

Landing in Madagascar

I am on the plane taking me from South Africa to Madagascar. When the captain informs us that we are about to land and we descend to an altitude of ten thousand feet, I can see through the window the landscape of the “Great Island” (the fourth in the world in size), whose name had already been mentioned by Marco Polo in the chronicles of his travels. My first impression, while flying over the central high plateau where the capital is situated, is that I am arriving in a well-known place which is engraved in my memory. Green hills colored red by the soil, sinuous roads disappearing from sight, flooded brown rivers, lagoons of different shapes, rice paddies which become greener in the valleys, scarce or no forestation.

My fears arise once again. Firstly, regarding my health - I had the hepatitis B vaccination before leaving Argentina and yesterday, when I was in the hotel in Johannesburg, I took the weekly pills against malaria. Besides, I carry the recommended antibiotics in case of cholera but I am still worried about yellow fever. “Vaccination is only required for people who travel from an infected country,” the specialist in infectious diseases told me. However, the fear of catching something still prevails because a few days before my departure, Peter’s sisters mentioned the case of a Slovenian relative who had visited him some time before and who suffered the first attacks of malaria only after he had already returned to Europe.

My other fear, even more profound and visceral, haunts me: that of descending into the world of poverty, with all the prejudices I have created for myself before my departure; especially whether I will be able to put up with twenty-one days in contact with it. It is true, there is poverty everywhere and nowadays it is Argentina’s greatest problem with figures soaring but I have always been an external observer, never getting involved. I do not know if this is due to lack of opportunities, fear, indifference, helplessness, or a mixture of all this.

We land at Ivato airport, situated on the outskirts of this capital which has such a difficult name, Antananarivo (“the thousand towns”), and which the Malagasy simply call “Tana.” The aircraft taxis on the asphalt runway, the tires and the brakes screech, the aircraft shakes. I leave my fears behind; it is too late to back out now. As Father Peter said in his first e-mail, when we decided to go ahead with this book: “Once you step into the boat, there’s no turning back.”

We have arrived. “The Divine Adventure,” as Father Peter referred to my trip, is beginning. I look for my backpack. I am hopeful that I will not encounter any problems, neither with the visa I must request upon arrival nor with customs on account of all the medication and candy I am carrying with me. I go down the steps. No, it is not as hot as I imagined it would be, nor is it raining, which I thought would be the case at this time of year. We walk to the arrivals lounge. For the time being I

do not wish to look ahead into the distance to see if Father Peter is waiting for me, as he had promised me he would.

First step: join the queue for those still needing to buy visas, with the letter of invitation from the Akamasoa humanitarian organization in my hand. I buy the stamp for the visa. "Twenty dollars," a dark man says. I had the foresight to bring change. The lady with Asian features who is next to him hands me the change of one dollar and puts the stamp in my document. Voilà! It is strange, they look like a mixture of Asians and Africans, but it is understandable: this Indian Ocean island, two hundred and fifty miles off the East African Coast, which received its first inhabitants of Malayo-Indonesian origin at the beginning of the Christian Era, followed by Arab merchants bringing slaves from Africa, must be special, amalgamating these different races in its unusual island environment.

"Le billet d'avion, s'il vous plait." The man is saying something as simple as asking for my airplane ticket, but in accelerated French I do not understand immediately, despite the ten hurried lessons I took in the hope of being able to communicate with the people of the island. He realizes I have not understood and repeats in English: "Ticket. Plane ticket." I hand it over. My passport and ticket pass from one hand to another. I follow the procedure from the other side of the small windows which are attended by people of diverse physical features among which the Merina ethnic group prevails. This group is the most Asian-looking and their features are the most common in this part of the high plateau.

Having retrieved my passport, I go to look for my suitcase as I would in any other airport in the world. A world recently shaken by the terrorist attacks in Madrid. While I'm waiting by the belt, I listen to Malagasy being spoken, which I suppose comes from Indonesia but is mixed with Arabic words and tribal sounds of the African north-east coast.

The customs officer asks for my passport and tells me to open my black suitcase, but not the backpack in which I am carrying candy for the children of Akamasoa and a jumble of medication to protect me from so many imaginary dangers. When the man begins his inspection, I hear the unmistakable voice of Father Peter telling him there is no need for that, "He is one of ours," referring to the inhabitants of the Akamasoa villages (which in Malagasy means: "Good Friends.") I watch him coming over to meet me, with the bushy gray beard which makes him stand out and gives him a prophetic aura, the blue eyes under a creased forehead due to the years that weigh on his shoulders, the very white skin with reddish blemishes typical of Slavs, his athletic build and those long arms which I recognize from our first encounter in Buenos Aires.

"Oui, Mompera," the man answers, closing the suitcase. Mompera, "My Father," he calls him as all Malagasy refer to priests. What I realize at that moment is that he must have recognized him because Father Peter is not wearing any vestments, except for the large distinctive cross that hangs from his neck.

