

## SÉNÉGAL

My thoughts as the plane was about to touch down just after 16:00 were interrupted by the sight of a massive bronze statue on the left-hand side of the aircraft. I had, as part of my research for the trip, read about this statue. I had seen the pictures and knew it was huge. Still, the sheer size of the family emerging from a hilltop – a woman, a man with his right arm around her waist, and a child sitting on his left shoulder pointing towards the open sea with her small left hand – took me by such surprise that my jaw dropped.

South Africa's former President Thabo Mbeki, an African Renaissance man, and former Sénégalese President Abdoulaye Wade must be beaming with African pride whenever they fly past the monument, I thought. Both gentlemen were part of the Africa-can-and-must-solve-her-own-problems-the-African-way philosophy. What a pity that neither men lasted very long as head of state. Mbeki couldn't even attend the grand opening of this monument as president of South Africa, because by April 2010, which was also the 50th anniversary of Sénégal's independence from France, he had long been succeeded by a sexy singing-and-dancing man from Nkandla.

As we were disembarking I was hit by a wall of hot, humid air. I practically staggered back. Although I knew that Sénégal, as well as all the other countries that I was planning to visit, was hot, I was not prepared for the sudden and endless impact of hot, humid air.

The airport was not busy – there was one other stationary aircraft, a Kenya Airways plane – yet our pilot parked quite a distance from the terminal building. While making myself comfortable in the runway bus, I noticed that the grass-mowing contractor had not been paid and had decided to quit cutting the grass along the runway and parking areas.

Once inside the terminal building, which had probably seen its best days back in the 1970s, it was time to go through the dreaded immigration process. The queue for international visitors, unlike the one for returning citizens, was moving very slowly.

While inching forward painfully slowly in that old, dilapidated, hot terminal building where the temperature must have been above 30 degrees, in a line of passengers fanning themselves with anything from passports to airline magazines, I sorely missed Dubai International Airport where, on my way here, I had spent more than four hours in transit. That modern, air-conditioned airport of shiny chrome and glass and marble runs like a well-oiled machine. Besides the sleek, comfortable chairs on which I reclined for a while, I was pleasantly surprised to come across computers in one of the corridors where one could surf the internet for free for half an hour. I had been under the impression that such privileges were reserved for business-class passengers only.

Airports like Dubai International have no choice but to offer professional, efficient and outstanding service. To put things into perspective: during the 2010–2011 financial year OR Tambo International handled less than 19 million passengers, and that included all the international tourists who came to watch the FIFA World Cup; more than 47 million passengers went through Dubai International during the same period. The encouraging news, however, is that the Sénégalese government is constructing a new airport further inland, that will be named after Blaise Diagne, the first black African elected to the French parliament in 1914.

In the meantime, it took me more than half an hour of shuffling before I came face to face with a blue-black male official sitting in a small cubicle.

Despite the less than glamorous arrival, I was happy to be in Dakar, the western-most city on mainland Africa. Since my teenage years I have been intrigued by the annual Paris to Dakar Rally, better known simply as the Dakar, which was started in 1979. Unfortunately, after the killing of four French tourists, the 2008 Dakar had to be cancelled due to safety and security concerns, mainly in Mauritania, one of the transit countries. Since 2009, although

still called the Dakar, the rally has been held in South America. But that is like holding the Rio Carnival in Monrovia – or Johannesburg. It's just not the same.

Still, imagine driving almost 10 000 km in less than two weeks, averaging more than 800 km a day, under challenging and mostly sandy conditions – even in South America. It sounds like fun, it looks like fun, and that is exactly the reason why I'd love to do it.

Still daydreaming about the off-road vehicle I'd buy, I suddenly found myself facing the immigration official.

'*Bonsour, mesour,*' I greeted him with my first and last French phrase.

He nodded without showing much enthusiasm. Not that I was expecting him to jump up and hug me. Stamping an endless stream of people in and out of the country all day long, week after week, month after month, has to be one of the most boring jobs on earth.

Immediately after handing over my passport and completed immigration form, I realised why our queue had moved so s-l-o-w-l-y: each and every international passenger had to be finger-printed – not just one finger, but both the left and right index fingers – and once that was done you had to look into a webcam to have your photo taken.

While this tall, dark official was processing my form, I started suffering, just by looking at him, from BDE – Big Dick Envy. Yes, it is said that men from West Africa are way, way better endowed than the South African brothers. In fact, there is speculation that *that* was one of the main contributing reasons for the so-called xenophobic attacks of 2008.

This also explains why, after 1994, when we became more welcoming to our African brothers and sisters, so many penis enlargers set up business, right from Beit Bridge down to the Cape of Good Hope. And if you are in the penis-enlargement business, irrespective of scientific evidence showing it to be a scam, why you will never run out of clients.

My trail of thought was cut short when the official stamped my passport and immigration form with two loud bangs.

I once came across a renowned aviation columnist's description of Léopold Sédar Senghor International Airport as the 'world's worst airport'. Surely Patrick Smith had never been to Lubumbashi Airport, which is constantly under construction, and where on a good day only one official will try to solicit some sort of a bribe from you. On a bad day you lose count.

On my way to collect my bag, I had to hand the stamped immigration form to an old, grey-haired official seated not far from the carousel. Out the corner of my eye I noticed that my bag was already circling. After grabbing it I had to squeeze through passengers still waiting for their luggage to emerge.

As I left the terminal building – after one unofficial-looking guy offered to help me carry my bag, which I politely refused, and another official-looking one insisted on scanning it, which I couldn't refuse although I didn't understand why – I stopped to scrutinise the crowds behind the fence. I was hoping to see someone holding a sign with my name on it. Before I left South Africa I not only made a booking at a budget hotel, I also asked them to organise a transfer for me. Everything was confirmed by email.

None of the signs held up by all sorts of people had my name on it. Damn! Not being met by someone was going to complicate my life no end. Firstly, even if I wanted to take a cab, I couldn't as I didn't have any West African franc (CFA), the currency used locally and in the rest of the *Communauté Financière d'Afrique* (Financial Community of Africa). Secondly, my non-existent French was going to make communicating with a taxi driver more or less impossible.

Naturally, the first thing I did was to phone Kingz Plaza Hotel where I was booked for three nights. It still mystifies me how people could've travelled seamlessly and without glitches in foreign places before the advent of internet and roaming cellphones.

A woman answered. Once I had told her my name and that I was waiting for a transfer, she said, 'The man is in airport.'

That was very comforting. At least she knew my name and about the transfer. It meant I just had to look more carefully. The good thing was that I was still standing just outside the terminal building under the shade of the extended roof looking out across the crowd of taxi drivers, incutras (informal currency traders), boys selling simcards, and people who had come to pick up family and friends.

As I moved closer to the fence I finally spotted the small Kingz Plaza placard. I had not noticed it earlier because, to protect himself from the blazing sun, the guy was holding the placard more on top of his head for shade, not at an angle that made it visible from the exit of the arrivals hall.

It turned out that he did not have a car at his disposal. I only realised that when he started negotiating with some taxi drivers. In the end we boarded an old yellow Peugeot 504 with a cracked front window. Not a just a chip or a small line running through it, no, the whole thing was just short of shattered. I struggled to work out how the driver could see the road through such a windscreen. I did peep at the dashboard but the speedometer, like the petrol gauge and the rev counter, was not working. We couldn't have been travelling at much more than 60 km/h, and I was convinced that if the driver had accelerated to 100 km/h the whole window would disintegrate and land in our laps. Thank goodness the car was so old it couldn't go any faster.

As this old *skorokoro* was graciously making its way down a dual carriageway, it dawned on me how quickly I had had to adjust: less than an hour earlier, I had disembarked from an airline which had recently won the Skytrack 2011 Airline of the Year Award, and here I was crawling down an unknown road in an unroadworthy vehicle.

The eight-hour flight from Johannesburg to Dubai had passed very quickly, mainly because of two – ok, three – reasons. One, the wide variety of music on offer ensured that I could satisfy my eclectic musical taste: on the funky earphones I listened to hits by Madonna, George Michael, Paul Simon, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Alicia Keys, Michael Jackson and Prince.

Two, the dry red wine was bottomless, like the coffee at Mugg & Bean. My ears ringing with music, I spent most of the overnight flight sipping fermented grapes. As the wine was warming me nicely, I got stuck listening to one song over and over again: 'Three Little Birds' by the late Bob Marley. As I was embarking on a trip on a 'road less travelled', I found the lyrics, especially the chorus, almost too reassuring:

*'Don't worry about a thing,  
'Cause every little thing gonna be all right.'  
Singin': 'Don't worry about a thing,  
'Cause every little thing gonna be all right!'*

Lastly, I had chosen an aisle seat on the advice of my 57-year-old colleague, a typical dirty, old white man. 'Because in that aisle seat now and then,' he reminisced, 'especially during meal times when they are serving passengers on the other side of the aisle, the air hostesses are forced to move their backsides deliciously close to your face.'