

The Hostetlers, Missionaries to Madagascar

The following article is a chronicle of our experience getting to St. Marie and trying to settle in here. It is in raw form, and there are grammatical errors.

*Proverbs 13:12 Hope deferred maketh the **heart sick**...*

January and the first part of February were busy as we were preparing to move to St. Marie on the 14th. Frustrations are part of life, especially life on the missions field, and they seem to be extra frustrating here for some reason.

We have been blessed to have purchased a 12 seat van that has air conditioning and is automatic, which is a rare find here in Madagascar. We purchased new tires, got the oil changed, recharged the a/c, and purchased wiper blades. Another blessing we had is that a young man named Hery had kept in contact with me for the last 2 years. He had prayed more than a year and a half ago about coming with us to St. Marie. He told me before we left for furlough that we felt the Lord wanted him to go with us to St. Marie. We kept in contact during furlough, and when we got back in the country he was ready to go with us.

Things seemed to be going along smoothly, and then we discovered a snag with the trip plans. The boat that we were planning on shipping our things on wouldn't leave for two weeks, so that would mean we had to stay in St. Marie for close to two weeks with none of our things. We had planning and reserved a furnished house on the North end of St. Maire about 5 months ago, and had already paid for it. But, our plans had been based on having our vehicle the day we set foot on St. Marie.

Bro. Hery (this is the older Hery) is a national that we have gotten to know from a fellow missionaries church. He has been a real blessing, and has become a friend to our family. He began to make calls and locate other boats on which to ship our vehicle and belongings. Finally, the plan was settled to drive to a town called Soanierana-Ivongo from Tana, spend the night and the next day ship our things on a boat which we would meet up with in St. Marie.

We left Tana on Thursday morning February 14th, "Happy Valentines day" to us! We left around 6:30 am and it took 2 hours just to get across town. We pressed on and shortly as I was stopping I heard the back brakes start to scrape. So, that was one thing thing we forgot to check! Tana is about 4,000 feet in the mountains and our path would lead us down 2 lane roads with switch backs as we descended to sea-level. The first part of our trip took us from Tana to the port city of Toamasina where we arrived around a quarter after 3 in the afternoon. We got diesel fuel, ate, and left on the second leg of the trip up to Soanierana-Ivongo. The road was a typical road for Madagascar it had pot holes and areas where the road seemed to have been washed out. Our average speed was somewhere between 40km/h and 60 km/h. As the sun set and it became darker the holes in the road were harder to see and I wasn't able to slow down enough before we hit them. This, we later found out in St. Marie ended up helping to reveal some cracks in the frame of our van.

It was about 10 pm when we arrived in Soanierana-Ivongo. So, our trip had ended up taking 15 and a half hours. The hotel rooms available to us in this small port town, were very basic, and nothing like even the most basic hotel in the United States. There was a full sized bed crammed into the room with a worn mosquito net draped over the bed. There is a barely enough room stand between the bed and the wall. The bathroom has no shower curtain, no seat on the toilet, and no hot water. The windows are wooden shutters that have bars over them, and they need to be open in order to get a breeze, since there are also no fans in the room.

Around 2 am I get woken up by Laura because the boys, tired and hot, are fighting in their room. The twins were sound asleep in my room, so Laura and the other children went to the van, and turn on the a/c and sleep in there for the next few hours. Finally, at 5:30 Grandpa Hery wakes me up to say that we need to get the van down to the loading area for it to go on the boat.

The plan is that all of our stuff plus the van will go on one boat, which we will be able to ride with. We even brought our own life-jackets! Shortly after getting to the loading area, Grandpa Hery tells me the plan has changed and the boat we were supposed to be on has a limit of 3 tons, and that our stuff and the van will be too heavy, so it will go on another boat. After all the changes up to this point you'd think this wouldn't be a huge surprise, but since we had a long day the day before, and didn't get enough sleep during the night this news is beyond frustrating.

So, after a little bit of cooling down, Grandpa Hery tells me that our stuff will be moved to a safe storage location to wait being loaded on the boat. Since the tide is out the boat won't be able to leave until the evening. We say goodbye to Grandpa Hery and young Hery and head over to the passenger boats and purchase a ticket to head to St. Marie at 11 am. We bought some food from the little shops that line the street and wait. The children are in quite the cantankerous mood and are fighting with each other and frustrated at the "stupidity" going on around them.

On the bright side the seas are smooth considering the fact that this is prime cyclone season. Weather has been beautiful and no forecasts of bad weather, and no looming clouds on the horizon. We leave later than planned, but right on time for the local schedule. We arrive at the port in Ambodifotatra in St. Marie a little before 1 pm.

Laura and all but two of the children grab their personal bags and head for a local hotel that has air-conditioned rooms. With the other two children I hire a three-wheeled bike taxi called a pousse-pousse to carry our baggage to the hotel. Only one air-conditioned room is available, so I get that one for Laura and the girls, but the boys ended up in that room later, as well, sleeping on the tiled floors. The other room did not have a/c, but did have two fans. So, we slept there.

After some rest, we hired a three-wheeled motorized taxi called tuk-tuk (took-took) to a restaurant that we have eaten at before and enjoyed. They also had a pool that the children would enjoy. We were unwinding a bit, and enjoying the cool breezes from the ocean, and a swim in the pool. I was sitting on a bench look at my emails. One of the little guys was playing on the edge of the pool and a ledge he was standing on in the water. He lost his balance and got in water over his head and I went in after him, phone in hand. Needless to say my phone meet its demise as the water seeped into the circuitry and shorted out.

We had dinner, rode back to the hotel, and got everyone into bed. I stayed in contact with young Hery and he told me that the boat was leaving at 9:30 pm. They arrived about a quarter to eleven pm, and thought they might unload, but they said they would wait till the morning. Young Hery and I went back to the hotel and tried to get some sleep before the 4 am alarm to be back at the boat for unloading.

In the morning, we went back to the dock at 4:30 am, but the car was not unloaded until close to 8 am then the other stuff was unloaded. I found a truck to carry our stuff to the house we rented in a little town called Ambatorao, which is 31 km north of Ambodifotatra.

It took some time to get the van off the boat, and then we waited to get the rest of our belongings from the hold.

Young Hery and the truck headed North to the house, and I followed, but ended up passing them. The 31 km took little over an hour to drive because of the many little villages we have to pass through

and the poor road conditions. About half way up the road becomes nice and smooth and easier to drive on. While I was driving, I remembered that I forgot the large propane tank, and hoped it would be there when I got back. A few hours later, I went back to the port and did find my tank.

After unloading the van and the stuff from the truck, I headed back to town to pick up Laura and the rest of the children. We got to the house and started settling in. The day wore on and we were all getting tired, so after dinner we cleaned up things and started settling down. The fans we had brought were handy, since the house we rented did not have any. We laid down, and put the mosquito nets over us, and the heat began to penetrate our bodies. It was a stifling, piercing, humid heat, and Laura began to have a panic attack from the heat and was struggling to breathe because of it.

Sunday we woke, and Laura made pancakes. We dressed up and sat down in the living room for church. We sang, read from Psalms and I made some comments on the various passages. We swam in the afternoon. Had dinner and settled in for another night. The heat seemed to be more oppressive and stifling.

Monday afternoon, Andrea and the other children were playing down by the beach. Pretty soon Andrea came back to the house grabbed her Bible and went back to the beach. She started telling them the story of Jonah and the Whale, and young Hery interpreted for her. They sang some songs, and played some games. I went down and talked with some of the children. There were about 12 and about 9 of them were Muslim, one Catholic, 1 Presbyterian, and the rest non-churched. So, that was a bit of interesting information. Later that week she taught another lesson and there were over 20 children at that time.

Sitting in the shade and dripping sweat is not as comfortable as it may seem. We also had to draw water from the well by hand. It only adds to being uncomfortable. Washing was done by hand, and takes quite a while to do, especially for a family like ours. Some of the clothes dried well, others just stayed damp and ended up souring on the line. Those clothes will have to be rewashed, so that was some wasted effort.

There also seems to be a slow change in standards of hygiene. We had noticed this on trips to the village when we were in Tana. And, for a couple of days at a time that can work, since we will be back at home in a few days. It is quite undesirable to be sitting and smell something and then realize that the smell is coming from your own body. But, trying to live in those conditions is hard. Before putting clothes in the laundry basket they need to be dried out from all the sweat so they don't stink worse after sitting in the hamper for a couple days because if it is raining you can't wash clothes since there is no way to dry them.

Tuesday, we worked on a few things, and then we headed into town. The fatigue of travel, and not sleeping restfully at night because of the intense heat in the house, we stayed two nights at the hotel in town with A/C. I had called Grandpa Hery and told him about the situation with the house and that we needed to find another place more suitable for a long term rental. He left on Wednesday and arrived in St. Marie on Thursday mid-day.

Before heading back to the rental house we looked at a couple of places, and he made some contacts that might be able to help us. I had also spoke with a man that owns a hardware store and he told me about a couple places that might be available.

Grandpa Hery spent the night at the house and felt how hot it was inside the house. In the morning he made a few phone calls and then Laura and I along with Grandpa Hery went in to town to see a place. We didn't realize that we would be gone the rest of the day, but young Hery was with the children and they were tired of traveling.

We looked at a couple of places, and after lunch we waited for an appointment at 3 pm. The man for that appointment said he couldn't make it until 4, but we had another appointment at 4. So, we went to the previously scheduled one. I had seen this house on the East coast of the island, and asked for the guardians phone number. Grandpa Hery had made contact, but wasn't hopeful about any success from that lead. We went anyway. On the road back, he commented that the road was bad. We said it was, but just wait. The house we found sat off to the East of the dirt road that runs in front of the house. We arrived right at 4 and the guardian was busy working inside.

We were all surprised to see that the house was larger than what we could see from the gate. We looked through the home, and it was modern, with a nicely laid out kitchen, dining, and living room area. A nice bathroom with 2 sinks, shower and toilet. A hallway had three rooms off it. A smaller room for the girls, a larger room for the boys, and the largest room for the master bedroom.

Laura had gone elsewhere to look at things and when I found her, she excitedly told me I needed to see something. In the back of the house was a large room that had 24 batteries, an inverter and 3 solar panels that feed into it. This was a totally off-grid home — just what I have been looking for. Even in town where there is power there are routine power outages.

We moved into the new house on Saturday March 3rd. It took a good part of the day, but we were excited. I rented a truck with a driver and took my 2 oldest boys along with young Hery to get our belongings from the house in the North. When we got back to the house the driver said it was a really long way back to the house, and wanted to change the price on me. I had told him exactly where I wanted to go, but he thought I meant somewhere else near by. I told him he had agreed to the price and that he shouldn't be changing it on me. I tried to express that fact that I was not happy with him trying to change the price. Finally, he agreed to take the original price. He did however treat our things quite roughly as they were "unloaded" from the back of his truck.

We had a good Saturday evening, feeling good about finally having stable electricity and running water. Sunday, was another great day, we started the morning by getting the washing and drying going, because we had a back log of dirty clothes to restore to a wearable condition. We had a service mid-morning, and then had lunch. More laundry in the afternoon, but we did make sure we had a day of rest otherwise. We slept well using fans in the rooms, but we also concluded that we needed to put screens on the windows so we could get fresh air inside at night.

Monday morning rolled around, and about 7 am the power suddenly shut off! This was a huge disappointment and surprise. It had been overcast on Sunday, and we did use the washer, dryer and fridge as well. We learned that the the number of solar panels were not sufficient to recharge the batteries enough. We are waiting on 3 more solar panels, but there was a generator in the generator house. When I tried to look into starting it I discovered from the caretaker that there was no battery to start the generator. So, I removed our battery from the car and hooked it up. Then I was told that there is a wiring issue with the generator.

All day Wednesday we kept the panels charging the batteries, even though there was a fair bit of cloud cover. We turned it on for an hour at quite time, and then waited until the evening to turn it back on. We had the fans on for only an hour when they shut down again, and we decided to go into town to stay at a hotel. There is a mechanic coming out on Saturday to see if he can fix the wiring issue with the generator. So, not even a week in the house and there are issues. Not surprising I guess if you consider that this house has sat for nearly seven years unoccupied.

It is now March 20th and the solar panels that were promised just arrived yesterday. Hopefully, they will get put up soon. The generator is still being worked on. One problem was fixed and another was found. So, life continues with enough electricity to use fans for part of the night and nothing else. We

are making do, but will definitely rejoice when we can have power again. Things like refrigerators and washing machines are luxuries that sure are helpful. Laura has been scrubbing all of the clothes by hand across the street next to the well where there is a wash area that consists of a concrete wash basins and a place for the water to drain.