



by Mathieu Van der Hert

Den Helder to Beirut, a EuroMed love story

You sometimes start a cruise without knowing what the next port of call will be. I almost didn't set out on the cruise at all, as the invitation came late and I had already cast it aside. However, the route of the trip, all around the Mediterranean, made me change my mind at the last minute.

The first leg of the trip took me to Estoril in Portugal. While the ship was being refuelled, I attended a EuroMed training course called Step At, organised by Salto EuroMed Resource Centre.

In the cruise brochure, I read that one of the aims of the EuroMed youth programme is building bridges across the Mediterranean to establish co-operation between organisations on both sides of it.

Standing at the railings looking at the dark blue sea with all its strength, mystery and pride, I realised that these bridges are built over dangerous waters, infested with dangerous species like stereotypes and prejudice. But I also knew that motivated builders from both sides of the Mediterranean could overcome these dangers and set up projects with a profound influence on the lives of the people taking part in them.

What the brochure didn't tell me was that this profound influence could stretch so far as to change my life completely.

I knew from earlier experiences of training courses that they provide opportunities to meet people, to find new partners and to develop new youth programmes. But I never expected to find my life partner, get married in Cyprus and build a life in Beirut in Lebanon.

Den Helder – Nicosia

When establishing new projects, one of the first steps is contact between two people, in which mutual interests and possibilities for co-operation are explored. Our first contact was on a trainee - trainer basis, me the trainee and Fabiola Joseph Dina as one of the trainers at the course.

However, as anyone who works with the EuroMed programme knows, at the start of new projects, informal moments often carry more weight than official ones. Our informal moments were innocent; neither of us attended the training with a desire for short-term physical contacts.

We spent time together on the seafront between Estoril and Cascais on the Portuguese Atlantic coast; during strolls in the sweet, warm ocean wind, we explored each other's experiences and personal past, present and future hopes. This led to an agreement to work together in the summer of 2004. Every summer, my organisation in Holland, Richter, organises a multilateral exchange called a North East Westival. Dina would be part of the Richter team and would also help me with preparing a big European project, as she had experience in that area.





On the journey back to Holland, I noticed that I missed her presence and our walks and wondered whether she had the same feelings. It turned out that she did. In the months before the multilateral exchange, we shared daily telephone, text-message and msn moments and gradually developed a closer friendship. At first, we didn't know where this friendship would take us, but we certainly did not expect it to lead to a trip to Nicosia to exchange wedding vows five months after we had first met.

I guess the readers of Coyote magazine don't read the magazine for its famous series of love stories, but for the information, messages and challenges they can find in it for their daily work. The main story here is not our own story but the stereotypes and prejudices we encountered and still do on our journey, which they also might encounter when setting up projects under the EuroMed programme. It's a positive message for those brave builders of Mediterranean bridges, encouraging them to keep on building and not give up even when the construction process does not seem to be going as planned. It is also an appeal for the bridges in question to be publicised widely so as to foster recognition of these non-formal learning projects.

I've already thrilled readers with the beginnings of our own story and explained why this article should be useful for Coyote readers, so now we can move on to the laughter, joy and amazement of our encounters with stereotypes. It might be useful here to begin with a definition of stereotypes. The Oxford dictionary tells us that a stereotype is "a fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality."

Of course, our reality is that of a Dutchman, who wears wooden clogs and eats cheese with tulips in his hair and some legal dope in the corner of his mouth, and a Lebanese woman, an Arab terrorist who does nothing all day but talk politics, play tic tac and smoke the hubble-bubble!

The multilateral exchange in Holland was the first place where our love was confronted with raised eyebrows, dropped jaws and shocked expressions. During the "getting to know each other" sessions, we heard questions like: "Doesn't she come from the country that is in civil war? And: "How did she enter Holland after 9/11 and 9/3?"

But multilateral exchanges are also a wonderful opportunity for young people to work together, live together, get to know one another and overcome and straighten out their fixed ideas about one another. So, at the end of the event, people went home with different ideas about an Arab woman and Lebanon.

A holiday together can often relate to group experiences of this kind. In many cases, it is a baptism for a couple to see how strong their co-operation is or may become.

After a short weekend in an overcrowded Paris full of Tour de France crowds anxiously awaiting the arrival of the man in yellow, we went on to Beirut to meet her family and discuss our future together.

For many people, youth projects are a new experience in working with the unknown on the other side of their national borders. Our own particular "border" during our first time together in Lebanon was not a national border but the border of the surface of the Mediterranean. We decided to start diving lessons together - the ultimate experience of trusting each other literally with each other's life.

Sitting on the seabed, helping each other through frightening but enjoyable moments, we realised that we never wanted them to stop. To maintain an international partnership is an achievement, maintaining a long-distance relationship is an accomplishment.

After knowing each other for five months we decided that our next step was to get married and start a life together. Making the decision as a multinational couple to get married is one thing, getting married is quite another.

Getting married in Holland was impossible; the paperwork required exceeded the content of three t-kits. And, worse of all, the Dutch government was unable to give us any idea of how long their decision on our application would take. A marriage in Lebanon was also out of the question because there are no civil wedding ceremonies there, only church weddings, and that was not what we wanted. To achieve our dream of marrying, we had to change course and head for Cyprus.

📍 Cyprus – Beirut

Our wedding took place on 20 September at Nicosia town hall. It became an even more international event because our witnesses were Cypriots, namely two Yiota's, one of them the municipal marriage officer, and the other Yiota Karamatos, an active member of the EuroMed programme and contributor to Coyote magazine.

Our marriage also raised the vexed question of where to set up home. Lebanon won the day. This gave rise to new confrontations with stereotypes such as “who can be so mad as to leave Holland for Lebanon?” Or comments to my wife: “Mabrouk (congratulations), now you can get a Dutch passport and leave this country!” Yes, the grass really is always greener on the other side.

📍 Beirut

Many people still confront us with their stereotypes and fixed ideas of how Dutch people live and their ability to adapt to life in Lebanon. Our latest skirmish was with an English-Lebanese lady, who refused to accept that Dutch people do eat fresh homemade food. No, no, you only eat fried stuff like burgers and hotdogs with lots of beer, she said. With comments like that from a European, who can blame the Lebanese?

Encounters of that kind now bring smiles to our faces; we're getting used to them and in a bizarre way they have travelled the road from anger to enjoyment. In other words, our very own EuroMed project has a firm foundation on which we can build our life together.

We come from two totally different cultures, yet we have managed to find common ground to live together and even set up a family. It is not always an easy ride, but it is a journey worth all the sacrifices and compromises.

As Step At was our portal for co-operation, we hope that EuroMed continues to build bridges over the Mediterranean and give young people life-long experiences and new insights on outdated, fixed ideas.

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