

Hugh and Becky's Netherlands Adventure - one year update

Groetjes uit Het Nederlands!

Time flies when you are having fun!

It has been a year since Hugh and Becky's farewell parties and Hugh flew off to The Netherlands to begin his job with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) – emphasis on the word Prohibition! A month later Becky joined him. So much has happened since then.

We have sent out two updates and our standard Christmas letter but we have been remiss in keeping the updates updated! This is our one year update.

Hugh's continues to do great at his new job. He still becomes frustrated with the level of bureaucracy and micromanagement. However, he is making improvements at a steady pace. For example, he is close to getting agreement to solve a long standing problem that has caused international disagreements at high levels during the Conferences of States Parties and Executive Council meetings. For work he has traveled to England, Sweden, Switzerland, Singapore, USA, and China. Becky has tagged along on the England and Singapore trip and will join him when he goes back to China this October.

On 13 November Sinterklaas (think Santa Claus) arrived at the harbor near Den Haag on his steam boat, the SS Madrid. He made the journey from his home in Spain with his white horse, Amerigo, and his assistant, Swartz Piet (that's black Peter). We are not making this up! See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinterklaas> We attended the parade from the harbor into downtown. Hundreds of Swartz Piets, mostly Dutch men in blackface, escort Sinterklaas throwing cookies and candies to the crowd.



On his birthday, 5 December, Sinterklaas brings presents including chocolate letters that are usually the first letter of a person's name.

After Sinterklaas' Dag the focus shifts towards Christmas. Christmas decorations do not go up until the Sinterklaas decorations come down. Since we would be here for the holidays we bought a tree and the house was fully decorated.

We have made friends with our neighbors. The Dutch, by custom, are very private people. So if newcomers want to get acquainted they are expected to extend the first invitation. Hugh and I hosted an American-style open house for the people on our street (only 24 homes). We thought about ½ would come. Surprise – essentially every neighbor came and we had a house full. Since we had the party on 15 December the neighbors enjoyed the holiday festivities. It was loads of fun.

After roughly 30 years in California we had forgotten what winter is really like. The Netherlands had their second year of unexpectedly cold and snowy weather in late November and December. An accumulation of 20 cm of snow in our area essentially shut things down in mid-December.



We'd wake up in the morning, brush the snow off the paths and then, undaunted, Hugh would ride his bike to work. It was safer than getting on the road with Dutch drivers who are not used to snow!

Becky spent a few days in Nuremburg Germany to experience the Christmas markets.

We attended nice parties on Christmas and New Year's Eve. New Year's Eve is one of the only times fireworks are legal in The Netherlands. But not big community organized fireworks shows, there are fireworks EVERYWHERE. Many millions of euros of personal fireworks are shot off. At the party we attended there were thousands of euros of fireworks that went on for hours.

Early New Year's morning we headed off to Singapore and left the cold behind. Before Hugh's work week in Singapore we had a week of vacation in Borneo. We enjoyed the Borneo rainforests, what are left of them, as the palm oil plantations have taken over the island. The economics make it clear why but the impact on the wildlife is devastating.



For Becky's birthday we spent the weekend in Bruges Belgium which is so CUTE!

In March Becky accepted a short term consulting assignment with the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization. From home she works preparing health and safety documentation to support preparations for and possible on-site inspections that could happen when this treaty enters into force. She was hoping this assignment would come through so did some work in advance. She has been very pleased with the flexibility of the organization. So far they seem happy with her work.

April was a travel month. First Becky spent a couple days in Paris and then met our friend Sue Mathews in Switzerland. They spent a week as guests of Sue's cousins in Montreaux. What a gorgeous area!



The next week Hugh and Bruce Newcome joined Sue and Becky in Portugal. We had a week in Lisbon – GREAT FUN - and then a couple days in Obidos. In Obidos the guys had reserved rooms in the tower of an 11th century castle. This is Sue and Bruce on the wall with the door behind into OUR tower!



Sue and Bruce came back to the Netherlands. We enjoyed a beautiful day with the flowers at Keukenhof and visiting Leiden. Then Sue and Bruce went on to Amsterdam for the craziness of Queens Day in Amsterdam.



Becky was proud to help with a charity gala (Yes, she's doing charity work!) organized by the American Women's Club that raised over €50,000 for two groups that help children with autism in the Netherlands.

We have enjoyed seeing Pete and Pat Aiello periodically. They only live 2 hours from us. Together we have explored Brussels, 's Hertogenbosch, and Groningen.

We are taking day trips and up to 3-day weekends to explore areas not far from home. So much to see. We did think it was fun that one day we were driving through Germany, France, Luxemburg, Belgium, and The Netherlands!

Our big trip this year will be a lifelong dream come true – an African safari. We will start in the Maasai Mara and then go into Tanzania in the main game viewing areas there. We will end up with some snorkeling/scuba diving on an island off the coast of Tanzania. More on that trip in a future update.

We are looking forward to Hugh's brother's family visiting in September. With all they want to do we think they will have to chose between sleep and touring! We enjoy all our visitors! Some have only come for dinner and some for a few days. Each time we get to catch up, show friends around and see new things. Will you be coming too??? You are invited. Just let us know when.

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