

## MASTERS IN ASTANA - 1<sup>st</sup> MASTERS' ALLROUND TROPHEE

Thursday February 8<sup>th</sup> 2012 our journey to Kazakhstan started as we departed from Amsterdam Schiphol Airport. The 1<sup>st</sup> Masters' International Speed Skating Allround Trophy had been a great attraction to us, since it supported our motto "Skate Faster, Go Further". The party consisted of the Watertaxi Rotterdam Team nucleus Daan van der Have, Ben Rückert, Sallo Spetter and Victor van den Hoff. For the occasion Lou



Hoogewerf had joined the team. Our Watertaxi-friend Waldemar Kramer would later join us in Astana, having his own itinerary via Moscow. We were excited for no other master skaters visited Astana before and our previous journey to Moscow and Kolomna had made our expectations high. Would Kazakhstan be as interesting and exciting as Russia?

After a stop at Frankfurt Airport we arrived at 1 am local time at Astana International Airport. We were welcomed by our local contact, Alex, who waited for us at the airport and drove us to our

hotel at the Alau Ice Palace. At night the Alau Ice Palace is colourfully enlightend with sparkling leds on each of the towers (offices, gym and hotel). The hotel has been integrated in the oval, so the rooms were also brand new and of high standard. After we drank the last, five, beers from the hotel we went to bed, tired from the long journey.

A long journey: for although Kazakhstan lies on the fringe of Europe on the Caspian Sea, and south of the Ural mountain range, it extends to China in the heart of central Asia. Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is a country of extremes. With 2.724.900 km<sup>2</sup> it ranks 9 among the largest countries in the world, but with a population 16.5 million it has the lowest population density (5.5 per km<sup>2</sup>). The geography ranges from impressive alpine mountains to vast dessert country plains. The highest spot in the country is the Khan Tengry (7000m) on the Kirgizstan border whereas the lowest place is in the Karagiyan lowland with 123m below sea level. (Impressive for the lowest spot in the Netherlands is only minus 6.76m below sea level.) In winter temperature regularly passes minus 50C, but in summer it hits plus 40C more than often.



On getting down for breakfast we found out that Waldemar had arrived. His trip had been cheaper than ours, but also much longer having to lay over in Moscow. So for him only a short sleep on the plane from



Moscow. In spite of the advantage we had that Waldemar is fluent in Russian, we had some difficulty in getting a sporty breakfast. With hamburgers, fried bread and artificially flavoured and sugared bread, we actually never managed to get it right during our stay. The hotel staff did their utmost to make our stay comfortable, but obviously lacked the experience and knowledge although they were very service oriented and tried hard. We forgave them and made friends.

After breakfast we had a short tour of the Alau oval and we surprised by the quality and quantity of the facilities. And friendly staff all over!

And then on to where we were there after all: the ice. In the Netherlands we are spoiled by the quantity of ice facilities in our country. Elsewhere we are always impressed by the quality of the ice-facilities. Fortunately for the Kazakh sporting population the ice is not only of superb quality; the hall itself is also very inspiring. A modern structure, nicely coloured and well laid out can seat about 8000 people, and when they are not there, most of the seats are covered with colourful sheets. Two small rinks cover the inside of the 400m track and are used for figure skating and public skating.



Due to the ice orientation, on many of our skating trips, we only seem to get a small impression of the countries we visit. But we always try. Between skating practice sessions we went down town in the new city centre.



A dominant landmark of the Astana skyline is the 97 meter high Bayterek-tower, the Kazakh symbol of the tree of life. Once in the tower we had a perfect view of the impressive new capital Astana that has been build and still is partly under construction since 1997. The presidential palace, the concert hall, the art academy, the governmental buildings; all are well and carefully designed. As a contrast the old city lies across the Ishim River and previously was called Tselinograd. New buildings of acclaimed international architects and designers are replacing most of the structures from the Soviet era. Furthermore we visited the national historical museum, the shopping and

entertainment centre Khan Shatyr (Royal Marquee; a transparent tent shape structure) and the helmet shaped velodrome next to the Alau Ice Palace. So much to see and to enjoy that we consider adopting track cycling as an excuse to go there in a more convenient part of the year.

The competition started with grand opening ceremony. A parade of traditionally dressed Kazakh ladies and men waved flags and made traditional dances. Some openings speeches from the Chairman of the national Olympic team and our friend Azamath Ismailov from the



organizing committee and the national anthem completed the ceremony. The competition went smooth and time schedules were easily met: very convenient for the competitors. And although there were only five non-Russian speaking skaters all communication was perfectly done in English. Our skaters did not PB, but some had SB's which proved the quality of the ice and the venue itself. With one bronze (Daan) and two gold medals (Sallo, Waldemar) we were very happy with our results.

One could tell we still benefited from the experience the staff had build from the Asian Games that were held in Astana and Almaty last year. We were amazed by the apparent large budget for the organizing committee but than may be more understandable since the Kazakh minister of finance also took part in the competition; a hint for organising committees perhaps? It, however, also makes us respect the organizing committees in most countries who succeed to organize great competitions for masters with much smaller budgets, even more.



After the official prize giving ceremony, there was the usual banquet. And a banquet it was. We had the best supper of all meals in Astana combined with a Russian-wedding-party like programme. Although much of the presentation was in Russian (so me missed most of the funny stuff), the music, song and dance was more understandable and made us feel part of it. The regional lubricant called Vodka also helped to get to a celebration of friendship between all skaters.

The next morning was not easy to get up at four o'clock a.m., as

the preceding night was still in our heads. Our plane left on schedule at 5.55 am and with Kazakhstan flying away under our wings, our thoughts went back to the Kazakh experience of the days past. Ain't so bad, our life as master speed skaters. And I did not even compete!

*Victor van den Hoff*/NETHERLANDS