



Pam and Robert Weissen with their three sons.

In 2001, we were on the move again with Shell, this time to Manila. Once again, I faced an issue with registering as a practicing doctor.

In Manila, there are many local doctors so the government simply does not register foreign nationals. However, again chance played a big role in my next career move. Indirectly an email was sent to Robert, from another Shell colleague in relation to a position at the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The job title was 'medical advisor' which did not require official licensing and the position was to look after the spouses and dependants of the ADB employees (total 2000, with over 600 expats). In addition to general practitioner duties, we gave out of hour's phone advice, arranged medical transfers and evacuations whilst liaising with the International SOS. I was offered this position as a job share with another female doctor from

Germany, which allowed us plenty of time with family and to enjoy the wonders of Asia. From Manila we moved to Qatar. It was August 2005 and temperatures were regularly up to 50 degree Celsius. Coping with the heat was a challenge, but once I had set-up the house and settled the children in school, I again began to investigate work opportunities. I was initially disappointed to discover that part-time work or job sharing was not the norm in Qatar. However once again, luck was on my side when a friend showed me an advert looking specifically for a western trained GP. The company turned out to be Qatar Airways. I had to face the 'licensing' challenge again but was exempt from having to sit the local exams due to my UK postgraduate qualifications and experience, and began working with Qatar Airways on a full time basis.

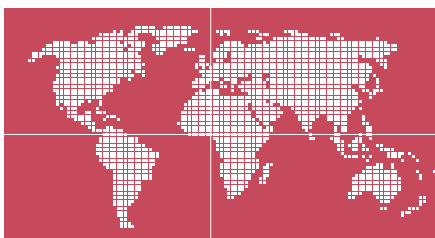
Regrettably balancing family life with a demanding full time career and a husband often travelling was difficult and I chose to resign my position. But never one to give up and keen to maintain my skills, I recently started a job share position with a friend and colleague at Al Ahli Hospital, a private hospital in Doha. Our first achievement was persuading the CEO that job share would work in Qatar. We also had to do some convincing as to the benefits of General Practice, known as Family Medicine in the Middle East. This area of medicine is not well known or practiced in Qatar where traditionally medicine has been very specialist and hospital based. In April 2007, we set up the Department of Family Medicine and it has worked out well. We both work around the school runs and family activities and hopefully opened the door for similar arrangements within other job settings. We see an international client base with many medical ailments and learning opportunities.

With the right approach, anything is possible for an expat wife – in Qatar and beyond!

# RETURN TO PORT HARCOURT RA

Saskia van Hardenbroek left her home in Port Harcourt in December 2006 when families of staff had to leave owing to the deteriorating security situation. She was able to return in December 2007, a little before other spouses - here she gives an account of her personal experiences of this unusual time.

**SASKIA VAN HARDENBROEK**



## NIGERIA

Capital: Abuja

Area: 923,768 sq km

Population: 135,031,164

Languages: English (official), Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo (Ibo), Fulani

Currency: naira

I had a fairly good journey although the long wait for suitcases in Lagos was stressful; you never know if your baggage will arrive with your flight or if Shell Transport will be there to meet you.

The next morning I saw the new Domestic Airport in all its splendour: very big, cool, and efficient - although apparently when it rains it is so noisy you have to yell at each other to be understood. Everybody seemed genuinely very glad to see me; Madam was back so everything would be "normal" again. I think not, but it is encouraging.

Coming back is weird; the Residential Area (RA) has the air of a Sleeping Beauty where time has stood still.

It is really strange, spooky even, to come back after 11 months to something you thought you had left for a two week holiday; your lipstick is still where you left it, only a little dusty. Arthur, my husband, had left everything exactly in place like a kind of shrine. Now I understand why he did not want to bring me the clothes I had left on the bedroom chair; without them that chair would seem very lonely indeed. Unpleasantly so.

I spent the next few days in my house but I found it difficult to settle after all those months in back in the Netherlands, my home country. Usually I can deal with this schizophrenic existence and adjust easily to where I am, but not now, not yet. The Sleeping Beauty feeling continued as I moved around camp. I was struck by the utter silence in the Activity Centre; looking at the Notice Board

it took me a while to realise that I was looking at the events for December 2006. Time had stood still and it felt bad.

A shout from the kitchen broke the mood - the nanny had spotted me. I hated to spoil her happiness by telling her that only a few of the ladies would come back but it did not put her off, her characteristic optimism had taken over. The staff continued to look after the Centre while it was only used for the occasional Malaria presentation or social gathering - predominantly male of course, but the place had quietly gone to sleep, waiting to be woken again.

The meeting with the Golf Committee proved to be more of the same; all was quiet with no more big sponsored tournaments because of curfews and the difficulties of entering the RA with its increased security.

I discovered that part of the Guesthouse had burned down and it sits blackened and forlorn, no doubt waiting for money. Instead they are renovating and rebuilding the school even though there are yet no children.

The Club has also suffered badly and things are very quiet indeed. The facilities are being used, but on a much smaller scale. Only the Club Bar and Restaurant are really lively. Here is some respite after a hard day's work, companionship and a chance to share concerns but also to try and forget them,

Sport is another way of keeping sane: it is remarkable how many people you meet after office hours, running, jogging, hitting the golf or tennis ball as hard as they can to get rid of frustrations, to work up a healthy appetite and probably to provide good reason for "liquid sustenance" later in the evening.

The shuttle bus to and from the Industrial Area (IA) proves to be another meeting place. Unexpected contacts are made in those cramped little busses with their sky blue curtains drawn to mask the presence of expatriates.

To alleviate the loneliness of the guys who are still without their wives and families I immediately invited two of them for dinner - forgetting that fresh vegetables and such are not as easy available as in Holland! Fortunately I like improvising and the gentlemen are not spoiled (any more). Although the food stalls near Chanrai's are empty, the RA shops of Best Ways and Chanrai's itself are in business and the vegetable ladies are still trying to make you buy more than you want.

People back home ask me about the security situation and I can answer honestly that I feel totally safe here and much more relaxed than in Holland where I was constantly worrying about my husband's well being. The new security wall does not feel as claustrophobic as I had expected. There is a large stretch of green grass along it and, as many houses on the other side already had walls, it seems little different, just neater. Total/Elf have also built their own wall next to ours and two sturdy fences with an electric wire fence (about 10 wires!) in between. You're dead as a doornail if you touch that - are they frightened of us!

At the entrance to IA and RA there are foxholes with sandbags, tents at a few hundred metres intervals and small busses with machineguns sticking out of the windows. The curfew from 12pm - 6am is nice, there is less noise. However there is shooting at night; I do not understand why as there are few pedestrians in the streets - perhaps a warning or just boredom?



The IA looks deserted as cars are banned, but is pleasantly quiet. Perhaps they should plant more bushes and flowers around the offices, and use the space for football or a golf practice range. A huge new parking place has bus stops for services to the offices. The influence of the increased security is noticeable and things are better organised.

Apparently the building of the new hospital on IA continues, another phoenix to rise eventually from the ashes of the past. Meanwhile medical care goes on; the clinic at RA has become busier, taking care of medical issues that do not require a trip to the hospital.

Picking up the threads of life here means contacting the various charities. The Sisters of Charity in the Compassion Home had an emotional meeting at my house. They looked well and are still able to help the local population, but they were very relieved to see me, feeling strengthened by the return of the spouses.

Many expats have now left for other postings, but even if they are still here, their houses give a dusty, deserted impression. Everybody is spreading their leave days to visit their families in their home country as often as possible. The faintly neglected homes depress me but suddenly I find that I am looking with new interest at those that have been left for good. I know them inside out and I mentally make a list to advise newcomers which ones to choose.

In order to welcome the spouses and partners who are returning or coming into Port Harcourt RA for the first time, Outpost and HR have plans to rebuild the community, to set up sport, arts and educational activities again. It must be made clear that time here can be used to good advantage, enhancing and enriching lives.


The challenge is now to rebuild this community into something positive and pleasant again and maybe the somewhat forced camaraderie of the past months will help to develop this. With that famous optimism that is prevalent in Nigeria I do feel that as the year progresses everything will be better and that we will wake our Sleeping Beauty!



# THE NETHERLAND POLDERS

TIFFINY ORR

Tiffany moved to The Hague in April last year with her husband Max and two boys, Sam four years old and Jess nearly two years old. Tiffany qualified as an architect in New Zealand and is currently enjoying discovering the Dutch landscape and architecture. She has just begun a Masters study programme in The Hague.



There is apparently an English saying “God created the world, but the Dutch created the Netherlands”.

Coming from the mountains, valleys, harbours, and general variety of ‘Middle Earth’, being presented by hundreds of kilometres of flat landscape was not the most exciting part of moving to the Netherlands. No doubt driving around such a country would be unrelenting, difficult to navigate, and boring. Like so many things you are sure you know before settling in a new place, this too, proved to be false.

Polders are a case in point. These distinct landscapes (once you know what to look for), are part of the national psyche and the image

of rural Netherlands. They were, however, completely new to a girl from New Zealand where spare land is abundant. Polders are reclaimed land – marshes, fenland and lakes – and knowing a bit about them has provided a whole new perspective on this flat new country we’re in.

During a university trip to the Beemster in the winter semester, I was shown a new way to look at this not quite flat landscape. Wealthy merchants from Amsterdam looking for a profitable way to reinvest burgeoning trading gains after the Conquest of Antwerp by the Spanish Army<sup>1</sup> devised a plan to drain a large open lake. In order to provide more valuable farming land, the idea was to essentially

subdivide the area in to even sized farm blocks for sale, five blocks to a purchaser. 'Selling off the plan' is often difficult in today's market, but to have successfully sold farmland from a drawing of what was then still a lake, in 1607, is pretty remarkable.

The area is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is described as "...a masterpiece of creative planning, in which the ideals of antiquity and the Renaissance were applied to the design of a reclaimed landscape." The innovative and intellectually imaginative landscape of the Beemster Polder had a profound and lasting impact on reclamation projects in Europe and beyond."<sup>2</sup>

The old lake (which now has the quaint town of Beemster in its centre) is ringed by a dyke over 30km in diameter – which makes a nice ride on a good, still day – with the land either side sitting at different heights up this earth mound wall. The reason for the difference in level is the type of soil on either side of the wall.

The Netherlands is mostly made up of sand, clay and peat. These react in different ways to water, and have different saturation levels.



A lake bed like that originally under the Beemster, was clay and had little water in its composition compared to the huge amounts in the surrounding peat lands. When this water was removed the clay remained relatively stable, while the peat lands would subside and 'fall'. This is most easily seen where water has been routed in to canals. Where a canal flows through peat, the water level and the level of the surrounding land need to be kept very close, usually within 30cm or so, to stop the ground from subsiding. Where the land is clay, the water level can be much lower than the land around it making 'river banks' over a metre high on the either side of the canal.

Whether you care what kind of soil you are walking on or not, this is a great way to tell what the land you are driving through is made of, and suddenly those slightly raised roads all over the place are recognisable as dykes. Driving around the country armed with this small piece of information, it is truly amazing how many dykes there really are, and just how much of this land must once have been underwater.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.beemsterswelvaart.nl>

<sup>2</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org>

For the Gemeente Beemster go to <http://www.beemster.net>

