



THREE MONTHS IN AN ACADEMIC  
LUXURY RESORT  
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I had a wonderful time at Wiko. My family (my wife Barbara and our then 18-month-old twins, Anna and Sebastian) arrived in Berlin at the beginning of March. Due to other commitments (teaching, preparing my move from Austria to Switzerland, graduating

students in their final year and getting married) I could spend only three months at Wiko. But despite the brevity of my stay the time at Wiko was a highlight of my (still relatively young, I like to think) career.

The first feeling I had when I received the official invitation to spend an academic year at Wiko was one of greatest “Vorfreude”. First, I had been at Wiko before, albeit just for a few days, as a guest of Gro Amdam, who was a Fellow in 2009/10. So I had already seen this miraculous place, and I therefore knew what a treat I was signing up for (just one example: when you enter your new guest apartment for the first time you will discover a welcome bottle of Bordeaux on the table in your living room and a fridge full of groceries, so you can comfortably get by upon arrival without any shopping). Second, I was thrilled that my best childhood friend, Christian Braendle, would also be there. Third, I was excited about the high calibre of evolutionary biologist colleagues whom I would be able to interact with: my former teacher and mentor Steve Stearns, Mark Viney who had kindly invited me to be part of his focus group, Jacob Koella and Ricardo Azevedo, both of whom I had met previously, Jim Hunt, whose work I had heard about from my friend Gro, the group of evolutionary anthropologists centered on Monique Borgerhoff Mulder and Virpi Lummaa, as well as several excellent biologists who would be visiting for shorter periods of time, including Paul Schmid-Hempel and Raghavendra Gadagkar (both Permanent Fellows at Wiko), Rüdiger Wehner (a former Permanent Fellow), Boris Baer, Henrique Teotonio, Marie-Anne Felix, Olof Leimar, Bob Trivers and others. Fourth, I was very much looking forward to learning from and being stimulated by my Co-Fellows, all eminent scholars who work on subjects I had either never thought or read about or that I had last encountered in high school.

Let me give you a few examples of some of the fun stuff one might talk about over lunch or dinner. At your own risk you might ask (I didn’t!) naive but innocent questions such as: do actually all archaeologists perform excavations? Or as a natural scientist you might wonder (I certainly did!) about jargon outside your field: what the heck do social scientists mean by “normative”, or “postmodernism” or “hermeneutic”? Other conversations, for example, might revolve around the question whether birds make music, the prevailing intellectual trends in the 17th-century Ottoman empire, the nexus between child development, music and neurobiology, the etymology of the first names of slaves, whether it is sociologically/culturally/politically correct if evolutionary biologists speak about reproductive “success” or where to get the spiciest Korean food in town (Kimchi Princess is a good bet).

Most importantly, though, I was happy to be away from the typical academic treadmill, with its never-ending stream of deadlines for peer reviews and grants, time-consuming meetings, mind-numbing administrative tasks, seminars and conferences and teaching duties: in today's ever-accelerating world of academia, the true luxury of a stay at Wiko is the privilege of having substantial blocks of time and silence to do scholarly work – to think, read and write – or as Christian Braendle put it: to “decompress” (while at the same time being pleasantly distracted by seminars, evening lectures, workshops [e.g., about what Shakespeare's King Lear has to do with the evolution of aging], the fantastic in-house library service [who will get for you about any book on planet earth in 24 hours or less], fun conversations over lunch [see above], Thursday dinners with lots of excellent food and wine [e.g., a very tasty Gigondas], in-house concerts, movie previews [e.g., on the life of the honeybee], guided museum tours, ping pong matches, evenings in the beer garden and so on).

So what did I work on? While Fellows often decide to work on something completely new at Wiko (e.g., to embark on a new book project), I brought five unfinished writing projects with me, some of them barely started, others much closer to completion. My largest and least-finished writing “assignment” was to write up the results of a massive genome-wide analysis, based on so-called next-generation sequencing data, of genetic variation and differentiation along a well-known latitudinal (clinal) gradient in my study organism, the fruit fly (*Drosophila melanogaster*). In a nutshell, these flies occur, among many other places, in populations along the east coast of North America, from very warm and humid places (Florida) to temperate/seasonal places that get very cold in winter (e.g., Maine or Vermont). This steep environmental North-South gradient causes, via adaptive evolution by natural selection, southern and northern flies to be very different from each other in terms of their “phenotypes” (traits). For example, flies from Florida lay many eggs, are relatively small, and do not live very long, whereas flies from Maine lay fewer eggs, are much larger and live much longer. Our aim was to obtain the first genome-wide description of the genetic basis of such differences along the North American cline. We identified hundreds of important candidate genes in many central molecular pathways that might underlie the pattern observed along the North-South cline. I spent pretty much all of March writing up the results (we had competition from at least two other teams working on very similar data, so we needed to be fast). My co-authors and I managed to submit the manuscript in April and got the paper accepted with flying colours at *Molecular Ecology* in May. In addition to this manuscript, my collaborators and I also worked on another

data paper (dealing with the phenomenon of reproductive and post-reproductive lifespan in flies), as well as on three review papers (one about the neuronal aspects of longevity; one about life history plasticity; and one about the connection between reproductive physiology, fat metabolism and lifespan). So given that three months fly by at almost the speed of light, I was happy with what I got done in the time at Wiko (crucial elements were a quiet office and that I had decided not to travel much).

In closing, a few words about my favourite highlights. The coffee breaks with my fellow evolutionary biologists were always a great time (and special thanks to Frau Speder, who always kindly supplied us with a constant stream of cookies!). The evening talks, for example by Steve Stearns about the evolution of life histories, aging and cancer (my field of interest) and by Yehuda Elkana about the sociology of science and science administration, were thought-provoking and stimulating (and so were the buffet and wine that followed). The *Gesprächskonzert* by Alfred Brendel about Liszt was most beautiful as well as witty, and the colloquium room was – not surprisingly – absolutely packed (my guess is that about one-third of the people who showed up did not have a formal invitation). The Tuesday colloquia: often interesting and educating – but sometimes also slightly annoying (for example, overuse of unnecessary technical jargon, or the habit of some to turn a rather trivial question into a twenty-minute statement). Wonderful dinners with Beverly and Steve Stearns; with Maria Majno and Alfred Brendel; with Adam Wilkins; chez Olivier Jouanjan (who probably cooks the best honey-marinated pork tenderloin with asparagus in the world); or at Peter Hammerstein's house (Peter, who is the head of the Fellowclub, is not only a very well-known theoretical biologist but also a former chef, trained in France!); and, of course, the fabulous Thursday evenings at Wiko (for some strange reason, I always ended up at the last table – I am not mentioning who else – in math, one would call it an invariant set). Taking walks exploring the city with Barbara; all the fantastic museums, bookshops, parks and restaurants in Berlin. Watching Anna and Sebastian giggling and roaming around our apartment in Villa Walther or the playground (or watching them tickle some of my famous Co-Fellows' toes!).

But above all, two things stand out. One is how extraordinarily well all the Fellows got along and how much everyone tried to learn from each other; one could really sense the fun people had interacting with each other – it felt like we are a class of schoolmates and good friends. The other thing is how friendly, helpful and efficient the lovely Wiko staff are. They really make you feel welcome and at home – they are the good spirit of the

place. Since every Fellow is eventually kicked out of this paradise, what remains are the fondest memories and the strongest possible urge to be back.