

## FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF...

In the articles entitled "From the Point of View of..." we tell the story of an expatriate who is living in the Netherlands. In each edition, we interview this expatriate, each time from a different country and each time in a different position (the person who was placed here by the employer, came her on his or her own initiative, the family members, etc.) For this issue of The XPat Journal, we interviewed Ana Fernández, who came to the Netherlands from Spain in 1997 and has since become a successful interior decorator.

Photos by Joan van Nispen tot Sevenaer

# Ana Fernández



When you enter Ana Fernández' house, you immediately feel at home. Not only because the space you enter is light, airy and welcoming, but because her entire demeanor is equally so.

**L**ike a pixie fairy, light on her feet, with dancing curls, a mischievous gleam to her eyes and a laugh that bubbles up from her toes, she dances between the dining table and the kitchen, offering coffee, tea, cookies – whatever it is you need to make you inner self comfortable too.

Ana is an interior decorator from Spain (she founded her studio, Barefoot Styling in 2009), who – like most of us – followed a roundabout route to where she is now. In first instance, she came to the Netherlands because she had fallen in love. “I had gone to Sweden for my last year of Business Administration and had met a Dutchman there. We fell madly in love so I went back home to Spain, said tearful goodbyes to my family and left. Three months later it was over,” she laughs. Yet the prospect of starting a life from scratch appealed to Ana, so she decided to stay. “Not knowing anyone here, I decided to spend the December holidays in Spain and then come back. I’ll never forget the day I returned; the train ride from Schiphol, the dreary, bleak January sky, trailing my little suitcase through the echoing, empty streets of Apeldoorn – the weather being too discouraging even for the Dutch – thinking to myself, ‘oooooh, Ana, what have you done?’” she chuckles. She moved back into her little room, with a mattress on the floor, and slowly created a home with things given to her by the people she got to know through a Dutch language course: “An old TV, a table, a couch...” Fortunately, her previous employer still had a job for her and she worked her way up, eventually ending up as account manager. Yet, though she had had a great time in Apeldoorn, she found herself longing for life in a bigger city.

Which brought Ana to Utrecht, and eventually Rotterdam, where she lives now with Thijs, whom she met 16 years ago in Apeldoorn. “We came to a point in our lives when we wanted to buy a house, and as we really wanted to live in an ‘old’ Dutch house this took us to Rotterdam,” she says, adding that this was the only place where they were still affordable. And that is where she and Thijs still live today.

Ana worked as a consultant in business processes (“It fits in nicely with my nature,” she explains, “figuring out what works, what doesn’t and what we are going to do about it – I like being practical and to-the-point”), but found herself increasingly attracted to interior decorat-

ing, “I took a couple of interesting courses and all of a sudden, people started coming to me for advice – before I knew it, I had my own company.” And a successful one at that for, “though, for a while, I continued to freelance as a consultant, soon enough I was able to focus entirely on interior design.”

The year Ana left her employer for good to focus on her interior decorating company, she bought a house in the south of Spain in a beautiful, remote area. “This had been our dream for years, and Thijs and I had been saving for it for a long time. I went down there and spent six months renovating the house. It went from being a hovel that didn’t even have doors to an item that is being featured in a Spanish lifestyle magazine this winter. The first four months I was there all on my own and it was a good time for reflecting on what I wanted to do with my career,” she notes. “Working on the house was a turning point for me. I decided you only have one life, it goes by very quickly and you had best fill it by doing what makes you happy.”

Does Ana miss Spain? “I miss certain things; a sense of togetherness, of community – and I miss the sense of humor. I also miss being able to express myself in the way I am used to. Yet, I must say, I have learned a lot from the Dutch. I have become much more assertive, and am better able to put things into perspective. Also, I have a tendency to want things to be perfect, which admittedly in some cases is easier to achieve here than in Spain. It was a conscious choice to come to Holland, I am happy here and Spain is just a short flight away – so we get to go back often.”

“Of course, there are differences between the Dutch and the Spaniards,” Ana notes. “For instance, it isn’t easy to develop deep friendships here, I’ve noticed, as people tend to steer away from discussing personal topics if they haven’t known you for a long time. Also, I seem to make them uncomfortable if I give too honest an answer to the question ‘how are you doing these days?’” she laughs. “But that might be me; I am a very open and transparent person and have no trouble giving a candid answer. In daily life,” Ana continues, “we have what I call we-moments and I-moments; a situation that is considered a ‘we-moment’ in Spain, is an ‘I-moment’ in Holland. For

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instance, when visiting a client in Spain, you immediately establish a deeper personal connection and end up sharing personal experiences that you would never discuss with a client here. They wouldn't know what to do with that information! Those are definitely 'I-moments' here. Though," she remarks, "it is precisely because of my tendency to make a personal connection with my clients that I am

able to create a home for them in which they recognize themselves and feel comfortable."

How about the Dutch vs. Spanish way of working? "I've never worked for a Spanish company, but I discovered some of the differences when working on my house with Spanish building contractors. They don't like to be pinned down on a price or a time frame. But I've learned how to cope with that. I break it down into pieces: 'Okay, so this part shouldn't take more than two weeks, should it? And it shouldn't cost more than 2,000 euros.' It makes it easier for them to commit themselves and it gives me something to build on. And you have to be on top of things and be able to anticipate - because they won't necessarily volunteer any potentially disagreeable information."

If Ana were to choose whom she could sit next to during a 10-hour flight, who would that be? "Oh, wow," she exclaims, "I guess someone who has great responsibilities, like the Pope or President Obama. There are a lot of things I would like to ask them." Such as? "Well, I think it must be really hard for them to maintain their integrity and do the right thing. I would like to ask them how they do this. How do they manage to keep sight of the big picture while making the necessary compromises? And, knowing that power attracts opportunists; How do they know whom to trust? If you want to climb higher up the political ladder, you need to attract attention and you need people who are willing to fund your campaign. But these sponsors are going to want something in return. So, whom do you accept funds

from and whom not? And how do you fit this into keeping your sights on a higher goal?"

And Ana mentioned the Pope - why would she like to meet him? "I always say; marketing rules the world. It is not about the truth or about who you really are, but about the impression you create. If your marketing machine is well-oiled, you will be successful. And, in my opinion, the Catholic religion is faced with what I would call a marketing issue. It is not exactly an 'award-winning company' at the moment. Changes will have to be made and without a doubt they have chosen someone whom they believe will be able to 'sell' this. I would like to know: how does the Pope bring people back into the fold and why? Will the changes implemented be about giving love and helping people - or are they merely about promoting the company called Catholicism? I believe the Pope is a strong man and a loving man, who thinks about the meaning of religion and how to help people find what they need. I think it would be interesting to learn how he has determined the course he will be taking, and how he wants to do this..."

Yet, Ana notes, "I don't really believe in institutions - religious, political or commercial - because those who are in charge of them for a long period of time tend to forget they serve a higher purpose. They are surrounded by people who believe they walk on water and soon they start to believe it themselves - to the point that they stop questioning their own actions and motives. We have to find a way to ensure that their terms of power are limited, and that the higher goal is not forgotten."

Ana explains, "I like to believe that everyone has wisdom that we can benefit from. Also the people in that little village in Spain, who have never gone beyond its boundaries; what they know about finding happiness in life it at least as valuable. Or my husband's ability to put things into perspective and to focus on the big picture." After all, Ana says, "I want to go through life with my eyes open and without judging. That way I enjoy more, I learn more - and besides, who am I to think I have enough information to judge, anyway?"

With her profession, Ana has found her niche in life. "Being an interior decorator is very rewarding: it appeals to my need to take in a situation, to find out what changes are needed and help make them happen - but most of all I love creating the intimacy that allows me to find out who my client is so that I can have a positive impact on their life. Every time I am about to present the finished product to my client, I feel a certain tension inside, like before going onstage. Will they like it? Will it feel like home? And then, when I see the expressions on their faces as they take it all in - the 'wow, this is cool' - then it feels so good... helping them find a place they can call home is an emotional journey that really suits me; it makes me happy to make people happy."

The website for Ana Fernandez' interior decorating company is [www.barefootstyling.nl](http://www.barefootstyling.nl). On this site you can also find information on her home in Spain ('Spanish Dream'), which she rents out whenever she isn't there. ❧



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