

Happy to be back

Thomas (12 years), Mathijs (11 years) and Anne-Marie (7 years) Soek live in Muscat, Oman, with their parents Chris and Harry. Thomas has spent more than half his life in Oman. This is his perspective on living there.



→ *Thomas Soek*



Teenagers are well known for sleeping in. But not here. My day begins at 5.45am. I attend the British School Muscat (BSM) and since it isn't based in the PDO camp where we live I take the school bus which collects me at 6.45 am. It isn't so bad getting up early, during the summer months it gets really hot by midday so making the most of the early morning hours is quite smart. Also, all my friends take the bus and we all live on the same street so we are very close - this is just one of the big advantages to me about living here at my age.

I was born in Muscat during my father's first posting here and although I was only 2 ½ years when we moved I still have some memories from that period. I remember our car, which I now know was a cool GMC Jimmy, and I remember our maid Nanda – she came from Sri Lanka, was not very tall, and had hair to her toes. I remember that her hair burned one time when she turned too fast at the cooker and she had to get it cut. She made us delicious meals and could cook anything.

We returned to Oman four years ago and I really like it, well most of it. I don't like that our house, like most of them on camp, only has three bedrooms. I have to share with my brother Mathijs and we are both starting to get on each others nerves sometimes. My sister though gets her own room, but it's quite small. Some people live off camp and have big houses but I live close to the club and can go down there on my bike whenever I want. The club has lots of activities and facilities for me and my friends. We have our own club card

and can meet together and order our own meals and just hang out, talk and flirt with the girls!

I also don't like that there are no football clubs to join. I am in the BSM school team and there are a few other school teams that we can play but never any club matches so there isn't much competition. There is this huge football league though for about two months every year and I have been in it for the last four years. I have also got best player of the league for my age group every year. The league is for all under 14 year olds in the Muscat area. It's really big here and is run entirely by volunteers. There are always more people wanting to play each year than spaces available, but we still manage to get a good mix of expats from many different nations as well as local Omani children.

The two things I love most about living in Oman are the weather and the sea. It's always hot, sometimes too hot, but usually just really nice and we have water everywhere. The camp is on the seaside and we also have swimming pools that we can use whenever we want. Although thinking about it, maybe they are not the best things - there is so much to do here it's hard to choose. I haven't even mentioned the adventure trips we do, like hiking through the Wadi and the snake gorge, which can be quite dangerous. For instance when it rains the rocks fall down and the Wadi can flood. I love living in Oman, and so does my brother and sister and all my friends.

.....I just wish I had my own room!

New country, new food...

Paul Montgomery

Paul left Shell last year, living for the first time in many years in his home country England. He reflects here on his culinary experiences abroad and at 'home' in Winchester, England.



A vegetable section that looked like a compost bin, prices too high to be believed, and no chicken. This was my first impression, when we moved to Norway, of an otherwise well-lit, clean and well-supplied supermarket.

First impressions are not always accurate, but this was. It was very difficult to buy a chicken. Occasionally the shops would have large boiling fowl which were great for making soup, but one of the family staples - roast chicken - was dropped from the menu fairly quickly. We arrived in the country at a time when regulations forbade the import of potatoes until the Norwegian crop was exhausted. Well it certainly looked exhausted - green and sporting sprouts to put bean sprouts to shame. As for the prices - it took weeks to adjust to paying three times what we had been used to.

So did we die of starvation? Of course not. We found flapping fresh fish from day boats in the harbour, wonderful prawns sold on the street to be eaten whilst sitting on the harbour or rocking gently in a boat, and as the year wore on more and more delights became available. Once we understood the different cuts of meat, had bought fishing rods, and kind Norwegian friends had guided us to the riches of the wild, we ate like kings. Venison, reindeer, elk and even whale, were enjoyed. Brown trout from mountain streams, codling from the sea and shellfish to die for. As in Australia, barbecuing is the preferred method of cooking, at least during summer months. Most of our regular beach haunts had public barbecues, usually already fired up by the friendly local ranger for the long summer evenings or weekend lunch. All we had to do was cook and eat.

Our foraging skills were honed. My knowledge of fungi grew and grew. Although the whereabouts of the best treasures were fiercely guarded, I was taught what sort of vegetation harboured various species, and we were soon able to locate and pick a few ceps, or a half kilo of chanterelles, with ease. Combined with berry picking, this

added a dimension to family walks. The children enjoyed comparing blue teeth after eating the bilberries we gathered by the kilo, and we enjoyed the resulting pies.

Once understood, the delights from the shops were also enjoyed. Air-dried leg of lamb, whole cod sold live and swimming, local smoked salmon and gravdax, wonderful soup which powered most of our skiing trips and strawberries better than any I have had anywhere. Some of these delicacies were not to our taste though. The sweet, fudge-like brown goat's cheese, to a Norwegian what Marmite is to a Brit or Vegemite to an Australian, was never to my taste, and brave was the foreigner who faced lutefisk (cod preserved in a strong alkali) which has a particularly strong smell.

What about the chicken? Well, during our stay, there became available jointed and marinated chicken pieces in a foil tray, which barbecued perfectly. This was supplemented by the occasional smuggled poultry which the customs men seemed to turn a blind eye to, except at Christmas, when they were particularly diligent. One year they must have dined well on the confiscated maigret de canard and armagnac...

In the Netherlands, the first shock was the lack of supermarkets, at least supermarkets as we knew them. The Dutch had done a great job of resisting the out of town superstore and maintaining the local shops. And what local shops. In our area we had four good butchers, three good greengrocers, three fish shops, three delicatessens, three bakers, three wine shops, two cheese shops, a nut shop and a wonderful chocolate shop, in addition to an excellent selection of restaurants and bars. We did have a small supermarket, too, but one felt the balance of power was with the small shopkeeper. And counter to the received wisdom of lack of a service culture in the Netherlands, the service was excellent. In the delicatessen I came to favour,

I stood in the queue one Saturday morning and listened as the well-informed young staff serving customers in front of me switched from Dutch to Spanish to French to Italian and finally to perfect English to serve me. When the shopping was completed and the menu decided, I would wander round to the wine shop where advice on what to drink with dinner was unerringly accurate. The local market, where exotic fruits, vegetable and fish could be bought alongside more regular fare, became another favourite place to shop. We soon learned that the Dutch keep the best cheese for themselves, and export stuff they probably would not eat. We had excellent cheeses from shops and farms, and I recall with pleasure the best cheese plate I have ever had, which held slivers of fifteen excellent Dutch farm cheeses.

A pleasure of The Hague was the availability of everyday cafes and restaurants, where a snack or a meal of reasonable quality can be had for a modest price. Unlike where I now live in England, where I have to plan much further ahead, a table at the best local restaurant could be booked in the afternoon for that evening. Cheese and bacon pancakes soon became the family's favourite Dutch lunch, preferably consumed outside and certainly covered with stroop, the thick sugar syrup which is so effective in attracting wasps. For dinner, there is little to rival a whole fresh fish, grilled to order, and eaten with a nice glass of wine on the harbour side.

My culinary tour ends in the Caribbean. The variation between the different islands in the style of food was as much a shock to me as the variation in culture. Food in the Dominican Republic is not generally spiced, unlike that of Jamaica with its jerk seasoning, or the excellent curries of Trinidad. Staples were rice, beans and chicken, augmented by stews of meat or offal: rather bland to my taste. A delight, however, was the fruit available. In the tropics, bananas, avocados, mangoes, oranges, limes, pineapples, papaya, passion fruit and melons are much more intense in flavour. On a short visit to England one summer I bought two ripe avocados from the market. I tasted one, then threw them away immediately, as, to my heightened palate, these gas-stored, force-ripened pears had no discernible flavour.

In the Dominican Republic, our shopping pattern was soon established. Staples from the large and well-supplied supermarket, meat from the German butcher who seemed to be able to source lamb as well as beef, pork, goat and chicken, and fruit and vegetables mainly from roadside



sellers. Paying for bananas as the traffic lights change and the horns start blaring was interesting, and we soon learned not to buy frozen products in a country with an unreliable power supply. Our little garden provided us with mangoes, avocados and various citrus fruit.

Restaurants were plentiful and generally good. We were too late to find the Indian restaurant which opened for a short time in a suburban house, but we compromised by starting a 'Curry Club' where like-minded folk of various nationalities gathered to eat an array of dishes which would put Veeraswamy to shame. The local restaurant we used was an outdoor one. The excitement of going there was somewhat reduced when they installed an easily deployable rain shelter. My favourite meals, however, were eaten at the beach. One particular restaurant, where the road met the beach, consisted of several vendors with bubbling pots of stock or spitting fat fryers, but nothing to cook. That was provided when the fishermen arrived and after a bit of negotiation we would sit down to freshly cooked fish or lobster washed down with a 'Gim and Tommy', a local variation on that favourite English aperitif.

Back in England now, we are fortunate that our local farmers' market is the largest and best in the country. During our absence tastes have changed. Our vegetable selections include excellent locally grown garlic, aubergines and chillies as well as a great variety of green vegetables and beans. Meat and game of all sorts and fish from small South coast fisheries are readily available. We are better than ever provided for, but I still miss the Norwegian prawns, Dutch smoked eel and those wonderful avocados.

PS On a recent trip to Norway I called into the supermarket to find it better supplied than my local supermarket in England, with a good selection of nice chicken and vegetables and carrying a wide range of 'foreign' foods. *Plus ça change!*

Fort McMurray, North of nowhere...

18

Mary Broekhuijsen

Road to Fort McMurray

Mary is a mother of three children. Amongst many other things, she has written a book on breastfeeding (published in the Netherlands in 2002), is a breastfeeding counsellor, a volunteer for Outpost Calgary, and is a regular contributor to Destinations.

THE ROAD TO FORT McMURRAY

I don't particularly feel at ease when I am on the highway to the 'North of Nowhere'. The dark tyre tracks tell the story of many emergency breaks and near misses. We're looking at an 800 km trip from Calgary and when we hit the road from Edmonton (300 km from Calgary) we brace ourselves for some serious long distance driving through Canadian Alberta.

We're on our way to Fort McMurray, also referred to as 'Fort McMurray', a booming oil town, gateway to the Athabasca Oil Sands. The Athabasca Oil Sands are the promising future for today's American Oil addiction. They are the world's largest proven source of oil after Saudi Arabia. Albian Sands, a joint venture between Shell Canada, Chevron-Texaco and Western Oil Sands scrapes 155,000 barrels worth of oil sands a day from Canadian soil at the Muskeg River Mine 75 km North of Fort McMurray. They're not the only one. Syncrude started their plant in July 1978 and Suncor built their plant in 1964. The Alberta Government calculates that about 28 billion cubic meters (174 billion barrels) of crude bitumen are economically recoverable from the three Alberta oil sands areas at current prices using current technology.

The Oil industry attracts many skilled workers from all over the globe and the once quiet town of Fort McMurray has changed significantly throughout the past few years. Today's Fort McMurray cowboys are now construction workers and they traded their Mustang horses for a Chevrolet Silverado or a Dodge Ram 3500 4 x 4.

The road to Fort McMurray is a straight highway as far as we can see. We can't speed due to the risk of crossing wildlife. We see a coyote crossing the highway, a deer hesitating at the roadside and beaver dams in creeks along the road. It takes us 5 hours to drive from Edmonton to Fort McMurray. Driving 5 hours in Europe would mean crossing at least 3 borders, an everchanging landscape around us and a significant language change every couple of 100 kilometres. Passports weren't needed here; in Canada you can easily travel 3000 kilometres without ever crossing a border...

BIG MINING TRUCKS

After driving for hours through mostly forest, Fort McMurray, which lies in the valley of the Athabasca River, welcomes us with its huge sign. We're struck by the existence of a completely developed human habitat in such a remote area. Seemingly out of the blue, we see our familiar Tim Hortons, Superstore, Wendy's, Canadian Tire, gas stations and the Safeway. We see streets filled with more hotels, motels, inns, suite apartments than you'll ever find in touristy Banff. But the people here are not on vacation; they're hard working people that come here to make their living.

THE ATHABASCA RIVER

I'm here with my family to visit the mine, the town, to interview the only Shell expatriates living here and to understand my husband's projects.

"I don't see any skyscrapers", says Onno (10) when we're driving 'Downtown' at Franklin Avenue. It's true, the scenery is different from Calgary. When grocery shopping in the supermarket, we meet new nationalities and construction workers who didn't bother to take a shower after their shift. At least they left their safety helmet in their car! They rush in the store and grasp whatever they need for their quick meal. We see more than the usual amount of liquor stores and heavy duty mud-spattered pickup trucks everywhere. When we take our diner in the restaurant, we see workers eating their hamburger silently and single. Their family probably lives far away in Red Deer, Edmonton, Calgary or even further away.

A week counts four, 10-hour days in Fort McMurray and we accepted the advice not to travel up North on a Thursday. Usually the road will be busy with tired workers travelling home after being paid. The city now has 61,000 residents up from 34,000 only 10 years ago. It is estimated that another 10,000 workers live in work camps near the mining sites near massive construction projects.

Fort McMurray, where winter temperatures easily drop to below 40°, is faced with many challenges: affordable and available housing, an infrastructure that hasn't been able to keep up with the demands of the rapidly expanding city and social workforce shortcomings. Housing in Fort McMurray is tight and the prices are sky-high, compared to Edmonton, Calgary or Montreal. Space is available but permits and the labour to build are scarce. With all the project investments, accommodation of construction workers is becoming a huge problem in Fort McMurray. An expansion project of Suncor alone, five years ago, has created up to 4,000 new jobs. As oil prices surge, project investments become attractive and more jobs are needed for these temporary 'peak-periods'. The rental vacancy rate is less than 1% and houses, apartments or basements are usually occupied by groups of males.

The housing has become so scarce that some workers live in RV's at camp sites, basements, hotel parking lots, garages or pitch tents. And then there's the cost of housing: A one bedroom suite starts at about \$3,000 which is usually only affordable for the better paid jobs or jobs that include housing allowance. Service sector workers are reluctant to move into the region and are struggling with available and affordable housing issues. Inadequate services start to form social problems.

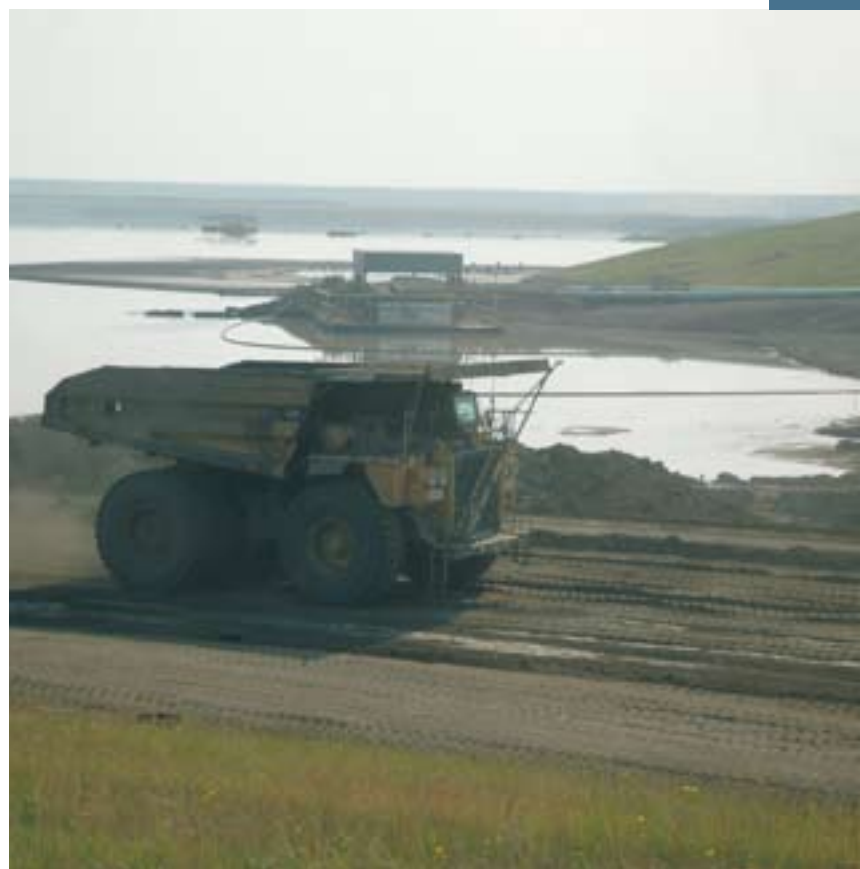
We see a variety of billboards with job offer screamers. Most of them offer at least \$14/hour, twice the provincial minimum wage, promising bonuses, while a Pizza fast food restaurant tries to bribe new employees with a 'free pizza' after every shift. High salaries lure newcomers with the promise of a wealthy life, but we're already familiar with the stories of broken dreams.

Fort McMurray has a prosperous future but unfortunately, due to the lack of timely (Alberta) government investments, the Fort McMurray infrastructure has been backlogged. What we see is a thriving multinational community that successfully tries to keep its head above the water.

While cruising the Fort McMurray downtown, I realize the sight of the screaming billboards are not that unfamiliar; Calgary also struggles with the demands of an expanding city, due to the booming Oil Industry in Alberta. Social care and health care are becoming a problem and with the increasing cost of living in some cities in Alberta, low income families are the first ones to drop off the scale. I realize that Fort McMurray's problems, from line ups at Tim Hortons to a shortage of skilled labour, also affect other cities in Alberta.

After two intensive days of visiting the only Shell Expatriates, a visit to the Albion Sands plant, the mining activities, a quick look at reclaimed land where Buffalo's found a new home, and the Discovery Center, we head back to Calgary. As we travel back, I realize that Fort McMurray will most likely look different in the future. Traffic is more heavier now and we see how every oncoming truck carries construction supplies or parts that will contribute to the Fort McMurray infrastructure. We see huge cranes being transported on 'oversized wide loads', pipes, portacabins and trucks loaded with complete portable houses!

We know that with each piece of equipment brought in, Fort McMurray will become a better place.



Mining truck

Mary won the runner-up prize for the 2007 JMS Literary Award for a previous story 'My suitcase'.

Please see page 27 for the story.

Leaving Nigeria

Annemarie Quadvlieg

Annemarie and her husband have lived in Nigeria for 3.5 years. She was relocated in December last year to her home country the Netherlands with her three children aged three, two and six months. The Quadvlieg family was one of the over 200 relocated families from Port Harcourt, Bonny and Warri in Nigeria in December 2006.

Last year, a week before Christmas, I heard a terrible loud noise. That noise was to change my life. I didn't know it then of course; my first thought was that the tumble-dryer had fallen on the washing-machine. Then other thoughts occurred to me: perhaps someone's car had hit our house, the cook told me there must have been some shooting at the gate. We were both wrong. A car-bomb had exploded at the Shell Club parking lot.

At a briefing that night the managing director explained that the relocation of all families was unavoidable and that we would not return before August 2007. We had to leave on Thursday the 21st of December, in three days time!

There was a lot we needed to organise over the forthcoming days. Top of our list was finding housing in the Netherlands (our base country, where we were to be relocated). We had sold our small, old house in the Netherlands years earlier when we left the Netherlands for Nigeria, and although we had recently bought a new one it was not yet available. We asked friends if we could stay in their house for a while and were extremely relieved to hear they were happy to help us out.

The next thing was to pack. We were allowed to take one suitcase per person. We took four suitcases and a pram. After almost four years in Nigeria we did not have much warm clothing, and what to bring with us to the Netherlands was a more difficult question to answer than I had anticipated.



This difficulty was compounded for my family by the fact that our assignment to Nigeria was coming to an end (because my husband's contract was coming to an end, not because of the bomb), so I was not even sure whether we would ever return. I packed items I was emotionally attached to and collected the children's favourite toys. We were ready to go - at least in a logistical sense - emotionally I was not. What about the staff that worked for us for several years? These people had been an integral part of our family. Our nanny had seen all our children growing up and now I was faced with the prospect that we may never meet again. Two of our children were born in Port Harcourt and now we were leaving the country, probably forever. We know expatriate assignments are of limited duration but you usually have a reasonable time to say goodbye, and not being able to do this as we would have liked, was hard on us all.

Even prior to our leaving Nigeria, friends and family in the Netherlands would often ask about security issues in Nigeria. How strange it must sound to them to hear me say I never felt unsafe in the Residential Area. Even after the car bomb while we were still on the camp, our security did not trouble us as much as other matters. Our concerns were much more about leaving friends behind, disrupting the lives of our children and having to give up our calm and comfy lives in the tropics for life back in the cold and dark Netherlands.

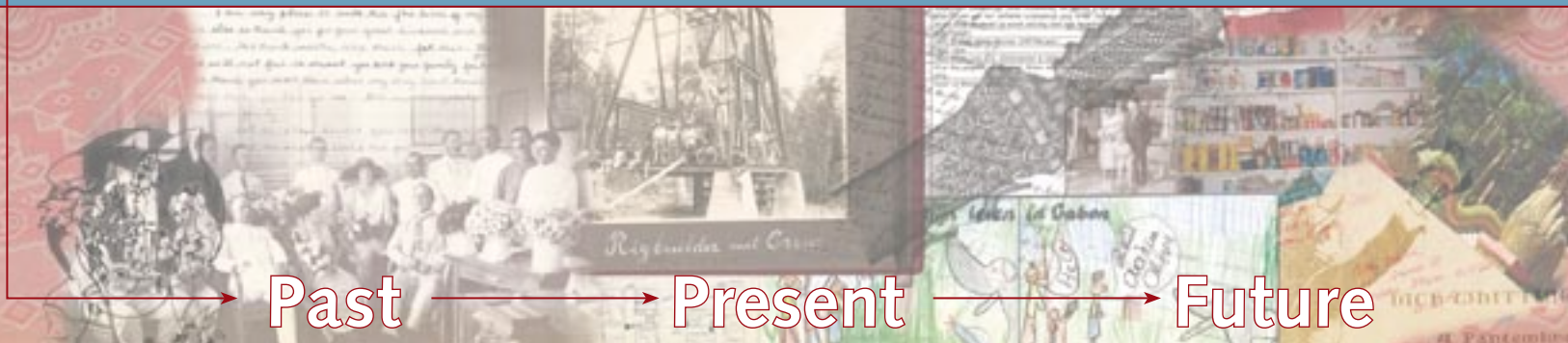
Similarly, conversations with friends and family would typically get stuck at "you must be glad to be back". But no, we are not, although we do understand that under the current circumstances it is wiser to be elsewhere. I also understand when friends and family say they are glad to see us back in one piece, and why they ask if I feel worried about my husband going back to Nigeria to work. What they don't understand, is that if it were at all possible, we would all return to Nigeria straight away. It is difficult to leave your house, friends and life and start up everything again so unexpectedly. But how do you explain this if you have never lived that life?

The journey from Port Harcourt to the Netherlands was long and tiring, but SPDC and all the wardens did a very good job to get us out of the country. The whole experience forged a bond between us and everybody did their bit. At Schiphol we were absolutely amazed at how well Shell took care of us. All in all it gave us a very warm feeling.

It wasn't until we arrived at the friend's house that the impact of our sudden move hit us. For one, it was Christmas and we did not have any real Christmas feeling. We just had to press the button and adapt quickly to the new situation. So we took the children to (indoor) playgrounds and organised drinks for relocated families.

Annemarie's husband Raoul with their children back in the Netherlands

Old times, new times



Jo Parfitt

2007 is a year of change for the Outpost Archive Centre. On January 1st we became an independent stichting, or charitable foundation, and are no longer an integral part of Global Outpost Services. Though, of course, we are still very much part of the GOS family and receive their support. We have received an endowment from Shell that should sustain our place in the future.

But what does this mean and how does it affect you? Firstly, we will soon no longer be contactable by our personal Shell email addresses. Instead we are working on our own new website and have emails pertaining to www.OutpostArchive.com. You can, however, continue to contact us via archive-centre@shell.com

Perhaps the most exciting development is that we now have a new database designed specifically for archives. Called CALM, it promises to revolutionise the way we manage the material we are sent and Lynn-Marie, our archivist is particularly thrilled to be working with it.

We continue to develop our workshops and you will find things running most Wednesdays here in The Hague. Give Your Memories a Voice, Journal the Journey and Making Memories are all being provided in March.

If you want to be kept informed of what's happening at the Outpost Archive sign up to our quarterly newsletter Archive Enews by sending an email to Ros at archive-centre@shell.com

NIGERIA - EVACUATION



Immediately after Christmas we tried to get our lives on track as much as we could. We bought a laptop to be online, a car to be mobile, and thick clothing to keep warm. We finished the paperwork with banks, solicitors and estate agents for our new house. We did an incredible amount in one week. On January 2nd my husband went to the office to work again.

My life has completely changed. Life in Nigeria for a family with 3 small children was a good one. The youngest two children haven't fully registered the changes, but the oldest one has and can sometimes be in a terrible mood. I guess she misses her friends and the kindergarten. We fight about the necessity of wearing socks and shoes.

It is good to stay in contact with our friends from Nigeria and it is good to talk to each other because we are all in similar situations. I just hope the unrest in Nigeria will be over very soon and I would love to return in August for half a year or so to have a proper end to our assignment. But on the other hand I have learned it is better not to plan too much in advance and to enjoy what you have when you have it. For me today that means focusing on the Netherlands and our life here.