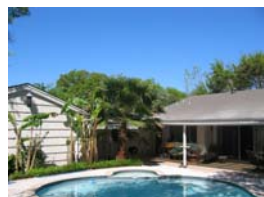


December 2004

To our Dear Family and Friends!

Let me start with wishing y'all a very merry Christmas, the best for the upcoming New Year, good health, good fortune and that all your dreams come true! 2005 is supposed to be a very good year and we look forward to it.

Not that 2003 and 2004 were bad years (yes, we are sorry, we missed to tell you about 2003, that's why this letter is so much longer – it covers 2 years!). For those of you who have been in close contact with us know how much we still enjoy the Texan way of life, despite of its leadership. But we rather do not talk about politics, which is actually not so difficult in our small world here on Loch Lomond. Inside our walls we manage to keep a very peaceful, multi-cultural, open atmosphere. We are a very international group here in Houston, and that is what makes it so interesting and nice. Just last September we had a big party at our home, and believe it or not – we had people from 26 different countries from all around the world, only less than 10 people were actually from the United States!



In general, our life here is driven by the same daily routines as yours probably is. We work long hours, we are tired in the evenings, we practice dancing on Wednesdays, we go out on weekends, we have friends over for dinner, and we long for the next vacation. Mostly on weekends, our house still keeps us busy even though we had no major constructions lately (unless you count the new windows we put in last spring). I guess that is what all houses do to you? But it is so nice to see it getting homier. Old furniture is slowly replaced with modern parts, walls are getting filled with pictures, shelves are loaded with books and magazines, and plants are growing. Also, for the fourth time now, we were proud to harvest (and eat!) our own home-grown bananas, oranges, mandarins, and even figs (the peaches were all eaten by the squirrels). And by the way, just in case you are afraid of the hot sun here – in summer 2003 Europe was the one to suffer from the biggest heat wave in ages; the Texan sun was not too bad, it never really got hot (or are we finally getting used to it?).



Better, if you like you need to come and see for yourself. You are always welcome here; you do know that, don't you? And Rob is an excellent chef, he will sure spoil you. Many of you have found that out already! Let me tell you, in 2003, starting September we constantly had guests in our life. There was Rob's Uncle Jan and his friend Leo who discovered Texas and found it was not so bad after all. Then there was our friend Menno from Holland who found a new love around the corner. Oliver was here, again, but even though he officially spent 5 weeks in our house we hardly saw him since he worked most of the time. Well, let's see, my friend Emily was here for a short weekend and I wished she could have stayed longer. And Erik spent New Year with us; he tried to escape from the Dutch cold and found 25 degrees, sun and blue sky here in Houston. Of course, to my special delight, my Mother also stayed with us for a while. It was a little colder here than in Florida, but she was ok with it.



This year we have proven our hospitality again, when visitors started pouring in already in April. The first was again my Mother who this time managed to color my garden with the most beautiful flowers. Then there were the unDutchables including Rob's "sister" Marcelle and her 5 year old precious Julien, seriously thinking of moving to Houston, our dearest Menno again last year. Also Uncle Jan visited us once more, this time he brought with him. I am especially happy for the opportunity to spend this and to get to know them better. I hope they will come again real dancing Peter is still to come and celebrate Christmas with us this that my Dutch improved dramatically this year! But there were also Germany here who helped me practicing my native language. My friends-forever Kim and Anna came to relive their 1-year Houston experience. They were closely followed by our best friend and "Trinke-bruder" Oliver who this year worked a little less (his thoughts were otherwise occupied – see below). Our record of 9 people sleeping comfortable in our house was help up one weekend when our Munich/Dallas friends Lothar and Annette came to us with 4 of their visiting friends while we had Anna with us. Also from Dallas drove David and Christopher to celebrate together with 60 other people Rob's 27th birthday (just one of our parties which drove our neighbors crazy). Just last week my ex-roommate Donna (remember her?) flew in, not only to see us, but also to drive back to Dallas in her brand new beautiful white German car.



our friend Evelyn who is since he liked it so much his lovely Jo and Aunt Ria wonderful time with them soon. Last but not least, year. All in all, I may say quite many friends from two ex-students and now



All in all, you see, we were never alone, and that is how we like it!

But lucky us, we did not spend all our time at home. We collected our 15 holidays-per-year and ventured out into the world. We made a few, but very nice trips within the country. In spring, as well for Christmas 2003, we spent some time in Florida with my Mother and Aunt Heidi in their beautiful house. For some time they were thinking about selling it and going back to Austria, but fortunately they changed their mind. Instead Aunt Heidi started her own real estate business and was amazed what opportunities you can have here business wise. She just loves it and we are really proud of her (we always knew she would get bored in retirement). Unfortunately my sister Birgit could not join us for the holidays, she was busy singing and painting as usual. In May we took a tour to New Orleans and got drunk on Bourbon Street, after we lost our money on the gambling boat, and before we stumbled on the alligator in the swamp. Still, we survived and hold this trip in a very unclear memory.

In September 2003 I had the chance to go to Vienna on a "business trip". I packed my blue dress suit and presented my work at the European Heart Society Meeting. But the real reason I actually went there was to celebrate my Mother's 60th birthday. My sister and I organized a **surprise party** for her, and we think she really was surprised! It was a wonderful evening with many family members and friends. Thanks to all of you who joined, it was a big success and great to see you again! We hope you enjoyed it as much as we did!



Well, in November we always have our big vacation, I guess because even here in Houston it is the rainiest time and good to escape. In 2003 we had a really wonderful trip to South America, **Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands**. Whoever has not been there we strongly recommend it! For all animal lovers it is a must anyway. For 8 days we observed, watched, smelled, photographed, and filmed wild animals which were not wild at all. In the water we swam with sea lions, we saw sharks and turtles, we were surrounded by thousands of



fishes and even a We stayed on a small other (all European!) from one island to the are truly amazing; they are not afraid of humans and even come curiously



penguin swam by. sailing boat with 14 tourists and went other. The animals



towards you to check you out! What an adventure. After that we spent a week in the **Andes Mountains**. We went to the equator and had one foot in the northern, the other in the southern hemisphere (we did not feel anything special, in case you wonder). We also hiked among llamas in the beautifully mountain landscape and even climbed the highest active volcano. At 5000 m height the view was really breathtaking and thus we had to turn around and go back down pretty fast...

The year 2004 unfortunately started very sad. Rob's father had to undergo heart surgery and even though he fought adamantly for 6 weeks, we one day got the dreaded phone call which made us hop on the next plane to Holland. We arrived just in time to say good bye before he passed away in our arms. This was particularly hard for Rob, but he was very thankful that he could be there with him in his final hours. While I was there with Rob, I realized how big his family was and how supporting and loving they were, and I am very happy to be one of them now.

But now back to a lighter note. Have I told you that 2004 brought an **exciting change** for me? After two dreadful years in Dr.X's lab, I have decided not to quit, but to stay in academic research. I accepted a faculty position here at the same Department at Baylor College of Medicine, but far away from Dr.X. It's funny, as someone recently pointed out, figuratively I took a step upwards, but literally I went one step down (from the 7th to the 6th floor). I am very happy here. I have many new



possibilities in my new environment (I can order students around), I have a nice boss now (he already offered me his beach house for the weekend), I can go to more conferences (such as to New Orleans where I met my friend Beate from Vienna, or the one in Washington State where I climbed **Mt. St. Helen** just before it started to smoke again), not to mention I have my own office, phone line and finally a nice pay check! I plan to stay here for a while, make myself indispensable, and see what comes along.



The downside was, new job – a lot of work and little vacation. So only one thing to tell you about: our annual November holiday trip, this year **sailing in the Grenadines**. Erik and Oliver joined us again, but this time Oliver brought his fiancée Daniela with him, who left the boat 10 days later as his **wife!!!** Yes, we had a big wedding (5 people plus judge) on the beautiful beach of the island Mustique. It was wonderfully romantic and we are much honored to have witnessed their exchange of vows and promise of **love**. Even though the remaining days were rather rainy and windy, we all kept smiling.



When we came home – Rob found out that, while we were gone for just 2 weeks, 200 people in his company were laid off for no reason, 5 of them were immediate colleagues of him. We were pretty shocked how fast and easy those things happen here in the USA. And we are grateful that Rob was not among them, at least not this time. He works now 9 years for this company, but that does not count anything when stocks are down. This is the **mentality** here, we had to get used to it too.

Well, I guess this really turned out to be a long letter even though there would be much more to talk about, maybe another time. To some of you - **thanks** for all your Christmas cards, phone calls, visits and letters that we have received. It is good to know that "out of sight does not mean out of mind"! So let us assure you, you are all on our mind, and we look forward to hear something from you soon.



**All the best, merry Christmas, happy 2005
With love**

Sandra and Rob

PS: Not that you think these kind of letters are "so typical American" – we have received three like this one from Europe, and only one from somebody within the States!!