

1994: the year that was for Riemke and Maarten

South Africa

Our message on 1993 ended with the observation that we were on holiday in South Africa. We made a standard individual tour there with a hire car and all hotels pre-booked. From Johannesburg via Pretoria to the Kruger National Park and through Swaziland and the Drakensbergen to Durban. From there by plane to Port Elisabeth on the East Cape and along the "garden route" to Cape Town. All reservations were correct and although Maarten suffered food poisoning on Christmas Day, that happened to be a rest day in our programme.

All that has been said is true. South Africa is an enormously large country, we drove 4000 km in three weeks time and flew another 500. It is also an extremely beautiful country and we were greatly impressed by the National Parks. Kruger was impressive and very well organised. Although we were there only for a day and a half, around Christmas it is difficult to book extra days, we have seen lots of animals. Most of them had young at the time and this contributed greatly to the attraction. For Riemke, who has known Africa since 1970 but only through stories and slides, Kruger was an extraordinary experience.

South Africa also turned out to be relatively cheap. The rand was worth 60 cents (0.6 guilders) but the purchasing power was approximately a guilder. And the better sides of life, eating and drinking were cheap even then.

On the western tourist track the separation between rich and poor, between white and black is not very visible but quite clear. We did not visit townships, because one should not challenge fate, and we have not felt unsafe. If South Africa continues to develop as it does now, we would certainly like to go there another time.

Kazakhstan

Shell and five western oil companies have formed a consortium with a Kazakh national company, which acts as the operator, to make a seismic survey of the Kazakh part of the Caspian Sea. The western partners have seconded senior staff with KazakhstanCaspShelf. For environment and safety Mobil Oil has been given the lead and a Mobil staff works in Almaty (= Alma Ata, of Olympic Winter Games fame) as deputy head of environment and safety. His boss is, like the other department heads, a Kazakh and the environmental advisor is a Kazakh lady, who used to work at the Ministry of Ecology and Bio-Resources. The work is not without problems, and that is put mildly, and even in Almaty there is not much to do if you do not speak Russian. And although Maarten feels for his colleague from Mobil, he is glad that Shell has not been given environment and safety in this project.

In 1993 an environmental working group of the participating companies worked out an environmental programme, including the environmental assessment of the seismic survey. That was, as could be expected, a bit of a camel, a horse designed by a committee. If you add to that that environmental regulations in Kazakhstan are still of the Soviet type, it will be clear that we have had some extremely interesting discussions. And, when all hidden agendas have been uncovered, the Kazakh naturally would like to see dollars and work for their own institutes, there remain very fundamental differences between the western approach to environmental assessment and research and the Kazakh one. Or the Russian one for that matter, because Maarten's colleagues have similar experiences in the Russian Federation.

In July of this year Maarten worked for two weeks in Almaty on a management system for health, safety and environment for KazakhstanCaspShelf. He stayed in a sanatorium, built for the party bosses, just outside Almaty together with the seconded expatriates, who had lived there out of their suitcases since May, because there was no suitable housing available for them as yet. In September he was again in Kazakhstan, this time to give a lecture on behalf of the western partners at an environmental workshop in Atyrau (at the mouth of the Ural river on the Caspian Sea) on seismic surveys in areas similar to the Caspian Sea.

Meanwhile the preparations have started for environmental assessment for the next phase, the drilling of one or more exploration wells. All discussions will therefore be held again (and again).

Scotland

At the end of last year Maarten's colleague for technical safety at Petroleum Development Oman had been posted to Shell Expro in Aberdeen. The Purvis family have bought a house near Banchory, some 40 km west of Aberdeen on the Dee in Royal Deeside.

Thanks to our KLM frequent flyer points we could both fly for free to Aberdeen and back and from Ascension Day until Whitsun we made a tour of the central highlands of Scotland. First we stayed for a few day with the Purvis family and from there drove through Inverness to Ullapool on the west coast and then on to Skye and Fort William. We made the round of Loch Ness and returned to Royal Deeside by way of Perth and Dundee.

Near Aboyne, 15 km west of Banchory we visited Maarten's British Petroleum counterpart in the Caspian Sea Project. He lives in a village rectory dating back to the 18th century and tele-commutes to Uxbridge near London Heathrow Airport. It was very clear why his family does not want to move to Greater London. In October Maarten went to him for a day to work on a project proposal. Their working day then started with a walk in the neighbourhood.

During our visit in May we had glorious weather, although it was still quite cold (some 9 to 12 °C). The gorse was in full bloom and it was, as we had expected, very quiet because Ascension Day and Whitsun are not public holidays in Scotland and England. We stayed in bed and breakfasts, which worked out well, and which included a beautiful room with a family outside Fort William with a view of the snow-covered Ben Nevis at sunset.

The Hague School

When we returned from South Africa, our house in the Van Neckstraat had been sold. Not for the price that we had hoped for, but then you cannot have everything. Our new house was not finished yet for some time to come (it was completed in October), but through our estate agent we hired an apartment in the Weissenbruchstraat. That was pretty expensive, certainly for what it offered, but it was close to where we were living, so that Maarten could continue to walk to the office and we could keep our telephone number. Besides we were only eight minutes walking away from the building site, so that we could easily keep an eye on progress there.

A large part of our furniture went in storage with the removal company that also still held Maarten's sea freight from Oman. And at the end of March we left the Van Neckstraat after almost thirteen years. The apartment in the Weissenbruchstraat also dated from the nineteen twenties. A reasonable dining room and a living room, a bedroom that would just take our 210 × 120 cm bed, a cubby-hole bedroom that was filled by our plastic wardrobes and a kitchen that was so small that our fridge had to be put in the corridor. The bathroom had been constructed later and the drainage pipe for the washing machine could not be used as it would cause flooding in our downstairs neighbour's house.

There we were under the flat roof, without a balcony during the hottest summer of the century. And to think that there was a house waiting for us with a (small) garden, a balcony and a roof terrace! Riemke left for Leiden and worked entire days despite her half-time appointment in order to be out of the flat. It was just doable for seven months, because we were able to look forward to our dream house.

Around the flat the streets are named after painters from the Hague School impressionists. When they planned the Clingendael area, in which our new house is, they chose to extend the Breiterlaan to become one of the central axes of this new area. Therefore the new streets were also named after Hague School painters, but the well known names had already been used. Maarten's mother found out that Hanedoes had been a quarter maker for the Hague School at Barbizon in France but otherwise was a "maitre manqué". This dampened our idea to search for a real Hanedoes to put on the wall of our new house. Clingendael: The Hague's daubers quarter!

At the end of October we could finally move in. Our three job lots came together again and right now we have almost completed unpacking. The house is marvellous, although of course a number of things have to be completed properly as the builders have made some mistakes and did not do things that we ordered and paid for. Also we are very happy with the new furniture, curtains and carpets, on which we have been advised by an interior decorator. We shall not try to describe it here. It is much better for you to come and visit.

Shrinkage

Maarten also moved office. Because of the shrinkage of Central Office space became available at the main building at the Carel van Bylandtlaan and Shell decided to sell the small office building at the Van Hogenhoucklaan. This will be turned into luxury apartments.

In addition, the entire Central Office organisation is being scrutinised and as yet it is unclear what the consequences will be.

Maarten's boss decided to quit in order to become vice-chancellor of the University of Dundee in Scotland. He has been succeeded by another Briton, who worked in agrochemicals in London. But Shell have sold agrochemicals and Billiton has been off loaded as well. Soil pollution at the various sites played an important role in all negotiations. Shell has been left with a number of sites, that now need to be cleaned up.

Shrinkage is also rife at the university. Because of the pill-dip in births in the nineteen seventies the number of students is now falling and on top of that there are the economies imposed by the government. The Faculty of Law at Leiden was slightly faster than the Faculty of Social Sciences in designing staff structure plans, reorganisations, step-trajects and other gloriously sounding ideas. Those plans have (as yet) little to do with reality, as Riemke observed when her boss Van Staden was asked to become the director of the Dutch Institute of Foreign Relations "Clingendael", situated at the adjacent estate that has given its name to our quarter. He remains at Leiden as a professor for one day per week and for the rest the position of Professor of International Relations is frozen.

With all the discussions on changes in university education because of economies forced upon the university, the atmosphere has seriously been affected. Contrary to general developments, Riemke has extended her job, as she is now for one day per week the secretary/manager of the research school of the Dutch political scientists "Polybios".

Our beloved son

Jurjen has left the army in September, having signed on extra time as long as was allowed. Despite his enthusiasm he has decided not to try and make the army his profession. Now he is again a job-seeking citizen, as he was before he did his military service.

Almost at the end of his time in the army he wanted to go and take his para-wing together with some mates. He did the ground training and made one successful jump. But one in his group of people landed the wrong way and broke his back. Much to our relief Jurjen has not made the remaining seven jumps that were needed to qualify.

As many of his age Jurjen appears to find it difficult to find out what he wants in life, although he knows what he does not want. Parental suggestions are normally not followed up. However, he is in good health and we continue to foster our hope.

Riemke Riemersma and Maarten Smies