



THE BEST-LAID PLANS...

A helicopter at your service, a desert to explore and a guide at the ready – what could go wrong?

Paula Slier found out

“I SURVIVED” – two words uttered through the ages by war-ravaged soldiers, weary mothers after giving birth, bungee-jumpers swinging back to life, and me – after a week of living in the Sahara desert.

I am many things, but a happy camper I am not.

Tell most people you're going to Algeria to experience the delights of the world's largest desert and their mouths drop open in disbelief. Algeria is not exactly up there among the world's “must-visit” tourist destinations and government warnings tell you to avoid the country unless you “really, *really* need to go”. I apparently did, which was why I boarded a rather antiquated South African Air Force military chopper to fly halfway around the world.

But let me not get ahead of myself. When I say “boarded” it would be more accurate to say “was dragged aboard in a comatose state”. The chopper was scheduled to leave at five in the morning and at that hour we were all strapped in, seated on hard metal chairs that had definitely seen better days. Ready for the trip, I dutifully took two sleeping tablets which, I had been assured would knock me out for hours. Everything was going according to plan and I was drifting off after lift-off when a technical glitch saw us having to circle the airport and land. I slept – wonderfully – on the tarmac, prostate on my back and, I'm told, snoring loudly – just long enough for the engineers to sort out the problem. Once dragged back on board, I was left wide awake, painfully conscious for the duration of that 16-hour flight.

I should have known that such ominous beginnings spelled trouble ahead. To be fair, my work assignment went well, but it was when I chanced upon the brilliant idea of spending a week in the Sahara desert because “when else will I ever get the chance to do this?” that things started going haywire.

Beginning on the west coast of Africa and extending through 12 countries, the Sahara measures 8,6 million square kilometres. It's home to 2,5 million people, one of whom I chose to be my guide.

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](https://twitter.com/PaulaSlier_RT)

Unfortunately, he couldn't speak English and I'd foolishly asked a Lebanese journalist who couldn't stop trying to prove to me that she could, to join us. The jury's still out on who was worse.

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN
THAT **OMINOUS
BEGINNINGS** USUALLY
SPELL TROUBLE AHEAD.

And just to cement my bad luck in this north African country, the trip started with a crash course in domestic Algerian flying. Silly me for thinking that if a plane was due to depart from Algiers airport at eight in the morning that it would actually do so. Six hours later – which feels like an eternity when your only companions are a Lebanese woman with verbal diarrhoea and a kiosk

selling only stale chewing gum and warm tins of Coca-Cola – we were told that the plane was not coming. So back it was to the hotel for a repeat experience the next day. Suffice to say that it took a full 48 hours from when I left my hotel – the first time – until I saw a sand dune.

Now I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I didn't change clothes once during the ensuing week. I can't tell you how bad I smelt because we were all in the same boat – or rather Jeep – careening over golden dunes and laughing up at the desert rain that sprinkled us at night.

For the first – and last – time I ate bread baked in the sand. Aside from the grit in your teeth, it actually tastes okay. And when, as clichéd as this sounds, the stars enveloped us in their brilliance, I was reminded yet again of how tiny each of us is in this great, magnificent universe. 🌈