

1993: the year that was for Riemke and Maarten

Back at base

Early in 1993 two important events occurred. On 20 January Maarten left the Sultanate of Oman to rejoin Shell in The Hague on 1 February. His posting to Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) has eventually lasted two years and eleven months.

Immediately after Maarten's return we signed a preliminary contract to buy a new house, which is currently being built in the Benoordenhout area of The Hague, close to where we are living at present. It is one of a series of fourteen houses that are built at the location of a defunct school building. In November 1992 Riemke had seen an advertisement and she then went to an "open day" on the project, where she took an option. Soon after the drawings appeared on Maarten's fax in Muscat. The ideal house, what a surprise. On our return to The Hague it turned out that we could transfer our contract to a slightly better located house, on which the option had lapsed.

The big gain is that we are now truly together again. The last three years have been very difficult for both of us. The periods of temporary separation became more and more difficult, while we had secretly hoped that things would become more easy for us with time.

Fortunately, the bad experiences fade quickly. The good ones remain and we look back on three very interesting years. Maarten's work as head of Environment with PDO was a down to earth pioneering job. And it has yielded results. This year Shell conducted an environmental audit at PDO and this resulted in a "satisfactory" rating. That would not have been possible in 1990. Besides Maarten was pleasantly surprised in July, when he received a substantial pay improvement in recognition of his work in 1992.

Our final days in Oman were quite agreeable. One of Maarten's brothers was visiting and friends from the Netherlands came by. They were in Oman to interview His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, but we were not forgotten. Maarten had to take a number of days leave, because his successor would only be arriving in January, so that we had the opportunity to make a number of trips into mountains and the interior with our 4-Runner.

Rob Nunn, who has succeeded Maarten in PDO, comes from Woodside Petroleum in West Australia. Rob and Maarten have known each other since 1981 and they have met regularly at company conferences. As they understand each other well there was no real problem with the hand-over of the job. Rob also bought our two Toyotas, a Corolla and the 4-Runner. But Rob was totally unprepared for the culture shock of the change of his life with Woodside in Australia to life in Oman and in PDO. He has had some very difficult early months in Muscat.

The half-time job finally materialises

In 1989 Riemke's full-time position became officially a half-time one. That was imposed from above but it suited her fine. Because Oman was in sight at the time she agreed with her Department that she would continue to work the full week. She would use the time saved in that way to go and live with Maarten in Muscat for two months during the summer and during the winter.

At the end of 1992 the studies advisor at Riemke's department went on maternity leave and Riemke was asked to fill in for her. This replacement has lasted until March, but now the half-time job is really there.

It clearly takes some time to get used to. Riemke is not yet back to a real half-time working week. The number of students, who want to write their MA theses under her supervision, continues to be large. And Riemke is therefore a frequent member of the department's examination committee to address the parents of her students. After all it is for them that these speeches are given ... Regularly she manages to hit the right note of emotion, especially if she has again managed to save a student from the deprivation of grant termination.

Our beloved son

For Jurjen the bells have tolled too in 1993. In June he was called up for military service. Following a two months crash course at the School for Reserve Officers and NCOs Infantry at Ermelo he has become a sergeant. Not for him the well deserved lot of a group sergeant in one of the Infantry Security Companies, which guard military objects in the Netherlands. No, sergeant Smies is the life and soul of the Helicopter Office of the Staff of the Dutch Air Mobile Brigade near Arnhem. With English his second mother tongue and his encyclopaedic knowledge of all that flies, runs and shoots in NATO he is almost irreplaceable.

Our wildest dreams come true. Jurjen loves the uniform and the stripes and the regulated life of a conscript sergeant. Plain army green is not good enough for him. So he has arranged for a CaMo (camouflage uniform) on the side to be able to get into HeLi (helicopter) and LaRo (Land-Rover) in a suitably dignified fashion. His repertoire of jokes has been extended by an infinite number of military stories, none of them fit to be put on this paper. But he has really a nice job, which brings him in frequent contact with helicopter groups of other NATO units. They are visiting sometimes and Jurjen then has to arrange the accommodation and messing, and of course he has to take the guests to see the best watering places in town.

In Shell a cold wind blows

Maarten is now back again with Health, Safety and Environment (HSE) Division, which is his home base personnel-wise. Of the eighteen years he has been working with Shell, he has spent six years in The Hague and twelve elsewhere. He is now in his seventh job as head of Upstream Activities (Environment). His staff and he himself spend a large part of their time doing environmental impact assessment work for new Shell projects outside Western Europe. His group is charged with the environmental work for all Exploration and Production projects in the former Soviet Union. Work in western Siberia and north-west Russia and Maarten acts as the environmental advisor for a potential project in Kazakhstan.

All that sounds very nice but this year the hour of truth appears to have struck for Shell. At Central Office in The Hague both the Manufacturing and Chemicals Manufacturing divisions have been reorganised and jobs have been lost. Shell have sold their agrochemicals business to American Cyanamid and the Billiton Metals group is for sale as well. All these developments have their consequences elsewhere, for example in Research. The Amsterdam laboratory has been shedding staff, the Billiton Research laboratory at Arnhem, not yet ten years old, closes and the same applies to the Shell biosciences laboratory at Sittingbourne, where Maarten started back in 1975. Also in HSE Division a number of people have to go.

The rot also affects the Shell Operating Companies in the Netherlands. Pernis and Moerdijk (refinery and petrochemical plants) have to rationalise and Chemicals Marketing is being decimated. And that in turn has its effects for Shell Nederland, the Dutch holding company. The problem is that almost everybody who could be retired early, has already gone during the last ten years. The Redundancy Package has been cut, albeit that it remains a pretty good one. And people are really sacked now. A veritable change in climate.

There is a clear shift of activity towards the Pacific Basin, where markets grow at a frantic pace. It would not surprise us if Shell were to open a regional Central Office there shortly. And it would be a good opportunity to provide central services on health, safety and the environment to all business sectors in that region.

Nature conservation

The attentive reader has already noticed that 1989 was an ominous year for us. It heralded Maarten's assignment to Oman and Riemke's half-time job. It was also the year during which Maarten was elected a board member of the Dutch National Trust for Nature Conservation.

The proposal for that had just been arranged and double-checked with the Trust and with Shell, when Maarten's posting to Oman appeared on the table. More ritual dances were needed to seal a deal. In the end, Maarten travelled back from Muscat a number of times to attend board meetings (and to visit Riemke) and did his best during his periods of home leave

or in combination with business visits to the Netherlands. In addition he contributed by fax to policy making. In retrospect, it worked out pretty well.

What we had to miss however was the social side of the Trust board. That disadvantage we are now trying to compensate, because it is a most sociable group of people. That does not only apply the board as such, which derives its charm from the fact that it has birds of so many a different feather. Nevertheless, everybody really appreciates the contributions of all the other members, even though hard nuts sometimes need to be cracked. And are. But also meetings with partners, such as the board's excursion in summer and the New Year party at the president's home are thoroughly enjoyable.

The rapid growth in membership, now at 750 000, in recent years and a number of other developments, such as the new income derived from a national lottery, require a lot of the board's attention in the near future. This applies to the relations with the new and the "traditional" members of the Trust, but also to the relation with other conservation organisations and with the government.

Leave

Because of our choice for Maarten to go to Oman and for Riemke to keep her job in Leiden, we have had no real holidays during the last three years. When Riemke was in Oman, Maarten would be at work, when Maarten was on leave in the Netherlands, Riemke would be busy at the University at Leiden.

This year all would, of course, be different and we had happy dreams about camping in France outside the holiday season. All in vain. In spring Maarten had to rush to Gabon for a project, which in the end lasted for four weeks. And then the Kazakhstan project came off the shelf. In June Maarten joined the Shell negotiation team in Alma Ata to show that Shell take the environment serious. And in July he went again to Kazakhstan to develop an environmental work programme and to make a field visit to the Caspian Sea.

For Riemke, summer has become a bad time to go on holiday. The summer months are filled by students who need to complete their work and graduate before the end of the summer. During that time it is dissertations galore, which Riemke received in Oman by mail and fax and commented on by return fax. And in September the new academic year starts.

Therefore we have had to take a holiday in the winter. A warm destination was called for, especially after the cold, wet summer of 1993. After some thinking we have chosen to go to South Africa. We are making a round trip there by hire car and wish you a "baie" (Afrikaans for very) happy new year.

Riemke and Maarten