

New Year's Greeting 2012

From Doreen and Sjoerd Nienhuys

Dear family and friends,

Think something good and think something glad,
Think something crazy or something even mad,
Do something fun, do something mystic,
But no matter what, be optimistic!
Good health and have no fear,
For the coming New Year!

The New Year has begun; the holiday season is now a thing of the past. Everyone (hopefully) had a good time and now looking forward to what 2012 has in store. But first, a little look back to 2011. It was a good and fun year for us, with lots of travelling and new experiences.



In February, we were already on our first trip to Tamil Nadu in India where Sjoerd assisted with the setting up of a biogas and sanitation project. He had to assess two proposed locations for the construction and work out details for a combination urine-separation toilet, kitchen waste treatment, biogas production and waste water purification; thus, everything Eco. A locale NGO had already established a communal dry composting toilet complex in the same village where now one of the integrated biogas installations had been proposed. In addition, we participated in the opening ceremony of a Urine Bank where urine from the dry-composting communal toilets will be deposited, stored and later processed into dry fertilizer. After working out detailed plans, in the end it was decided to wait until the end of 2011 before proceeding further, after the upcoming elections because public funding might change. Doreen tagged along because Tamil Nadu is famous for its many elaborately decorated Hindu temples, similar to what we saw for the first time in Jaffna (northern Sri Lanka). The Tamils in Sri Lanka have their origin in India.



Our journey began Tiruchirapalli (or Trichy, each city is called differently than what's on the map), a large typical Indian city with garbage everywhere, especially in the drainage channels. Surprisingly, there are waste collection points, where first free-roaming cows would gather for their daily meal before the garbage collectors came along. The electricity fell out daily and so everyone – households, offices and shops – has a generator. What a racket and stench when they were all turned on. There is an incredible amount of traffic – cars, three-wheelers, buses, bicycles, scooters and motorcycles – all constantly honking their horns. Added to the chaos are the poor pedestrians trying to manoeuvre through the moving traffic because there are no sidewalks. Where sidewalks once existed have now been taken over by retailers expanding their shop or used as parking space for the countless number of motorcycles.

One afternoon we had some free time, so we hailed a 3-wheeler and headed off to Sriangam Island in the centre of town to visit the Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple, a 14-17th century temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. The temple has seven prakarams (concentric enclosure walls surrounding the sanctum sanctorum) with above each gate a high gopuram (tower) lavishly decorated with figures and animals. We were allowed to climb up onto the roof of one of the buildings for a fantastic view of the entire temple complex. This is the largest functioning Hindu temple in the world; Angkor Wat in Cambodia is even larger, but non-functioning. In the distance, we could see the gilded dome of the sanctum sanctorum where inside there is a reclining Vishnu image. Unfortunately, non-Hindus are not allowed inside. Like all Hindu temples, our shoes were deposited outside before entering. Wow, the sun made the concrete, stone and sand extremely hot, like walking barefoot in a frying pan. At least the grounds were reasonably clean . . . for Indian standards, that is.

After a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and a banana, we stepped back into a 3-wheeler and headed off to the nearby Thiruvanaikaval Shiva Temple (2nd century AD). A laughing Brahman priest with a Buddha (beer) belly – actually more like a hairy gorilla belly – took us under his wing and guided us around. But first, a white ash tikka from the laughing Brahman to bless and welcome us. The sanctum sanctorum was off limits for us. Tamils have very dark brown skin. So, with our pearly white faces, it was quite evident we were not Hindus. Even if one has converted to Hinduism, admission to the sanctum sanctorum is prohibited unless you can pass as a Tamil. The "baby wish tree" (banyan tree) was something new. Women worship the tree for fertility and hang small wooden cradles or tie strips of cloth to the branches. The lingam plays an important role in Hinduism and almost every temple has at least one; this temple had two large lingams. The first was partly submerged in an underground spring in a sanctum and represented God's incarnation as Water. Standing at the door, we were allowed a peek inside. A bit further was the second lingam, even bigger. A spiritual leader was performing a puja while the many female spectators, all with well-oiled, shiny black hair braided to their waist and adorned with flowers, sang the litany from a prayer book. Unfortunately, our holy man needed to return to his little sacred temple to give out tikkas and blessings. Before departing, he told us to wait around because the Shiva idol procession would take place soon. In the meantime, we tried to have a look at the Akilandeswari idol (goddess Parvati) in a side temple. Tooters and bells heralded the arrival of the little procession – a group of worshipers following a float on top of which was a silver Bull Shiva statue, draped in a red cloth and adorned with garlands of flowers, from the sanctum sanctorum (seen it anyway!). The entourage made a circle around the main temple and then eight men raised the thick, heavy poles of the platform with the Shiva on top onto their shoulders and entered the sanctum sanctorum. One last white tikka from our holy guide, a donation given and our extraordinary visit was over.



The Trichy Rock Fort, on top of the world's oldest type of granite rock (same as found in Greenland and the Himalayan Mountains), is reached by 344 steps carved into the rock. Halfway along the route is the Pallava cave temple with beautiful images carved into the rock and ancient inscriptions dating back to the 3rd century BC. By a viewpoint, we met a family making the journey to the top with their baby, so tiny that we thought the baby was only 1 month old, but she was actually 6 months of age. Doreen was asked to kiss the baby and Sjoerd had to hold her – for good luck. The Uchchipillyar temple on top of the 83 m (272 ft) high rock is dedicated to Ganesh. At the entrance, we had purchased a puja card. After handing over the paper, the holy man asked our names, mumbled something, waved a bowl in front of the Ganesh idol adorned with a silver breastplate and draped with an abundance of marigold garlands, placed a white ash tikka on our forehead, put some marigolds and fragrant leaves in our hands and then asked for a donation. "A donation? We just gave you the pre-paid puja card." "Oh that," said the holy man, "that's for the government." Okay, another donation for the entertaining ceremony. A circle around the idol with beautiful views over the city and then back down. Moments later we saw the temple helper carrying the silver Ganesh breastplate down the steps, obviously only on show during special hours of the day.



Our vacation started the next day, a tour with a private driver, Ramalingam. Ram showed us not only the most famous temples on our itinerary, but much smaller, very interesting village temples and everyday life of rural Tamil Nadu as well. En route to our first destination, Madurai, we stopped at a family-run brick-making factory; a small village temple where sacrifices to the gods were made in the form of brightly painted terracotta animals (horses, oxen and elephants); a Jain cave temple with beautiful rock paintings; and lastly, a look at three people making rope from recycled plastic agricultural bags along the side of the road.



By this time, Ram began to get tired. First, he almost drove into a motorcycle and then, just in the nick of time, he was able to swerve around a woman who was walking on the road. Literally, only inches away and that only because both of us suddenly cried out – Sjoerd a warning and Doreen a gasp of horror. It is hard to judge when you should say something because each country has its own driving habits, very different from at home. We knew it was a habit to beep the horn constantly, but we were uncertain whether it was customary to drive so close to pedestrians or other vehicles. No matter what, this was way too close and could have been fatal if we hadn't reacted; Ram had not seen that lady at all. The reason he was so tired turned out to be that last night there was a huge party in his family's house in Madurai because Ram was to get married in April and the soothsayer had determined 21 April to be the most auspicious day to marry. So, he went to bed too late, didn't get enough sleep because the party went on into the wee hours of the morning, and then he had to get up early this morning to drive to Trichy (3 hours), pick us up and now drive back again to Madurai. Fortunately for everyone, no accidents that day.

Elections were soon to be held in Tamil Nadu and everywhere hung ridiculously big posters, especially in Madurai. When we made this remark, Loekie, our guide for the day, explained that many of those posters were not for the election propaganda, but actually wedding announcements! Looking more closely and, indeed, pictures of the upcoming bridal couple, parents, brothers, sisters, relatives and friends along with the date when the marriage would take place. Quit funny really, especially when the bridal pair on some of the banners didn't look all that happy! Teasingly, we asked Ram if he was going to have a mega poster. He laughed and very shyly replied, "That's only for very rich people." He was a nice boy, always with a big smile, a good sense of humour, courteous and good-natured, especially after a good night's rest!



The photo left was taken in the museum located in the Hall of 1000 Pillars in the Meenakshi Amman Temple in Madurai. The statue is made of one piece. If a person taps on one side, the other person can hear, with an ear against the other side, a clear, almost musical sound.



In Kanadukathan, we visited an old village temple. Ram had come to this temple for the first time with his mother when she made a temple pilgrimage trip a few years ago. So few tourists come here. The same ritual, shoes off.

With it being another beautiful, sunny day in India, walking barefoot on the cement floor was like walking on red-hot coals and there was not a speck of shade. Quickly, we made a beeline towards the row of large, colourful terracotta horses, a fascinating sight. Continuing towards the temple entrance, Ram stopped and informed Doreen that she couldn't go inside because women

weren't allowed. Now, that was a new rule! Sjoerd walked on taking pictures of the terracotta horse; Ram disappeared in the opposite direction, with an apology that there was no shadow; and Doreen was left standing there, hopping from one foot to the other, her bare feet frying. After a few minutes, Ram returned. Doreen could proceed. Doreen first thought that he meant proceed to the only bit of shade by the first temple. But no, Ram had told the holy man that Doreen was an "old lady" and thus was given permission to enter the whole temple complex. Now, Doreen didn't know whether she was glad that she could continue or insulted because of the reason! Laughingly, we entered the temple complex. When we saw a few other "old ladies" walking around, we concluded that it wasn't about women in the temple, but menstruating women. We then remembered, during our tour of Rajasthan in northern India, seeing signs by some temples that menstruating women are not allowed inside. Perhaps this is the case here as well. Naturally, Hindu women would comply with this rule, but how can they control foreigners? Anyway, it was a fabulous temple with so many terracotta horses. Before departing, we received a white tikka from the holy man and he received a donation; everybody happy.

A blessing at a 7th century Pallava cave temple. After buying a leaf garland, we were allowed inside the sanctum sanctorum – not sure if it was because we purchased the garland or there were no other Hindus or tourists around to see us enter. Inside was a reclining Shiva statue. The holy Brahman took the leaf garland and hung it on an idol. Walking first to the left, then to the right, he said a little prayer to one idol after the other. Next he picked up a devotion oil candle and held it out to us. Placing our hands over the

flame, we then brought our hands to our face. After that, Ram received a little oil in his cupped hands and dribbled the oil over his head. Hmmmm. Interesting. Luckily both Ram and the holy man immediately understood that the oil-in-your-hair treatment went a bit too far for us and with a smile skipped that part of the ritual. The following – holding a silver bowl for a few seconds above our head and eating some of the same kind of leaves as our garland – went according to the ritual. A white ash tikka on our forehead and the blessing was completed.

Passing through a region with many cashew trees, it went without saying that when we saw some roadside stands selling the nuts, we needed to stop and investigate. Behind the little stands were shacks where whole families from grandparents to little ones were sitting on the ground in the shade of the trees processing the cashews to be sold. Plucking the fruit from the tree, shelling, dry roasting the nut along with the hard inside shell, breaking the charred black shell, picking out the nut, sun drying, removing the thinner peel, sorting and packing. Now we understand why cashews are so expensive; it's very labour intensive to make them edible. Naturally, we couldn't leave before buying a few bags. Later, we had to chuckle when we saw that the plastic bags were cleverly packed with beautiful whole cashews on the outside and the centre filled with broken pieces; sold of course for the more expensive "whole cashews" price. No matter, they were delicious, whole or broken pieces.

Driving along the small, narrow roads, we got to see the "real India" – the poverty; small dilapidated houses with palm-leaf roofs; little old crooked men and women walking behind their herds of goats; children going to school, half of them without shoes, but laughing; playing children; young people sitting under a tree playing an old game with stones; carts loaded with hay being pulled by oxen and a cobbler replacing worn-out ox shoes; a pottery maker; laundry being washed in the river and dried on the banks; villagers bathing in the local pond; little temples on the side of the road under a tree; and local tea shops. We also saw several plots of land planned for new housing in the middle of nowhere. Apparently, the government plans to relocate people living along the old roads so they can be widened. These new sites have no water or electricity, nor jobs in the neighbourhood. No one will be eager to relocate to such remote sites of their own free will.

The roof of the sanctum sanctorum of the Chidambaram temple complex is covered with gold leaf. Ram had organized a temple guide for us – Ramesh. Both Ram and Ramesh had warned us not to give money to the Brahman priests because all 309 of them take the money, put it into their own pockets, eat themselves full and do absolutely nothing for the temple. That was evident to see, garbage everywhere (one of the dirtiest temples so far) and all the Brahmans with fat bellies. The tour began by having a look at the five big Rathis (floats) outside, followed by the hall of 1000 pillars and the holy water tank. The tank was big, but so dirty with a film of fat floating on top; the result of the ghee and oil used in the daily pujas in the temple being swept over the floor and via a channel deposited into the water tank. There were actually some fish swimming around in the black water, saved from being caught and eaten because they, too, are sacred due to the deposited fat, oil and water used in the pujas. If that wasn't enough, people actually bathed in that filthy water before going to pray in the temple, yuck. A stroll around the sacred tank maybe wasn't such a good idea after all – trying to avoid not stepping in the shit from dogs, birds, monkeys and even humans was quite a challenge.

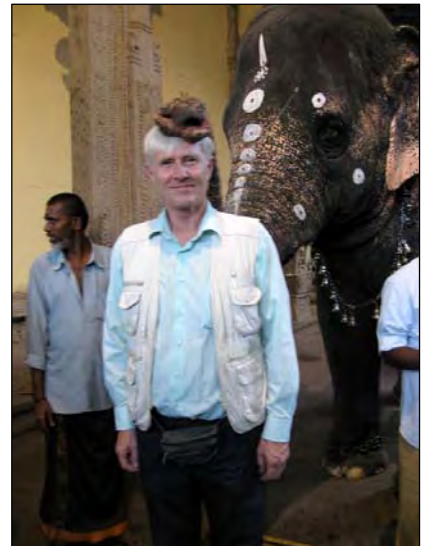


A Sadhu, not a Brahman priest

That all said, what was great about the Chidambaram temple was that we non-Hindus were also allowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum and have a look at the jewel-covered statue of Lord Shiva as the cosmic dancer Nataraja. Pity there was so many decorations, flower garlands and silk scarves hanging on the idol that you actually couldn't see the jewelled statue! There was an extensive puja held by the dancing Shiva with a crowd of devotees participating. Big towers of devotion candles were lifted and large circles made in front of the idol, once halfway between us spectators and Shiva and twice close by the idol. Then a hard clang of a bell and everyone began to cheer, arms raised up in the air, then silence as the Brahman priest gave a longish sermon – a captivating and quite lively spectacle, you can't help but to get caught up in the magnetism of the ritual. Afterwards everyone received a tikka – we included. When the Brahman brought out the tourist donation book, Sjoerd said, "We've already given at the other temple." The Brahman was satisfied with that answer and we gave him the usual tikka price donation.

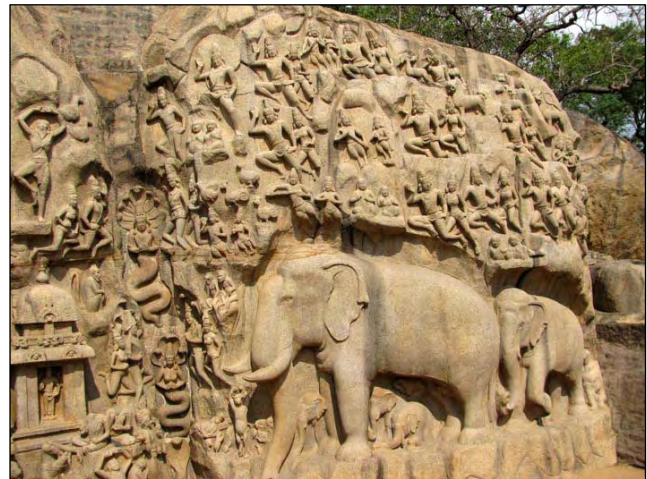
Along the temple wall was a man with two fortune-telling parrots. Now, this we had to see. The parrot owner put a stack of thick cards on the ground, opened one of the cages and the parrot strolled out. The bird began to remove the cards one by one from the pile and lay them aside. When he got halfway through the pile, he gave the card to the man, received a peanut and returned to his cage. With Ramesh as a translator, Doreen's future was read – a long, healthy life and if Doreen has or starts a business, she will become very rich. In addition, if she gives some donation to a temple at home, her life will be even better. Now, that was good to hear. Too bad the man sat next to the public defecation field because it stunk terribly.

At some temples, there was an elephant. If you held out a coin, the elephant would pick it out of your hand with his trunk and then give you a blessing by placing his trunk on top of your head. What a laugh. Naturally, Sjoerd also got a blessing when he offered the elephant a delicious bunch of bananas!



When we arrived at the Ekambareswarar Temple, it was just closing for the midday break. Many temples in India close from 12.30 to 16.00 hrs, but for a small fee, plus a little extra for two cameras, we could still come into the complex for a quick look around guided by the Brahman temple guard. The inner temple was closed, but for that price, we were taken to a very big, old mango tree. Very special, but unfortunately, we had to walk barefooted through the temple garbage dump to get there. Under the tree were a few small *nagar* (snake) statues. Our Brahman guide didn't accept our standard donation for the red tikka and asked for ten times the amount. Sorry, then nothing. Here, too, the Brahmans seem to be notorious for asking for money because on the way out, we spotted a sign by the closed temple: "Tourists, beware. The temple is free. Do not give money to people who ask for money."

Our tour ended at the fantastic Mahabalipuram temples, a UNESCO world heritage site near Chennai. One of the most interesting sights was the Descent of the Ganges (also called Arjuna's Penance), a beautiful, huge open-air granite bas-relief that depicts an episode from the Hindu epic. The carving in the monolithic rock measures 29 m (95 ft) long by 13 m (43 ft) high. Very impressive, the largest in the world?



Tajikistan

Tajikistan in April ~ Our itinerary was planned so we could visit several villages en route from Dushanbe to Khorog and assess the progress of the project, look at the demonstration thermal insulation applications and ecosan toilets in three of the five districts of the GBAO. The road over the

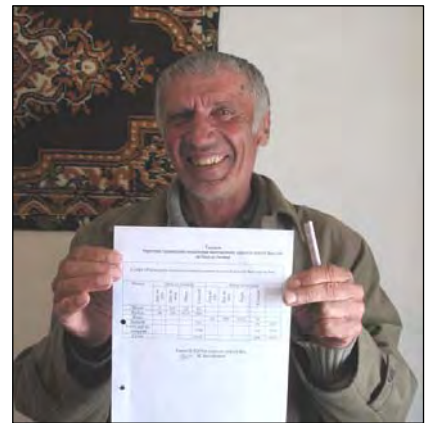
pass after Khatlon (halfway to our first stop) had worsened, but on the positive side, the temporary loose rattling metal bridge made of pieces of rusted old scrap metal had been slightly improved since our previous trip. Ten hours later, we reached Darwaz district. The next day we visited a few schools – the children all neatly dressed and patiently waiting in a straight line to greet us. One school received ecosan toilets as a demonstration unit, another wall insulation, the next water supply, etc. In Zingizog village, we were welcomed with two big round loaves of bread with "welcome" baked on top in dough; one loaf had a cup with salt on top, the other a pot of yogurt. The girls were dressed in pretty summer dresses, their best. There was music and dancing. We danced too. The Tajiks love to dance. . . and of course vodka! After years of negotiations, MSDSP (the organisation for whom Sjoerd works) is finally starting a water project in this village. The villagers of the 37 houses have been waiting so long for drinking water (from a clean source) that they nicknamed the project "wait a bit". Suddenly a cold wind started to blow, dark clouds rolled in and it began to rain. Brrrr. We began to shiver because, like the girls, we were dressed rather light for what started out as a warm spring day. Stupid, because a day later we both came down with sore throats and a cold; taking nearly two months to get over it.



After visiting Vanj district, we arrived in Rushan where we met up with Khushkadam, an exceptionally friendly and exuberant guy who accompanied us during our first visit to Tajikistan in 2008. He is now district manager and very proud of his work, making sure we didn't miss a thing. We were taken to a school in Chidz village where a classroom had been thermally insulated. Normally, they used 17 kg of coal and 2 kg of wood per day to warm the classroom, but after the insulation, this had been reduced by 40%. Although that was already a big improvement, Sjoerd thought the figure was on the low side. However, he was unable to look behind the wall and assess whether they had applied the insulation correctly. Perhaps they heated the classroom more than normal because for the first time the classroom got toasty warm. In any case, saving 40% fuel is a big improvement. Sjoerd suggested that they alternate the classrooms so all the pupils can experience the warm classroom and then tell their parents about the thermally insulated classroom. The children in the cold, non-insulated classroom thought that was a great idea – all their little heads shaking up and down in full agreement. In Vamd village, they had insulated an Early Childhood Development (EDC) classroom. Because the toddlers play on the floor, the floor was also isolated and a rug put down. Now they no longer use a wood burning stove, only a small electric heater for a few hours in the morning and the classroom is warm enough; much healthier for the toddlers.

In Abdullabad, they were installing a drinking water system. Khush wanted to show us the water source, about 2-3 km uphill. When we saw two men walking towards a truck carrying baskets on their backs with what looked like manure, Sjoerd needed to investigate and walked into the farmyard. Indeed, it was compost from the toilet mixed with cow dung and earth. At first, the owner was shy and didn't want us to see what he was doing, but when Sjoerd gave him a thumbs-up and said it was great he was composting human waste to use as fertilizer, he was extremely happy and smiled from ear to ear. Proof that the Tajiks, especially farmers in the villages, have no objection to composting manure, be it human or animal.

It's rewarding when your advice is carefully followed and people are happy with the result. For example, the village hospital in Ver village (2850 m / 9350 ft) was thermally insulated (reflective foil + glass wool) and a roller shade with a decorative floral pattern. The manager was extremely proud of the amount of coal the insulated room had saved this past winter (photo). In another school, the project insulated the ceiling and two walls and replaced the broken windowpanes with double glass in one of the classrooms. Upon entering, we were surprised to see the whole classroom looking beautiful – all four walls painted snow white. The schoolmaster explained that because the other two walls looked so awful after the improvement of the project walls, he had collected money from all the parents to buy paint for the other walls. The insulation improvement resulted in such a reduction in the amount of coal stoked, that with the money saved, they plan to insulate another classroom; each year, another insulated classroom. Previously the government gave each school a lading of coal for the winter. If they needed more coal, bad luck. It was then up to the schoolmaster to figure out how to warm the classrooms – buy more coal, have the children bring wood from home, etc. The regulation has recently changed. The schools no longer get a truckload of coal delivered, but a fixed amount in cash. If there is money left over at the end of the winter season, the school board can decide on where to spend the money. There is never enough money for maintenance, thus the savings from a good insulated school can lead to better maintenance. The children also participate in the insulation demonstration. Each day they need to measure the temperature in both an insulated classroom and an old classroom, not only without insulation but usually with broken windowpanes as well.



After the insulation of the classroom had just been completed, the first cold night arrived. The woman responsible for lighting the heating stoves arrived early in the morning and, as usual, put some kindling wood, paper and a big scoop of coal into the stove and lit it. After five minutes burning, the classroom was already warm and after ten minutes, it became so hot that she started to panic and opened all the windows, as well as the door to the hall to create cross ventilation. Later she learned from the schoolmaster that the walls had been insulated. From now on, a half scoop of coal is enough for the whole day.

En route to Khorog



Before we departed Murghab, everyone did a little shopping. While the MSDSP people went to buy yak meat, we strolled through the market, that is, between the two rows of cargo containers serving as shops. During previous visits to Tajikistan, Doreen had received several pairs of thick hand-knitted woollen socks as gifts, but has no boots/shoes fitting them. The locals wear the socks with shiny black rubber shoes (*galpos*) and Doreen decided to buy a pair, while Sjoerd bought a traditionally decorated felt hat. With both of us hoarse from coughing, we searched for a pharmacy. Most of the medicine comes from Russia, so the packaging is in Russian. However, we did spot a box of Strepisils. When Sjoerd said that he would buy the whole box, the man looked surprised and confused. Most people buy just one or two tablets, not a whole box! When asking the price, the man held up eight fingers and said, "six". Sjoerd assumed that the fingers were the correct amount and his English was not so good.



Doreen's birthday is in April and what a beautiful setting to celebrate the day – high in the mountains of Tajikistan, the sun shining brightly, not a cloud in the azure blue sky, the surrounding mountaintops still with snow, and the apricot and apple trees in full blossom. Doreen expected the day would be like any other, but it turned out to be very special. It happened to be Good Friday, but in a Muslim country, you don't think of Easter. However, we did know that Doreen shares her birthday with Lenin (still a hero there).

The day began with Sjoerd waking Doreen by singing "lang zal ze leven" (Dutch version of Happy Birthday). Doreen thought that was the beginning and end of the celebration with the rest to be celebrated in Istanbul where we planned to spend three days en route home. But no, that was not to be the case. Sjoerd's training on ecosan toilets began with an excursion to a nearby village in a valley where Doreen had never been before. It was a beautiful drive, the dirt road following a meandering river, the green valley gently rising up the mountain slope and spotted with farmhouses and the many fruit trees in full bloom – what an idyllic, beautiful countryside. After having a look at the ecosan toilet one of the MSDSP engineers was building, we were invited inside the traditional Pamiri house for the customary cup of tea. When Doreen walked in, the entire group (a dozen or so people) started to sing Happy Birthday (in English!). Mawulda, one of the girls from the office, had baked two beautiful, elaborately decorated cakes with "Happy Birthday



Dear Doreen" written on them. The plastic tablecloth laid out on the floor was covered with nuts, candies, cookies, dried fruits, yogurt and more. After enjoying a piece of cake and cup of tea, the music started. Everyone got up and danced. What a surprise party!



And there was even bubbles on her birthday. . . Walking back to our guesthouse in the evening, we stopped in a shop to buy some yogurt. On the shelf, we spotted a champagne-looking bottle with a wired cork. When we pointed to the bottle, the shopkeeper said, "ah, champagneski" and gave us a thumbs-up, confirming the good quality. Back in our room, it gave an explosive pop and the air filled immediately with the scent of apples. It turned out to be apple cider. . . not champagne. . . but hey, what do you want in such a remote spot for \$4 and an expiration date of May 2010? After weeks of endless cups of tea and water, it was a welcomed change.

The return trip to Dushanbe was also by road because MSDSP wanted Sjoerd to have a look at a new project half way, in the Khatlon district, and provide some advice. GIZ had also asked for Sjoerd's advice on their project in the nearby Baljuvon area. After a night in Kulyob, the district capital, we continued to Baljuvon, an area where we've never been before. It was a beautiful drive through rolling green hills with grazing cows, goats and sheep. After an introductory meeting, we set out to look at some houses. While houses in the high mountainous GBAO are usually built of stone, here there is good clay soil and most houses are built of adobe. That presents other problems relating to maintenance and ensuring no moisture gets into the foundation and walls; thereby reducing the insulation value.

After visiting the often stuffy and dusty rooms, it's always refreshing to be outdoors. Lunch one day was served in the garden of one of the members of the Khatlon village organization. It was a lovely garden with ducks swimming in the babbling stream, frogs croaking, chickens clucking and a dog running about. All in all, a very rural setting. We sat on a raised platform in the shade of an old tree. Lunch consisted of dried apricots, raisins, nuts, candy, cookies, yogurt, plates of cucumbers, spring onions and herbs, pizza-size bread, juice, vodka and even brandy! First, an herb broth was served with a piece of meat in it, actually more like a piece of white fat. Inedible, and frankly, the soup was not very tasty. The second course was absolutely delicious – wild mushroom fried in butter. Usually a meat dish is then served, but not this time. Another bowl of soup was served, this time with green leaves and a very unusual flavour, maybe nettle? For dessert . . . we followed the lead from the others. Lying on the tablecloth were long green stalks, a bit red on one end like rhubarb and on the other end a few leaves and a broccoli-like flower. Breaking open the long stalk, we ate the fleshy centre, having a radish or horseradish taste. It was a wonderful experience, tasting such unique local dishes from the district and so very different from the GBAO region. Back home after the one-month mission, it was then on to making a detailed report.



Back home after the one-month mission, it was then on to making a detailed report.

Istanbul Istanbul is a fascinating city with beautiful buildings, such as the Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya), Topkapi Palace and Blue Mosque. Although drizzling, it was not enough to take an umbrella offered by the hotel. Walking along the Hippodrome, we headed for the Ayasofya, but they only accepted Turkish Lira and we had forgotten to take our bankcard with us, not very smart. Off we went in search of a foreign exchange office to convert some Euros. While waiting, Doreen spotted that there was no line for the Basilica Cistern and we decided to begin our day's tour there. It is a very large underground water tank with numerous columns. A scene from a James Bond movie was shot there; quite cleverly, as if it's not a tourist-walking route. Then we headed off to the amazing Ayasofya and the mausoleums next to it.



When we arrived at the Topkapi Palace, the rain had stopped and the sun even came out, making it a bit warmer. The Harem apartments weren't included in the entrance price and after counting the Turkish Lira we had left, we were 2 Lira (Euro 0.85) short and they wouldn't accept Euros. What to do? After asking some other tourists, without success, Sjoerd finally went to the nearby café and they obligingly accepted one Euro for 2 Lira. It would have been a real pity to have missed seeing the Harem apartments because they were quite impressive with spectacularly decorated tiles, more so than the rest of the palace.

The Grand Bazaar was amazing, a huge covered bazaar with a maze of streets and hundreds of shops, each three or four meters wide and some quite deep. Turkey is known for Iznik pottery and we went on a search for a big plate to add to our collection of Delft Blue plates. It needed to match a bit and decided on a tulip motif, linking The Netherlands with the origin of the tulip (being either Turkey or Iran). The atmosphere was fantastic with all the colourful bright lights, shops crammed with pottery, carpets, brass urns, jewellery, spices and much more, the cries of shopkeepers, and the crowds of shoppers; one can easily get lost in the labyrinth of countless shops. After looking in more than 20 shops, we concluded that the very first shop we had looked in had the prettiest plate and for the best price. Now the hard part . . . how to find that shop again????



The highlight of our stay was going to a real Turkish bath (hamam), an experience not to be missed if you're ever in Istanbul. The Süleymaniye Hamam was established in 1550 and mainly visited by tourist couples. With Sjoerd dressed in a sarong and Doreen in shorts, top and a sarong, all made from a red plaid cotton fabric, our bathing outfits were completed by traditional wooden sandals called *takunya*. It wasn't easy walking in those sandals – our feet kept sliding forward through the strap. So very slowly and carefully we made our way through the rounded archway into the warm relaxing room with painted murals on the walls. Five minutes later, we entered the bathing room, a large round room with a domed ceiling, entirely lined with marble up to three meters in height and with six-meter high arched stained glass windows. In the centre of the room, there was a marble platform to sit or lay on. We were the only guests and Sjoerd started singing, well more like doing scales, as it reverberated quite nicely. It was nice and warm 50°C (122°F) and we started to sweat profusely. After a half hour, we were joined by two other couples, so Sjoerd's singing debut came to an end. Then it was time for our bath in one of the half-open "bathing rooms" around the centre platform. We each had a boy to wash us. First, we had to sit down; suddenly the boys threw a bucket of lukewarm water over our heads. What a shock – a combination of not expecting it and because we were so warm, the water felt colder than it was. Actually, it was quite refreshing. Next, each boy took out a big muslin pillowcase from a barrel filled with soft wet soap. After blowing into the pillowcase and filling it with air, they then pulled the bag through their fist hand, squeezing out an enormous amount of foam bubbles and spreading these over our bodies like a warm, superlight feather blanket. After getting scrubbed and rinsed, we stretched out on the warm stone table, got another foam bubble treatment, massaged for fifteen minutes and rinsed with buckets of warm water. Squeaky clean, we were wrapped in dry towels and lead in to the slightly cooler relaxation room where we enjoyed a cup of apple tea. Once redressed in our own clothing, we relaxed a bit longer in the reception area, enjoying another cup of apple tea. We were just in time because a group of at least 20 young boys and girls arrived – quite a crowd.



Mozambique

Mozambique in May ~ Sjoerd was asked to provide technical advice on a school construction project making use of adobe blocks and bamboo. The technology was innovative, but laborious, and could be simplified and improved. In addition, he looked at issues regarding water supply, sanitation, cooking on wood fires, grain silos and electricity supply.

LAM, the national airline, is famous for delays and cancellations and has received the nickname "Late And Maybe". While our first flight from Johannesburg to Maputo was on time, the morning flight to Pemba lived up to that nickname. We checked in at 09.30 hrs and then waited, waited and waited. Finally, the flight

departed at 16.00 hrs and three hours later, we arrived in Pemba, 2500 km further north (near the Tanzania border) and a sultry 27°C (81°F).

Fernando, one of the AKF drivers, picked us up and on the way, we asked about the guesthouse where we would be staying:

What is the guesthouse like?	Well, it's a bedroom and a shower.
How many rooms are there?	There are 4 with two showers.
Are there any other guests?	Yes, another man.
Do we get breakfast?	No.
Is there a hot water kettle?	No, there is nothing. Nothing at all.

Now, we began to get a little concerned, thinking that maybe we were should stay in a hotel. Apprehensively, we entered the bungalow, but were pleasantly surprised to find a very luxurious, spacious, well-appointed living room with a large flat screen television, DVD player, a fully equipped kitchen (with fridge, stove and hot water kettle), two bedrooms (ours en suite) and there was no other guest.

Early the next morning we were picked up and immediately departed for a field visit (without the promised breakfast). The paved road was good and in less than one hour, we had reached the first village (Impiri) where we visited a nursery school. The kids loved to have their photo taken and then giggled exuberantly when they saw their picture on the camera screen. In the second village, Nacopo, we had a look at a school and a new hand pump. These were typical African villages with houses made of sticks, red clay and grass roofs. The corn had just been harvested and hung on racks to dry the cobs. Women and children were walking about with buckets of water, bags of cornmeal or whatever on the head. All the women wearing a kanga (African sarong).



On the way back to Pemba, we stopped suddenly on the side of the road. At first we thought Marcelino wanted to buy some charcoal because there was a man selling bags on the other side of the road. But no, we stopped for a picnic lunch (our breakfast) – cheese and steak sandwiches with water (or cola). Too bad there wasn't any place to sit, but still a fun surprise.

One day, we stopped on the way to the guesthouse for some groceries at the *supermercado* and then the local market for bananas. When Sjoerd spotted avocados, he began to bargain with the seller. In the end, he purchased two big avocados for MZN 300. Doreen did a calculation: that's Euro 7 !!!!! An error in the exchange rate calculation, one zero too many; not very bright. The young seller, on the other hand, was very happy, grinning from ear to ear. He had just earned a week's salary in five minutes.

The mission itinerary included a trip to Macomia district – 150 km north of Pemba. After more than two hours, we had arrived at Koko village where we visited an ECD preschool. Once again there were no children in the school; the reason being, they told us, because today the President of Mozambique was coming to open a new electricity substation. The teacher had already left for Macomia town centre to attend the very important occasion. Later we found out that the main reason there were no children in the schools, and all the villages looked pretty empty, was because it was harvest time and everyone was in the field harvesting the corn. The whole family helps, even the little ones, and the families sleep in the field and don't come home each evening. From an early age, children help in the daily housework – children from five years look

after the even younger children, gather wood, pound cornmeal, fetch water, planting, harvesting, scaring the birds away, etc. Such was the same in the next three villages – no pre-school children.

After viewing the empty nursery school in Tapuale village, we struck up a conversation with four male villagers about their "dream home". What would they want if they could build a house without having to think about the cost? One man was particularly talkative – larger rooms (3 x 4 meters), but only four rooms with the front room to the right of the entrance so he could see who entered and scare off thieves, if necessary. The kitchen would not be in the house, nor the bathroom and toilet. We then went to have a look at his current house. During the harvest season is the only time they cook indoors because the new corn crop is stored in the "attic" space and the smoke from the cooking fire is needed to preserve and protect it from insects. He also had a separate grass hut where (extended) family members slept.



In Bangala village, while we waited for the driver (he had gone for his afternoon prayer), we saw a woman standing before her house a little ways down the path looking at us. A good opportunity for a chat. She was very friendly, a single mother with four children. From the sale of peanuts grown in her fields, she had bought this house for MZN 1000 (USD 33). Sjoerd went inside for a look around. It was pitch dark inside, like all the houses. He turned on his little flashlight and looked around the corner into the second room. Suddenly we heard a shriek of two little ones "Maaaaaa". The mother had already anticipated what was going to happen when Sjoerd went in and started laughing, laughing, laughing. Sjoerd shone the light again on the sleeping children, and again the cry "Maaaaaa", and again the mother and we all howled with laugh. Those poor children; they'll probably have nightmares about a big white giant or a burglar in their bedroom.

Continuing, we drove across the main road onto a dirt road leading through a reserve area towards Guludo village, about 40 km and taking about 1.5 hours to reach. When we passed a two-story house, we naturally had to stop and have a chat with the owner. By an intersection

with another dirt road, obviously "downtown" because there were a few shops, we turned right. After a few meters, the dirt road narrowed into a single track. Meeting up with a big truck carrying a "load" of standing passengers in the back coming from the other direction, we drove our 4WD into the bushes to let him pass. The sandy road was proving difficult for the truck to drive through and half of the passengers had to spring out of the truck and give it a push; handy to pick up so many passengers, extra pushing power.

Our accommodation was planned in the luxury Guludo Beach Lodge. The large rondavel huts along the beach were nicely furnished. When checking in, we mention our dietary restrictions to Angus (the manager) – no chili, masala, curry, spices, etc. . . . and we would really love a big lobster for dinner. The menu is based on the catch of the day. When Angus told us later at the bar they had caught a lobster, our mouths started to water. What a disappointment when the appetizer turned out to be extremely spicy Indian samosas, followed by crab ravioli and for dessert a Graham cracker cake with a layer of chocolate on top. A bit dry. When we inquired about the lobster, the answer was that there was no time to prepare it. What nonsense. All they needed to do was put the lobster in a pot of boiling water, that's not too time-consuming. Anyway, the wine was delicious, but for the price, we could have bought a house in the village!!!

The rest of the mission was devoted to discussions, giving advice on a myriad of topics, building a demonstration model of an improved cooking stove, report writing, etc. Before returning to Maputo for the debriefing meetings, we took a weekend off to visit the nearby Ibo island, part of the Quirimbas archipelago national park.

The flight in a six-seat propeller plane lasted 20 minutes and offered beautiful views of the coastline. With only one flight a day, Sjoerd thought the grass landing strip would make an ideal golf course. After being welcomed with a cold towel and a refreshing drink, we were shown our room. Ibo Island Lodge is made up of two old villas, garden rooms (former servant quarters) and a third villa under renovation. We were assigned the pretty Ngalawa room in the main Bela Vista Villa, the only room in this villa. Our room had a sea view, even if lying in the king-size bed! The bathroom was very spacious with a freestanding clawfoot bathtub in the middle, a large rain shower, double sinks and even a sitting area with a view of the garden.



Our first excursion was a cultural walk. Guide Ali told us a bit about the history of the island while we visited the three forts, all mainly used for the slave trade. As we were walking past the cemetery, Ali enlightened us with an interesting piece of tidbit. Hindus who once lived on the island were cremated and the ashes scattered in the sea. Present day Hindus on the island don't eat fish because they believe that if they eat fish, they are eating their ancestors. After a stroll on top of the walls of the biggest fort for the views, we headed back to the hotel, just in time for the sunset, actually the best of the three days. Being closer to the equator, the sun sets here quite early. As the afternoon activities begin only at 15:00 hrs, when it's cooler, it makes for a very short afternoon with the sun setting at a quarter to five. Doreen later read in a magazine that on a different island, the hotel has set the clock back one hour so the sunset is at a more normal time.



The next morning we had an early wake-up call (05:30 hrs) with tea being served in our room. Then we headed down to the bay, boarded an old wooden dhow and set sail to our destination, the sandbar. The sandbar is only above water during low tide, so the excursion is dependent on the tide. It was too windy to hoist the sail, so we "sailed" with the outboard motor. The captain dropped a fishing line into the water and what a surprise – in no time he had caught a big Rock Codfish. Wow, was he ever happy – a big white teeth smile. We surmise this was the catch of the month for him.



The sandbar was not very big, about 60 x 30 meters. The wind was picking up, but the Ibo team was well prepared; definitely not the first time for them. While Harris (our guide), the captain and the cook busied themselves with setting up two windscreen tents, we explored the sandbar; after which it was time to get snorkelling. Although the water was a bit cloudy, we did see lots of different tropical fish. It was like swimming in a big aquarium. After nearly 2 hours, it was time for breakfast – a full English breakfast topped off with a piece of the Rock Codfish of the day. Later we heard from Harris that he wasn't served any fish and was quite disappointed. Apparently, the ruling is that what the captain catches, he can keep for himself and family. That's why he was so happy. And the tourists, they get a tiny little piece to make them happy.



Another early morning wake-up call with tea being served. Today the old dhow sailed (again motored, too windy) to a coral reef on the other side of the island. It was an exceptionally long reef. The boat followed us, so it would always be in the vicinity if got too tired. Above and around the coral reef, it was swarming with beautiful tropical fish – clownfish, red, striped and long-nose fish, angelfish, blue starfish, several moray eels, one completely out from his hole under the coral. And a flat flounder, blending so well with the colour of the coral that it was almost invisible. Doreen spotted a lizardfish, being equally well camouflaged in the sandy seabed. There were also some very beautiful lionfish in various colours. Sjoerd told Doreen later that lionfish are highly poisonous and they can give you a nasty burn if you touch them. Doreen didn't know this, but fortunately, she had kept her distance from them. After more than an hour and half, our fingers



began to feel numb; the water being on the chilly side. During the half hour trip back to the hotel, we sat low in the boat, out of the wind, to warm up a bit.

With low tide, the water in front of the hotel recedes considerably; nice for walking on the sandy bottom spotted with a few mangrove trees. While Sjoerd kept himself busy by planting more than 50 mangrove seeds, Doreen went searching for beautiful seashells, but found nothing special. Conservationist Sjoerd: "Be careful where you walk Doreen because everywhere little seedlings are sprouting out." There were hundreds of these little "trees" growing in rows and forming a star pattern with the mangrove tree in the centre, making it difficult not to step on them. Soon, we thought, there'll be a new mangrove forest here. Later in the day, during our sea kayaking trip through the mangroves, we learned from Harris that they weren't seedling trees, but aerial (air-breathing) roots; conical root organs growing out of the ground so the root has access to air for part of the day. Well, Sjoerd had forgotten to say "I think" after his little trees story so Doreen had fallen into the trap of believing it was fact. Something new learned.

After three days on Ibo Island, we flew back to Maputo where we met Dafne (she had come up from Cape Town by train) and planned to spend a week together. Our holiday began by witnessing a very rare phenomenon – a total lunar eclipse. That was special.

While Dafne was busy with a few appointments, we took in some of the sights of Maputo; not very many, a couple of hours and we had covered pretty much everything. Along the coast, there was a famous fish market, so the three of us went there for lunch. You first buy your fish in the market and then let it be grilled in one of the many little restaurants located behind the market. The atmosphere in the market was great with the numerous stands loaded with fish in all colours, tiger prawns, calamari, crabs, clams, etc. and the various sellers shouting to get our attention to buy their fresh fish. After Sjoerd negotiated for a few kilos of large tiger prawns, we sat down at one of the restaurants and waited for the shrimps to be prepared. The patio was lively with every few minutes another seller stopping by our table to try and sell us something – peanuts, cashews, CDs, DVDs, handbags made from a coconut shell, earrings, watches, sunglasses, batik cloth, kangas, dresses, hats, and more. We ended up buying cashew nuts and roasted peanuts from a friendly gal. When placing our fish order, the boy asked whether we wanted rice, French fries or, what we all thought he said, potato salad. We opted for the potato salad, along with a green salad. What a surprise when we were served, instead of potato salad, a big plate of nshima (corn flour, similar to polenta). Tasteless. Take it back and give us French fries. Now, tourists always pay more than locals do, but when we got the bill, it was way over the top. After some bargaining, we paid half, still too much. Another lesson relearned, always extensively bargain beforehand. But, no matter, the atmosphere was fantastic and that's also important and part of the price.



In our rental car, we headed north along the coast to Casa Barry Lodge. Our chalet with a palm-leaf roof was spacious and had a partial view of the bay. The chalet was on top of a hill, thus plenty of workouts going up and down several times a day. For our sun downer, we would grab some plastic chairs from the reception and sit on the lower wooden platform connecting the chalets for a better view of the sunset. Then we would climb up to our patio to enjoy the rest of the evening. It was a beautiful bay and beach. The waves were just big enough to have some fun. The temperature of the water was a bit chilly at first, but once completely under, it wasn't so bad and we could swim around for quite a long time. There was no dangerous undertow dragging you seawards. Quite the opposite, the waves pushed us towards the beach, which Doreen liked.



The next morning, Sjoerd and Dafne went on an ocean safari in search of whale sharks, humpback whales and dolphins. The open sea water seemed too cold and rough for Doreen, so she stay behind. Besides, being Father's Day, she thought it would be a nice trip for father and daughter to do the excursion together. The ocean safari lasted 2.5 hours. After waving goodbye, the orange inflatable boat with eight people sitting on the rounded sides sped away. As it hit the waves, the boat flew into the air and then continued further into the deep sea. Meanwhile, Doreen took a long walk along the coast to the war memorial – a concrete block with on top an extended arm holding a broken chain. Not only ugly, but falling apart and rusting as well. On the way back she spotted the safari boat returning, but before then, making one last stop to snorkel with a group of dolphins. A fun excursion, they saw lots and naturally swum after a whale shark.

In the afternoon, we had a look around the small market along the beach, recalling our resolution, "We don't buy anything." After bargaining for half an hour, we walked back to our chalet carrying our new acquisition, a statue made of a tribal group of people with cute funny heads carved into a piece of tree trunk. We had seen this type of statue previously in South Africa, but hadn't bought anything because the carving of the faces wasn't very good. This statue was much better, made here in Mozambique. Another swim in the sea. Sitting on the plastic chairs below our chalet, watching the beautiful sunset with a cold beer and peanuts. At breakfast, Sjoerd had purchased three crayfish and some tiger prawns from two young fishermen passing along. So, tonight a delicious crayfish dinner accompanied by a fine glass of wine. Ahhhh, this is the life!



For our last day in Tofo, we drove to Inhambane to do a bit of sightseeing. The topper was the statue of Vasco da Gama. This made the trip worthwhile. There he stood, tucked away behind a government building next to a rusty old vintage car; a fantastic sight. In the square in front of the bay, we had seen a pedestal without a statue. So, we now suspect that Vasco da Gama once stood on the pedestal, but was removed and dumped behind the government building to make way for someone more important. But, to date, that other statue has never arrived.

The flight from Maputo to Johannesburg. . . there was again something wrong with the plane. Fortunately LAM didn't cancel the flight because the next flight would had been too late for our connecting flight to Dubai. LAM eventually arranged two smaller aircrafts and divided the passengers. We were put on the second flight. The smaller plane not only added a half hour to the flying time, but the old thing vibrated like crazy – a 1.5-hour free massage! We had just enough time in Johannesburg to collect our luggage and check-in with Emirates. We were already halfway out the baggage claim hall when Doreen suddenly remembered that we hadn't collected our extra box with the wooden statues! Back again. It wasn't on the conveyer belt, but an attendant quickly found it where the fragile and special baggage pieces are delivered. We had just enough time for a cup of tea before we flew home.

Pakistan

Pakistan in October ~ Our village visits were somewhat reduced because the planned trip to Chitral was cancelled at an early date. This area borders on Afghanistan and the military were in conflict with radical militants. So, the area was off limits to foreigners and even embassy officials. The Astore region, south of Gilgit, could also not be visited because the residents are ultra conservative and don't want foreigners in their villages. The women are not even allowed out of their houses and now the men themselves have to collect firewood. Nevertheless, we did have one day in the beautiful Ghizer valley and there was plenty of work for Sjoerd to do in the head office – consultations, teaching sessions and presentations at two conferences.

Each time, Doreen thinks it's going to be our last visit to Gilgit and at the end of our stay always gives away her shalwar chamises (local dress, pants and scarf) as gifts. Then purchases new ones again when we come back. One evening we were invited to a reception hosted by the Austrian ambassador at his residence in Islamabad. After returning to the guesthouse at the end of a full day of meetings, there was just enough time to walk to the Jinnah supermarket and search for a ready-made shalwar chamis for the occasion. Nothing in the first two stores, but the third had two nice dresses to choose from. A record for Doreen – search, try on and purchase a shalwar chamis in less than 15 minutes! Quickly back to the guesthouse where the shalwar chamis was ironed and Doreen was ready by the time a colleague came to pick us up.



Barcelona

Christmas in Barcelona ~ On the way, we stopped by a friend of Sjoerd's from his schooldays who had bought a farm on a hilltop in the French Pyrenees from a sheep farmer and converted the old, rundown farmhouse, stables and barn into a comfortable house and several vacation apartments. Rix and his wife live there along with a pack of dogs, a cat, two geese, chickens, goldfish, parakeets and a pony. For fresh croissants for breakfast, they have to drive 10 km to the nearest village, but life there is very relaxed.



A couple of hours away is Lourdes, a pilgrimage site visited by thousands of Catholics each year in the hope of a miracle and being cured of their illness by bathing in or drinking the water of the Lourdes spring. We lit two large 90 cm long candles, one for us and one for Rix. It would take two days for the candles to burn completely. The candle remains are not removed until completely burned. At the end of the row of metal tables where one can light their candle was a shed where two employees were filling carts with large candles and then taking them outside and lighting them. There were thousands of candles piled high in the shed. An amazing sight. They told us that during the busy summer period, so many people come to Lourdes that there is not enough space on the burning tables. So, the visitors have leave their unlit candles with the assurance that during the coming months it would be burned – until the very last drop of wax. It was nice to be able to light our own candles . . . and even went back the next evening to see if they were still burning. . . and they were!

Doreen had the courage to bath in the ice-cold spring water. There weren't many other women – maybe ten. No line, she could walk straight into the building. Inside there was a long row of curtained changing rooms, each with 10 plastic chairs and coat hooks. One of the nuns (volunteers) held a long blue cape over my shoulders, like a screen, to provide privacy while I undressed. Once naked, my helper wrapped the cape securely around me and indicated how I should hold it closed. Then I was ushered to another curtain and told to wait for my turn in the bath. From behind the curtain, I could hear murmuring, a splash, more murmuring and then it was my turn. The nun said something, but from my bewildered look, she quickly realized I didn't speak French. English? Yes. A discussion arose between the three ladies – who would do the ceremony in English? None of the three really wanted that honour and it finally came down to the first nun. In broken English, she began the ceremony. I stepped down into the water – gosh, it was freezing cold and I already had goose bumps. One of the other nuns dipped a white cloth into the holy water. The blue cape was quickly removed and at the same time, the nun wrapped the cold, wet white cloth around me. What a shock! Goose bumps on top of goose bumps and shivering. The first nun said "cross" and I realized that I had to cross myself like the Catholics do. All three nuns began to recite a prayer and at the same time leading me further into the stone bath, two of them firmly holding my arms, the other the wet cloth. Once I reached the end of the stone bathing tank, the nun motioned me to sit down into the icy water up to my shoulders. My heart missed a beat, then they quickly pulled me up, spun me around and I had to

repeat a prayer to St. Bernadette. I think it was in English, but I was still in shock, and can't remember what I repeated. The white cloth was exchanged for the blue cape and I was lead out. It all happened so fast, a bit like a dream. Wet and cold, I started to rub my shoulder with the cape, but the nun quickly motioned that that was not allowed. I had to get dressed dripping wet. When I came out, Sjoerd took a picture of me next to a statue of Mary. Well, my sore knee was not healed instantly as I had hoped, but I am very grateful that I didn't have a heart attack!



The next stop was the ski village of Luchon Bagnaires where a thermal spa has existed since the Roman times, over 2000 years. The interior of the spa was like a swimming pool complex and very organised – enter the changing rooms on one side and leave by the other side; the cubicle for the supplied towel and bathrobe has the same number as the locker where we stored our clothing; towels can't be used to reserve lounge chairs so there is always available chairs, etc. There is a large round pool with a water temperature of 35°C (95°F) and a jacuzzi zone with lying space which bubbles frantically for 5 minutes and then stops for a minute or so to allow bathers to change spots. The Vaporarium was fantastic; an 8-shaped narrow tunnel carved about 20 m (66 ft) deep into the hot rock with some sections where you can walk upright. The 70°C (158°F) hot spring water runs along the sides of the tunnel where there is seating. The whole tunnel has a haze about it; being a cross between a sauna and steam room. The deeper into the tunnel, the hotter it got. After 15 minutes in the Vaporarium, it was then into the pool to cool off. Back and forth, until we were warmed through and through. After three hours, we had had enough – the longest bath Sjoerd has ever taken! And for his birthday, no less.

After visiting Fraixnetet, the largest Cava producer in Spain, we arrived in Barcelona, a super hotel near the Plaza de Catalunya and La Rambla. Via Internet we had booked a morning visit to the Sagrada Familia. What an impressive building. Sjoerd was there 40 years ago, but at that time you couldn't go inside. The audio guide enhanced our visit with information about the building, sculptures on the façades, construction techniques, materials and of course about Gaudi himself. We could take all the time we wanted to enjoy the masterpiece – inside and out. In the crypt under the church was an exhibition of various models and behind a glass window, we could see the workshop where they are still planning the next building phase and testing models. We took an elevator to the top of one of the towers for views of the city and the work in progress of the central tower. Many of the towers are wrapped in gauze, perhaps because some of the mosaic pieces are beginning to fall out. It will still be years before the Sagrada Familia is completely finished and viewed without the scaffolding. At least, the Nativity and Passion façades are visible without obstruction.

The Casa Mila (La Pedrera), Casa Batlló, Palau Güell and Park Güell, most with audio guides – in short a complete Gaudi tour. All the buildings are now completely restored and open to the public. Because it was off-season, we had the added pleasure of no crowds and no waiting on long lines to enter.

After visiting the Barcelona cathedral, we decided to give the Christmas eve midnight mass a miss. There were only a few pews with a view of the altar and sitting behind a pillar watching the service on a television screen? No, that didn't appeal to us. We would rather do that in our hotel room with a glass of Cava. However, attending a classical concert in the magnificent Palau de la Música theatre made Christmas day extraordinarily special.



After Barcelona, we headed for home, stopping in Figueres to have a look at the Salvador Dali Museum with eggs and gilded statues on top of the stylized façade. Outside there were statues on pillars made from tractor tires. It appeared that many of Dali's artworks were made from painted junk. As Sjoerd said, his best works hang in the Rijksmuseum and museums in New York or Paris. Sjoerd's esteem of Dali has fallen sharply.

We also made a stop at the highest mountain (hill, 350 m / 1148 ft above sea level) in The Netherlands where three countries meet. Doreen has never been there before, so it was obligatory to snap a photo of her with her foot in Belgium, body in The Netherlands and hand in Germany!



In July, friends from our Nairobi days, living now in New York and whom we've not seen in years came by for a day's visit during their biking vacation. The luck of the Irish (very suitable, they are originally from Ireland) was with us. It had been raining for days on end, but on this day the clouds disappeared and it turned out to be a sunny beautiful day. We took a bike ride to Naarden-Vesting and returned across the heather fields because they couldn't miss seeing the highest point of Het Gooi, Tafelberg (Table Mountain) – 35.4 m (116 ft) above sea level and only 12 m (40 ft) above the land. You call that a "mountain" ?????? Ha, ha. They were not impressed. ☺

Naturally we went to the Keukenhof . . . and some more.

And how is it going with our Pieterpad walk, you might be wondering? Well, we're not one step farther. Maybe this year 2012.

Once more, you are a bit up to date on our experiences of last year. We hope you have enjoyed the stories. Until the next edition.

Warmest and best wishes,
Sjoerd and Doreen

