

Newsletter Number Twenty Seven - December 2009

I know, I know. It has been over a year since my last newsletter. It appears that the interval between musings extends as time goes by. Those of you on [facebook](#) would however have kept up with the occasional posting of photos and status updates. For those on twitter – sorry, I'm not a twit! I guess social networking is starting to take over from emailing and certainly brings the death of letter writing to anyone under 40...ish! So after a dose of guilt administered by a number of friends I have penned a 'Readers Digest' version of 2009. I know you will be bombarded by impersonal "this was our year" emails and letters, but hopefully I got to you before the other lazy buggers!

I have decided for this edition to share my happenings by theme rather than chronologically – it's just easier that way and allows my mind to wander in a haphazard manner. To really enjoy this note I suggest you pour a drink of your choice (mine is a vodka) and enjoy the journey.

Family Comes First



During the course of the year I have seen quite a bit of the extended Emdin & Bennun clans. In May the family gathered to celebrate **Dad's 70th birthday**. Quite a milestone when you consider the trouble that he got into as a youth, packed up his family and shipped us to the other side of the world from South Africa and only until recently retired from all those dangerous high rope activities of Scouting and SES. It was a wonderful occasion enjoyed by everyone who was able to attend. The one thing that the day certainly highlighted was the strength of our family. Michael and I used Dad's birthday as an excuse for extended holiday in Australia – more on that later.



The advantage of having an airline employee as a partner is that I can access cheap standby tickets to most parts of the world. This has allowed me to recently make two trips to Johannesburg to see my grandparents. This first was in July with Michael, the second earlier this month to join Mum, my sister Tali, Uncle and friends to celebrate my grandmother's 83rd birthday – not that you would know it to look at her!



Despite being spread around the world we still manage to stay in touch (thanks to Skype).



Surviving (another) Shell Shake Up



2009 has proved to be quite volatile at Shell. Who would have thought that 12 months ago we would all know about credit crunches, toxic debts, sub prime mortgages and credit default swaps. The upshot was that like all businesses Shell has had to respond to tough market conditions and cut costs. I won't go into details here, suffice to say that Shell has reduced staff numbers by between 20-30% depending on which paper you subscribe to.

For me this meant having to reapply for my own job which was being 'readvertised' on local terms & conditions. Basically this means same job for less pay. Now, I had the option of heading back to Australia and bringing my Shell career to an (early) end or staying in Holland. On the positive side all jobs were now open and available to anyone who wanted to apply. For me this presented an opportunity to move into a position which was more in line with what I really enjoy – Organisation Effectiveness – in one of the Shell businesses rather than consulting to third party companies. So, from 1 January 2010 I'll be moving into a new part of Shell supporting senior leaders establish and deliver on one of our new businesses, Projects & Technology. If you are really interested in finding out more you can check out the [corporate web site](#). The down side of all this is that after nearly 8 years I will have to jump off the expat train (well pushed off) and live like everyone else on a local Dutch salary...oh well, the fairytale had to end at some time.

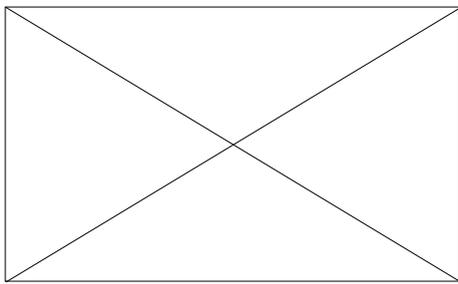
Another Property to the Portfolio



As a result of moving from being an expatriate to local terms and conditions, the rental subsidy that I get from Shell also comes to an end. Now in The Netherlands the cost of renting is quite expensive when compared to mortgage repayments. In fact home owners are able to claim back part of their mortgage through the tax system. Thus, wanting to maintain a certain quality of housing and making the most of the generosity of the Dutch government, Michael and I have bought a house in Amsterdam. We are currently in the process of finalising the paperwork and should be moving in by 1 May 2010. For those who have visited us in the past, I am afraid to say that there is no canal view or roof top terrace, however there is still a spare bedroom (which will double as the study) and a lovely garden area where we will be hosting many a bbq. Finally don't worry – the décor in the pictures is that of the current owners, not Michael and I!

Amsterdam Gone Mad

Earlier this year Michael, myself and a few friends gathered on the Noordermarkt in breach of the law to protest against what must be some of the stupidest local council regulations proposed. In summary Cafes can have a terrace outside, with chairs and tables, where guests can have a drink. The rules say that *standing* outside with a drink is not allowed, you must *sit* on one of the chairs of the cafe. Standing outside without a drink, for example to smoke (which is not allowed inside any more because of the smoking ban), is allowed. So to prove the absurdity of these rules, we joined a few thousand locals to 'break the law'. Below is a youtube video of the event. You will also get a chance to enjoy some classic Dutch music.



The councilor who wanted to bring in the ban has also (I think) banned gas heaters outside bars as they are bad for the environment.

Holiday travels

Now for the best part of this little read – my travels over the last year, and what a year it has been. Over the last 12 months I have touched almost every continent apart from South America and Antarctica. Michael and I will make up for that by heading to Argentina in February next year. Below is a summary of this years travelogue and links to a selection of photos.



Viva la Cuba

There is nothing like starting the year with a revolution so Michael and I spent 2 weeks in Cuba. This has certainly been one of the more fascinating places that I have visited. Havana is truly a city where time has stood still. Unfortunately large parts of the city are crumbling and getting to the point beyond where many of the buildings can be restored. The country is also one of have and have nots. The economy works on two currencies – pesos (CUP) for the locals and CUCs (Convertible Cuban Pesos) for the tourists. With the CUC being worth more than the local peso, locals will do anything to get their hands on CUCs. I was amazed by how many well educated university trained people are working in the tourist industry as cleaners, waiters and guides as they earn more in tips than if they were working as engineers or economists. The result is a type of internal brain drain. The government some time ago allowed individuals to open their houses to tourists and provide a mix of accommodation and meals. I never thought it would happen but by the end of the holiday Michael and I were both saying that we would be happy if we didn't eat another lobster for quite some time to come...

Due to bad storms our luggage did not arrive on the same flight as we did. The result was that we needed to buy some new clothes, in Cuba, on a weekend. When buying a new pair of sandals/thongs/jandals we experienced shopping Cuban style. At random intervals the shop assistants vanish into a small room, pretend to be busy then return with you shoes. At the same time a small crowd gathers at the door to the small room hoping to be served next! We were not sure when our bags would arrive so took a chance and headed to the airport the next day hoping our bags were on the next flight. Amazingly we were able to walk straight into the luggage claims hall explaining what had happened – no id required. According to the airline system our bags are still missing.



We travelled to the west coast of the country to enjoy a few days of scuba diving. I must say that Maria La Gorda is one of the best dive spots that I have been to. The water was crystal clear, the corals and fish wonderful and the crowds non existent. What is fascinating is to speak with people about the US embargo and in the impact that it is having on everyday Cubans. Whilst many hope that things will change as a result of President Obama coming to office, the reality is that this will take time. What we became aware of was the change happening within Cuba – especially the opening of the economy to local businesses and access to services like mobile phones and internet. I guess a change of leadership is making the difference. As Fidel has said “once a revolutionary always a revolutionary”.

There is so much more I could write on Cuba but I will let the [pictures tell the stories](#).

However, of there is one thing that Havana is known for it is the old American cars. Below is a selection of what we saw. It is amazing how these guys keep them running. Some look as though there is no longer any body work, just 79 layers of paint! Click on each car for a better quality picture (these wilopen in a new tab or window).



Would someone please tell them communism is dead!

Although not holiday travel I spent about 5 weeks working in Romania in a town called Ploesti. The region is the oil capital of Romania with a number of refineries in operation. I was leading a consulting project at one of the less than pretty refineries! Unfortunately the rest of the town was not much better. Someone had forgotten to tell the locals that communism was dead and that they could bring some colour to the drab exteriors.

The service at the hotel we stayed at typified Romania. Until recently people have not been expected to think or take initiative but rather just follow orders. Hence when items at the breakfast buffet (read table with crumbs) start to run out you have to constantly ask to have them replenished. Over the 5 weeks I had a running battle for fresh fruit salad. On one occasion I was presented with an orange as a substitute. Amazingly the restaurant manger explained, in front of the hotel manager, that the reason why there was a substandard breakfast was because there were not enough guests staying the hotel and that it was the fault of the hotel manager.... gotta love the east bloc! I only wish I had some [photos](#) of this wonderful place.

I still call Australia Home

As I mentioned earlier, during May Michael and I headed down under for an extended holiday of Australia. In planning the trip we decided to spend time in places that neither of us had been to, as well as a few familiar spots. We started our trip with a week of rest and relaxation in Port Douglas which gave us great access to the Daintree Rainforest (the elusive Cassowary) and Great Barrier Reef. From Cairns we flew to Alice Springs before driving to Ayers Rock - a word of warning; you can't take a hire car along the Larapinta Drive from [Hermansburg](#). After the red centre we flew to Sydney for Dad's birthday in the Blue Mountains before a detour to Melbourne and the Great Ocean Road.

Now I could try and share with you all 678 photos we took, but instead offer a selection in the [attached gallery](#).

Zanzibar



Given that I had spent little time at home during July and August, Michael and I decided that we would get away for a week and spend some time in the sun to celebrate my birthday. Originally we had planned to head Syria and Lebanon – we had even bought the Lonely Planet guide book! Much to my mothers' relief we felt that getting visas was going to be too much of an issue so started to consider Malta, Cyprus and finally landed on Zanzibar – as you do. Main reason was KLM had a deal in points to Dar es Salaam.

After flying into Dar es Salaam and enjoying a night at the newly renovated Holiday Inn we headed to the old airport which now services domestic flights. Now for those with a fear of flying we recommend that you take a boat. For us our departure was delayed when we had to disembark from our first 12 seater due to technical difficulties. An hour later a replacement plane arrived from Zanzibar to take us on the 25 minute flight across the water. After a taxi ride from the airport through the markets, police stops and some pretty less than appealing scenery we arrived at the Imani Lodge, a lovely guest house oasis. Despite the end of Ramadan festivities taking place across the park we were both in bed by 8:30 and in need of some major sleep.

Monday the 21st was my birthday and it was a wonderful way to spend a birthday walking through the town and markets of Stone Town. The history is both exotic and horrific at the same time given that the island was a major trading post for the Arab slave trade. Whilst walking around it is easy to notice that at one stage Zanzibar was the capital of the Omani Empire given the fusion of colonial and Arabic architecture.



If there is one thing about Michael he is not shy in taking photos of the locals. It must be that Dutch charm, and yes it does exist. Through out the day we meandered through the streets of the town, markets, fish markets (where the cats looked like they were not making the most of what was on offer) and parks. For those planning a trip a day in town is more than enough. However the highlight of my day was watching Michael dancing with three lovely little girls aged probably between 3 and 6 at the local neighbouring disco. Besides he proving that white men can't dance to African beats these girls could certainly move.

Tuesday we made our way to the east side of the island with a stop on the way to see the famous Red Columbus Monkeys in the forest. Our guide was one of the more fashionably dressed park guides I had ever seen, wearing a hijab and black & silver sandals more suitable for the beach. We stayed at Coral Rock lodge in Jambiani, which is away from the back packer lodges. The lodge is a series of bungalows and a restaurant set right on the beach. Of course we had a deluxe bungalow, rated so as it had air-conditioning and a tv with DVD player. The only problem was that the tv didn't work as a tv and you could not see the screen if you were lying on bed due to the foot board of the four poster bed. Nice touch though.

If you walk around outside of the accommodation you end up in the local village surrounded by wonderful people who with a smile who genuinely welcome you. After about 15min we had a band of young kids following us around the town. At first glance the place looks poor and run down, and it is. However it is also a fully functioning community with amenities, schools and Internet cafes. There is also a thriving seaweed collection industry which allows the women to earn money and independence.

All in all this was one of the most relaxing holidays we have had. Unfortunately the [pictures](#) do not do justice to the real thing!

Well that is it for this extended edition. I will try and be a little more vigilant next year and frequent with my updates. I'm looking at possible moving to a blog format which is much easier to put together than these HTML pages. For those of you who are on facebook and not yet "my

friend", seek me out and make a request.

So as the weather gets colder here in Amsterdam and heats up at home, let me wish you all a wonderful festive season and hopes for a sensational 2010.



Click on my (soon to be ex) house to go home