

1999: the year that was for Riemke and Maarten

Difficult times

We look back upon a difficult year, not so much for ourselves but for others in our circle of families and friends. Partly, this is a natural consequence of the fact that we all grow older. For both of us it means in particular that our parents are growing old and that of course applies to their entire generation.

It all started with an accident that Maarten's mother had when she fell from the stairs at home at the end of November last year. She suffered a concussion and a haemorrhage in the brain. She was in hospital for three weeks and then for another three weeks in a nursing home, before she had sufficiently recovered to return home at the end of January. And there she only progressed slowly to start with.

For us it was a frustrating time. We were in Abu Dhabi and depended on medical bulletins by phone and email. Should we go to the Netherlands, where we had just been for a week at the beginning of November ? (We did not go.) Afterwards we have been able to offer some assistance by providing accommodation in the sun, but we shall come to that later.

Riemke's mother went into hospital for a relatively minor operation at the end of May. But of course there were complications. Riemke went for a fortnight to the Netherlands expecting to be of assistance at home with her parents. But in the end her mother left the hospital when Riemke had already returned to Abu Dhabi.

She came home to learn about the tragic death two days earlier of the chairman of the Dutch Community Association in a traffic accident. A young man with a young family, with whom Riemke had been on the committee of the Association for a year and a half. It came as an enormous shock to the Dutch community and we are not over it yet. Fortunately, we keep many good memories of him.

Just before we were going on leave, we learned that one of Riemke's uncles was terminally ill. The prospects were not clear at the time and eventually he died in November. We said our farewells when we were in the Netherlands in September.

During our holidays, on our way from Kota Kinabalu (in Sabah, Malaysia) to the Netherlands, we heard that Maarten's mother had had another accident at home and that she was in the Burns Hospital at Beverwijk. So that was the first place we went, after we had touched down at Schiphol. Again, Maarten's mother recovered but it did not help her general physical condition. His parents' world has shrunk considerably since last year.

Finally, when we were back in Abu Dhabi, we heard that one of the members of the Dutch Community Association had been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour while on leave in the Netherlands. Again somebody with a young family.

The reflection on social life

The death of the chairman of the Dutch Association and the departure from Abu Dhabi of another committee member, meant that Riemke again spent much time on the Association. In March she had stepped back as chairwoman to be the secretary as well as editing and publishing the Newsletter. Since this summer she is also temporary chairwoman again and the committee suffers from its small number of members. At the same time there are many activities and that implies lots of work for the committee members that remain. This year we had two visiting artists, totally different but both quite nice.

By contrast, Riemke's librarianship of the Emirates Natural History Group does not involve much. Since the beginning of this year, the books and other material are parked with the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency. That is a combination of a number of ecological research institutes. A new department has been added to it that will be responsible for the implementation of the Federal Environmental Law, which has finally been signed into force in October.

Riemke has just started taking golfing lessons. We are not quite sure yet how this infection has come about. Besides she is a member of a book club of American women, which is nice

for us as we do not know contemporary American literature. Also, she plays Mah-jong with another group of women. And she has continued to operate in the information network for Shell families. Together with her activities to bolster her physical condition, it means that she has a busy schedule.

Our further social life has not changed much. After two years in Abu Dhabi we have developed a regular pattern. Twice a month the Natural History Group has a meeting and in the following weekend an excursion. In May Maarten has given a lecture and slide show for the ENHG on his environmental work for Shell in Siberia in the years before we moved here. There are concerts and theatre productions that we go to if interested. And once a month we have dinner with the other Shell secondees in ADNOC. That was a rather large party this year, because ADNOC and Shell did a combined study of the possibilities to develop sour gas fields here.

A job with ADNOC and another with Shell

As part of Shell's renewal all Shell staff in Abu Dhabi have been to the "Leadership and Performance" course. This is a worldwide Shell programme. In addition they have worked on a number of subjects outside their normal working hours with the ADNOC Group companies. Maarten took part in a working group on technology acquisition to leverage maintenance of Shell's business interests in Abu Dhabi and to create new ones. He also took part in another group working on the application of Shell's statement of general business principles. Finally, he contributed to the management system for health, safety and environment that Shell Abu Dhabi is introducing.

This last one has some special aspects, because most Shell staff do not work for Shell but for one of the ADNOC companies. However, they are not formally employed by these companies. In emergencies Shell Abu Dhabi will therefore have a role to play for these people. All in all Maarten has spent quite some time on Shell business.

In ADNOC work is pretty difficult. Maarten's projects have stranded in various places and he is now busy to get them on the road again. It is not entirely clear what the causes have been, but it is better not to speculate here. In some ways Maarten was back where he started two years ago. It is all very frustrating and he is not enjoying work.

In March a UAE national was appointed manager of Environment & Safety Division. Maarten's previous boss, who is seconded by Mobil, is now an advisor in the division. That meant two captains on the bridge and this did not contribute to the quality of the working environment. The department is severely understaffed and the work just does not get done. In November the manager was reassigned and in his place has come a young, dynamic UAE national. This provides a much better basis for the future.

Guests

This year we had again a number of people staying, mostly family. In February Riemke's twin sister and her brother-in-law came for two weeks. After two times here, they have seen almost everything that is memorable here and we do not expect them to come for a longer period of time next year. Much to Riemke's regret of course, as her sister and she are very close. So close that their spouses cannot hope to come between them.

Soon after that we had Maarten's parents with us for four weeks, which included Eid al Adha (the public holidays at the height of the Mecca pilgrimage). After all their troubles at end of 1998 and early this year and as their trip to Naples last Christmas had fallen through, we thought it a good idea to offer them our marvellous spring climate to recuperate. It was nice to have them with us for a longer period of time. Maarten's mother found it difficult to get used to new circumstances and it would have been a pity if she had had to go back and spend eight hours on a plane after a week of adaptation and just one week in the sun.

We believe that it has been a good four weeks for both of them and we certainly enjoyed it. They could sit in the sun in our garden, we often went out for meals and in the weekends we made trips to various parts of the UAE. This was helped by the fact that Maarten had extra days off to mourn the death of Sheikh Issa of Bahrain. Similarly, the deaths of King Hussain of Jordan and King Hassan of Morocco resulted in days off for mourning but these events happened when we had no guests. However, it was quite a different visit from the one they

made to Oman in December 1991. Then we could take them camping at the turtle beach at Ras al Had and halfway up the Jebel Shams, the highest mountain of Oman, where we saw the tropical night sky revolve above our heads.

In November we had the light and sound technician of our second artist staying with us. In the past the Dutch Community Association could get hotels room cheaply, because one of the Committee members was a director of a company here, which had a contract with a hotel. Now visiting artist are again staying at home with members. Which gives such a visit a special flavour. For the hosts it is nice to meet the artist and her or his company in an informal manner. The guests get a much fuller picture of Abu Dhabi and expatriate life here.

A fantastic holiday

After last year's trip to West Australia and the Northern Territories we wanted to do something very different this year. After some consideration, south-east Asia emerged as a possible destination. A number of our Shell colleagues here have worked in Brunei or Sarawak and after having heard their stories and advice, we decided to travel to Sarawak and Sabah (Malaysian Borneo). Somebody recommended a travel agency in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak. Borneo Adventures turned out to have a very good website and we made a selection of the tours they offered. We then wrote them an email and in six days time everything had been arranged.

As in 1998, we had divided our trip in three parts. The first ten days we operated out of Kuching, we then spent a week in Miri, from where we made a trip into the interior to Mulu and the final week we were in Sabah, notably in Kinabalu National Park.

From Kuching we made day trips as well as a two-day and a three-day trip to all sorts of places, mainly National Parks. We had booked a journey for two persons and every day we had our own guide and often also a driver working for us. We visited the Sarawak Museum, the Sarawak Cultural Village (an open air museum, where one can find the most important types of tribal longhouses and other regional houses) and some National Parks. Our three-day trip was into the interior. After an hour and a half by longboat we arrived at a guesthouse that Borneo Adventures had built next to a longhouse. This was quite a good arrangement, because the tour guests did not need to stay on the communal veranda of the longhouse, as was the case with other tour operators. Both the villagers and the tourists kept their privacy. The villagers were employed to do cleaning and cooking in the simple guesthouse and as guides and boatmen for the excursions. In between the various trips we stayed in a modern hotel in Kuching, which is a very nice and friendly city.

Sarawak has had three white (British) rajahs (kings). The first one came in the middle of the last century and battled against the pirates at sea and against the head-hunters in the interior. He then at his own request was made rajah by the Sultan of Brunei. The last rajah, they were all members of the Brooke family, resigned in 1945, when Sarawak became a British Protectorate at the end of World War II. In Kuching they built a fort and later a palace.

In Miri we visited two National Parks, of which one (Niah) with a large cave, where birdnests were collected as well as guano from the swifts and the bats. The National Parks are eminently accessible but generally very quiet. The notable exception was Bako National Park on the coast near Kuching. You can only get there by boat and there is a constant stream of visitors for longer stays as well as daytrippers. At Bako we saw proboscis monkey ("orang belanda" – Dutchman – they are called in Bahasa) extensively.

From Miri we travelled by air to Mulu National Park, where we also visited caves. In contrast to Niah, where there have been prehistoric dwellers, the caves at Mulu have been uncharted until the 1970s, because the locals did not enter them for religious reasons. In the Mulu caves there are some three million bats living, which leave the caves at dusk. This is a spectacular view, clouds of bats streaming out of the caves, which you then see flying round against the evening sky. Specialised bat hawks try to obtain a meal from them.

Back in Miri we spent a morning at Sarawak Shell to visit one of their environmental staff, whom Maarten had got to know in 1996 during his presentation to the introductory course of Exploration and Production. He also has known the head of environment at Shell in Lutong for years.

We spent our final week in Sabah. Four days in Kinabalu National Park, home of the Mount Kinabalu. Here we immersed ourselves in the montane rainforest. Our guide from Borneo Adventures in Sabah was very friendly and knowledgeable, as the other three guides had been. He also knew his plants and animals well, which was a plus for us. In Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah, we visited the museum, which was very interesting just as the Sarawak Museum in Kuching had been. However, we found Sabah a much more Third World country than Sarawak. But everywhere the people were very friendly and never pushy and eating in the open air in the many food courts was sublime. We could wring out our shirts everyday, but we had one of the best holidays of our life.

From Malaysia we went to the Netherlands for two weeks, where we had exceptionally good weather. Again, we were fortunate to be able to use the guest quarters of friends of ours in Oudewater, almost in the centre of the country. With them we had lovely days and evenings and we made a bicycle ride with them through Holland's Green Heart. We even dashed off to Germany for a couple of days to visit friends of ours just outside Cologne, whom we had not seen for many years. They had recently come back from a posting in India.

Home again in Abu Dhabi, Riemke remarked in the first afternoon: "Somebody is singing outside !". It was our local muezzin calling the faithful to prayer. We had quite forgotten: welcome back, Alhamdulillah !

Abu Dhabi, December 1999

Riemke Riemersma and Maarten Smies