



A war zone was the last place war correspondent **Paula Slier** expected to find fellow South Africans wishing her luck

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE...

As the Middle East Bureau Chief for Russia Today, Jo'burg-born Paula Slier has had her fair share of hair-raising adventures. She shares first-hand encounters of her travels off the beaten track.

TWITTER:
[@PaulaSlier_RT](#)

A FRIEND IN NEED

is a friend indeed. Except, perhaps, in wartime. And so it was that I found myself positioned on the Israel-Lebanon border from where Hezbollah militants were firing Katyusha rockets into northern Israel during a particularly violent battle. It was eerily quiet and no one dared to breathe or move. The only sound was the intermittent booming of cannons and the whistling of rockets as they crashed into the earth around me. Suddenly, like Satan emerging from the darkness, a small olive-green Hyundai, its open windows rattling to the blaring soundtrack of *St Elmo's Fire*, came careering through the smoke to brake just a few metres from me and a group of open-mouthed journalists. If the fighters hadn't figured out where the reporters were standing yet, they now had no problem pinpointing our exact location.

Inside were two South Africans grinning voraciously, their baseball caps facing backwards. Sticks of biltong were proffered in our direction. They were mightily impressed with themselves for having braved the front line to find a fellow South African and wish me luck. Sweet. But if I ever see them again I'll run a mile.

But that's now... Then I climbed into the back of their vehicle, all windows open because, as they insisted, if a Katyusha [rocket] hits glass it's more dangerous than if it flies straight through an open car. Not that this means a vehicle is a safe space to be in. Far from it. And so every few minutes we were slamming on the brakes, jumping out and running for our lives in opposite directions. It took a while to get more than a few hundred metres.

One tends to hear Katyushas before seeing them, which presents a unique dilemma: if you can hear the whistle, it's pretty darn close and you have just seconds to throw

yourself on the ground; if you don't, well, you could meet your maker sooner than you'd planned.

I remember one particularly hair-raising miss when I went scampering down the street shouting in Hebrew for a shower instead of a shelter. Only later did I understand my mistake as the two words sound very similar.

The local police insisted on escorting us and took us to visit a community leader who was far more interested in feeding the chickens in his garden than talking to some arbitrary foreigners. As we drove out, the sirens shrilled across the mountainside and the police officers abandoned their truck. I was stuck inside as the door latch wouldn't open and I found myself with front-row seats to a rocket landing 60m from me, taking the garden gate and my breath with it.

A while later, we stumbled into an outside bomb shelter where people hunkering down to escape the danger were passing the time by having a braai. They were amazed to see us and insisted we stay, which presented another dilemma, because between 3pm and 5pm each afternoon is when the sun was at its highest and the Hezbollah fighters would take a break from firing rockets. This was the perfect time to make like Donald and duck. But it was also the perfect time for the meat patties that had now been placed on the hot coals "for the foreigners from Africa" to be turned over. And as typical South Africans, we felt we couldn't be rude and leave.

So we stayed for the braai, some chit-chat about how we like our meat cooked... and were nearly incinerated by a rocket when we left.

My father insists that such rockets are the reason he turned grey. Each time he phoned, he'd complain about the crackle in the line. "Don't worry dad," was my standard assurance, "it's only rockets flying overhead."

That night, the two South Africans slept in a hotel bath, believing it would offer them protection. Then, dead-tired the next morning, they drove off into the sunrise. 🌅

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