



FROM BIKINI TO BULLETPROOF JACKET

There's never a dull moment in the life of a war correspondent, says **Paula Slier**

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.

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THERE I WAS, lying on a massage table on the Thai island of Ko Samui, my head cushioned by a lavender-scented towel. Warm oil was slowly dripping onto my forehead from a copper jug, as the distant sound of crashing waves gradually enveloped me. To put it mildly, I was deeply content.

And then it happened. Like a thunderbolt from nowhere, my mobile phone started buzzing. I'd forgotten to turn the darn thing off.

"Hello," I murmured sleepily.

"Paula!" my News Editor bellowed back. "We need you on the next plane to the Ukraine! And I mean now!"

I stared at the monstrosity in my hand in disbelief. By now I was fully awake and for a split second seriously considered switching the phone off. An inner voice pleaded for me to feign ignorance and claim that weak signal had made hearing him impossible. This was the first vacation I'd taken in three years and the clear turquoise waters of Thailand's second-largest island were beckoning me to stay.

"There's massive fighting in eastern Ukraine," the voice hollered down the line. "We know you're on holiday, but there's no stopping the news!"

Thirty minutes later I was packing my summer dresses, bikinis, sandals and suntan lotion, on my way to a freezing cold war zone. Suffice to say, this attire was not ideal and the only solution was to ask my cameraman to go past my apartment to pick up a few items of clothing more suitable for our destination – such as a bulletproof jacket and helmet, and long pants.

He's a nice chap, a bald Russian by the name of Yevgeni, and the plan was to meet him in the Ukraine. When we were out filming and explained that we worked for Russian TV, people would point at him and chuckle: "Putin". He was shy and blushed easily.

As luck would have it, everything was going smoothly until he was stopped by airport security in Tel Aviv. The Israelis are renowned for conducting some of the most thorough security checks in the world, and after Yevgeni's bags were x-rayed, he was pulled aside and ordered to open them.

First, he pulled out the bulletproof jacket. No questions were asked and it was put to one side. Then he extracted a bulletproof helmet and again, no eyebrows were raised. It was only when he pulled women's underwear out from among his camera batteries that the airport official stared him straight in the eye and demanded that he explain himself.

Recounting the story to me later, Yevgeni blushed at the memory.

"Ah, err, I'm a cameraman on my way to a war zone. I'm meeting a journalist in Kiev. She was in Thailand on holiday and I need to bring her clothes."

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The official nodded, took Yevgeni's passport and went to consult with three others in a corner. After what seemed like endless muttering and nodding in his direction, the officer returned and asked Yevgeni to continue unpacking.

This time he pulled out my jeans and what were obviously women's pyjamas. By now the official had had enough and demanded to know *exactly* what was going on.

"Er, like I told you, I'm meeting a female correspondent in Kiev..." Yevgeni's voice trailed off as he realised the man didn't believe him.

"You know what? The truth is that I'm a cross-dresser!" he suddenly announced.

That answer satisfied the airline official who, with a nod and a wink, returned the clothes to the suitcase, closed it and wished Yevgeni well on his travels. 🌈