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May was an interesting month. I wound up visiting a half dozen mostly European countries on some pretty crazy weekends to hook up with various friends from the Linux community. That's one of the coolest things about working with Linux – you can have friends from all over the world who turn up in random countries on weekends between whatever conferences they're visiting, and they invite you over for coffee. In fact, over the past month, I've been to Amsterdam, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and further afield, pretty much just for the hell of it. And before anyone mails me about it, I know, this isn't great for my own personal carbon footprint.

The month's random travels began with another trip to Zürich, where I caught up with one of the guys working

Community Notes

PLANES AND LISTS

on the teal time patches being developed for the Linux kernel. We took a train over to Geneva to meet Andrew Hutton, organizer of next month's 8th annual OLS Linux Symposium <http://www.linuxsymposium.org/>. None of the group of international Linux enthusiasts were from Switzerland, so it seemed all the more appropriate that we'd managed to pick such a famously neutral country for our international weekend of mystery. And that's really all I knew about Switzerland – its neutrality. The Swiss are famous for generally keeping out of world politics, and for their banking system, but I had no idea whether they particularly dig Linux in any of these activities.

Switzerland – the neutral country

According to the CIA World Factbook, Switzerland occupies a total area of around 16,000 square miles and has a population of around 7 million people (about the same population as London). There are six registered national LUGs on the linux.com website, with the main group of interest being LUGS (Linux User Group Switzerland). LUGS is based out of Zürich, which we discovered is a couple of hours from Geneva by high speed train. They hold very regular meetings in Zürich – often at the Swiss Institute of Technology – and discuss the usual wide range of topics via their mailing lists and on IRC.

In fact, for a small country like Switzerland to have over a half dozen Linux User Groups shows that

something is going right somewhere. The community appears to be strong and vibrant, with some interesting twists. For example, a number of LUG members are obviously drawn from the technical banking community, but it's not just banking that helps to service the Swiss Linux community. In fact, a little known startup Swiss company called ImCoSys (based in Zug, near Zürich) unveiled its first Linux smartphone a few months back – one of only a handful servicing European markets to date.

The ImcoSys quadband (universally usable in most countries) smartphone sports the usual array of bluetooth and PDA functionality we've come to expect from the latest generation of Linux smartphones, but it also has some pretty cool extras – like built-in WiFi and even an internal GPS receiver (presumably for route planning applications that'll be made available later on). The technical specifications include a powerful proces-



Figure 1: In my recent travels to Germany and Switzerland, I ran across a remarkable product known as Linux detergent.



Figure 2: The recent ImcoSys quadband smartphone appears to be hacker friendly.

sor running a (slightly dated) 2.4.20 Linux kernel, 64MB of memory, and an expandable SD Card memory slot. Most interesting of all is the inclusion of an RS232-compatible serial port, indicating that this phone will be pretty “hacker friendly.”

In Brief...

The last month has been punctuated with the release of two major Linux distributions – first came openSuse (version 10.1), closely followed by Ubuntu “Dapper Drake” (otherwise known as Ubuntu 6.06 “LTS” – that’s “Long Term Support”) just a few weeks later. Both of these major Linux distributions received their fair share of interest from the community, though the long awaited release of a long-term supportable Ubuntu probably caused the most waves. It was clear that many people had been waiting for this release, if the traffic on the mailing lists is any indication.

Ubuntu 6.06 has been a long time in development – and it had at least one speed bump on the way when Mark Shuttleworth slightly postponed the release in the interest of improving the overall quality – but now it’s here

and available, so everyone can try it out for themselves. One poster on the Montreal Linux User Group (MLUG), announcing a local “release party,” summarized the situation quite succinctly, “All I can say is, if you have not tried Ubuntu/Kubuntu, you really are missing out. I have been running 6.06 through the

entire Beta period, and it is amazing.”

Greater London LUG - GLLUG

Several members brought up the issue of identity cards in the modern electronic world in which we live. Although not everyone in the Linux community is a card carrying liberal, many are concerned about the dangers that large government databases filled with biometrics pose to our civil liberties.

A lively debate took place over ways that both the United Kingdom and the United States might be attempting to introduce national identity cards through various “backdoor” requirements for everyday life situations – as a required ID to purchase alcohol, for example.

When not debating ID cards, the London list debated the usual – trolls, open source, unkillable processes, more logging, spying, and a lot of Xen. One of the job postings this month was for a kernel porter working for 3D Labs (we used to call them Creative Labs). The job entails developing software for their ARM-based proprietary audio chip, presumably for

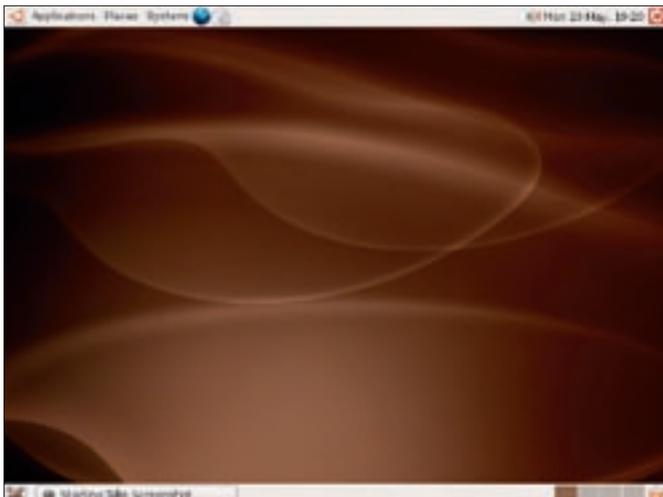


Figure 3: Ubuntu 6.06, which is included as this month's Linux Magazine DVD, was a popular topic in the LUGs this month.

some next generation series of sound cards. Whether these drivers will be open source or not would certainly be of some interest, since the open source community has historically had a tough time gaining technical details on new audio devices.

Mumbai LUG - IMLUG-Bombay

The Bombay Linux User Group spent some time debating mostly user-centric issues such as grub configuration, web-servers, and the usual jazz. There was some debate about getting high-quality broadband connections in Bombay – something I can personally attest to being sufficiently difficult even at this point in the 21st century in a major city such as Bombay.

One of the local telcos (BSNL) is apparently offering “unlimited” connectivity at 256Kbps – something that we in Europe certainly take for granted. Several people weighed in with their views on the benefits of getting good connectivity, though these options were still much more than the average person in India can afford.

Both SuSE and Ubuntu came up in LUG discussion, though not the latest versions. This is something I've seen a lot of in India – reliance upon outdated versions of software, presumably due to difficulties in getting the updated software. One question this month related to Red Hat 9, which hasn't been in use for some time now in the West, yet somebody was very keen to get support for Red hat 9 from the local community. I would love to hear from Indian-based

Linux users whether they feel this viewpoint is justified.

Sydney LUG - SLUG

This Australian LUG is widely followed by a large community of readers from around the world, in addition to the many vocal members of the local Sydney Linux User community, who keep the group

running on a daily basis. Over the past month, hundreds of mailings to the slug mailing list have covered a wide range of topics – everything from undeleting files on FAT32 to the use of particular datatypes in the Linux kernel. One reader was interested to know in particular why Ubuntu “Dapper Drake” won't provide an ssh server by default in it's server install, starting a thread of discussion about what should and should not be disabled by default in the name of enhancing out-of-the-box security on Linux systems.

Discussion of Windows Vista followed the general trend in the Linux commu-

nity to laugh in the face of Microsoft's ongoing delays in getting its “next generation” product to customers. A number of readers pointed out how the cryptographic features in Vista will make it increasingly difficult for Linux systems to provide compatibility and support dual booting/working with Vista based systems. That's typical behavior for Microsoft, however, and they have no reason to suddenly change their tactics.

New York LUG - NYLUG

The group discussed a range of topics, including streaming radio, job hunting, whether there is or should be a Python Interest Group in New York, and a bunch of conferences taking place around the United States over the next few months. The list was otherwise surprisingly quiet this month, despite meetings taking place as usual. One interesting thread of conversation that did occur was centered around the popularity of programming languages. A poster noted that an advertised security seminar talked about “popular programming languages” and was curious to know how popularity should be defined – and whether the group was interested in the observations made by Tiobe <http://www.tiobe.com/tpci.htm>. Perhaps the best overall comment came from Michael Bacarella, who said, “I'm kind of stunned that, decades later, C is still very relevant.” ■

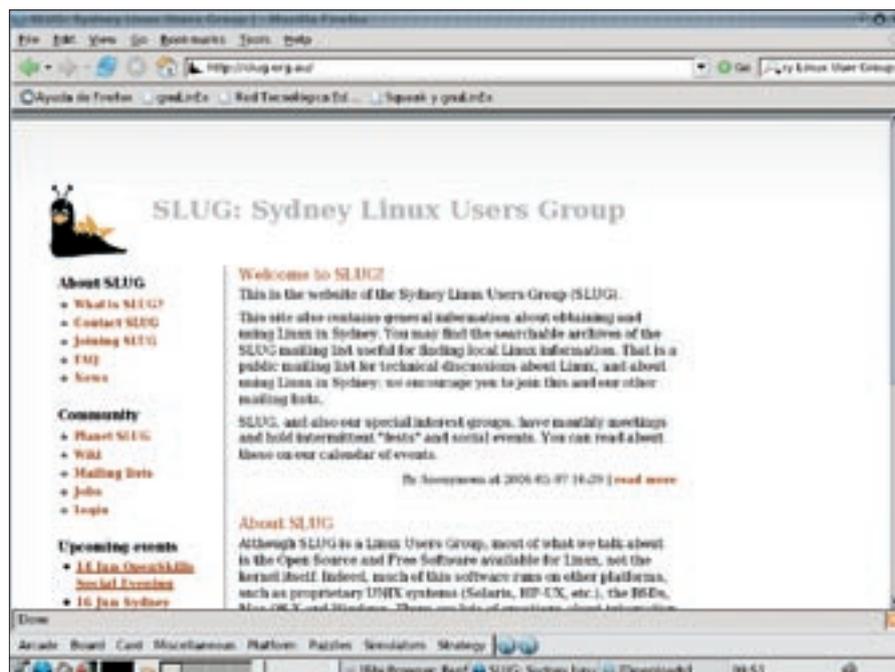


Figure 4: The Sydney Linux Users Group (SLUG) is followed by users around the world. Note that their mascot is a slug with a strong resemblance to a familiar penguin.