



Friends helping Aaryana find her balance



Canal side in Giethoorn

“THEY’RE *TOO* STRAIGHT-FORWARD”

That’s how they described the Dutch people on the many expatriate forums. We checked online and they echoed similar sentiments. Some opinions went even further, calling them rude. So, if there ever was a skeptical moment, it was this.

At the other end of the tug were all those exciting childhood stories we’d heard, about those Herculean dikes, the serene waterways, those timeless windmills, the cheese and those lovely tulips. And all our skepticism and our natural resistance to change melted away.

Next up was to really learn something about this new place, so we wouldn’t jump out of our skins. Scouring through the bookshelves we came across this absolutely wonderful book called, ‘Culture Shock! Netherlands: A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette.’ For whatever we were looking for, the title could not have been any clearer. After poring through, we surfaced a couple of days later, learning interesting things about Holland; the coffee breaks, the three-kiss greeting, the love for bicycles, and about a world that lives by appointments.

“...we were taken aback when we were expected to carry our 40” television ourselves.”

Our entry into Holland and settling-in was mostly uneventful. There was no denying a few shocks experienced while setting up our new home. Having come from ‘at your service always,’ and ‘customer first,’ environment in Asia, we were taken aback when we were expected to carry our 40” television ourselves. But there were other nicer things, which made up for that.

We were visiting the countryside during our first spring. At a picturesque place in Leiderdorp, we decided to go for a short walk along the waterway. We parked and had a short conversation with a Dutch gentleman, who was fishing nearby. We returned after an hour to find him still around. When we neared, he calmly mentioned that we had forgotten to close our car doors, and that the keys were still in ignition!

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We'd missed it all in a rush to transfer our two-year old onto her stroller! But he chose to sit and watch our car for us. This kind incident will forever stay with me. I am sure this quality fails to get mentioned in those discussion forums.

Being unfamiliar with the kind of temperature drops here, the cold winter was an aspect we needed to get immediately adjusted to. I remember seeing a well-dressed man cycling in 2°C cold, only to learn from the taxi driver that he had probably parked his Audi back home and chosen to cycle! The surprise on my face must have been priceless. And now I like to see the same expression cross the faces of our visitors from home who invariably comes across similar scene.

We have so far enjoyed living here and have looked at most experiences as opportunities to know this culture better, which one could easily miss if a tourist. And in this process we have experienced that it subconsciously ends up as a healthy exchange of cultures. I remember my new Dutch neighbor's surprise when I said she needn't make an appointment to visit me, and that she

was most welcome any time. And the gracious lady appeared informally at my doorstep the very next week. It was my turn to appreciate her gesture. It must have been a detour from what she grew up believing was the right etiquette, but she tried to be different for us.

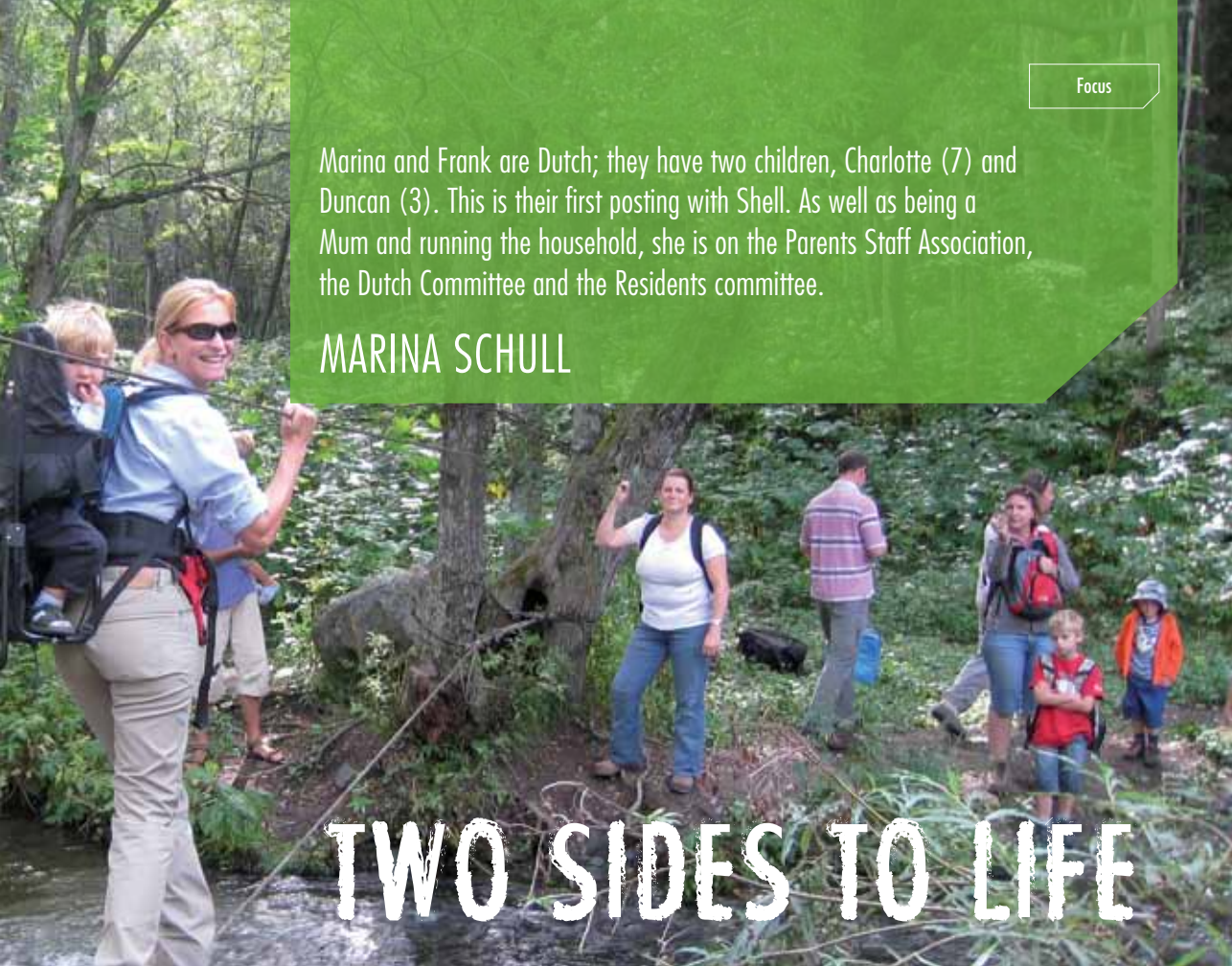
There are other niceties too. It is indeed heart-warming to see the courtesy given to mothers with young ones and prams, both being dutifully assisted onto trams with a polite *'alstublieft'*; an etiquette observed by young and the old alike.

We look back three years on and we still miss our Asian mall-hopping weekend routine. We still miss the tropical heat and our Indian sweets. But on the plus side, we now cycle more than we ever did. We are more family orientated on the weekends and have become more organized, as we learnt the hard way that being an hour late to the market won't yield us that desired loaf of bread.

The Netherlands has given us many opportunities and experiences to cherish, going well beyond the known ones.

Marina and Frank are Dutch; they have two children, Charlotte (7) and Duncan (3). This is their first posting with Shell. As well as being a Mum and running the household, she is on the Parents Staff Association, the Dutch Committee and the Residents committee.

MARINA SCHULL



TWO SIDES TO LIFE

A family outing to Frog rock

Almost two years ago, Frank and I left our jobs in Holland to go and live with our family on Sakhalin Island, Russia. With a new job for Frank and our first time living abroad and becoming a stay-at-home mom with children who did not speak English for me, were enough changes for a challenging adventure. We were advised to bring some warm clothes in our hand luggage because it could be really cold. It was freezing, -25°Celsius when the plane landed. Snow all over the airport, wind whistling around our heads pushing us from the landing strip through a little door in the fence. It was quite a shocking difference compared to our departure airport. This would prove to be the first striking contrast that I was going to experience. In this story I want you

to be aware of my experiences of the two sides of life in this location.

After a while when we were settled in I joined the hiking-group. We walked for three hours every week in the mountains behind our camp. I really loved it, because of the beauty and the silence of nature. Nature on Sakhalin is very wild and raw. During our peaceful walks, I am always unpleasantly surprised when we find a trashed car or the remains of a BBQ in the midst of the woods. The excitement of these walks is increased in late spring when the bears wake up hungry from hibernation. In this period, bears are drawn to populated areas by the trash left in these surroundings and regularly attack people.

Most of the Russian Sakhalin ladies are very well dressed and look well groomed. Physical appearance seems very important to the female population. Driving down the main road you can see women in high heels; fur coats; strikingly dressed and with hair-dos straight from the pages of a glossy magazine. Although they don't have a lot of money, the ladies look very glamorous. It is amazing when you see these extraordinary women entering apartment blocks built in the communist period, all grey, rotting, little balconies falling apart, concrete steps and rusting iron bars.

The climate on Sakhalin is again a topic of contradiction. Extreme cold temperatures and great amounts of snow characterize winter. Temperatures of -30 Celsius are not unusual and from mid December until end of March all is covered in a thick layer of snow. The beauty of the scenery is further enhanced by the clear blue skies. I truly enjoy my weekly downhill skiing trips and due to the dryness of the snow it is magnificent. Because of the lack of humidity, the cold is bearable with proper clothing. At the end of March, most people have had enough of the snow. After that it will take another month before the snow disappears. The summer is pretty warm and humid. This is the season that we often take trips around the island with friends. We try to find great places for the children to play and to have barbeques. The children love these trips and they always ask: "When are we going on a new adventure?"

Summer in compound Zima (that means winter in Russian) is also fantastic for the kids. They don't have to dress themselves up with snowsuits, which makes it a lot easier. There is so much space to play in and around the houses. The changing of the seasons makes it very diverse for them. In the summer they are catching tadpoles in the pond and chasing after grasshoppers. In the winter they build igloos and sledge around Zima.

Zima is a pretty large compound; a walk of the perimeter fence is about 3 km. With no past camp life experience, I didn't have any strong feelings in relation to camp life in general. In the past two years, I have developed a love\hate relationship with the social aspect of it. After a while, social life started to feel a bit 'cramped'. It took a while before I recognized the feeling that social life on a compound can be suffocating. I jumped into a lot of committees to fill up my need to be productive which was the feeling that I missed after quitting my job. There are a lot of events going on though... sport clubs, school events and social events like the Christmas bazaar and work related events, dinner parties and so on. The people I meet at these events are always the same, helpful and friendly... but always the same.

A day after arriving on the island I was met by a very friendly lady to do some shopping. Driving into Yuzhno (the capital of Sakhalin) she explained to me all the ins and outs of life on Sakhalin. I had terrible jetlag and the only thing I remembered was her saying "Try to get off the island every three months". You can picture my reaction, I had just arrived on my first expat posting; new house; new country; and I hear this! I thought 'my goodness, is this the typical expat attitude?' I assumed she had lived too long abroad and she did not remember normal life anymore. However, this lady proved to be right and this is still the most valuable advice that I have had. In Zima where you constantly meet the same people, escape from the island on a very regular basis is a good recipe for sanity.

Another piece of advice was offered to me while walking back from school. A mum advised: "Marina, you definitely do need a nanny here". This was the second time that I was flabbergasted. Having just left my job, I planned to devote my time to the children and I had not even contemplated the thought of having a

nanny. I quickly discovered that shopping with a toddler and a stroller in a small shopping bus was a rather challenging activity. This was not even taking into account the fact that Yuzhno has no pavements or facilities for strollers or disabled people. It is very slippery and dangerous, especially in winter. After struggling through a few shopping trips, I decided: Marina needs a nanny!

The experience of having the kids in an international school has turned out to be a very positive one. In the beginning Charlotte found it a little bit hard, because she didn't speak any English. The children in her class helped her and after two months saying hardly anything she was able to express herself. Now she is helping new children to feel confident and happy in her class. All the children are very sociable; they understand what it is like to start over with every posting. School also gives them the possibilities to explore and improve themselves in many different ways. Respect for each other is a top item. The down side of our multi-cultural children is that as a result of this protective environment they are not very streetwise.

Traveling to and from Sakhalin is far from enjoyable. The trips are always long; the airport is dirty; the queues for customs are long and slow and on top of this the weather is always uncertain, several weather patterns can result in an airport closure. It frequently occurs that planned escapes to sunny destinations are cancelled or delayed. You might think that this is the typical whine of an expat wife; but it is extremely frustrating when it occurs. On a more serious note, the potential inability to immediately fly back home in case of an emergency makes people here feel a little uncomfortable.

The experience of living on Sakhalin gives our life an extra dimension. We realize that living on a compound is special but not always easy.

We are grateful that we can experience this life and I am thankful to those that have helped us. The children are given a high standard of education and have a safe and spacious place to play. However, following the best advice given to me... I'm very happy that soon we will be traveling home for Christmas, assuming the weather is not too bad and the airport is not closed. Sakhalin is a great place and I highly recommend it as a place to live, but it is good to go home every now and then.



The Dutch contingent

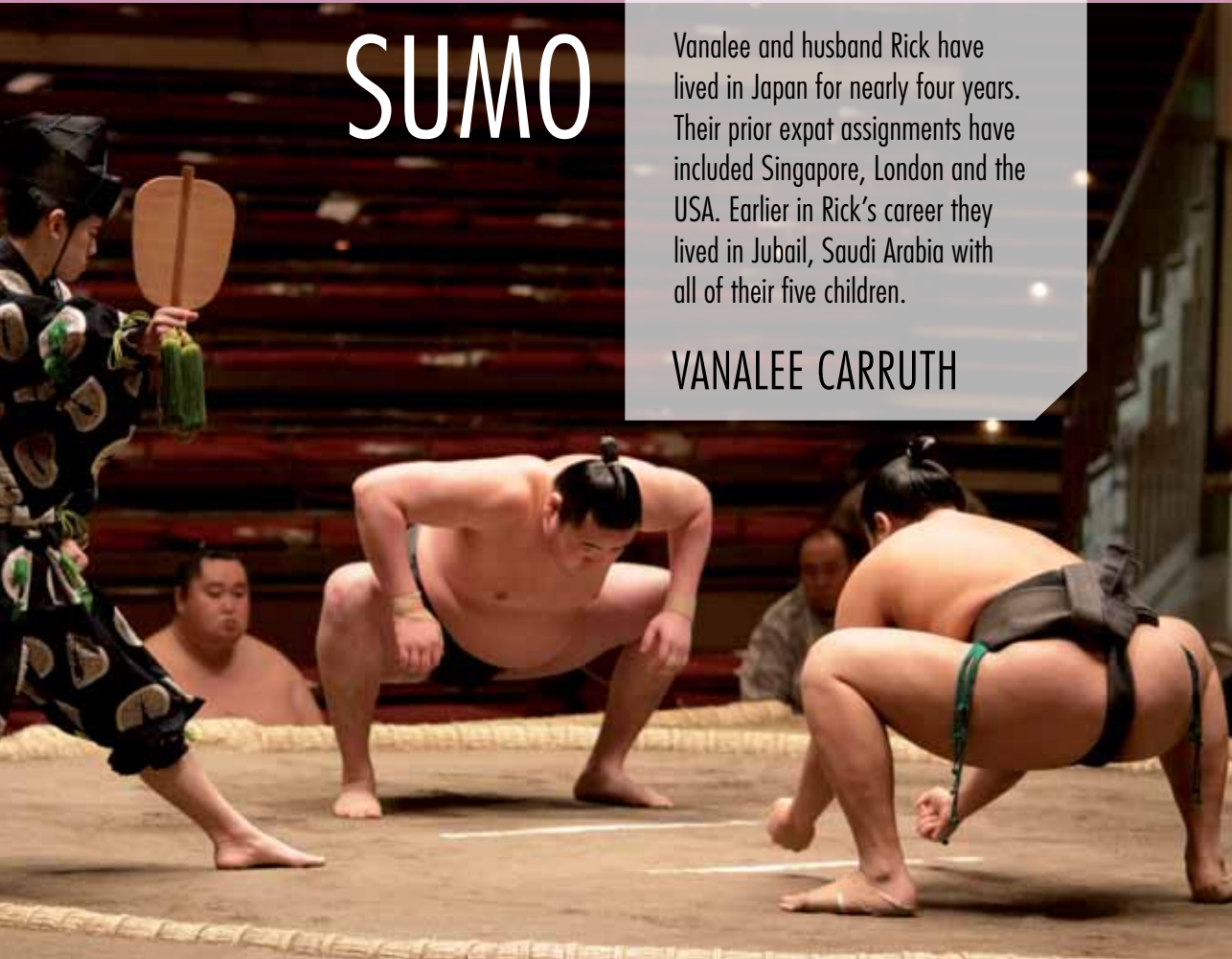
Playing in the snow



CEREMONIAL SUMO

Vanalee and husband Rick have lived in Japan for nearly four years. Their prior expat assignments have included Singapore, London and the USA. Earlier in Rick's career they lived in Jubail, Saudi Arabia with all of their five children.

VANALEE CARRUTH



My father loved to watch any sport that was on the television. A few times a year our local station would rebroadcast sumo tournaments on Saturday afternoons. I think he watched more to annoy my sister and me, than because he enjoyed the sport. We would come into the room and when we saw what he was watching we would run from the room shrieking, "That's disgusting!"

During our second month in Japan my husband came home from work with tickets to the current sumo tournament I wasn't sure if I wanted to go. I even suggested that he take someone from work. He finally convinced me to go because it was an important part of Japanese culture and the national sport of Japan.

Ako-san, my husband's secretary accompanied us to Kokugikan (the national stadium). The large man sitting at the ticket gate was obviously a retired sumo wrestler. He pointed to a door on the far left of the stadium and said something to Ako-san in Japanese. The only part I understood was "ju bango" (ten). We entered the doors to a long corridor lined on each side with identical stalls. Number ten was the very last stall on the right. Ako-san handed our tickets to a man. He disappeared to the back of the stall and then emerged with a large shopping bag and drinks. We followed him to our 'seats'.

The tickets we had were for box seats. The box is the size of four tatami mats; which means it

seats four Japanese or two *gaijin* (foreigners). We removed our shoes and tucked them under the box behind us. We climbed over the railing that surrounds the box and sat on the mats. Ako-san hurried away in search of radios with English translation. We watched a few matches and then began investigating the bag of food. The bag included four of everything: Japanese cheese, rice crackers, edamame, yakitori, assorted sandwiches, bento boxes with rice and Japanese sweets. Ako-san returned with the radios and we proceeded to watch the remainder of the day's matches, eating and listening to an English-speaking commentator.

The elevated dohyo (sumo ring) is made of clay and has a straw rice bag about 15 feet in diameter imbedded into its surface. The sumo match is confined to this ring. Over the dohyo suspended from the ceiling by cables is a roof resembling a Shinto shrine with four giant tassels hanging from each corner to represent the four seasons of the year.

"Sumo tournaments are an important part of Japanese culture and the national sport of Japan"