

## Summer Camp in the Netherlands

By Madeleine Picozzi



I went to the Netherlands via a somewhat circuitous route. I originally contacted the Salesians with the intention of going to China but had not realised that there were no concrete links established with that corner. As I only had a small window of time in which to fit my trip, we agreed to research this for a limited period. Unfortunately, this was not viable and since none of the other projects really took my fancy, James suggested a short placement in Europe this summer and China the next, both of which appealed to me enormously. There was a summer camp in Holland which fitted my schedule nicely. Then one morning, James phoned me. "Madeleine, I've been speaking to a friend who has just returned from a project. They are setting up a jewellery-making business, making beads from clay and ground-down glass in kilns and need a designer to go out and give them advice." As a Glasgow School of Art Silversmithing and Jewellery graduate with a special interest in enamelling, this seemed too providential to pass by. This was in Swaziland. "Let me think on it", I said.

I did. The more I thought, the more I wanted to go. For the second time in this venture, rule no.1 came back to haunt me: don't contact your sending organisation only two months before you intend to go. Due to the time limit and it being the middle of June, I could not get an appointment at a travel clinic or the necessary vaccinations. So clogs and cycles it was.

This apart was arranged quickly. James made a few phone calls to Biju, the Rector in Rijswijk, The Hague and to Johfra, the camp coordinator (no pun intended). A few emails were exchanged and it was all arranged.

It is said that Dutch people keep themselves to themselves. Maybe Don Bosco Dutch people haven't heard this rumour. On arrival with two Slovakian volunteers, in a foreign country to a place consisting of a Salesian house, a cafe and a glorified barn, I could be forgiven for being a little apprehensive but we were greeted enthusiastically and made to feel right at home as we sat chatting over tea and biscuits. Well, dishwasher and biscuits to be precise – the Dutch can't do a decent brew. Here I met Johfra, Roberta, an Italian volunteer also on my team and Suilven, Leon, Melissa and many others from the other team, who would be working at the camp held in said barn, known as "the shed". The next morning, Saturday, after the arrival of Koen, Esmeralda, Judith and Wendi, who along with Roberta, Johfra and myself would be the tent camp team and other shed camp volunteers, we packed up numerous cars and vans and set off for the site.

It had already begun to rain. We put up the large marquee, the "keuke-tent" and the small tents, helped and amused by the children of two of the volunteers. Unbeknown to me at the time, they also taught me how to communicate with children with whom I did not share a common language. In the evening we returned to the shed for dinner and in traditional camp-style, we had to earn it. Unfortunately, the puzzles the cooks had devised were all in Dutch. Where food is involved, however, language presents no barrier and it was not enough to stop me from finding one of the food parcels. With the last one being hidden five minutes away in the forest, I was given a flavour of the week ahead.

That night, back at the campsite, we discussed the programme for the week ahead, mostly in English, fortunately. The theme this year was "Enter Ship!" and a storyline had been devised around which each day's activities would be based. In the mornings, Kapitein Watervrees (Captain Fearswater, one of us dressed like Johnny Depp, with a stuffed owl flopping on our shoulder) would appear to intimate to his crew what they could expect.

What did really surprise me was the lack of Salesian ideology in the programme. All Dutch children go to a camp during summer. Neither children nor volunteers are necessarily Catholic, which, of course, is not a problem but they had not even heard of the four windows. They seemed to know enough about "playground" though. The week was pack full of exciting activities, gazillions of games and, *natuurlijk*, lots and lots of cycling. We looked in depth at Sunday, the next day, when the kids would arrive.



In the morning, I went to Mass back at the Salesian house in Assel. After breakfast, we had our final preparations, including dressing up as pirates, ready for the first to arrive.

I have been blessed with a good memory for names however nothing could prepare me for the onslaught of weird names and weirder spellings with which the Dutch grace their Children. I eventually got to grips with Afke, Wieke, Wendela and Joppe, remembering Sjoerd only because it sounds like “Stuart” without the first “T”. My limited *Nederlands* was tested as the first point of contact for children and parents, directing them to registration desks, tents and tea and trying to remain enthusiastic. James’ advice about language barriers, some previous experience and a bit of creativity came in useful as Roberta and I helped them settle in. Fortunately, she spoke more than I. Dutch, I mean. Although the same did apply in general.

Once the parents left, we began in earnest, starting with games to learn names and break the ice a little, during which I mastered the phrase “Wie is dat?” When the weather changed, we took shelter in the marquee and made paper ships. Even at this stage, I had begun to make friendships with some of the children and could use my artistic skills to help and offer ideas and to photograph finished pieces with their proud owners. Art is a universal language and through it I was able to reach many of the children and motivate them.

I won’t complain at this point about the fact that it had been raining heavily over the past few days and my once-waterproof shoes were proving somewhat inadequate for the sodden field. Cold wet sore feet were, unfortunately, one of the most memorable characteristics of the first few days.

Dinner was begun, not with grace but with a song, wishing each other a good meal and then with the ubiquitous Dutch blessing – eet smakelijk. After this we went to a wood for a game involving spies, guards, candles and a lot of nerve. They loved it.

There is an eleven pm silence curfew in the camp and we expected that on the first night, we would exceed it. We did. And on the second. And the third and fourth and... As you can imagine, sleeping under the stars in the middle of nowhere, away from your family amongst other ten-to-twelve-year-olds after a day filled with excitement is not conducive to good sleeping. This is testament to the thrill and joy with which we are able to provide these children, even if it is exhausting. When we finally achieved silence, we returned to the marquee for tea, biscuits, debrief and planning.

The basic outline of each day was the same. Up around 7.45, get the kids up and dressed, breakfast and *corvee* (dishes and tidying) then begin the activities. Lunch was between 12.30 and 1.00, and then activities would continue until dinner time. After more *corvee* we had an evening game, showering and “tick-control”, then sitting together with drinks, cookies and bedtime stories before lights out and evaluation. It seems so quick and insignificant written like that but the quality and range of activities put on for the children was incredible.

On the Tuesday, the weather really took a turn for the better and we were able to go on our cycle trip to a town called Ermelo, reaching our destination via a multiple-choice quiz in which wrong answers sent us off the long way round. In the town itself, we played a life-size version of Cluedo, with animators (I always find this title amusing) regaled in their pirate costumes hiding in the streets with children seeking us out to find out which cards we held and hence solve the mystery. It was my turn to cook that night, along with Koen. We cycled to a sandy location called Caitwikerzand and began frying the contents of a thirty-something litre pot. We were eating pancakes for days. That did, however, have to be one of the most memorable occasions for me. Kneeling beside gas burners, ladling batter into sizzling pans, eating hot pancakes while the children played games beneath a glowing sunset then cycling back to camp was not something I will forget quickly.

Other special moments included those around campfires, toasting marshmallows on sticks we had found in the woods or attempting to bake bread-dough over the flames. They had to be turned very quickly; we got the water to powder ratio a bit wrong. And there were the bedtime stories, made all the more camp-like for being read in turn by the children, through mouthfuls of crispbakes. Or just sitting together in the warmth, with hot chocolate and cookies – lekker!

One day we went swimming. The weather was unbelievable and after a morning's hard work burying treasure in Caitwikerzand, we cycled to a tropical pool. That was a really memorable time for me. Water breaks down so many barriers as the children (and animators) just mess around and many friendships were forged in those few hours, even among those who were struggling to relate to others. I also got a chance to reach some of those who were a little more distant.

The games and activities had already been prepared by the Dutch animators, which left little scope for Roberta and I to contribute to the organisation except for one afternoon, when we put together a "treasure hunt", which was really more of a collection of activities. It was a great success, however, with games such as *Fizzbuzz*, making lines of clothes tied together (the Dutch have no concept of modesty), rewriting songs with pirate lyrics and subsequent campfire recitals proving amongst the most popular. Some tasks challenged their intelligence, others their creativity, teamwork, skill or agility. I think this was the closest we got to a four windows educational aspect. On the Monday, the rain forcing us inside the marquee and a lack of planned measures created the perfect opportunity for me to introduce *Port-starboard*, a game based on ships with the captain giving orders. It was amazing to hear the kids' screams and shrieks in their effort not to be last to port or to be the odd one out on *man overboard*, especially after my patchy Dutch/English/mimed explanation. Owing to its success, Johfra insisted that we play it again one evening, in the sodden grass and muddy puddles, with swimwear only, before showers. He invented a new command – "enemy" which involves lying face-down on the ground. Enough said. I also organised a newspaper tower competition and Roberta saved the day on numerous occasions with impromptu games in unplanned-for moments.

Despite the water games and our attempts to be really enthusiastic on the Friday and treat them to an unforgettable last day, the atmosphere was pretty flat. That night we were due to have a *bondavond*, a party night consisting of performances interspersed with food. The preparations for this began after lunch and this was incredibly taxing, since it really requires in-depth discussion with the children but we got there in the end. As soon as the event started, the mood totally changed. The acts were unbelievable and the kids revelled in each others' performances. Spirits continued to soar during the disco-cum-rave and culminated in the grand sleepover in the marquee that night. We finished the week on an all-time high and it was great to spend the last night all together – that at least seemed very Salesian.

Of course, a pirate's life is not always a barrel of rum. On the Friday, when preparing for the *bondavond*, I felt awful. It was a mixture of tiredness, feelings of inadequacy and frustration that despite my attempts to enthuse the children, they refused to be excited. The language was also a barrier. On the first or second day, I began to wonder why they had taken on foreign volunteers as there were times when I was seriously limited in my interactions with the children. Combined with the initial incessant rain and the cold, wet, sore feet, progressively later nights and Dutch tea, there were times when I wondered what I was doing there. Although close to unbearable at the time, these lows were to be expected and were fortunately immeasurably outweighed by the highs.

So what would be the most special part for me? The children's attempts to communicate with me, their hugs, smiles and requests to sit or cycle beside me, their sheer joy or their spirit of fun? The love and support of the other animators, their translations, their encouragement of the children to translate for us, their enthusiasm or their humour? The infinite meals of bread with chocolate spread, peanut butter, Gouda, *hagelslag* (chocolate vermicelli which is poured onto buttered bread) and pancakes? Possibly the drink and meal we had after the children had gone and we enjoyed each other's company one last time. Maybe the comments written by the children and animators in each other's booklets on the last morning before leaving. It's hard to say. But what I can say with conviction is that I wished that I had not waited until I was twenty-five before I started volunteering. I wish I had known about this when I was eighteen and my advice is, if you are that age – or whatever age you are, volunteer! There are just so many places to go.

So, I'm already excited for next summer. Hopefully this time I'll make it to China or Swaziland but with BOVA, one never knows. Planet Mars, here I come? Just watch this space.