

2001: The year that was for Riemke and Maarten

Back in The Hague

After four years this message comes again from The Hague. When we left Abu Dhabi at the end of August we hoped that with some luck we could be back in our house in Hanedoesstraat in the second half of September. That was too optimistic a wish, and we managed that towards the end of October. By that time Maarten had already left for a long business visit to Nigeria. But now we have settled and are again enjoying our house to the full.

We were very pleased to be invited by one of our neighbours for a party in September. There we met almost all inhabitants of the two times seven houses that were built in 1993-1994, of which ours is one. Most of our neighbours are like us the original buyers and it was a pleasure to meet them again.

From April 1998 until the end of May of this year our house has been let. Fortunately our experience of house letting does not need to be included in the book of horror stories. On the contrary, we have had the pleasure of having exemplary tenants, who have looked after the house and the garden very well. When they moved out at the end of May, this presented a good opportunity to let the painters and the decorators in. That happened in June when we were on leave in the Netherlands for some weeks. And in September a freshly painted and decorated house awaited our arrival.

In September we were free as Maarten still had five weeks of leave to consume before going back to work on 1 October. If that had not been the case, our seafreight would only have left Abu Dhabi by the end of September. And probably we would then have had to stay in a hotel for almost two months rather than the four weeks that Riemke was in it. The hotel stay was not too bad because the hotel was close to the centre of The Hague, close to our house where we had to be regularly anyway, and close to Shell's Central Office. And friends of us from Abu Dhabi now live in an apartment next to our hotel.

During our days off we saw enough rain to make us wonder why we had left Abu Dhabi just when the temperature there was going down. While sniffing and coughing we tried to get used to Dutch weather again. In our first weekend in The Hague we went to visit the Panorama Mesdag, which was also next door to our hotel. Although we have been living in The Hague more or less permanently since 1981, this was Maarten's first visit. An extensive restoration of this huge circular painting, which shows Scheveningen at the turn of the 19th century has saved this monument of a bygone age for the future.

On 1 October our container arrived in Rotterdam, 33 days after we had driven our new car as our last household item into it at Port Zayed in Abu Dhabi. Our seafreight to Abu Dhabi in 1997 arrived there after only 20 days. Our moving agents had told us two weeks earlier that they were going to apply for an import license. With some effort we had managed to deliver to them the enormous bundle of papers required for the license by the end of September. The import license is purely a paper exercise, primarily based on the inventory made by the movers. Our agents told us that this normally takes a week but officially the Customs are allowed up to six (!) weeks to issue these licenses. In our case it took them almost three weeks. Although our container came from the Middle East (after all this was after 11 September), the Customs fortunately did not think that it contained anything that was suspected or forbidden. And therefore our freight was released immediately with only an inspection of the car.

By that time Maarten had already been in Nigeria for two weeks, commuting between Port Harcourt and Warri. A surprise welcome of the HSE Department of Shell International Exploration and Production. Originally it was even the intention that Maarten should go to Nigeria on the first Sunday after he started work, but he managed to delay that by a week in the (idle) hope that by that time our freight would have been released.

In the end Maarten was in Nigeria for four weeks to help Shell Nigeria to get the reporting of their environmental performance data in order. And he went back again to Nigeria for another two weeks in December. He hopes that his present job will not gain turn out to be one with

extensive travel, which often means taking flights in the weekends and missing out on his spare time. Whether he will succeed in not having to do that is at present not clear yet, as he is scheduled to go to Nigeria again for four weeks in January and February for the final phase of the project. Meanwhile he has also been engaged again for environmental management input into projects in the former Soviet Union.

Early in December Riemke brought her Volkswagen Passat for an inspection and test to the Department of Transport testing station at Schiedam. The technical inspectors turned out to be very friendly and helpful and they approved our car for use on the Dutch roads. This also means that we can now replace our Abu Dhabi export plates by Dutch numberplates. And that will an end to the surreptitious looks (is that perhaps Osama bin Laden) at our car that have amused is during the last two months.

No successor in ADNOC

Immediately after our return from leave in 2000 Maarten started preparations to resource a successor for his position. With the departure in the previous summer of the first manager of the ADNOC HSE Department it was also a good time to do some organisation development, which could well be combined with making new job descriptions and developing other ideas.

Maarten informally made the rounds along the industrial shareholders (BP, ExxonMobil, Shell and TotalFinaElf) to gauge their interest in possibly supplying the new corporate environmental management advisor. While they were all interested, they were also all busy with their own business because at that time the oil price was about 25 dollars a barrel. Last spring a few candidates were proposed but ADNOC did not think that any of them had sufficient experience to take over Maarten's job.

In May ADNOC eventually decided to start looking for candidates in the open market. However advertisements in papers in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, Australia and of course the Middle East only yielded ten applications but no suitable candidate.

It was however clear that Maarten was going to leave regardless of a successor. He had already made clear in the summer of 2000 that he was going and his departure had been agreed. Also, he had never been in a job for four years yet and also from that point of view it was really time to move on.

Saying good bye to Abu Dhabi

We have four intensive years in Abu Dhabi under our belt. That became clear when Riemke started to think about invitations to the party on the occasion of her 50th birthday. We realised that that party would also be a sort of leaving party, especially because we would leave in the summer when there are few expatriates in Abu Dhabi. Because of our social engagement in a number of partially overlapping circles the number of potential invitees rose rapidly.

In the end we gathered some 70 people under the starlit sky round the outdoor bar of the Beach Hotel. That really brought home to us how many friends we had made since our arrival in October 1997. And we became aware that we would have to say good bye to many of them shortly, even though a number of our friends had already left Abu Dhabi themselves.

It was a very special occasion and Riemke's Dutch friends and the Beach Hotel contrived to make into a really Dutch Sarah party. We often think back about with great pleasure.

Fortunately we managed to make a good number of weekend trips in the UAE. During last Christmas and the New Year Jurjen's visit was a good occasion and again over Easter when he was back together with his friend Carolyn. We made trips that we knew already and but that continued to be fun. During our Easter trip to Kalba, Fujairah and the Musandam we visited the bullfights in Fujairah. This sumo wrestling for bulls takes place along the entire Arabic coast of the Gulf of Oman. When we lived in Muscat, we had seen the stadiums but never the fights themselves. Now we even witnessed two bulls deciding that they did like to wrestle each other and that together galloped out of the ring.

Another excuse to make trips was they we needed to run in Riemke's Passat. As we wanted to take this car back to the Netherlands we needed to have covered 6000 km with it and that

was difficult for Riemke to accomplish on Abu Dhabi island. Therefore we made another number of trips that did not require 4x4 capacity. It was also an amusing experience because when we needed to fill up, it always took some convincing to get the service station attendants to give us diesel rather than petrol.

In this final year we spent the summer in Abu Dhabi for the first time. Leave planning in ADNOC's HSE department required Maarten to do the honours over the summer months. Fortunately, this summer was relatively mild and the humidity stayed rather low until well into August.

Riemke used the slack season to engage a dressmaker to make her a number of outfits. It was a project that had been in the wings for some time but that now was undertaken with a vengeance.

We did not think that our departure that had been known already for such a long time, would such a last-minute affair requiring so much red tape. It was as if we were the first Shell family ever to leave Abu Dhabi, as we had to chase everything. In the end we left without any official notification of where we were going and what our entitlements were. In November it even became clear that Maarten was still on the expatriate payroll as a secondee in Abu Dhabi.

HM Ambassador in Abu Dhabi honoured by giving a special farewell dinner. We have had plenty of contacts with him over the three years that he has been in Abu Dhabi, not only because of Riemke's involvement in the Dutch Community Association but also privately. But it was an honour nevertheless.

A (Royal) Dutch treat

By now Maarten has been without a proper job for almost three months. While Shell International Exploration and Production had undertaken to remain responsible for Maarten's career when his posting to ADNOC would come to an end, that obligation turns out to be an empty one.

Of course Maarten has been on the lookout for other suitable positions himself starting from January. Besides some informal contacts he has had to rely on the Open Resourcing System that Shell has introduced since he left The Hague but all his applications have come to nought.

His present position with the HSE Department of Shell International Exploration and Production is a temporary one and intended to enable him to find a new job for himself for some more time. It is unclear how long the position will remain and what will happen if Maarten does not find another job himself. It appears that loyalty is only expected from staff and that the Company does not take into account the efforts that people have made for the Company.

Hopefully we shall have more positive news next year.

The Hague, 21 December 2001

Riemke Riemersma and Maarten Smies