

# NA vs European Worldcons

By Stephen Cooper

This article only covers the differences I've seen between North American and European Worldcons, as despite my best efforts the only other Worldcon I've managed to be involved with, or attended, was ConZealand, and I cannot expect this to be typical. So, in this article, I'm concentrating on the differences between the North American and the European Worldcons I've been involved with or have attended.

## Practical Differences

There are several practical ways that European Worldcons differ from those in North America, and these are all due to differences with the sites available to us in Europe.

The first difference I need to point out is the cost of suitable venues in Europe (at least in Western Europe, where I have the numbers) and that is the cost of hiring the space, before any additional decorator or service costs are added.

As an example, the current space contracted by Glasgow 2024, for an Interaction sized event, is contracted at just over \$400,000, and represents 35% of the budgeted expenses and this will probably rise to well over \$500,000 if we have to cater for a Dublin 2019 sized Worldcon.

This is generally two to three times what a similar amount of space would cost in North America, and has two immediate ramifications on the Worldcon experience:

- **European Worldcons do not generally do volunteer and programme participant reimbursements** – Most North American Worldcons will budget to make reimbursements and will have a budget line for this that can be sacrificed if the post con balance falls below expectation. This adds \$150,000 to the budget on top of the contingency and means North American Worldcons budgets are usually not as constrained as those in Europe.
- **European Worldcons generally have higher membership rates** - Even with the elimination of reimbursements the added cost of the venue is still far from safeguarded against. As a result, after inflation, European Worldcon rates can be 10-15% higher than the average membership rates for a North American Worldcon.

The second difference between North American and European venues is their configuration. Worldcons are part of a very small set of events in Europe that need both large amounts of function rooms and large amounts of exhibition space. Most

large events in Europe either need large conference centres with minimal Exhibition space, or are large Exhibitions with little use for breakout rooms. As a result, the bulk of European convention centres are targeted at having one or the other, and not both.

In addition, European hotels are generally much smaller than those in North America and have fewer, smaller suites, spread across many more floors, making the traditional suite activities nearly impossible

As a result, most European venues are totally unsuitable for a Worldcon, and even those we can, and do, use, are usually limited in some aspect, so a Worldcon will find itself pushed for function rooms or exhibition space, or sometimes both, and will have to use alternatives to suites for many activities. These differences have their own ramifications on the Worldcon experience:

- **European Worldcons are never under one roof** – A European Worldcon will always find itself pushed for space and will invariably find itself splitting its activities across multiple venues. This might be spinning out some fringe events to other venues, as with Worldcon 75 in Helsinki, or having a second smaller venue for some core events, as with Interaction. It might even find itself needing to do both options as with Dublin 2019. This means European Worldcons need to programme taking the additional travel times into account.
- **Parties and other many other suite activities will not be in hotel suites** – A European Worldcon will often find that activities normally hosted in hotel suites have to be located in function rooms or exhibition space, either or both of which can be in short supply. This requires European Worldcons to be creative, which can lead to some fabulous innovations such as the Fan Village created by Loncon. But more frequently needs compromise, such as in Dublin 2019, where programme rooms had to be switched to party spaces each evening, a less than ideal solution.
- **Accommodation will be spread across multiple hotels** – As said before, European hotels are generally much smaller than those used in North America. A large European hotel may have just 250 rooms and suites, but the average is more likely to be between 100-150. This means that to have a room block of 1,500, you would generally need to spread these over at least 9 hotels, and given we can rarely get blocks of over 2/3 of the rooms in a hotel, this is more likely to be 15 plus. But this does have its advantages as European Worldcons are better able to offer a range of hotel room rates and locations, so you will often find rooms available on both the Worldcon campus and in the city centre, and a variety of rates to suit many more pockets.

There is another limitation in the venues European Worldcons use as corkage is not common in Europe and getting is often expensive and comes with significant limitations. As for forage this is totally out, and other than pre-packaged snacks providing food of any kind, unless provided, and often served, by the venue is impossible. This is understandable as food regulations seem to be much tighter in Europe and if there were any incidents arising the venue would be held responsible and could be closed down. As a result, you'll see the following differences:

- **You will not find a Con-Suite at European Worldcons** – Without being able to provide food at reasonable cost and even supplying snacks and soft drinks in the amounts needed, it is just impossible to run a Con-Suite. But as a result European Worldcons look to provide a better selection of catering options than you generally see in a North American convention centre.
- **You will not find food or drink in the Staff-Lounge** – European Worldcons generally target what corkage they can get to the parties, so what refreshments are offered in the Staff-Lounge are usually very limited. Hence the use of the Groat (tokens with a monetary value given to volunteers in thanks for their help at the convention) at European conventions that go some way to compensate the staff and help subsidise the usually high costs of food and drink at the venue.
- **Parties are generally limited in the provisions they can supply** – European Worldcons will do their best to allow party hosts to bring in their own supplies for parties. But this is often limited. Hopefully, as with Dublin 2019 there will be no limits on the packaged snacks and soft drinks than can be supplied at parties, but there is often a cap on the value of the alcohol that can be provided unless supplied by the venue. For Dublin 2019 this was €300/\$300.

There are other differences, but these are more down to the social and demographic differences between North American and European fandom.

### **Social and Demographic Differences**

European Worldcon runners have spent a lot of effort in the last decade making our bids and Worldcons European in nature and flavour. Such that a new bid is greeted by excitement across Europe and not just in the host city or country (state). This means that we can draw on members and volunteers from across Europe and with European Worldcons running at least every 5 years, there is always a bid or Worldcon for these fans to feel part of. This means:

## **European Worldcons are now larger than those in North America –**

European Worldcons draw fans in large numbers from across Europe, with the proportionality of interest being more keyed to the economic demographic differences of each country, rather than any difference in wanting to attend. This has meant that the 3 European Worldcons in the last decade have, on average been 50% larger than North American Worldcons in the same period (This is after excluding the Covid Worldcons on 2021 and 2022 from the NA average). In fact, only LA Con II in 1984 was larger than these recent European Worldcons, and there have been no comparable sized Worldcons in North America since the 1990's.

- **European Worldcons skew younger than those in North America –** Some parts of European Fandom have a younger demographic – specifically those from Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and some part of Southern Europe. By drawing members from across Europe, we draw upon the enthusiasm of these younger folk. This enthusiasm combined with offering cheaper forms of accommodation through the convention booking system, and with cheap coach, rail and air travel in Europe means that this enthusiasm turns into attendance. We are not reliant on drawing younger members from the local area and the children of older fans.
- **European Worldcons offer a career progression for new volunteers –** By having a Worldcon that European Fans feel part of every 5 years, new volunteers often end up working on Worldcon after Worldcon and gaining the experience necessary to progress. So someone can start off volunteering to help with Gaming at Loncon and end up chairing a Worldcon in Glasgow a decade later. This is also helped by the cheaper travel and longer holidays enjoyed in Europe, so that volunteers have the time to travel to be part of the staff and committee putting on the Worldcon, with much of the day-to-day pre-con operation being held online, rather than by physical interaction.
- **European Worldcons have a history of being more innovative –** In the last decade European Worldcons have been innovative in the discounted membership types they offer. This started in 2010, when the Loncon in 2014 started offering Young Adult Friends, resulting in the first Young Adult membership rates. This was followed by Worldcon 75 in 2017 introducing the First Worldcon Rate, and then Dublin 2019 introducing the Irish (Local Fan) rate. Which have all been taken up by Glasgow, which has introduced its own discounted rate for people whose voice has been historically under-represented at Worldcon. Many of these innovations overlap, as many of those qualifying for one rate, will often qualify for several, but the existence of these rates sends a message about the type of event we want to be. The same way including WSFS rights with teenage memberships by Glasgow,

sends a message we want these younger members to be fully involved in our Worldcon.

But that innovation is not just limited to membership rates. Because of the limitations of our sites and wanting to bring people in we have grown accustomed to innovating, often introducing elements that have been adopted by Worldcons around the globe. Such as YAFA to bring children into the convention, the now regular symphonies that make full use of the facilities we do have, and marketing elements such as videos and convention specific merchandise such as the Glasgow 2024 Gin.

- **European Worldcons are Worldcons** – By reaching out across Europe, European Worldcons have reached out across the World as these European Fandoms often have ties with different parts of the World. This is also helped by Europe being the global hub for air-travel, with more and shorter direct flights, from more countries into Europe than North America, which by its geography is separated from much of the globe by the world's two largest oceans. Although it is surprising there are not more fans from Mexico and other parts of southern North American

But as with everything European Worldcons are changing. The growing concerns over CO<sup>2</sup> emissions probably mean attendance from outside of Europe will probably become less common. Which is why the next European Worldcon is adopting Virtual Attendance whole heartedly. Not because of Covid and expecting lower attendance, but to broaden the attendance and keep our Worldcons World-Conventions.