

### **For nuts' sake**

“Excusez-moi, Monsieur Pilot, but what exactly is happening?” my husband manages to say in clumsy French. Still shaken by the rough landing, there's polite urgency in every word.

We've just disembarked from our small aircraft. Judging from the scene outside, we're not where we're supposed to be. The landscape is parched, dusty and deserted rather than the rainforest-frilled coast of the Bay of Antongil in northern Madagascar.

There are no clues to indicate our location: No signs, landmarks or tracks. Just miles of baking, rust-red earth peppered with the scorched remains of old tree stumps. There's no obvious reason - no engine trouble or even proper airstrip - to explain us being here.

We exchange anxious looks, the same scenario racing through our heads: Is Air Madagascar about to gain a reputation for hijacks?

The pilot gabbles something neither of us catch. He's speaking in Malagasy not French as he points in the direction of the aircraft's left wing. This is where he's instructing us to stand and wait. We're not keen but standing beneath the wing will at least shade us from the 40-degree heat. The other six passengers clamber down to join us. Most are locals and equally hot, nervous and confused. This doesn't look to be a scheduled stop.

We stand and wait. Flies whine around our heads and the scent of kerosene curls through the hot air. “This can't be happening,” I say beneath my breath. “We must have got the wrong flight.” My husband shrugs and shakes his head. The chaos at Antanabe airport had meant we'd not only double but quadruple-checked. There was only one flight to Maroantsetra scheduled for today.

Time passes. We're none the wiser about what's going on. Staring at the scenery, we detect signs of life emerging from along one side of the barely functional airstrip. What we'd thought were rocks are actually a cluster of ramshackle huts. Mothers in faded T-shirts and skirts appear, their small, round-bellied children close behind. An ancient man, with more wrinkles than skin, comes out to sit on the ground, smoking and gesturing in our direction. Nobody says anything to anyone. Our arrival seems to be as much a surprise to them as it is to us.

It's then we see a group of men running towards us across the dirt. Each carries a large mesh sack balanced on their head. Reaching our side of the plane, they lob the sacks at the foot of its stairs. There's a heated exchange between the pilot and two of the older men – raised voices, wild hand gesticulations, slaps on arms and legs. Thankfully there are no knives or guns on display.

“They're trying to persuade him to take the sacks,” my husband murmurs. It's a big and growing pile. The pilot points over his shoulder towards the end of the makeshift runway. It's then we notice it's furrowed, not very long and disappears abruptly into air. We've landed on a mountain cliff-edge.

When the pilot's attempt at negotiation fails, one-by-one the sacks are crammed into the plane. “Perhaps they aren't as heavy as they look,” I say, the size of the cliff drop lengthening in my mind as each sack disappears inside. What kind of cargo is worth taking such immense risk?

The load stowed, we're ushered back on board and squeeze into the few remaining seats. Eager to depart, the co-pilot slams the door shut and the aircraft's engine bawls. With the sheer drop less than 200 meters ahead, the only thing keeping us in our seats is the thought that surely the two crew know what they're doing. That they, like us, believe all our lives are too valuable to lose. Pulling my seatbelt extra tight, I close my eyes and clasp my husband's hand. The plane's wheels skid and slip as they strive to gain traction on the bumpy ground.

There's a judder. A lurch forward. A sudden drop and sense of weightlessness. We hear the rush of wind and feel the fuselage start to twist and shake. And then - in all of 30 seconds – we're climbing up and soaring. Like an eagle taking off in flight, the pilot has used the air currents rushing up the mountainside to lift us airborne. The tension in the small cabin gradually dissipates.

As the aircraft levels out, my husband and I notice there's a seven-letter word printed on the sack in front of us: *'Peanuts'*. Neither of us can believe we've been through this for nuts so we ask a fellow passenger for their opinion.

“You don't land in the middle of nowhere just to collect bags of peanuts,” is all he will say.

We stop asking questions, both now knowing exactly what is happening: smuggling Madagascan-style.