

2000: the year that was for Riemke and Maarten

That time again

Yes, it is that time of the year again. And here in Abu Dhabi we are also enjoying the festivities of the Holy Month of Ramadan. Ramadan is a good month, because by law the working day is shortened by two hours and once you are a week into it, few nationals are fit enough during the day time to do any work. So, there are plenty of opportunities to get a number of things off your chest, for which you have not found time before.

Of course, Ramadan is a month of fasting and spiritual cleansing, but the nights are so long and so much food is being prepared, that many people in the UAE are gaining weight rather than losing some. It is amazing to witness the shopping for food just before and during Ramadan and the women have a hard time, cooking all day and serving food (almost) all night.

This should be our last message from Abu Dhabi. We have been here for three years now and we have decided that we really need to move on. For social reasons we would rather stay a bit longer, because we have made many new friends and really enjoy being here. However, workwise these have been a frustrating three years and Maarten feels that he must go and do something else before his mental health becomes permanently impaired. In addition, the longest time he has ever been in a single job has been for three years and four months. So, by the time we get away, which will probably be some time next summer, he will have hit a record of almost four years.

We entered the new millennium in Fujairah on the Gulf of Oman. On CNN we saw the grandiose New Year festivities to the east of us, but when midnight reached the UAE, we counted seven red flares over the harbour area, listened to ten minutes of car horns, and that was that.

We spent a number of weekends in Fujairah this year, as it provides the best access to that part of the country and most notably for us to that part of the Musandam peninsula that is on Omani territory, but freely accessible from the Emirates. We went across Wadi Be'a as it is called, five times with different people and each time we were enchanted by the magnificent mountain landscape and the beautiful remains of farms terraced against the mountainside. It is difficult to imagine that people were living here regularly until well into the 1960s.

During the National Day holiday, which falls on 2 and 3 December and this year on a Saturday and a Sunday, we were in Fujairah for a four-day weekend courtesy of Shell Abu Dhabi. This was a special reward for efforts in extra-curricular activities for Shell undertaken last year. Again, we made a good trip with visits to an alternative fossil hunting place near Al Ain and to Khor Kalba, a tidal inlet on the Gulf of Oman with an abundant mangrove ecosystem, which harbours an isolated population of the White-Collared Kingfisher, a subspecies unique to that area. Although, there have been many attempts to get Khor Kalba turned into a proper nature reserve, it is feared that it will fall victim to harbour development activities.

HH Sheikh Zayed returns home after medical treatment

In the UAE and especially in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi there has been much concern about the well being of HH Sheikh Zayed, the Ruler of Abu Dhabi and President of the UAE. HH is an old man, his official age is about 85, although he is also said to be more than five years older than that. His health was deteriorating rapidly early this year and just before the summer, he moved to Cleveland in Ohio where he is a regular client of a well-known hospital.

Eventually he underwent a kidney transplant there and then had a long period of recuperation. Meanwhile the UAE was awash with gossip about his state of health or lack thereof. We have been truly and utterly amazed by all this gossip and by the parties involved. Fortunately, HH recovered and was able to return home on the advent of Ramadan and just before National Day. The people of the UAE were overjoyed and on the night of HH's return there were extensive festivities along the Corniche in Abu Dhabi that lasted well into the night.

HH is literally the Founding Father of the UAE, of which he became the first President when the country was formed in 1971. Few people can think of the UAE without him and we are extremely fortunate that he is still with us, as nobody really knows what would happen if he were no longer there. This of course is another topic of conversation and gossip, which we shall not amplify.

Plenty to do

Riemke continues to be steadily although not gainfully employed. She is now the vice-chairman of the Emirates Natural History Group, her gender preventing her from becoming the Group's president, because of the necessary annual contacts with the Group's patron, HE the Minister of Education and Science (a nephew of HH Sheikh Zayed).

She remains the backbone of the Dutch Community Association and a major member of Outpost Abu Dhabi, the committee of Shell partners that provide information to prospective comers and introductions to Abu Dhabi to those who actually arrive. The Shell Family Day was one of the Outpost activities, even though the committee members do not feel that it is their job really.

Riemke's golfing has virtually stopped, although she is considering taking it up again. But she still goes to some fitness classes as well as her book group and a weekly Mah Jong group. She has plenty to do.

The growing Shell family

When we arrived here in October 1997, there were about twenty Shell families in Abu Dhabi and all but three of them on secondment to ADCO (onshore exploration and production) and GASCO (gas processing). Now we have about double that number, with a substantial increase of staff directly employed by Shell Abu Dhabi, in part attached to a joint Shell-ADNOC project. In addition, there are now five staff seconded to ADNOC itself, including Maarten of course.

This increase in staff came most clearly to the fore at the Shell family day, where there were more than a hundred people. This is an annual event aimed at providing some additional social glue besides Shell Business TV sessions for the men (there are of course no women on secondment to the ADNOC Group) and the occasional reception in honour of visiting Managing Directors. The Shell wives enjoy more or less regular coffee mornings, mostly to meet new arrivals and to say good-bye to families who are leaving.

So, Shell has been quite successful in Abu Dhabi, because many of the new secondees have taken positions that secondees from the other industrial shareholders occupied before. Of course, this is part and parcel of the courtship that all oil majors extend to the major resource holders, i.e. the countries in the Middle East. Unlike Abu Dhabi, most of them are fortunately not in fine fettle and they need foreign direct investment to make the most of the development of the resources they hold. Shell has been successful in Iran and is in the waiting room with projects in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. But whether Shell will be able to develop real new business in Abu Dhabi remains to be seen because Abu Dhabi does not really need external capital. What they do need however, is quite a lot of managerial and technological support to ensure that Emirati nationals can take over the positions now taken by expatriate direct hire staff.

This is quite a sensitive subject because many of the direct hire staff, mainly "non-national" Arabs such as Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqi, Egyptians have been here for a very long time already. Many cannot even go home, because they have no home to go to. While the underlying idea of emiratisation is fine, it will very difficult for some of the people who are targeted to be replaced by nationals. Fortunately, the economic upswing in Egypt and the political change in Syria may make things easier. Also, as long as oil prices stay high, there are opportunities for these people elsewhere.

This year Maarten completed twenty-five years of service with Shell. Although he is regional and not international staff, he will have been in foreign postings for a little over ten years by the time that we leave Abu Dhabi. And this does not count the enormous number of days that he has been working in many different other countries from The Hague. His country tally stands at over forty and only South America and Antarctica are mostly terra incognita to him.

We basically expect to go back to the Netherlands when we leave Abu Dhabi, at least initially. The primary reason for that is a contractual one. Maarten went to Abu Dhabi in the old Shell days, when the company reigned supreme over its staff. His contract of employment, which is with Shell in The Hague, stipulates that Shell International Exploration & Production will give him a job when his assignment to Abu Dhabi comes to a close. Currently, Shell operate an open resourcing system, which means that staff have to apply to vacancies posted on Shell's internal website. However, this does not affect Maarten's contractual position.

The other reason is that there are few places where Maarten can go given his age and job seniority. Shell in The Hague is a more likely station, either in the corporate HSE group, from where he came, or in one of the present big development projects, which are run out of Rijswijk initially.

We ourselves would prefer to go back to The Hague in order to be closer to our families. Also, our house is beckoning as our tenants are due to move out by April of next year.

Guests

This year we had fewer people staying with us. Some friends of Riemke came for a week at the end of February. And we were fortunate to be able to spend Eid Al Adha in March with our hosts from Oudewater, who kindly lend us their guest apartment when we are in the Netherlands. We made a four-day round-trip covering Al Ain, Fujairah, the Musandam and Ajman. Unfortunately on the second day the battery of our car gave up (not bad after almost three years in this climate) but we managed to keep the car going until the private sector opened again after the holiday. And thanks to our Ford service manager in Abu Dhabi, we got a new battery at their Sjarjah branch for free, as this was amazingly still covered by our special three-year guarantee.

Riemke's twin sister also came again but this time on her own. Riemke took her to sample expatriate life, which led to considerable confusion in her various clubs.

Over Christmas and the New Year our son Jurjen will be visiting us. And we are really looking forward to that as we have not had time to talk to him properly since he was here at the end of 1998.

Another fantastic holiday

Among the many memories of our stay in the United Arab Emirates will be the fantastic holidays that we enjoyed. After Western Australia and the Northern Territories in 1998 and Sarawak and Sabah (Malaysian Borneo) in 1999 we went to the USA this summer. This is certainly a destination that we did not contemplate to be on the menu while in the Middle East. But as fate has it, it happened.

Prime movers were that a friend of Maarten's, an ex-Mobil staff with whom he had worked in Kazakstan, retired to Jackson in Wyoming, about one hundred kilometres south of Yellowstone National Park and just south of Grand Teton National Park. She invited us to come and visit her and enjoy that part of the Rocky Mountains.

And then in February we met a biologist from the US National Parks Services, who was visiting the UAE to lecture at a desertification conference in Dubai and to look for biological soil crusts in the Omani and UAE deserts. Maarten enjoyed one of her presentations and subsequently we both joined her for a field trip to the Liwa desert to find that all fine-grained surface sediments had been mined as road-fill or for agricultural purposes and that all biological soil crusts had disappeared. She suggested that we would visit her in Moab in Utah and see what soil crusts are all about.

And since Wyoming and Utah are adjacent and sport an abundance of National Parks and National Monuments, as we found out the excellent US National Parks Service website, we decided to go Westward Ho !

Of course, we did not do that straightaway but first spent a fortnight dusting off family and friends in the Netherlands. And then we flew to Salt Lake City to pick up a hire car to drive to Jackson. As last year, we went on the Internet and sent weekly email bulletins to a selected audience of family and friends.

We really had a great time, especially because we had so much access to local knowledge. In Wyoming we went on a one-day class at the Teton Science School to learn about the local geology and how this has formed the landscape of Grand Teton and Yellowstone. In Utah our friends took us to sites with petrified wood and to a dinosaur dig on Utah State land, where thirty skeletons of which ten species new to science, had been dug up recently.

For the rest, we made an easy tour along the many National Parks and Monuments, which are all extremely well documented. We purchased a National Parks pass, which gave a free access for a whole year. And of course we bought a large number of books and other memorabilia, notably three relief maps, of Grand Teton, Yellowstone and the Moab area. In fact, we had so much and so unwieldy material that we sent some of it separately back to Abu Dhabi, as we could not carry all of it ourselves.

On our way back from the States, we went for a few days to Houston to visit two of Maarten's colleagues, who had gone back to their parent company, Mobil, now ExxonMobil. They both found that the Mobil in Exxon is very silent indeed.

Abu Dhabi, December 2000

Riemke Riemersma and Maarten Smies