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Surveying the Earth: Interview with a Geodesist

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Koldo Verheij lives in Rotterdam. He is Dutch but was born in San Sebastian. Koldo is Basque for Luis. He studied geodesy, a branch of earth sciences.

GC: Koldo, what were your studies about?

KV: Geodesy is about measuring the earth's surface, including sea surface, from land, from water, or from the air, meaning through satellites. In my last year at the Technical University of Delft, I investigated the possibilities of using satellite images and digital imaging techniques to update maps.

GC: So maps are updated now thanks to your thesis on using satellites for that.

KV: I'm afraid my work was not that important, but it was an interesting matter at the time.

GC: What was your first job?

KV: My first job was to investigate the possibilities of automated determination of the lumbar bone mineral mass using digital image processing techniques. That was at the University Hospital of Leiden.

GC: Didn't you also work in Spain?

KV: Yes. In Barcelona I worked at the Institut Cartogràfic de Catalunya to learn how to transfer satellite images to "normal" maps using themes like land use. I have forgotten much about my daily business there. That was 23 years ago.

GC: What do you do now?

KV: I work with the Rotterdam Climate Initiative, a program addressing climate change. Connected to the (Bill) Clinton Foundation, it involves the city of Rotterdam, port authorities, industrial companies, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Rijmond. EPA Rijmond is the organization I work for. Rijmond is the area consisting of the Port of Rotterdam and 17 surrounding municipalities.

GC: And what's your "daily business"?

KV: My current job is to monitor the results of our efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We want CO2 emissions in 2025 to be 50% less than in 1990. I have to point out where we've been successful and where not, so that new or better measures can be taken. I have to determine the effectiveness of these measures. And then I submit annual reports to management and the municipal council of Rotterdam so that they know what's been done with the money invested in the Initiative.

GC: You have no doubts about climate change.

KV: One has to be really stubborn not to be convinced that human (fossil) activities are the cause of changing climate.

GC: How do you go to work?

KV: I bike. It's healthy, money-saving, and better for the environment. And there are no parking problems. Everyone should try it at home.

GC: Talk about the Netherlands being more environmentally conscious than other countries.

KV: I'm not so sure about that. We were one of the front-runners ten years ago, but haven't done much for the environment since. Only when air pollution started to frustrate spatial planning, on account of our legal system, were measures to combat air pollution initiated. I think that Spain is now at least on a par with the Netherlands. Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Germany are in my eyes Europe's most environmentally conscious countries.

GC: What do you like to call yourself. An environmentalist? A geodesist? An earth surveyor?

KV: Environmentalist is probably closest to the truth but it sounds so idealistic, like a Greenpeace activist. Earth surveyor sounds good and can be interpreted in two ways.

GC: What two ways?

KV: Well, earth surveying as a profession, meaning satellites, etc. And traveling around.

GC: What's the farthest, hottest, or most Indiana Jones you've traveled?

KV: South Africa and Thailand. Hot! So was Zambia. The desert in Jordan was not cool either. But I also remember some very hot days in Spain. We've never met Indy, we're not that adventurous. Sorry, no great stories. Rafting on the Zambezi, the Zambia-Zimbabwe border, was special and we've been close to lions, leopards, elephants, and cobras, but never close enough to endanger our lives. Working for an environmental agency, all this traveling around, especially in planes, does make me feel a bit guilty.

GC: What's your favorite Spanish city?

KV: Well, I guess San Sebastian will win that easily. The beach is great and I like the atmosphere of the Parte Vieja, especially in the evenings. The food is great and I love to try the *pintxos* with a nice glass of wine or beer. But I also like Barcelona a lot with its great architecture and nice hills around (Montjuïc, Tibidabo...). I had a great time spending the weekends with my colleagues there and frequenting Camp Nou, which often had a Dutch accent in trainers and players. And Sitges is a nice place to stay.

GC: Did you go to the Expo?

KV: I didn't. I was in Zaragoza for a European Congress on climate change. We were offered a visit to the Expo but it was my wife's birthday, so I returned to Rotterdam. Our Crown Prince and his Argentinian wife Maxima missed the opportunity to meet me.

GC: What do you think of Princess Maxima?

KV: Well, it could be much worse for a future queen. She's active in social programs and she is smart, learned Dutch in a few months. She's even good-looking.

GC: How many languages do you speak and why are the Dutch such polyglots?

KV: I speak Dutch, English, some German, French, and Spanish... and some words in Catalan and Basque. I guess since we are a small country and our language seems quite hard to learn, we have to learn the languages of the countries surrounding us. More so being a country with a trade culture. Some believe, though, that if New York, originally Nieuw Amsterdam, hadn't been traded for Surinam in the 17th century, the world would now be speaking Dutch.