

1998: the year that was for Riemke and Maarten

A dry, hot and a wet, cold summer

There was probably no greater contrast this year than between the weather in Abu Dhabi and that in the Netherlands. We are both still busy getting rid of the cold that we picked up during a short visit to the Netherlands in the beginning of November. In September too we saw lots of water fall in the Netherlands.

Here the summer has been long, dry and hot. We are still waiting for the first rain, while at one time in November last year we needed wellington boots to keep dry feet at the vehicle registration office.

This year is of course characterised by the lasting low price of oil. We do not notice that much in our day-to-day life, but the building fever in Abu Dhabi has definitely come down and many building contractors are up to their heads in debt or have gone bankrupt. However, there has also been an extensive beautification programme of the city for the conference of the Gulf Cooperation Council heads of state in December. The Corniche has been rebuilt and all Ministries have been renovated.

The low price of oil has its first effects in supply contractors to the oil and gas industry. Dutch friends of ours lost their job overnight last summer, when their firm decided to discharge their most expensive employee, even though he had been the one who had made the important commercial deals. Our friends and we ourselves were really shocked by it.

Meanwhile it has become clear that all oil majors will shed considerable numbers of staff. Shell's exploration and production sector has just announced that all operating companies are reconsidering their staffing levels. For the time being it is not clear what this will mean for our many friends in Shell and other companies and indeed for ourselves. It appears that in Abu Dhabi National Oil Company it remains "business as usual" for the time being even with regard to the big investment projects that are in the pipeline.

Our hectic social life

In Abu Dhabi we lead a busy social life. Before the summer we took an Arabic language course for eight weeks and we are now working on the next course. Now we also learn to read and write, which is much easier for Riemke than for Maarten. In any case we hope that we shall be able to learn enough Arabic to be able to have a decent conversation with the locals when we are in the interior during the weekends. The big problem is that we have too few words and too few opportunities to practise.

The relative absence of cultural activities means that we try to grasp all the opportunities that arise. Before the summer we went to concerts, which the Abu Dhabi Concert Committee organises about once every two months. Soon after our return from leave we attended a performance of the "BBC Young Musicians 1997" and enjoyed the quality and the enormous enthusiasm of these young artists.

For the theatre the offer is mixed. Every year there are dinner-theatre productions by the British Airways Playhouse in one of the hotels. These are rather crude comedies, for which there is much interest: "tout" (expatriate) Abu Dhabi is there ! There appears to be less interest in more classical theatre. We went to a very good Irish company production of Sheridan's "The School for Scandal", the famous 19th century satire, for an audience of perhaps fifty. Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" attracted some 500 people in the National Theatre that could accommodate 2000.

We continue to be faithful visitors of the lectures organised bimonthly by the Emirates Natural History Group (ENHG) and we regularly take part in their field excursions. In the summer, Riemke took over the library of the Group from the wife of a Shell family, who was transferred. The library however is in storage and the work is therefore limited. That is a story in itself. The library was housed in the old, historical fort, right in the centre of Abu Dhabi. There was also a historical exhibition and a natural history exhibit made by Riemke's librarian predecessor. In the fort also housed the Documentation Centre, where Portuguese, Dutch and British volunteers translate old reports by the agents of the Portuguese, Dutch and British

trading companies, such as the East India Company, in the Arabian Gulf into modern English. These reports are virtually the only historical documents on the Gulf from those times. However, in the middle of the summer His Highness Shaikh Zayed, president of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Abu Dhabi, decided that the fort had to be vacated. It is to become, in the fullness of time, which may take some years here, a museum on the Al Nayan family, the ruling family of Abu Dhabi. And so literally from one day to the next the ladies of the Documentation Centre had to move to the National Archives. The ENHG was not offered any alternative accommodation for its library, laboratory and natural history exhibit. Fortunately, ADCO which is one of the ADNOC operating companies, stepped in with temporary storage but there is still no new accommodation in sight.

Riemke is, a little unexpectedly very busy in the Dutch community. She was going to be the editor of the newsletter of the Dutch Community Association here but ended up as chairperson as well. By implication she now belongs to this village's notables and to the coveted relations of His Excellency the Dutch Ambassador. For the first time in years, Riemke has been busy with Saint Nicholas. There are some thirty Dutch (an a couple of Flemish) children of susceptible age here and on 5 December Santa will come to Abu Dhabi especially for them. An occasion of such import that His Excellency will personally welcome him. In November, we came back from the Netherlands with a suitcase full of chocolate letters and other seasonal sweets. KLM delivered an order of seven boxes of Saint Nicholas delicacies such as gingerbread for sale to the Dutch community.

Working in a National Oil Company

Maarten is now a year and three months busy in Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC). That is a mixed blessing. On the one hand there is an enormous potential for environmental management improvement. On the other hand, ADNOC is incredibly hierarchical and bureaucratic and it takes an enormous effort to get things actually done. In some ways ADNOC is like Shell fifteen years ago. Convinced of its technical ability, which in many ways is of world class standard, and therefore convinced that things must be also all right when it comes to health, safety and the environment. These subjects are as yet insufficiently integrated into the line of management and continue to be delegated to HSE departments.

The interest in and motivation for better management of health, safety and environment come very much from the top of the organisation and are in part a reflection of the priority that the environment takes at the political level here. His Highness has put the environment high on his personal agenda. This represents of course his personal views of what needs to be done but that does not detract from convictions behind them. HH's programme is directed at greening the desert and at a certain degree of self-sufficiency with regard to agriculture. Along the roads many palms have been planted, forests have been planted and there is agriculture. Abu Dhabi city has many parks and much public green, irrigated by sewage treatment effluent, which is excellent practice. However many trees along the roads, the production forests and the agriculture are fed by groundwater. That of course is not sustainable and you may wonder about the purpose of forestry and agriculture, if their products cost a multiple of their prices on the world market. In practice much of the local produce is of insufficient quality for the local market and local products are likely to contain relatively high agrochemical residues.

In the ADNOC operating companies the pressure on health, safety and environment has come primarily from the private shareholders (the BPs, Mobils, Shells of this world). The Japanese shareholders are less keen, which is not that surprising. Japanese companies do not have a reputation for environmental management outside Japan. In addition, the ADNOC companies with Japanese shareholders operate concessions that the Western oil companies did not consider attractive at the time.

A central part in what is happening is the new environmental law for the United Arab Emirates. The Federal Environmental Agency must implement it and the permitting will be delegated to the governments of the individual Emirates. The Supreme Petroleum Council has insisted that ADNOC will become the regulator of the oil and gas industry in Abu Dhabi. In addition, companies and institutions with an environmental management system will be self-regulating in principle. Within ADNOC the Group HSE Committee will act as the permitting authority, following advice from Environment & Safety Division.

Maarten is therefore continually reviewing environmental assessments. In addition he has two major projects out for contract. The first is an integrated system of HSE rules and regulations, which should bring together best regulatory and industry practice. The second is the design, installation and operation of a comprehensive monitoring system of emissions and air quality for the whole of ADNOC. Both projects naturally require cooperation with all operating companies, which makes sense but is not easy as all communications go through the top of the organisation.

Gadgets for a modern life

Last year we reported on the role of the Internet in our communications with our nearest and dearest. Since then many of our friends have let us know that they too have access to the electronic highway. We think that we are able to reach about half of our friends and acquaintances by email. In the course of the year all Shell secondees in Abu Dhabi have been given a notebook PC and access to the Shell email system and the Shell Wide Web (Shell's Intranet). That is very convenient, because Maarten can now easily find out where his friends in the Shell system are to ask questions. The Shell Wide Web contains a wealth of information which is useful for his work. On the down side, he shall be able to see on the same system where staff are being shed, which is not so positive.

This year we used the Internet extensively for our holidays. A travel agency in Perth arranged all our accommodation and car hire in Australia after we had contacted them by email when friends of us in Perth sent us their brochure. That worked extremely well and it was fun to meet the lady who had done all the work in person when we finally got to Perth. Through the KLM Flying Dutchman Cyberwing we ordered free flights from Amsterdam to Frankfurt for our return journey to Abu Dhabi at the end of our leave and two return tickets Abu Dhabi – Amsterdam in early November to attend a party of the Dutch National Trust. We now have used almost all the KLM frequent flyer points that Maarten had accumulated during the many trips for his previous job.

On the World Wide Web we also discovered the existence of prepaid GSM phone cards, which enabled us to use our Emirates cell phone with a local number in Australia and the Netherlands. That is much cheaper than "international roaming", for which you have to pay in a hefty deposit in the UAE, and it is also cheaper than phoning from hotels. Besides, we could be reached in case of emergencies in the family. In the Netherlands the cell phone providers give you a phone number for a year. The validity of the number moves forward with your call credit that you upgrade with additional phone cards. In practice we now have a permanent mobile number in the Netherlands. Both during our leave in September and during our visit in November we used our phone extensively in the Netherlands.

Our newest electronic toy is a GPS receiver. We purchase a Garmin GPS III which has a map of the entire world. The map is of course not very detailed, but we were surprised how many roads and homesteads in Australia it showed. It also turned out to be a convenient tool to show us how far we had got during the long treks that we had to make on occasions. And as it could be powered from the car battery we did not need many small batteries to keep it running. We can put to good use in the UAE to mark attractive excursion destinations and find them back on future occasions.

G'day down under

At the end of July we went on leave for six weeks. For some years already we intended to visit Australia, as Maarten's successor in Oman had come from Woodside Petroleum. He has since taken early retirement. Maarten had visited him and his family after the environmental audit which he led at Woodside in 1996.

We knew that Australia is far too big to cover in a single journey and we decided to limit ourselves to Western Australia. Following advice from Perth we made a travel plan to visit three regions. After a weekend with our friends in Perth we took a hire car and travelled to the south west. This region sports beautiful coasts with a vegetation that strongly resembled the "fynbos" that we knew from South Africa, extensive hardwood Eucalyptus forests and vineyards. Because we were there in the middle of winter, it was not very warm, some twenty degrees during the day, and we also had some rain. For us that was great after Abu Dhabi. In one of the Eucalyptus forests a walkway had been built into the treetops, which was a

wonderful experience. Although we knew that the south west was beautiful, it was even better than we had expected.

After returning to Perth we got onto the plane to Port Hedland on the north west coast. Here we travelled through the Pilbara, as this region is called. We visited Karratha and the LNG plant of Woodside Petroleum which Maarten's audit had covered. And from there we went to Exmouth on the north western tip of Australia. After that we stayed for another couple of days in National Parks in the interior Pilbara. This is iron ore country and there are many beautiful gorges carved out in the mountains. There are several iron mines and most of the towns in the interior had originally been set up as mining company dwellings. It was striking to see how empty Western Australia is. It has about 1.8 million inhabitants living in an area of 2 million square kilometres. But 1.2 million of them live in metropolitan Perth. Except around Perth itself there are no dual carriageways. Many roads in the Pilbara are not black-topped. The two-lane coastal highway is a tarmac road but this is the main road for the entire region, along which the roadtrains (a tractor unit with three trailers carrying a 100 tonnes of freight) pass. On the secondary roads we often drove for an hour or more without meeting a single vehicle. And your mobile phone is pretty useless out there as there are too few customers on the roads to justify installing transmitter stations. In the Pilbara and not only there we were struck by the large numbers of dead kangaroos along the roads. We saw more dead than live ones. In the late afternoon they come out of their hiding and are run down by trucks and cars. As one park ranger said to us: "they have no road sense" (sic). Aussies do not regard their national symbol highly.

For the final week we took the plane to Darwin, the capital of the Northern Territory. Here we also visited some National Parks, among which Kakadu, the largest in Australia. It has been leased back from the Aborigines because it is part of Arnhem Land, which is aboriginal territory and not accessible without special permits. Beautiful extensive floodplains of lowland rivers with prehistoric Dutch landscapes. Magnificent birds and awe-inspiring crocodiles. Impressive aboriginal rock art with politically correct information for the public. The upland is savannah woodland and this was being burned. That made for a rather lifeless landscape, but one could see the emus at least. And at an empty picnic site we met two dingo's that came bagging for scraps.

From Darwin we flew again back to Perth, as we had not been able to book seats on the weekly flight of Singapore Airlines from Darwin to Singapore. As on the way up to Darwin we made a stop at Alice Springs and overflew Ayr's Rock, which politically correctly is called Uluru. That has also been leased back from the Aborigines and on television we saw how a constant stream of tourists is climbing up: to be on top of Uluru and then die ...

Although we covered all the really large distances by air and we stayed for two nights in most places, we nevertheless managed to cover over 7000 kilometres by road during our three week long trip. Fortunately that went well, we did not hit any kangaroos and even passed a breathalyser test, which in Australia may be carried out at random.

Abu Dhabi, December 1998

Riemke Riemersma and Maarten Smies