

The Ekeren Files

Volume 26 – November 2014

'The getting in shape'

Anita still takes her bicycle to go shopping and I'm building a house. That's about all.

'The Snow'

Our yearly trip to Ischgl in Austria was again a very relaxing holiday. There was just enough snow to get the slopes in good shape but no real off-piste skiing was possible. After taking skiing lessons for 20 years, our technique is good enough to be able to relax during the skiing on the slopes. Which is a good thing because of our lack of physical training ...

As usual, we combined our ski trip with the visits to our German friends Bianca & Marc and Heidrun & Axel. Always good fun!

'The working'

Part 1: the working in the Ardennes

At last, we finished the bathroom and it looks very good with the dark grey natural stone, the oak wood and the blue mosaic.

In 2012, the forest was cut and now we built a parking lot and a carport. For the parking lot, we used 200 kg heavy granite strips and the result is

spectacular. I had a lot of wooden beams from the house in Ekeren and these were ideal for the construction of the carport. The old-timer Land Cruiser likes it very much to have its own dry spot during winter.

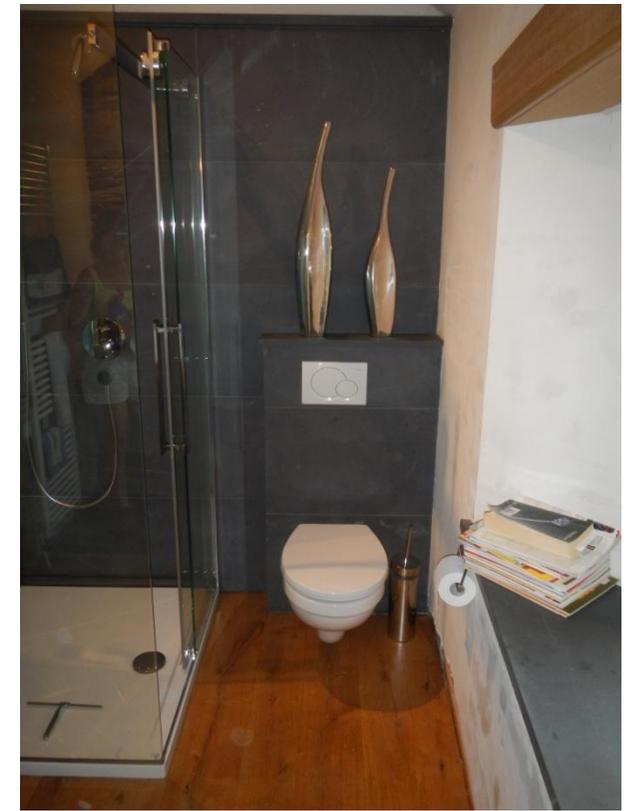


The beekeeping is difficult! It takes a lot of knowledge, work and discipline to make it a success. In June 2013, we got a nice colony from which we had the most delicious honey in August. Very different compared to the honey you buy in the supermarket.

In March 2014, in spite of a very mild winter, there wasn't much left of the colony, so no bees anymore. I went to check the bee's hall in June and there were quite some bees buzzing around. I took the cover from the supposedly empty hive and it was full with bees! Since I didn't have any protective clothing on, the cover was very quickly replaced. So when I went back later with full armour on, I took the cover off again and checked the inside of the hive. A few hundred bees but nothing spectacular.... until I wanted to replace the cover.... a lump, size of a small

football of several thousand bees, fell out of the cover on the ground. Oooops... the buzzing and my heartbeat went instantly crescendo. I kept my cool, replaced the cover and got out of the bees hall with only two bees trapped inside the face cover. It hurts when they sting! The morning after, Anita and I went back. The bees were back into the cover, so we carefully(!) took it off again and shacked the bees into the hive.

Beekeeping again with a new colony!



Part 2: the working at work

Anita: a new boss, a new colleague, a new product.

A lot of changes which didn't work out too well, so she's now awaiting a restructuring of her department.

Wouter: a lot going around these 2 years. There was a big train crash with several tanker wagons derailed and on fire. <http://youtu.be/QPKpzHF7tIA> The escaping chemicals were very toxic and half a town had to be evacuated. One person was killed from an overdose of the chemical vapours. So at 2 in the night, we got an emergency call from the government for our assistance and expertise at the disaster site. Our Turbo Jet fire truck, the vacuum tank truck and several technical trucks were deployed. Together with the public fire-fighters, the army, the civil protection and the medical emergency teams, we worked for days on the site until the fires were out and the chemicals pumped in tanks and ships. It was a huge operation and our team played a major role in it. (<http://youtu.be/J8e82goGWTA> the turbo jet in action!)



Also a lot of work at the BASF site with the start-up of new chemical plants and they got us new toys as

well! Pump trucks with 10.000L/min pumps, mobile pumps and a mobile flare for flaring combustible vapours and gasses. The flare is my responsibility and the operation of it can be impressive: BIG flames!!

Part 3: the working in the other houses

July 2013 we started rebuilding the hobby house in Ekeren. Stripped everything and just the front wall remains. Now it's November 2014 and I still have a full time job on the house because we can't afford the builder anymore. We used to have enough money to pay him, but Marc, our neighbour who lived in between our two houses, decided to move and sell the house. We couldn't miss this once in a lifetime opportunity, so another house to rebuild. Work, work!

'The Driving and other nice things in life'

We have a beautiful Toyota Land Cruiser and we already had great trips in Morocco and Tunisia. Time for a bigger adventure: the Algerian Sahara! This is the desert at its best! The Assekrem, Tamanrasset, the Tassili and Hoggar mountains. I've been dreaming about these epic places since I was a boy. And now it was really going to happen! Truck? Check! Visa? Check! Maps? Check! Medical check-up? Check! All ready to go.... until some Islamist groups raided an Algerian gas field and killed a lot of innocent people. Also the north of Mali became a dangerous place and all the revolutionary Tuaregs fled north towards Algeria....

This would turn out in a very dangerous undertaking. Those guys are very keen on tourist vehicles and their money. Trip cancelled!

5 Weeks holiday to spare.... Mexico here we come! A small Opel Corsa is not the same as a big 4 wheel

drive truck, but nevertheless took us around southern Mexico without missing a beat. We had a great trip and kept ourselves busy with visiting the old Mayan and Aztec ruins, canoeing on freshwater lakes, diving in cenotes and hanging out at the beach. Very relaxing except for the police who tries to rip you off. After they endured Anita's fury, we were free to continue without paying. At the next roadblock, we didn't speak a word of Spanish anymore...

3G Coverage in Mexico is good, so we bought a sim card for the ipad and used google maps for our navigation. Worked flawlessly! At the exit of a national park somewhere in Yucatan, we had a look at the Belgian second-hand internet site and discovered a nice new toy: a HDJ80 Toyota Land Cruiser. A 'nice to have' addition for our collection!



This was before we ran out of money with buying houses... Don't worry, we rented the new place out, so the money is slowly returning and we still have enough to finish the house and go on holiday.

A new toy wants to be played with. But it still had to wait because we already had something different planned, for which we needed a fully prepared overland truck:

Albania, 'Land of the eagles!'

A mysterious country with a doubtful reputation, hidden somewhere in Eastern Europe. If you hear

the word Albania, chances are big that the same sentence will include: stolen cars, mafia, murder, illegal weapons.... so why would any sane person go for his pleasure to a place where his car will be stolen by a Mafioso who will shoot him with an illegal Kalashnikov?

Well, Albania is Europe's off-road paradise. A mecca for the 4WD enthusiast. Almost 30.000 km² of unpaved roads, mountains, lakes, forests and beautiful scenery. If you get bored by the mountains, there is 350 km shoreline to be explored with nice sandy beaches, a Mediterranean climate and an old soviet submarine base hidden in a giant cave: pure James Bond! Cross a lake on an antique ferry to get to an ancient roman ruin. Follow a river into a narrow valley which would have been a perfect location for the Lord of the Rings movies. Behind every corner there is dramatic scenery with waterfalls and mountain peaks towering above the clouds. When we made a photo-stop, it was not unusual that the local people invited us in their home for coffee and we weren't allowed to leave without a bag of fresh fruit and veggies. Although we didn't understand a word of each other's language, these contacts were very intense.

Since WW2, Albania has been very isolated from the rest of the world because of the communist dictator Enver Hoxha. In the 50's and 60's, the standard of living was good but towards the 80's, the economy collapsed and so did the communist state in 1991.



Until then, private car ownership was not allowed with a matching road network dating from the Ottoman period. A 19th century situation which is now slowly improving. Every Albanian wants to own a Mercedes! So the cars you spot are 25 years old Mercedes with the obligatory horseshoe on the radiator, but also a lot of very posh ones.... We even saw a Landrover with Belgian licence plates parked in front of a restaurant. We asked the waiter where the owner of the Belgian car was and he pointed us to 4 Albanian guys sitting at a table. One of the guys told me he used to work in Brussels and that he bought the car there. Anita was already nudging her elbow in my side to indicate that this was the moment to leave. When you buy a car in Belgium, the license plate stays with the previous owner and not with the car.....

We spent three weeks in this amazing country with its friendly people and huge contrasts. A fantastic trip!

Back in Belgium, the new toy was still very keen to be taken on a new adventure. After a few modifications, 'the grey one' (the others are 'the white' and 'the red') was ready for its first shake-

down trip. Nothing remote, easily accessible and covered by our breakdown insurance... Okay let's cross the Pyrenees from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean with the maximum possible use of dirt roads.

'En route' through France we were spoiled by Lulu and Will in the city of Niort. Great holiday starter!

Day 1 at the Atlantic coast: rain. At least we don't need the airco and fog patches between the trees have their charms, but ripping off the mud flaps trying to drive up a slippery slope is not what I call fun. From day 2, as we made our way up into the mountains, weather improved, tracks dried up and the driving through the Spanish national parks was pure joy.



From valley to mountain pass and down again into another valley; until we were confronted with an obstacle in the form of a 4 meter high wall of snow on the highest point. Driving up the wall was no problem, but the first thing Anita said when she looked at the other side was "driving down here? No way!" This would have meant driving back into the

valley and make a large detour to another, lower, mountain pass. The boss already said no way, but as a fireman, I'm used to make risk assessments and I had a closer look at this 'wall', estimated the 'attack angle' and decided that it would be a close call but not impossible. Missing would mean the truck tipping over and nothing to keep it from rolling for 500 meters... So I got behind the wheel, inched forward towards the slope with only blue sky in front of me, then the nose went down and..... the bumper hit the gravel, the wheels got grip again and I was on track again at the other side of the pass. Anita's comment: "You have even more guts than I already thought!" Nice ego-boost, thank you very much! So there I was, high on adrenaline and on the other side was Rob, driver of the other truck, looking as if he just swallowed a lemon, because he had to drive down there too..... but as he is a good driver, he got nicely down the wall as well. (as if he had a choice, I would have teased him with it for years if he had chickened out...) The rest of the trip went very smooth with fantastic weather, a nice variation in 'wildlife', ranging from cows over wild horses to mountain vultures soaring over our heads. At night, we slept with the tent open under a million stars. At last, we reached the Mediterranean sea. Where we had a delicious 25°C degree in the mountains, at sea level it was a heat wave with temperatures going over 35°C. Switch on the airco and we steered north towards our home in the Ardennes. Another relaxing week of holiday and then back to work! Next trip will be towards the Alps in June 2015 or to Sardinia when there is too much snow on the passes....

'The Friends & the Family'

My mum and dad have been married for 50 years and we had a big celebration party with speeches from friends and the kids (yeah, the three of us) with

a presentation of their life before and after their marriage. All very pleasant with the obligatory drunk uncle and all.

Anita's mum and dad are quite ok, mum had a back operation and has become dependent of Anita's dad.

But her dad is becoming a bit 'vague'. He had to give up his veggie garden and rabbits. The old age playing its tricks...

In April, Anita had a phone call from Wim who was crying in agony... 4 Perforations in his bowels were giving him a very hard time and it was a very close call. Now, 7 months and 2 operations later, he's doing much better and he is becoming his old self again.

In Ekeren, we had some great parties with the neighbours. Luckily with no casualties this time.

The house in the Ardennes is still a fantastic place to



meet our friends who often extend their stay.

On a nice and sunny day in June, Marty chartered

Pim's helicopter and invited us for a tour over the

highlights of the 'Battle of the bulge'. He wanted to have photographs for his new book covering this major event during WW2. Our house in the Ardennes was the perfect location for coffee and lunch breaks in between flights. Such helicopter rides are always fantastic! Thanks Marty & Pim!

Sadly some old friends passed away. Gerd, 'Bear', Harry and Hilde will be missed.

'The Cat'

Gaston: 'The Fat One' 'Our Youngest' 'Silly!' 'In your basket!' 'Stop whining!' We love him! And he loves us very much especially just before feeding time...



Hugs & kisses from,

Anita, Wouter & Gaston

Our mobile numbers are working most of the time:

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'The Team'

You only live once!

On the long run, the only things you regret are those you didn't try.

And we are now certified beekeepers as well!!

(this extended our team with 50.000 members; still struggling to memorise their names...Already told you that beekeeping is difficult....)



That's it for now!