



Life after Francken

By Dr. Ronniy Joseph

Science is a global endeavour. The best thing about studying science is that it opens the world for you, but you may have to spend a bit of effort opening doors. Just like you I was mesmerised by the inner workings of the world, in particular the Universe, but I also fell in love with a career that could take me around that same world. That also meant my life at Francken was 'kort maar krachtig'.

After finishing most of my undergraduate in Astronomy in 2012 I decided to do something else for a bit. After filling in stacks of paperwork, I went on exchange to Uppsala in Sweden to complete the rest of my degree by playing around with particle accelerators, and small-scale nuclear fusion experiments. Being there was also a great excuse to do touristy things with the many exchange students I met, like going up to



Figure 1: Looking forward to the next set of cold water rapids after barely making it through the previous one.

the arctic circle, and seeing the Northern Lights. However, there is also something very special about life in Sweden with its own set of traditions, like building a Styrofoam boat to ride river after it thaws in spring, being hired as male choir to deliver serenades across the city, or to jump into a freezing lake after a sauna.



Figure 2: Although desperate for a cool down, this is not the best place. It's called Shark Bay for a reason.

After completing that exchange, I decided that accelerators were cool but not as cool as some of the accelerators in outer space, i.e. supernovae. Unfortunately, I decided that **after** the enrolment deadline at McGill University in Montréal. That was a slight setback to my plan to travel the world. Instead of returning to Groningen, I decided to do a master's in Astronomy in Leiden. Leiden's student culture was so different from Groningen, with a much stronger focus on student's societies. Everyone was a member of something next to being a member of their study association! I decided to join SSR Leiden, and I made some of my best friends there through committees and board memberships, but nevertheless I wasn't done travelling yet.

Although I knew I wanted to do a PhD, I didn't want to start one immediately after finishing my master's in 2015. I wanted to travel for a good few months, but like any recent graduate I was also cash-starved. It so happened that the Computer Science department was in dire need of someone familiar with the Faculty of Science and willing to fill in as a study coordinator and advisor: As soon as I got the e-mail I loaded my CV to the cloud and casually dropped by the departments' business manager. I got lucky and walked out the door with an exploded inbox, and a hundred things to do. I started at the most hectic time. August, the time when one cohort finishes their degree, and a whole new cohort is about to walk in the door. This meant I had a lot



Figure 3: One of many stops along a 3 month trip along the Great Barrier Reef

of chaos management to do, and it turns out I like solving problems, not just deep problems about the origin of the first stars in the Universe.

By the time everything calmed down, I was preparing to hand over my job in an orderly fashion and pack my backpack. After e-mailing and talking to about 30 research groups around the world I choose a PhD position in Perth, Australia. Instead of flying directly to Australia, I decided to take the long way round. I started in the Himalaya's in Nepal and from there would take six months to travel to Australia. Along the way I stopped in amazing places across Southeast Asia, and finding some of the best dumplings in the middle of the night. During my 3.5 years in Perth I researched radio telescopes that look for the first stars in the Universe. I worked with the Australian counterpart

of the LOFAR telescope, the Murchison Widefield Array (MWA), which is located at the exact location where the largest radio telescope in the world will be built: the Square Kilometre Array (SKA). The west coast of Australia is an amazing place for radio astronomy because it's devoid of people, and therefore electronics that emit radio signals. Perth is after all one of the most isolated cities in the world. It also means there are so many places you can travel to. From the coral reefs and majestic whale sharks in the North, to the endless wineries in the south. But most of all, you can easily see the centre of the Milky Way with your own eyes. Australia's night sky doesn't suffer much from light pollution. This turns every camping adventure into a little trip into outer space. The number of visible stars gives you the feeling you can touch the universe itself.



After my PhD, I decided that I needed a break from Astronomy (the story of my life) and so I ended up working for an Australian government agency. Hired as a Data Strategy Analyst I helped the federal government make better use of the data it collects from hospitals, doctors, and welfare organisation around the country. The goal of my agency was to use that data and evaluate the health and welfare of Australians, particularly in marginalised populations. Australia is a country that (like many others) is still coming to terms with its history of colonisation. The Aboriginal people of Australia are still suffering from the long-term impacts of colonisation. It was therefore an amazing opportunity to put my brain to good use and contribute to something that would make the world a slightly better place.

As I reached the 5th year of my time in Australia, I was getting eager to continue travel onwards. Anticipating my travel bug, I applied to a postdoc with an awesome professor I met during my PhD. I spent a lot of effort during my PhD to spin up a collaborative project, an excuse to visit the research group so I could leave a good impression. I got lucky, because I am writing this from my office at McGill University in Montréal, Canada. Eight years later than planned, but here we are, nevertheless. Will I stay in research who knows? All I know is there are amazing opportunities that can take you around the world, and you just need to find them.

