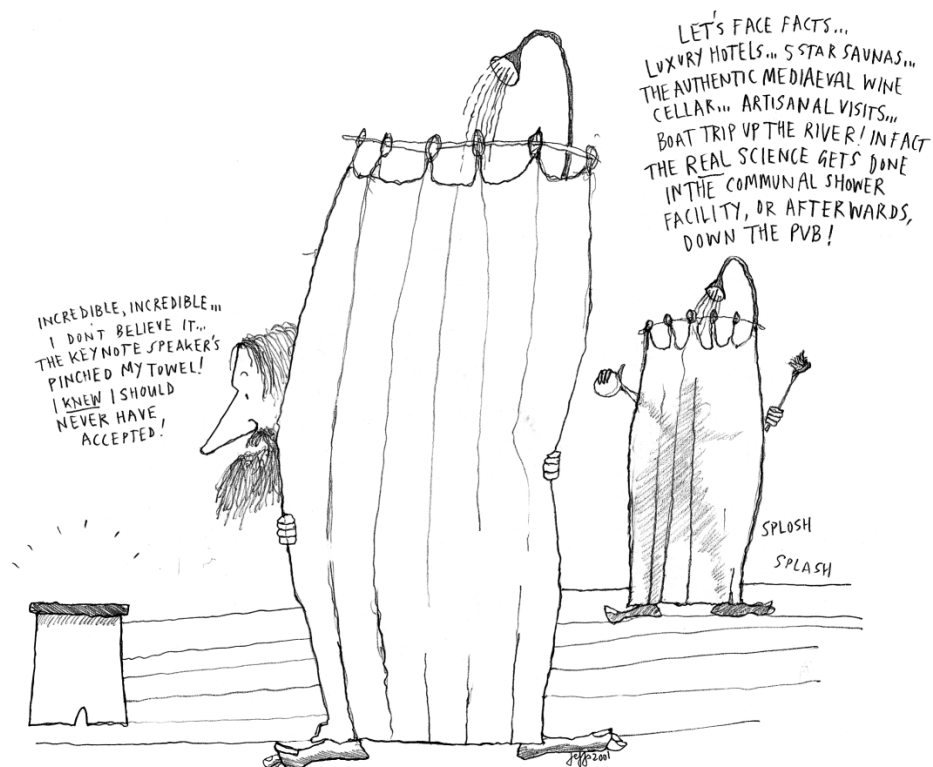


An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at **caveman@biologists.com**. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

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Location, location, location!

I recently received in the mail an invitation to a scientific meeting. If one assumes that the information for the meeting was ordered according to decreasing importance, the most important section was the first, which extolled my contributions to the field and the need for my attendance for the overall success of the meeting. Ah, flattery will get you everything, unless, as in my case, you are sure that the same template was used to address all the other invitees!

Second in importance, based on order, was the location of the meeting. And quite right too. The meeting was to be held in a small castle in a beautiful region of a central European country. The site offered, and I quote, "unparalleled vistas from individually appointed rooms overlooking the River XXXX, and 5 star dining in a medieval hall in which the nobility of Europe had once entertained each other". Furthermore, the organizers had made sure that there would be ample time for attendees to hike in the surrounding forest, travel down the river, and visit the

historic town that contained many artisan workshops and quaint restaurants. Oh, and facilities for tennis, swimming and croquet (croquet?) were also available. A veritable luxury spa.

The next item was a note that all expenses incurred by me in traveling to and from the castle, the registration fee, room and all meals (including the banquet on the final night, which would include a boar roasted over an open firepit) would be paid by the organizers. Also, I could bring a guest.

Hmm. An all-expenses-paid trip to Europe; I would stay in palatial surroundings and could bring my spouse for a vacation. Sounded like a good deal. I was hooked. Now, again, what was the purpose of the invitation?

Ah yes, a scientific meeting. I knew this because the next section of the letter briefly, and very briefly in comparison with the description of the location for the meeting, outlined the proposed scientific content of the meeting and mentioned a list of scientific nobility who had been invited (but not necessarily accepted). Could it be that the organizers worked out the location

first and were trying to build a meeting around it? Nah, surely that couldn't be.

But let's be honest. What would you do? Me? I was already hooked on the meeting before I got to the part about the scientific content. I could probably put up with any style, content and quality of talks in these surroundings. Who knows, I might miss a session or two because I was lost in the garden maze in the grounds of the castle (another 'facility' of the venue).

I faxed the acceptance form immediately with an assertive tick in the box marked 'Will Attend'.

Do other meeting locations have the same effect? In the vast majority of cases, the science is the hook and, because of the location of the meeting, the science had better be really good to offset the surroundings!

Popular, well at least traditional, are Gordon Research Conferences, located mainly in the north east of the US. With a few exceptions, the sites of these conferences are private boarding schools for the wealthy and delinquent. No

"individually appointed rooms overlooking a river" here. These are small cell-like rooms with up to four small beds made of springs covered by a thin mattress. Clearly, part of the Gordon Conference experience is sharing rooms, showers and bathrooms with complete strangers. The summers in this part of the US are hot and humid and are punctuated by cataclysmic thunderstorms. Armies of marauding insects patrol the school grounds, descending upon attendees as they leave the confines of the lecture room, which is often still adorned with the remnants of last year's school play. The food is bland at best - well, consider the normal clientele for the cooks. Here, the science better be damned good to make up for the miserable surroundings!

I have also stayed in university halls of residence while attending meetings in the UK and Europe. Some of these sites have the shabby elegance of Cambridge or Oxford, while others look like the inside of a prison cell or a concrete bomb shelter. All of these sites have one thing in common: the beds are usually quite short, perhaps evidence of the

stunted growth of students due to the lack of edible food.

Other meetings are held in hotels. This is the most uninteresting venue. With few exceptions, at least within the price range of most meetings, the hotels are the same; same furniture, same beds, same conference rooms, same uncomfortable chairs, same inner-city location (pizza and fast-food). I recall staying in a secluded hotel (four hours bus ride from the nearest city) where it rained non-stop for four days - talk about cabin fever! Here again, the science better be damned good!

So, for me, I tend to choose carefully which meetings to attend. I admit to going to some, but not all, that are located in interesting locations but also to attending the majority of meetings because of their scientific content.

Now, where is that guidebook to the area of Europe this up-coming meeting is located? Perhaps I should take an extra week and tour around the area and see the sights?

Caveman

Letters

JCS welcomes correspondence provoked by articles in all sections of the journal. Responses to articles in the Sticky Wicket section should be sent directly to Caveman (email: caveman@biologists.com). Correspondence relating to Research Articles, Commentaries and Cell Science at a Glance should be addressed to the Executive Editor and sent to

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