

ArcelorMittal Solidarity Holidays

Stan Zywockiewicz, a Design Draughtsman at Vereeniging Works recently used part of his annual leave to travel to Macedonia, where he worked with other volunteers and members of the community to build houses for needy families as part of the ArcelorMittal Foundation Solidarity Holidays Programme.

Stan Zywockiewicz



My Solidarity Holiday in Macedonia

When I submitted my application for the ArcelorMittal Foundation's Solidarity Holidays I didn't know what to expect. I was hoping to visit Kazakhstan, so it came as a bit of a surprise when I heard that I had been selected to go to Macedonia. Most of my colleagues didn't know that ArcelorMittal has a facility in Macedonia or where Macedonia is. Of course I was very excited to be part of this project and the days preceding my departure passed quickly with all the preparations to be made.

I flew from South Africa to Istanbul, Turkey where I met three of my colleagues – Dennis from Kazakhstan and Raqi and Kamal from Morocco. The three of us visited the Consulate of Macedonia in Istanbul to get our visas. Afterwards we had a very interesting sightseeing tour by bus. We even got the opportunity to cross the "Golden Horn" bridge into Asia for a brief moment.

The next morning, on our arrival in Macedonia, we were welcomed by sunny weather of 35° C – which wasn't too bad considering that the next day it was 45° C. And I thought South Africa was hot! My first impression of Macedonia (apart from the fact that it is very hot) is that there is a lot of work to be done since they gained independence from Yugoslavia. There is still a mixture of old and new buildings, some of which are in dire need of renovation.

We were met at the airport and taken to the hotel in Skopje where we were welcomed by a representative from ArcelorMittal Skopje and Raj, the co-ordinator who flew in the day before. At 17:30, after a quick shower and a change we attended the Habitat for Humanity (HFH) Macedonia welcome and orientation presentation, at the HFH facility. Afterwards we had a welcome

dinner at a local restaurant with the Corporate Responsibility (CR) committee and HFH Macedonia representatives.

On Sunday we had breakfast at the hotel and met the volunteers that arrived the previous night (from Brazil, Ukraine and the Czech Republic). We spent the day at Lake Ohrid where we had lunch and a swim with the CR team, CR team management and other volunteers.

On Monday we had breakfast at the ArcelorMittal Skopje facility, and then we visited the plant where we also met the ArcelorMittal Skopje CEO. At 09:30 we were transported to the building site, where we attended a site safety orientation and received our work schedule. They gave us all proper safety equipment and then divided us into our work groups. Then we started work on the project. We had a lunch break from 13:30 to 14:30 and then worked some more until 17:00. We had 'free time' until dinner at 19:00, where we met the Trade Union, exchanging our volunteer experiences.

Tuesday through to Friday we followed the same schedule, after breakfast we were transported to the building site to work, had lunch from 13:30 to 14:30 and at 17:00 were transported back to the hotel where we had free time until dinner at 19:00.

On Thursday each volunteer was invited by an ArcelorMittal Skopje employee for coffee and tea at his or her home. This experience was a good idea as it allowed us to connect with the locals and learn about each other's cultures and life situations.

I was involved in the Roma Housing Programme part of the project. The objective of the Roma Housing Programme is to improve the housing conditions for the Roma community in Skopje with focus on Suto Orizari which uses micro-loans for reconstruction, renovation and repair. In line with the basic principles of Habitat for Humanity, other ethnic groups from the same area are not excluded, as long as they comply with the loan conditions. The programme is run in partnership with the microfinance institution Horizonti.

My group, which consisted of myself, George (Canadian) and Saul (Mexican) was assigned to build the communal winter-wood storage space. I was the leader of the group and together with George made adaptations to the designs and explained what to do.

The highlight of this programme for me was that the people were all working together, like a big ArcelorMittal family. The local people were very friendly and grateful for the work we were doing for them. I made good friends with my fellow volunteers and the locals who were working with us. The locals that worked with us are the people that are going to live in the houses. They had to work on the project for at

least 300 hours as their community duty towards their new houses. They also get discount on the prices of their houses for assisting with the building.

I felt quite at home in Macedonia. The people are very helpful, kind and hospitable. In the beginning the volunteers had a bit of a problem understanding each other's accents, as we used English as our common language, but as the week progressed we learnt to understand each other and became a real, big family.

Taking along a "traditional" South African "musical instrument" was definitely a good idea. The vuvuzela was very popular, and provided a lot of entertainment. I am sure no one will forget me because of it. South Africa was clever to allow the vuvuzela at the world cup because now it has become a symbol of our country. It is apparently quite popular in Europe.

I learnt from this experience that there are people all over the world that are in need. The people of Macedonia appreciated the fact that we travelled over 10 000km to help them build better lives. Walking around the town in our matching shirts, we were often stopped by tourists wanting to know where we were from. Everybody we met was very interested in the project and very positive towards the work we were doing.

I also learnt from this experience that people who may not be rich in money terms can still have abundance when it comes to culture and friendliness. What many South Africans don't realise is that poverty is not limited to the African continent.

Although I found the work both physically and mentally exhausting, I would not have swapped it for anything else. It is, on an emotional, spiritual and physical level, very enriching. Apart from experiencing firsthand the hardships that these communities endure, I also got the opportunity to form friendships with ArcelorMittal colleagues from other countries. "It was a truly priceless experience."

I most definitely would recommend this experience to other colleagues, it is a once in a life time opportunity. It's a great chance to help people in need. I got to meet lots of new people from different parts of the world and got to experience their cultures. Once you've survived the heat and exhaustion, you feel good having helped someone. You make friendships for life.

I would like to thank everybody that worked with me, and all the organisers for the wonderful opportunity to work on this project. I think this is a good project to have, to help and take care of people less fortunate, and to allow employees to meet and experience other cultures.

