

# Lisbon World EXPO '98

## With a Global Language Exposition Thrown In

by João Roque Dias (translated by J. H. Phillips)



*This abbreviated report is an attempt to provide a glimpse of the other side of the World Expo '98 in Lisbon, Portugal: an exposition of hundreds of translations commissioned by organizers to accompany the 156 national and institutional exhibits and communicate their ideas and messages to attendees. This global language exposition will be seen by the more than 15 million visitors expected at EXPO '98 between May 22 and September 30, 1998. These translations will help attendees better understand the presentations on the world and oceans - truly the global heritage of all mankind.*

When Lisbon was chosen to host the World EXPO '98, Portugal underwent one of the greatest urban and cultural renewal initiatives in living memory. However, just as significant is the display of hundreds of translations commissioned by organizers to accompany the 156 national and institutional exhibits and communicate their ideas and messages to attendees. This global language exposition will be seen by the more than 15 million visitors expected at EXPO '98 between May 22 and September 30, 1998.

All informational material compiled by the organizers (Parque EXPO, S.A.) and participating countries and organizations was prepared in the exposition's official languages: Portuguese, Spanish, and English. There is no mystery to this selection. Portuguese is the host language, Spanish the neighboring language (and the language of most of the foreign visitors), while English is the de facto common global language. Thus, all the official publications available to visitors were prepared in these three languages. These include the theme pavilion brochures, the EXPO daily schedule sheets, the official guidebook and map, and all signs, show posters, etc.

### **Translation at different levels**

Translations at all different levels may be seen at the Lisbon EXPO: official EXPO material for visitors, pavilion and country brochures, and the commercial pitches inducing foreign attendees to purchase goods and services - from meals and lodging to reading material and transportation.

Generally speaking, the official EXPO translations from and into Portuguese are very good, and indicative of the care taken both in choosing translators and editing final copy. The same is true of the translations used at such theme pavilions as Knowledge of the Seas, Utopia, Future, Virtual Reality and the Seaquarium.

Another noteworthy exhibit is the recently rebuilt *Dom Fernando II e Glória*, the last sailing frigate in the Portuguese navy and the eighth oldest ship afloat. Displayed on the vessel are elegant and proper translations describing the difficult naval terminology endemic to the Portuguese language. The translator, Peter Ingham, is an Englishman and former officer in Britain's merchant marine. A resident of Portugal for over 20 years, Ingham has done a top-notch job.

Special mention is also in order for our colleague Alexis Levitin, who translated several poems by Portuguese poets for daily distribution to visitors. It's a nice feeling to note the participation of a fellow ATA member. Nice work Alexis!

On another level - or many different levels - we have the various translations featured at participating pavilions. These range from very good to unbelievably bad, but the latter did not result because the EXPO organizers left a stone unturned. Bids were accepted in August of 1997 to select individual and corporate service providers for the various EXPO exhibitors. These covered everything from catering to security, pavilion design and maintenance, graphics, translation and interpreting, multimedia productions, decoration, and so forth. Parque Expo chose 12 providers from each category, allowing them to include four pages touting their services in the 150 binders sent out to participants. Reading the translations at several pavilions gives rise to serious doubts as to whether some providers used actual Portuguese translators to relay their messages in the host country's language. Translations into Portuguese which appear in the exhibition pavilions of the various countries are generally of poor quality. Words - not register and context - were what were translated: "The water that carries us" was rendered as "A água que nos traz" at the Latvia Pavilion. Terms were poorly chosen and, in some cases, simply made up. The handling of verbs - and I understand that Portuguese verbs can be daunting - was even worse. What follows is a sort of shipboard diary of my travels through the EXPO '98 World.

### **Swiss Pavilion**

Gold, silver, and bronze medals! Linguistically correct and technically impeccable, the Swiss Pavilion's translations made a clean sweep. This, despite its inherent high-tech features - a thorny path indeed for non-native translators living in Switzerland. Another encouraging sign: this was the only one out of 156 pavilions which recognized their translators by name, together with their commissioner-general, decorator, and sponsors.

### **Chinese Pavilion**

Booby prize! A "mobile satellite station" (estação móvel de comunicações via satélite) ended up a "satellite mobility station." A placard announces the "cinema schedule" instead of the sessions schedule, and that "the film needs 15 minutes," instead of informing visitors that the duration of each session is 15 minutes. Thus, one of the largest pavilions at EXPO is marred by some of the worst translations I've seen in a long time.

### **Italian Pavilion**

Or, why the motto "traduttore, traditori" had to be Italian. Here we marvel at some of the loveliest original artwork brought straight to Lisbon from museums in Italy. Sealed in display cases and guarded by a fully armed Italian soldier in full-dress uniform, these are obviously priceless pieces. Just as priceless (at least based on worth) are the translations. One example should suffice: the plaque on a Ghirlandaio painting saying "olio sul tavola" was rendered as "oil on plank" (óleo sobre tábua, in Portuguese) rather than "oil on wood." Linguistically soulless, literal and awkward translations abound in this must-see (but mustn't read) pavilion. The horror-sideshow exhibit of false friends will harrow up thy spine.

## **United States Pavilion**

The one you've all been waiting for...in scale, technology, and its message to visitors, this is one of the five best pavilions at EXPO '98. In translation, however, the message is a bit blurred. Word-for-word, sentence after sentence, the versions slavishly dog the heels of the source text. Naturally, this comes at the expense of linguistic fluency and elegance. The U.S. could have been better represented. I give it a B-minus.

## **Canadian Pavilion**

Another must-see, and definitely one of the five best pavilions. Outstanding translations! A silver medal, *ex aequo* with Switzerland.

## **Pavilion of the Military Order of Malta**

True, it resembles a museum...but it is, after all, an EXPO pavilion! Again, the translations are brilliant. I would venture to guess that this is one of the few pavilions using native Portuguese translators, maybe members of the Order. Since the Swiss pavilion hogged all the medals, at least a well-earned honorary mention is in order.

## **Japanese Pavilion**

Another rising star in the exclusive top five, and a delight to the eye and soul. Ancient wisdom shows through in their approach: when in doubt, go graphic. Translations into Portuguese were kept to a minimum, with heavy reliance on "sign language" (i.e., graphics and pictures). *Arigato* (a Japanese word derived from the Portuguese "obrigado") for such a beautiful pavilion.

## **Western European Union Pavilion**

A beautiful, 10 by 15 foot satellite image of Lisbon grabs your eye. One simple caption (in foot-high letters) reading "Satellite Imagery of Lisbon" was translated as "Imagem Satelitária de Lisboa" [!]. The neologism "satelitária" was no doubt specially coined for the occasion.

## **Swedish Pavilion**

Clearly, the translator was good. "Business Stockholm," states a panel, and its counterpart reads "A Estocolmo dos Negócios." Very nice touch, and very well done.

## **Holy See Pavilion**

Small wonder the quality is sound! With 2000 years of translation experience, the Catholic church was definitely ready for EXPO. The theme is also catchy: the role of water in the Catholic faith and scriptures. The beauty of the religious artifacts and works of art on display is richly enhanced by the quality of the linguistic renderings. Saint Jerome seems to have inspired some followers here!

## Russian Pavilion

The message is clear: we were, are, and will continue on as a great maritime power, and have the technology to carry it through. Translations for the display plaques are generally high-quality. Four comely Russian interpreters exhibit a level of knowledge and perfection of diction in European Portuguese that simply defies belief. It was only after some time that I learned I was listening to young ladies born and raised in Moscow, who had not spent much time in Portugal at all. The only false note was President Yeltsin's message greeting visitors at the entrance. Here the rendering was not at all fluent, and quite obviously a translation.

## French Pavilion

Entitled "Escale en France," the French effort is one of the most consistent at EXPO. Under this heading you'll find all that is truly French (the pavilion, *les souvenirs*, the floating restaurant featuring the best *cuisine française*, etc.). This is another must-see pavilion. The translations fall under two headings: acceptably rendered standard fare, and more specialized material (such as naval terminology) which is not handled nearly as well. There is no excuse for calling a "mariner's compass" a "compasso de marinho" (which has no meaning in Portuguese), rather than "agulha de marear." And there are other examples of the sort. Don't miss the oyster bar. There you can savor fresh oysters flown in daily from Bretagne, and wash them down with a glass of *véritable* white wine or champagne.

## So, should I go to EXPO '98 in Lisbon before packing for the ATA Conference in Hilton Head?

Translations aside, EXPO '98 is the place to go this summer. The whole world is here to welcome you and fill you in on the many different ways we can care for our oceans. The theme pavilions are the *pièce de résistance* at EXPO, but no country pavilion should go unvisited. Relish the delicacies from all over the world and pick up handicrafts from Africa or samples of Finnish design. Catch some jazz and enjoy a hamburger and a Bud at the Ocean Blues floating restaurant (sorry, no discounts for ATA members). Visit the Brazilian Pavilion, where the ocean and joy of living go hand in hand. Fly over the Pyrennes in the Andorra Pavilion's simulator. Experience the four Swedish seasons in as many climatic bubbles (well worth the long wait in line). Visit the East-Timor Pavilion and learn about the anguish of its people, along with the Nobel Peace Prize medals won by Monsignor Belo and Ramos-Horta (when was the last time you saw a real Nobel medal?). Light up a genuine Cuban cigar in the Cuba Pavilion (we'll never tell). Travel with 16th-century discoverers in the Portuguese Pavilion (by the way, the food here is also out of this world). Stick around for the daily midnight light, sound, and fireworks Acqua Matrix display. The flesh may feel exhausted when the day is over, but your soul will be truly renewed. We'll keep the lights on and the show running for you through September 30, 1998. Afterward, at Hilton Head, you can tell all and sundry what they missed.

\*\*\*

First published at the ATA Chronicle, August 1998 issue.