

Mary Ann Paliani

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Topics: When My Life Got Better or Travel

MISSING IN THE SAHARA



With its endless vista of windswept sand, the Sahara is a powerful metaphor for eternity! At night, it becomes the essence of outer space with its canopy of stars, frigid temperatures and impenetrable darkness . During a camel trek, it became the setting for a terrifying event.

It was around 9PM and I was alone in the desert. After just emerging from the warmth and coziness of the dining tent, I found myself enveloped in a blackness that I could hardly penetrate with my flashlight. I was attempting to find my tent but was having difficulty distinguishing it from the surrounding sand dunes. My anxiety grew intense. Weighing heavily on me was the possibility that I could easily wander out of camp and get lost. Little did I

realize, that one of my travel companions was about to have such an experience that very night.

At dinner that evening, Kay informed us that she was experiencing serious insomnia. A member of our group obligingly shared with her his supply of Ambien— a fast acting, sleep inducing prescription drug. Not realizing that the drug would take effect almost immediately, Kay swallowed a tablet just before leaving the dining tent and after consuming wine at the earlier happy hour – a very dangerous combination of actions. By the time she left , she was extremely disoriented. In that condition, she attempted to navigate through the camp. But before she knew it, she was wandering aimlessly in the pitch blackness of the vast Sahara.

The drama began the next day when we were decamping. One tent remained undisturbed after all of the others had been taken down. It belonged to Kay - and she was missing. Immediately, a search was started. Fortunately, the night had been quiet, without the slightest whisper of a breeze. So, the task became that of following Kay's tracks in the sand – tracks that were many hours old.

Mohammed, our camel driver, began his search for Kay around 8AM that morning. The rest of us remained huddled on the sand – alternately praying together and then lapsing into a deafening silence.

Seconds, minutes, hours ticked by. We feared the worst!

Kay had at least an 11 hour head start on Mohammed. Catching up with her was going to be tough. What if a sandstorm hit us? Her footprints would be swept away , and all hope of finding her would vanish. In our present location, communicating with the outside world and getting immediate help was impossible –cell phone signals, nearby phones or villages were nonexistent. What would we do if we were unable to find her in a reasonable period of time? We couldn't camp here indefinitely. Did Moroccan search and rescue groups exist? Could we reach them in time to save Kay? If not, what then? How would we then handle the gut wrenching decisions and risks related to her search and rescue? Could we handle the

psychological, moral, decision making and team challenges that the crisis would demand? All of these thoughts were racing through our minds, and represented issues that we would have to face, if Mohammed was unsuccessful.

7 hours and 18 miles later, Mohammed spotted Kay. He immediately called out to her. In response she inexplicably ran AWAY from him. The action suggested that she was still cognitively impaired from the Ambien. Eventually, he caught up with her and brought her safely back to camp. Her account of what she saw, how she felt, and the decisions she made during the ordeal was consistent with that of a person in the grip of drug triggered hallucinations.

That afternoon we continued our journey through the desert. The setting sun transformed our world into a magical place. The towering sand dunes with their reddish hue, and intricately sculpted contours caressed an azure sky . The timeless particles of sand on which we trod turned into a carpet of gold. The exquisite beauty, majesty and power of the Sahara humbled us.