

ICWA LETTERS

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John B. Robinson is an Institute Fellow studying the struggle of the people and island of Madagascar to survive.

And Again Antananarivo

DIEGO SUAREZ, Madagascar

November 1, 1996

By John B. Robinson

I ruined three checks trying to buy my ticket from Antsiranana to Antananarivo. The amount was 629,200 francs malgash and I was a little rattled by the sum. First I misplaced the word franc, then I omitted the "neuf" in 29, the third attempt failed for the same reason as the first. During my final bid a dozen curiosity seekers crowded around the cashiers window to survey my work. I hesitated on the "v" in *vingt* and two people offered to finish the job for me. I persisted, wrote out the whole number in French, as it should be, signed, dated backwards (European style), and shoved it through the little window with a sense of accomplishment. The cashier declared the check good, his supervisor concurred, the crowd clapped. In short, by the time I elbowed my way out of the Air Mad office, everyone in town knew I was going to Tana, and I had a small list of items to find: allergy medicine, dental floss, cigarette paper, a new testament, a malagasy school book, a *coton* puppy, *foie gras*, wood preservative.

The airport routine consists of shoving your way to the check-in counter, placing your ticket in line, then retreating. In due time a clerk calls out your name, you fight your way back over the trussed baskets and homemade suitcases to claim your seat and hand over your bags. An hour later the plane spits out the inbound passengers, you mingle with them for a bit, then it's time to rush the plane and make sure you really have a seat. There is order somewhere in the chaos, and everyone almost always has a place, but it is that air of uncertainty always present in Madagascar makes everyone so tense, so pushy.

"I toy with the idea of reintroducing myself as a biologist. Something safe, non-threatening. A guy who studies bugs. I'm positive he'd rent to a bug man."

Waiting for the plane I see a few people I recognize: a hotel owner, a retired Italian, an Indian merchant. The Italian lets me know that his wife, Floris, is on the plane; she is going to Tana to get a signature. They want to open a snack bar in town but there is a certain Colonel who refuses to give some undefined permission. The Indian and I already have a history. He owns a hundred-plus houses but he refuses to rent me so much as a one-room studio. He doesn't like the sound of "cultural interaction and interpretation." I toy with the idea of reintroducing myself as a biologist. Something safe, non-threatening. A guy who studies bugs. I'm positive he'd rent to a bug man.

I take an aisle seat in the last row, close to the emergency exit. National airlines have always made me vaguely apprehensive. The woman next to me has just come from Tana and is on her way to Nosy-Be. This is when I discovered the plane's route was Antananarivo/Antsiranana/Nosy-Be/Majunga/Antananarivo. For some unknown reason, probably the check-writing fiasco, I thought this was a direct flight to the capital.

My row companion has a sack full of automobile decals. She buys them for 80,000 fmg in Tana, sells them for 120,000 fmg in Nosy-Be. The decals are fairly bland. Red, blue, or orange racing stripes. "The taxi drivers go crazy for them," she explains. I ask her about life on Nosy-Be (*nosy* means island, *be* can mean either large or superior).

"It's good," she says. "But the people are too racist. I come from the Haute Plateau. If they can get me, they will."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"They don't like us because we work harder than they do. *C'est ça le problème, le racism.*"

Nosy-Be (pronounced nosy-bay) is the home of the Sambava, a tribe with their own king who have waged war against the highland Merina for several centuries. On July 14, 1840, the Sambava king ceded his ancestral rights to the French. In return for Nosy-Be and surrounding islands he received a uniform and a pension worth 100 francs a year. With the French departure in 1962, old antagonisms have started to flare once again. The official Merina language is an oft-cited sore point.

After touchdown and takeoff from the small, blue-green tourist destination, my new row companion turned out to be a slightly exhausted Frenchwoman who had just sold her well-known bistro in Tana. "I'm taking six months to visit all my friends," said Barbara. "Then I'm going back to France." She talked openly about her experience after we established that we had a mutual friend in Diego.

"I came here three years ago when there was a call for investors."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. We investors arrived with energy, hope, and money. A lot of people I know left without a centime. Everything needs to be done in this country. You can't make a call to investors [and] then give them a one-year visa. You can't advertise for tourists when there are not enough hotel rooms, buses or roads. I have hope for Madagascar. I'll be back again, in a few years when things are better. At the moment, everything still needs to be done."

Near Majunga I saw several thousand acres alight with fire. These are the fires that send ecologists into black depression. Set during the last weeks of the dry season, when the old grasses are head high and no moisture remains in the ground, the fires sterilize the landscape so it is fit only for new grass and zebu (native cattle). Since it is a crime to deliberately burn a field in Madagascar, the peasants torch their pastures, then run away. Uncontrolled wild fires, like the one I saw out the plane window that turn homesteads and mature fruit trees to cinder, are the result.

The sea around Majunga is bright red for miles. A huge river draining the interior pushes silt out into the ocean in the shape of a mushroom cloud. Due to erosion (due to burning), the fresh water is undrinkable and the coral reefs have been smothered to death. I re-

mark on the seascape to my new friend. She just shrugs her shoulders.

I search for signs of the old rain forest on the flight from Majunga to Tana, 560 kilometers. There are none. The hills are scraped bare of vegetation; only rice fields lining the river beds and filling former swamps provide a dose of green. The earth is red, barren, save for clusters of red-brick houses.

In Tana, I team up with two ladies from Diego to hire a taxi into town. We are all exhausted from the long, hot trip. We stare listlessly at the huge eels speared in the rice paddies and hung out for sale along the road. The first hotel we stop at has no vacancy. We descend anyway and lunch together.

We all have one similarity; we all married Europeans. Floris, a Diego native, married an Italian she met when he did a tour of duty here. Lucia, another Diego native, married a Frenchman she met in France. I wedded a French woman I met in Zanzibar.

"My cousin married a European too," said Floris. "When his parents found out, they put a stone in the graveyard and celebrated his funeral."

"The hills are scraped bare of vegetation; only rice fields lining the river beds and filling former swamps provide a dose of green."

"That's strong," I said, remembering my own parents' somewhat more muted reaction.

"Ah-zalla," contributed Lucia. "The Malgash are strong."

After an hour or so Floris broached the topic of Xavier (a Frenchman) and Henriette (a Diego resident). Xavier had hung himself (or so I thought) last month, and Lucia had been the first to see the body.

"His glasses were neatly folded on the table. The knot was perfect. Just high enough to break his neck. Someone asked me where he learned to tie a good knot like that. I don't know."

"What did he jump from?" I probe, seeking to confirm known information.

"The bed."

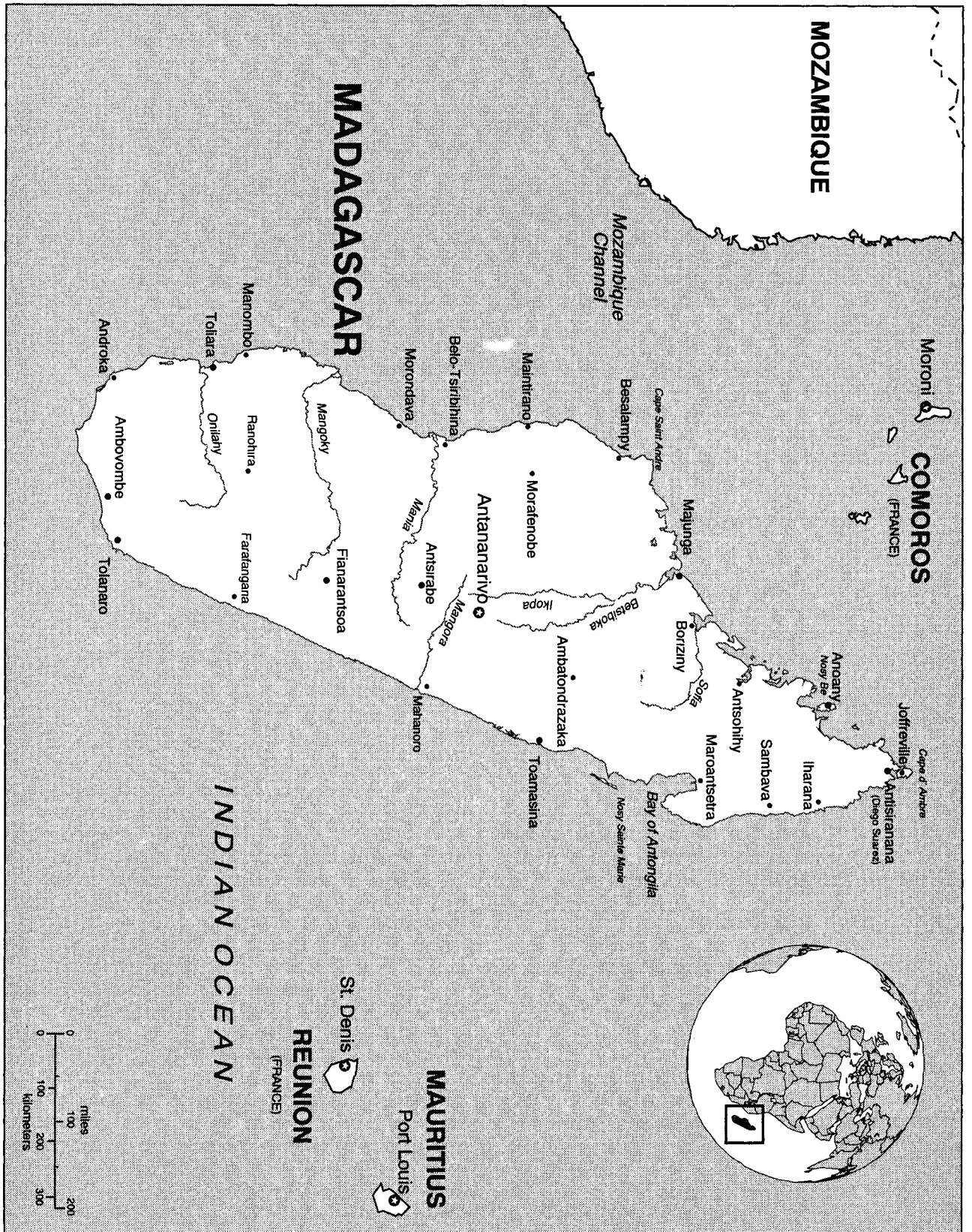
"Ah-zalla," says Floris

"And now," continued Lucia, "Henriette goes around stopping people in the street. 'Why do you say I murdered him?' she asks. 'He did it to himself,' she says. Just goes around stopping perfect strangers."

"Like Lady Macbeth," I posit.

"Yaa," says Lucia.

After lunch we stop at a place called Hotel de la Lac.



What used to be a lake is now in fact a great mud hole that looks like a breeding ground for half the world's mosquitoes. Luckily they have only one room available and I am left to keep wandering Tana in a thirty-year-old Deux Chevaux without floorboards. Looking down I can see cobblestones and dead rats pass inches from my exposed heels. I find Dickensian lodging near the central market. The stairs are like ladders and draughts blow through the ill-fitting windows.

Too flushed with wine and fatigue to wander out, I attack Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. The book was supposed to be the archetype of modern comic novels. Cool, interconnective, ironic, revelatory. I take the time to digest it slowly, carefully. The fall of night coincide with a piercing cold, and I lay wrapped in layers of thin, smelly sheets till morning comes.

In the first instant of morning consciousness I think I am in Maine. A chill hugs my covers and all I can see out the window is pea-soup fog. Descending the precarious stairs to sip hot tea on the open-air terrace, I realize the fog is actually smoke coming off the burning fields.

"Why do they keep burning?" I ask the owner.

"Two reasons," she responds. "One, it's political. The peasants want to send a signal to the government that they exist. Two, we Malgash love smoke. We love the color blue. We call Antananarivo 'the blue forest.' All this smoke makes us proud of our industry."

"We played Q and A for a couple of minutes, the usual confusion reigning when I tried to explain exactly what I was doing in Madagascar."

"But that smoke is from burning fields, not factories."

"I know it," she says. "My daughter's school planted a hectare of trees last year. When they went back to see how they were growing, they had all been burned."

"What did your daughter say?"

"She said our country is getting worse every year and our generation isn't doing enough to stop it."

"Is she right?"

"What do you want us to do? Fifteen candidates for President, one hundred and twenty-nine parties. We are being manipulated by the political class. They do whatever they want, and we suffer."

"Are you going to vote?"

"It is a civic duty"

"Who are you going to vote for?"

"I'm not voting, there is no point."

I was on time for my appointment with Dr. Patricia Wright, but she was in a meeting. While I waited I poked around the Center For The Tropical Environment (CTE). There were pictures of students on field trips, Dr. Wright receiving an award from the Malagasy government, group shots of young researchers swimming in a hot spring. I dug up a pamphlet that put U.S. aid to Madagascar at 35 million dollars a year. About 100,000 dollars for each of the 350 U.S. residents.

Dr. Wright appeared soon enough. An academic type. Clear, intelligent eyes behind the demeanor of a harried professor. We played Q and A for a couple of minutes, the usual confusion reigning when I tried to explain exactly what I was doing in Madagascar. Then we moved on to the name game, and I rang a bell with former ICWA Fellow Gary Hartshorn. The road smoothed. A few more minutes of chat and Dr. Wright agreed to sponsor me for a research visa.

The meeting upstairs broke up and the national director of the office, Benjamin Andriamihaja, introduced himself. Despite the facts that I had faxed him a sheaf of papers in English and he speaks English fluently, we communicated in French. It created a bond between us, even on the telephone. There are so few Americans of my generation who speak French that francophones seem to appreciate the effort; they feel I am meeting them halfway.

Benjamin gave me a tour of CTE's small building and then said, "Hand over your passport and I'll submit it to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tomorrow."

Anyone who has ever wrestled with the bureaucracy of a African country can well imagine my surprised delight. A previous visit to the Ministry of the Interior had left me mute at the prospect of collecting all the required paperwork. Among the 20 or so documents to collect were: a guarantee of good morality; a police background check from country of origin; a legalized letter from town of origin stating you no longer lived in that town; a letter of financial guarantee; an inventory of physical characteristics; and so on and so forth. When I called the U.S. Embassy for some help (a letter of good morality, for example), it was explained to me that nothing could be done if it had not been done before. And as there are very few, if any, Americans in Madagascar without the backing of an aid or missionary organization, I was on my own. Instead of insulting the consular officer (new on the job and in the country), I decided to mail a "Stay Well" card to Jesse Helms, and ten dollars to the young Republicans. I always vote.

The cab driver bringing me back into town from the CTE was all for the Prime Minister in the upcoming election. He didn't like Ratsiraka, detested Zaf Albert. "Ratsirahonana is a Merina, like me," he said. "But he

can't win, the *côtiers* are racist, *C'est ça le problème à Madagascar.*"

Tromping up and down the staircases that connect the city streets, I came across a used-car lot where drivers were selling their own cars. I convinced a middle-aged gentlemen that I was not going to buy his Nissan Patrol, and he told me how the system works.

"I go to *La Réunion*, buy the car for 10 to 15 million fmg. Everything is good in *La Réunion* except the body work. I repair, repaint, resell."

"What's the price here?"

"40 million."

"How long does it take to sell?"

"I usually sit here for a month," he said.

Back at the hotel, two English ornithologists and their long-suffering spouses had arrived. I invited myself to dinner and was rewarded by an hour and a half of bird check-lists. There are 256 species in Madagascar, 128 endemic. An aggressive birder, crisscrossing the island by chartered plane and *taxi brousse*, using bird calls, high powered binoculars and hired beaters, hopes to see 200 species, 120 of the endemics (the other eight may be extinct).

"What do you do when you see all the birds on the list?" I asked.

"Go to another country," said Phil, perplexed by the obvious response.

Marcus explained, "You see, birders all have a keen sense of their own mortality. They want to see as many birds as possible before they die."

"What do you think of the country?" I asked.

"We couldn't care less", said Phil. "We're here for the birds."

Before turning out the lights I burrowed back into *White Noise*. For some reason Jack A. Gladney and the Department of Hitler studies at the College on the Hill seemed too intellectual, too intelligent. Compared to Steinbeck's, *In Dubious Battle*, which I read the week before, the characters fall flat. Steinbeck's men bleed, sweat, and piss. DeLillo's characters are just that, characters in a book. Steinbeck hammers out his theme sentence by sentence; DeLillo plays memory games and syllabic tricks. I think Steinbeck culled his material from the world around him, I suspect DeLillo glean-

his from the mass of pop culture and the quiet of modern art museums. To my knowledge neither of them ever visited Antananarivo.

To get my family's passports from Diego, I telephone an acquaintance and ask him to send my wife to the airport with the necessary. When the flight comes in the next morning, a middle-aged man emerges from the throng holding up an amusing photo of myself and my baby boy. I hail him. He hands me the package. We never say a word. Implicit trust in total strangers is part of traveling in foreign lands.

I retrace the previous day's route, pass a pleasant hour with the CTE staff, and hand them the passports. I signal a pockmarked Peugeot driven by a Ratsiraka man for the ride back toward town. "He's got all he needs," says the driver. "He doesn't need to steal anymore." With traffic moving a centimeter at a time, my head begins to throb with exhaust fumes and the talk of good former dictators. Relief appears in the welcome sight of a tennis club hosting "The First African Tennis Cup."

"Surveying the ball boys I noticed an array of physical deformities, the most obvious a hunchback. To me, this was somehow a mirror of Malgash society, in which there is a use for everyone."

Sixteen sub-Saharan countries were invited to play tennis; seven showed up. Mali and Ethiopia sent one player apiece, Ile Maurice 2, Namibia and Kenya 3, Republic of South Africa 4, Madagascar 14. I asked the sportswriter Francis Rakotovo-lona why it was called the African Tennis Cup when Madagascar considered itself more Asian than African.

"We are between Africa and Asia," he said. "And we need them both."

I watched a mixed doubles match between the South Africans and the Malgash. The white-skinned, blond-haired and straight-haired, square-jawed players seemed to shake the foundations of African identity.

"You can damn well see they're not African," said the Kenyan coach, a former British Army officer sent out to quell the Mau Mau in the fifties.

Whenever the Malgash team won a point, loud cheers went up. After one particularly well-played rally, which terminated with an overhand smash from the South African side, I thought I heard death wails coming from the bleachers.

The entire Malgash organization received excellent marks from everyone I talked to. The hosts were attentive, the courts well maintained. One player declared the ball boys "the best in Africa."

Surveying the ball boys I noticed an array of physical deformities, the most obvious a hunchback. To me,

this was somehow a mirror of Malgash society, in which there is a use for everyone. The ball boys (mostly grown men) had been trained to run across the net, to throw the ball with a small bounce, to crouch inconspicuously. They took their work seriously.

I tracked down the head of the Confederation of African Tennis, a well-spoken Senegalese gent named Pape Diaby. "What does this cup mean?" I asked.

"It means tennis is not a rich country's sport. It means all countries can participate in this sport. Look around you, this is one of the poorest countries in the world, and look what a tremendous job they've done. If they want to hold next year's cup here, I will put my voice behind them."

Madagascar is very poor. The contrast between tennis whites and the beggars a few yards away did seem incongruous. The morning's paper announced Madagascar had slipped 20 places in the last year, from something like 154th to the 176th poorest country on earth. Only five percent of the population has easy access to potable water. School attendance has dropped from 50 percent to 20 percent during the four-year reign of Professor Albert Zafy.

"What do you think of the country?" I asked the players.

The Namibian responded, "Nauseating and revolting. I've never seen anything like this. People shitting in the marketplace, the poverty. I'm disgusted."

A South African player added, "I suppose we're third-world too, but this is incredible. We don't have anything this bad."

"Would you come back?" I asked.

"Yes," was the universal response. Leaving me wondering, once again, what is it about Madagascar that captures imaginations?

My third and last night in Tana, I dined with Floris. She told me about her great-grandmother, a woman who died at the age of 103.

"The slavers captured her and her mother when they were in the middle of a corn field. They were taken someplace where she worked for a lady with clear eyes. She was sold to Zanzibar before being sent to the Comores. In the Comores she met her husband and then they both came to Madagascar. Do you know a place where corn grows?"

I sketched out the trade routes of Zanzibar in the 1870's as well as I could remember them. That was the era after Seyyid Seyyid, when Zanzibar lost most of its power and Livingston began to sermonize the continent. Household slavery in Zanzibar was alive and well until 1900, when the British formally outlawed the practice in their new protectorate. I had never talked with anybody who had grown up knowing a family member who had been a slave. History seemed to come alive and beckon me at that moment.

I woke at 4:30 the next morning to catch an Air Mad flight back to Diego. The taxi drove through a tunnel where dozens of half-naked supplicants slept in rows, dead to the intermittent traffic and the bone-penetrating cold. On the airport road snaking between rice paddies, men jogged, overloaded buses labored, zebu carts trudged. They were all aimed into the big city as I headed out. □

Institute of Current World Affairs

Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two

years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber, an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, and manager of a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is tracing her roots in India, and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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