

2002: The year that was for Riemke and Maarten

On the axis of evil

Just as we thought that we had left the Middle East, we are back there again. Since the middle of April Maarten has been at work as the corporate manager for Health, Safety & Environment and Sustainable Development for Shell in Iran. That is of course on the other side of the Persian Gulf, but definitely in the Middle East. Riemke came to Tehran in the middle of May. A niece of ours, who is studying in Amsterdam but is doing an industrial training assignment in Rijswijk, is staying in our house in the Hanedoestraat in The Hague. The house is ready for us to move back into when things get too hot under our feet in Iran.

Maarten had applied for this position at the end of November of last year, while he was working on a project in Nigeria. In December the Country Chairman of Shell Iran phoned our home, when he was in the Netherlands for a visit. Maarten was at the time back again in Nigeria, but Riemke was told that people were very pleased with Maarten's application. It later turned out that he had been the only one to apply. It took some time to sort out the financing of the job and therefore it was April before everything had been cleared. Maarten got his visa on a Friday to fly to Tehran on the Saturday, just in time for a management away-day the next Monday.

At that time we were still busy unpacking in The Hague, and we did not feel like packing everything up again. In addition we felt that the general situation was rather uncertain following 11 September 2001. Since we had almost a double set of everything, we left most of our stuff behind in The Hague. That turned out rather useful as houses in Tehran are normally let furnished.

After Riemke arrived in Iran she started house hunting. Soon we found a beautiful apartment in Farmanieh, a suburb in the north of Tehran. That became only available in early July, which suited us fine because it was only then that our sea freight arrived in Iran. We really love our apartment and we have already had some guests. The first one to stay with us was a Dutch communications consultant, who was a trainee in Maarten's department in the Shell Nederland Public Affairs department. We had kept in touch during the fifteen years that have since passed. Later, Riemke's former professor from Leiden University, who is now the director of the Netherlands Institute for Foreign Relations in Clingendael in The Hague, came to Tehran together with a colleague. We even arrived on the same flight. They were staying in the guesthouse of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is close to where we are living and they came for dinner one night.

Immediately after our arrival in Iran we had little opportunity to go and roam the country and Riemke was back in the Netherlands over the summer. However, we have just made a trip to Isfahan, together with a family member of a Canadian colleague from Abu Dhabi, who was spending her sabbatical leave in the Middle East and who stayed with us for a week. Isfahan was a very special experience. The most important monuments in the city, which has been the nation's capital a number of times, date back to the 17th century. A number of them are around the central square, where the former shahs of Persia had a palace, a public and a private mosque built. Not far away from it, but separated by 5 km of bazaar, is the original Friday Mosque, of which the oldest parts date back to about 1000 AD. The mosques around the central square have exquisite tile work that has withstood the times. Especially the interior of the private, royal mosque is a wonder to see. While in the public mosque sounds made under the dome echoed several times before dying out.

We were in Isfahan during the holy month of Ramadan and there were almost no tourists. It was a privilege to be almost alone in these magnificent monuments. The local population is exceedingly friendly towards tourists. Men in the street bid you welcome to their city; students practise their generally already very good English on you.

Our new parental status

In recent years we have not written much about our son Jurjen. It is not that we did not want to write about him but he has not been part of our normal domestic scene for a number of years now. Since two years he has had a relationship with an American woman, Carolyn. They met in the Anglo American Theatre Group (AATG), an amateur drama group in The Hague, where Jurjen has been a member of the cast for a number of years. Carolyn is an IT engineer, who worked for the European branch of her American company in Nice. She was doing a large project for Dutch KPN Telecom, for which she was in The Hague for a longer period of time and she joined the AATG to keep up her dramatic talents.

At the end of October Carolyn and Jurjen got married in Lacey in Washington State in the USA. Carolyn now works from home for a small IT consultancy company and Jurjen is in the process of applying for his residence and work permits. Jurjen's application for a visa to go to the States as a husband-to-be was quite an involved affair. In the end they managed to get it just in time and he flew from Amsterdam to Seattle on a Friday to marry on the Sunday. Photos can be found on http://www.pbase.com/romybrock/smies_hastings_wedding.

We were the only wedding guests from the Netherlands, but Jurjen's friends had organised a surprise farewell party for him on the eve of his final departure. For this they had mobilised (old) friends from everywhere and it was a great occasion for Jurjen.

We had expected some difficulties getting into the United States because of all the Iranian stamps in our passports. But fortunately the Immigration officer in Seattle was not paying much attention. He just looked at the main page of our passports and then put his stamp on an empty page.

Because Jurjen was rather late, we took the opportunity to visit Mount Rainier National Park and Mount St Helens National Volcanic Monument, both at about an hour's drive from Lacey. The volcano of Mount St Helens erupted in 1980 and covered a large area around it with hot gases and ash. After just over twenty years the ecology has recovered quite well. Of the original mountain only half a ring remains, within which a new volcano cone is forming. As always we were quite impressed by the visitors centres in the National Parks.

Our working life

Maarten is very busy at work. His position has been vacant for almost a year, so that there is some catching up to do. However the business development projects of Shell in Iran are slow to materialise. As Maarten already had security in his portfolio besides HSE and sustainable development, he has also been given office services to look after. In August he also made a short trip to Japan for a prospective project.

Shell has its office on the upper floors of a new office building in north Tehran, close to one of the urban expressways and the current terminal station of the north-south line of the Tehran metro. To Maarten's delight there are peregrine falcons living on the office building, which he sometimes can see as they fly past his windows and that he can hear calling continually.

The Dutch Embassy asked Riemke to carry out an asset inventory for them in preparation for an audit. For that job she has been paid in kind in the guise of a number of green bottles from the South-African Cape Province. In addition she has been hauled in to teach art at the British (and Dutch) school and she has just now been busy working on surprise packages and poems for the St Nicholas party.

Although party life is rather restricted, we have been to a number of concerts from jazz to classical Persian music. And there are regular dinner parties for the many business visitors from Shell to Iran. In June we made a short trip to the Emirates, where Maarten had to go on business. We spent the weekend looking up old friends in Abu Dhabi. The Dutch ambassador even organised a dinner party for us on that occasion.

The healthy life ?

Life in Iran has less and more attractive sides to it. One of the disadvantages is that alcohol is strictly prohibited with the exception of wine for the Armenian churches. The good part is that it means fewer calories and as a result there is now a lot less of Riemke and Maarten than around the flesh-pots of Abu Dhabi. In the summer and well into the fall there is an enormous variety of fruit to enjoy.

Another less attractive aspect is the air pollution in Tehran, a city of more than 14 million inhabitants. Downtown Tehran lies at an altitude of 1000 metres and to the north there are the Alborz mountains. This gives rise to the classical conditions for the formation of photochemical air pollution. The mountainside traps the exhaust emissions from the cars and the brown haze covers the city. In the winter the emissions from the heating add to the mix.

Because traffic in Tehran is a nightmare, we have for the first time in our life a car and a driver. For this we pay a charge in the form of a percentage of Maarten's salary but that does not detract from the luxury. Driver and car are for both Riemke and Maarten and if we are abroad, our driver looks after the plants and checks for burglary. Our apartment has a burglary alarm, which is a good thing because breakings-in are the order of the night. From that point of view an apartment is a lot safer than a detached house anyway.

The expatriate community in Tehran is relatively small. Shell has four Dutch and one British staff; all the others are Iranian. However, the Dutch Embassy is quite large because of asylum and visa issues. Everybody travelling from Iran through Schiphol requires a visa under the Schengen rules. KLM has a golden line between Amsterdam and Tehran because of all the Iranians travelling between Iran and the United States and Canada. Most of these people have double nationality, because quite a number of Iranians have left after the revolution.

Another disadvantage is that women need to cover up in public. In winter that is not such a big deal but it is definitely a summer irritant. And since you also need to wear a headscarf in a restaurant, which is rather a nuisance, there is not much of an incentive to eat out. Visitors tend to be invited home for dinner, where you can dress as you like.

In Tehran the dress code is a bit more relaxed in the sense that many women wear an unlined coat ("manto"). But in the streets one sees also a lot of women in the long black chador. Nails, lips etc. are often painted. This is not really what the clergy wants to see but nature appears to be stronger than faith. Men can nowadays go outside in short sleeves. In the past one would be running the risk of having one's arms painted by the religious police. And neckties are now quite accepted, although not very popular as they are considered a sign of Westernisation.

Of course political developments in the region remain uncertain. We shall have to see what actually may happen.

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Riemke Riemersma and Maarten Smies