

1997: the year that was for Riemke and Maarten

Back in the Middle East

So, Christmas 1997 finds us back in the Middle East, not five years yet after leaving Oman. This time we are in Abu Dhabi, the largest of the seven United Arab Emirates, which lie next door to Oman but all but one of them inside the Arabian Gulf. In the summer the climate is really fierce here with temperatures well into the 40 degrees Celsius and a very high relative humidity. Even when we arrived in October, it was still that hot during our first two weeks here. By now the weather is much more clement, very much like the winters in Oman, although it has rained here (and in Oman) exceptionally hard this autumn.

Shell is a private shareholder in the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations (ADCO), with which they also have a manpower supply agreement. ADCO is a company of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) Group, which comprises a number of offshore and onshore oil and gas companies, two refineries and some petrochemical manufacturing, a distribution and marketing company and a number of oil industry service companies. Last year ADNOC management decided to put their HSE management on a modern footing. A new corporate HSE division was created and private shareholders were asked to provide a number of secondees to set this up. The division manager comes from Mobil and Shell was approached to fill the position of the environmental management advisor.

Maarten had been to Abu Dhabi in 1996. First in April, to conduct a series of environmental workshops for ADCO and again in September when another colleague of his and he helped the ADNOC HSE division head with a waste management workshop for the ADNOC Group. Early in May, Maarten was asked if he wanted to be nominated as the Shell candidate for the environmental position. In June he went for an interview and in July ADNOC decided that they would like to have him. Then there was the usual haggling over a starting date ("could he come yesterday, please"), but it was fairly readily agreed that October was the earliest date possible, also in view of Maarten's work for Shell projects in the former Soviet Union.

After Maarten's posting to Oman from 1990 until the end of 1992, we had decided that we would not contemplate another assignment on a grasswidower basis. So, after some hard thinking during the weekend following the Friday on which Maarten was first approached ("...and give me your answer by Monday..."), we decided that this was a very interesting and exciting opportunity and that this time, Riemke would come as well. What that would mean in terms of her work in Leiden will become clear below.

In September Maarten took the outstanding balance of his leave and together we sorted through our belongings to decide what we would take to Abu Dhabi, what we would put in storage and what we would give or throw away. We sold our car and decided to let our house (although we are still in anxious expectation of a tenant), because we could not bear the thought of having to sell it after having lived there for less than three years. Also, we like the house so much that we definitely shall want to go back.

On 29 and 30 September everything was packed. Twenty-seven cubic metres of sea-freight and ten cubic metres for storage, mainly books and some of our furniture that we felt would not be suitable for the UAE. As the weather gods had it, September was glorious and we were in shirtsleeves right up to our departure on 1 October, when rain accompanied us to Schiphol Airport.

And here we are in Abu Dhabi, the Garden City of the Gulf, still in our shirtsleeves.

Early experiences

On arrival in Abu Dhabi we were housed in a suite at the Hilton Corniche Residence, which is right in downtown Abu Dhabi on the seafront of the Arabian Gulf. After two weeks ADNOC made a guest apartment available in their housing complex, which is next to the ADNOC main office, also on the Corniche but at the western end. Our apartment was on the tenth floor and from our sitting room we had a marvellous view over the Gulf and the coast. Every day, people came to make up the beds and bring "breakfast", because normally only men stay there temporarily waiting for permanent housing and for the arrival of their families. For dinner

we cooked simple meals with the pots and pans provided in the apartment, or explored the many and various restaurants in town.

We were very well received by the different groups, to which we were going to belong. On the night after our arrival Maarten's boss gave a party, so that we could meet most of his new colleagues. The Shell women had a very extensive information package and they took Riemke round Abu Dhabi during the day to find shops and to go to coffee mornings. Also, we were almost immediately introduced to the Emirates Natural History Group, where we were fortunate to have lectures on the history of Abu Dhabi and on the history of the oil industry in Abu Dhabi, both by long-time resident British expatriates. We also joined the Netherlands Society (120 families) here and Riemke went to a lunch party for all Dutch spouses at the residence of the Netherlands Embassy.

Downtown Abu Dhabi is a permanent construction site. Ten-story buildings are being torn down to make place for new, gleaming glass-clad twenty and thirty-story high-rise offices and apartments. If you live in an apartment, you have a good chance that your view is that of your neighbour's breakfast table, and if you have a nice view, a new building is likely to go up within a year right in front of your house. Many apartments and offices have hardly any sun coming in. Through the centre there are six-lane wide streets, along which the traffic passes at 60 to 80 kilometres per hour. Owing to natural selection there are few cyclists, although still a fair number appear to survive, and pedestrians are not sure of their lives, even when crossing at the protected zebras or at green pedestrian traffic lights. Taxis are ubiquitous and cheap, the average trip in the city will cost approximately 2.5 Dutch guilders (or 1.25 US dollar). However, the driving style of the taxi drivers leaves much to be desired, as does the driving style of most other drivers, and there are hardly ever seatbelts available.

The main streets have names and numbers, in fact Abu Dhabi has an American-style streetplan and is divided in zones and uniquely numbered sectors, but nobody uses these. In practice, people use the vernacular name that many major streets have (e.g. Electra, because there used to be many electrical shops there). In between the main streets there are smaller streets and cul-de-sacs and although these are all numbered within their sector and maps are placed at the sector entrances, these are not used at all. As there is no postal delivery in Abu Dhabi, everybody and all companies, government departments and institutions have a PO Box and this is also the address given in the telephone directory and in newspaper advertisements. The real addresses of shops etc. are given relative to supposedly well known locations and landmarks or even previous landmarks ("behind the former British Council"), which is really helpful if you are a newcomer.

Almost immediately after our arrival Riemke engaged the services of three estate agents to look for houses. We had been told that it would be difficult to find a villa or even an apartment, as most new arrivals come here during the summer period, so that they can enrol their children in a suitable school. However, within two weeks we were shown some eight villas that would have been suitable for us and fairly close to our budget. And we decided to rent a smaller villa in an attractive neighbourhood, i.e. populated by expatriates rather than nationals, about 5 km from the centre. The house has three bedrooms and two bathrooms and a small garden with a terrace and a carport. Also, there is a terrace on the roof. The muezzin of the nearby mosque, which we cannot hear very well anyway, are not very melodious but their calls for prayers are usually brief.

The civic administration proceeds here in stages. First, Maarten's residence permit needed to be sorted out and only then could Riemke's residence permit be processed. Without a residence permit you cannot get a driving license and without a driving license you cannot buy a car. Foreigners are only allowed one car per person. Both for her driving license and for her car Riemke needed to have written permission from her husband. Surprisingly, there has been no real problem with the fact that Riemke does not use Maarten's name and all her documents have been made out in her own name. We have by now obtained all the necessary documents as well as two cars: a 4-wheel drive Ford Explorer and a Mazda 323.

Within a fortnight of our arrival, we went on a weekend trip to Sir Bani Yas, an island some 150 km west of Abu Dhabi. This is a personal retreat of His Highness Shaikh Zayed, the President of the UAE and Ruler of Abu Dhabi, who keeps a private zoo there. We went there courtesy of HH and were housed in the guesthouse, which is a former dredging camp, because the island is being enlarged all the time. HH keeps a number of animal species on

the island, including several species of antelopes and oryxes, giraffes, ostrich etc. In addition, there are a great number of different trees grown. The water needed for irrigation is supplied from the mainland by pipeline and by local desalination. On the way back, the hydrofoil broke down some twelve miles out of Abu Dhabi and our party of some eighty people had to be rescued by the Abu Dhabi Marine Police, who came out with ten small boats. It was all good fun and the newspaper headlines the following day "80 rescued in mid-sea drama" were, well newspaper headlines.

Meanwhile, we have made some more trips, both with the Emirates Natural History Group and with others, including a short camping trip to a beach close to Dubai on the occasion of UAE National Day, together with a number of Dutch friends. Although there was not much wildlife we saw flamingos and along the coast there are now many migrant and wintering waders from Europe and Russia. All our camping equipment (camp beds, camping chairs, coolboxes etc.) from Oman has been pressed into service again but we have had to buy a tent, as it does not appear the custom here to camp in the open air. Fortunately, there is a camping shop in town, which sells a good selection of American Coleman equipment.

We also have rigged up our PC at home and have connected to the Internet through Etisalat, the Emirates communication authority. We find the improvement in telecommunications a great advantage and urge all our friends to try and get on the Internet as well. This is the more convenient because snailmail to and from the Netherlands is erratic and slow, between six and 28 days (our container took only 18 days to get here from Rotterdam by sea!). At home we have two phone lines and both Riemke and Maarten have a mobile phone. Maarten's mobile comes courtesy of ADNOC and Riemke's phone is there to be able to call in case of emergency, both in town, for instance in case one of us gets involved in an accident, and when on trips elsewhere. Mobile phones are a great status symbol here, one is not a real man without one, and it is the only equipment men are said to boast to have the smallest...

Saying farewell to Leiden

In 1989, when Maarten was asked to go to Petroleum Development Oman, his assignment was going to be for two years he was told. Riemke had at that time just obtained tenure at the Department of Political Science at Leiden University and her position had become half-time. Also, our son Jurjen was then just about to enter his final year at grammar school. Under the circumstances, Riemke did not feel inclined to resign her position and we did not think it would be a very good idea to enrol Jurjen in one of the boarding houses in The Hague to finish the Gymnasium Haganum grammar school. Therefore, Maarten went to Oman alone and Riemke rearranged her working schedule to work full-time for a number of months and then come to Oman for some time.

Since then, several changes have occurred in Leiden. Student numbers dropped significantly, partly as a result of the demographic development and partly as a result of the much stricter basic grant system in the Netherlands. Her professor had taken up the post of Director of the Netherlands Institute of Foreign Relations "Clingendael", close to our new house in The Hague and remained only for one day per week as a professor in Leiden. The Faculty of Social Sciences, which is one of the parents of Riemke's department (she herself was appointed in the Faculty of Law), had to reorganise. As a result of these developments, Riemke had not only fewer thesis students to oversee, but she also had to teach first year courses outside her normal sphere of interest. A number of staff close to her had left in the meantime or had been given different positions in the wake of the reorganisation. All in all, Riemke did not enjoy her work as much as she used to do and she had been considering her future in the Department. Finally, during last summer it became clear that the Faculty of Law would also have to reorganise and while there would be no compulsory redundancies, the prospects were unlikely to improve.

Therefore, when the possibility of Maarten's being posted to Abu Dhabi came up, we decided to go there together and Riemke tendered her resignation after having been in Leiden since 1984. Her colleagues were most sympathetic and were very sorry to see her go. Since she could only decide to leave when Maarten's posting was confirmed, her resignation came at an awkward time because the teaching schedules for 1997-98 had already been set. Riemke's colleagues organised a special farewell party for her with drinks at home with one her friends followed by a well attended meal. Riemke was very moved by all this attention and by the

many presents she received. She has written a numbers of letters to Leiden since arriving in Abu Dhabi and is now using the Internet to keep in touch with her friends there.

Sorting out home and garden, and establishing a new social network takes up most of Riemke's time at the moment. A new kitchen has been fitted, and taking one room at a time, things are taking shape. The garden comes next, preferably before Ramadan, which is likely to start at New Year's Eve. In addition Riemke has joined the local Outpost team, which collects and evaluates information for new Shell staff and helps them to settle in.

Saying farewell to Russia

Maarten's frantic travelling schedule of the end of 1996 subsided. He spent a fair amount of time lecturing at courses at the Shell Training Centre in Noordwijkerhout and updating the environmental management training contributions. In July he went back to the Vankor field in Siberia, which he had also visited in 1995. This time, he took part in a survey of potential oil evacuation routes. One possible route was from the Vankor field to the North, to Dikson at the mouth of the Yenisey River, from where the oil would be transported by ice-breaking tankers through the Arctic Sea to the West. The second to the South to connect to the existing Transneft pipeline system. In addition, a vegetation and soil survey was carried out in the Vankor field itself as part of the environmental assessment work. All in all he was there for two weeks, during which time he was some 50 hours on board of a helicopter, travelling up and down the Yenisey River. He enjoyed this visit very much and was impressed again by the vastness of the landscape. The Yenisey River delta is a lowland area and the tributaries are meandering endlessly before emptying themselves in the main river. Further to the South, where the tundra changes into taiga, the rivers are wider and at bends you can see a whole series of previous bends that have since been cut off. For Maarten it was a very worthwhile conclusion of his involvement in projects in the Commonwealth of Independent States and a nice farewell to all his colleagues in the different project teams.

While we looked forward to Maarten's posting to Abu Dhabi and felt that it was about time for Maarten to move from The Hague, he regretted to have to leave Shell EP's Health, Safety and Environment department. He had been there for just over a year and a half following the Shell Central Office reorganisation. While the travelling was arduous at times, he enjoyed visiting many countries again and seeing different operations. Especially the auditing and the running of courses had been very enjoyable. In addition, the new organisation made quite a lot of difference in the approach of the various subjects and in the relation between Central Office and the Operating Units (companies) around the world.

Sunny Spain

Maarten's parents proposed to us to join them on a holiday to southern Spain in April. They had discovered a small tour operator in Amsterdam, specialising in historical journeys. As we had wanted to go to southern Spain in 1996, this was a welcome proposal, especially as we did not think that there would be many opportunities to travel together with Maarten's parents. The tour group was very small, only fifteen people in total, including the guide, a historian of the Spanish Seminary of the University of Amsterdam and the tour director, who was the director of the agency.

Our journey started in Seville en then led us via Cordoba to Granada. In between we stayed a various other places and made day trips. The daily programme consisted of an introduction by the tour guide, followed by an excursion to the place of interest. Even though we were early in the season, there were already many tourist groups including a great number of French school classes, but it was nowhere really busy. For Maarten and to a lesser extent for Riemke, the history of Spain was a closed book and we found the trip very interesting and worthwhile. In addition, the company was nice, although we were the youngest participants by far. We certainly intend to go back to Spain some time in the future and shall include some natural history then, e.g. in the form of a visit to the Marismas of the Guadalquivir.

The National Trust

In 1997 Maarten was also due to retire from the Board of the Dutch National Trust, on which he has served since 1989. During his final year he was vice-president and secretary. In fact, he was just considering how he was going to fill his spare time after his resignation, when the Abu Dhabi posting came up. In the end, we had to leave for Abu Dhabi a month before his official resignation but we managed to join the annual excursion of the Trust's Council in the weekend before our departure. Following the Board meeting before that, there was an informal farewell party and Maarten was given a very nice piece of art to remember the Trust by.

With Maarten's statutory resignation, he is terminating a fifteen year long relationship with the Trust, which started with his election as a Council member in the District of Zuid-Holland in 1982. Both Riemke and he have really enjoyed this period, during which we made many good friends outside our usual circle. And as most Board members point out when they step down, the National Trust is one of the most interesting organisations to be engaged with. There is a very positive atmosphere between Board members and directors, which does not prevent the sparks from flying from time to time. We shall miss it and Maarten will have to find some activity in Abu Dhabi to keep himself occupied.

Abu Dhabi, December 1997

Riemke Riemersma and Maarten Smies