Lost in Death Valley

Three women were stranded in the hottest place on Earth.

By Sarah Rehman

Gina, Donna, and Jenny were on a road trip, when a detour led to disaster.

The date was July 22, 2010. After driving in circles for hours, Donna Cooper, her daughter Gina, and their friend Jenny Leung were officially lost. Their car was out of gas. They had no cell phone service. And they could see no one for miles.

Still, that wasn't their biggest problem. The women were in Death Valley—a vast desert area in California that holds the record for being the hottest place on Earth.

Here, temperatures often rise above 120ºF. Long exposure to such extreme heat can cause stroke and even death. In fact, many people have died in Death Valley. Now, Donna, Gina, and Jenny were stranded here.

"I couldn't believe this was happening," recalled Donna.

What Went Wrong?

The day had started out as a fun adventure. They wanted to explore Scotty's Castle—a historical site in the northern part of the desert. They had taken just enough water and food with them to last the day.

At 3 PM, they decided to head home. Everything went as planned until they saw signs for "Racetrack," an area of the desert where shifting boulders have left their skid marks on cracked mud. Donna was fascinated, so she decided to make a detour to see the area. That's when trouble started.

The women drove for several miles when they realized they were heading in the wrong direction. They tried to change course, but everywhere they turned looked the same.

Donna, Gina, and Jenny were trying to find a site in the desert called Racetrack, shown here.

A Night in Death Valley

By 10 PM, Donna had driven more than 200 miles. Suddenly, her car sputtered to a stop. Donna pulled over, and warned Gina and Jenny to keep the windows rolled up. The women had no choice but to camp there for the night. Keeping the windows closed might protect them from the wild animals in the area—such as mountain lions and bears.

The next morning, Donna found that her car could start—but it only had enough gas to travel a short distance. Still, it was just enough to get them on a road and over a few hills. From there, they could see a patch of trees in the distance, so they decided to head in that direction.

When the car finally ran out of gas, they continued toward the trees on foot. It was at least 125°F. They were dangerously dehydrated and tired. But somehow, they kept going. It was a good thing they did.

Shelter for the Night

As the women approached the trees, they couldn't believe what they saw. It was a campsite!

"The campsite was abandoned," said Donna. "But we hoped to find food and supplies to help keep us alive."

Donna's hunch was right. The campsite contained some food, warm water, and matches to start a signal fire at night. They had enough supplies to last another night in Death Valley. And fortunately, that was all they needed.

Rescued!

The next morning, on July 25, two rescue pilots were scanning the area in a helicopter. They had received calls about the missing women and had spent hours looking for them. They were about to give up, when suddenly, they spotted Donna's car.

Jenny was the first to hear the sound of the helicopter. She ran out screaming. Soon, she was joined by Donna and Gina. They jumped up and waved at the pilots, who noticed them almost immediately. The women were finally saved!

Looking Back

It's been more than six years since their frightening ordeal in Death Valley. Donna, Gina, and Jenny still keep in touch with the rescue pilots. They've also gained confidence from having survived something so horrifying.

According to Gina, they're now prepared for any challenge that comes their way. "You have to be thankful for every day you get," she says.

p. 1: © Tom Spitz; p. 3tr: © Paul Brady Photo/Shutterstock