

**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
reads like fiction—but  
it's all true

# Lost in

# DEAD

CHEN SJ/OCEAN/CORBIS

# ATLH

## Valley

The incredible story of three women lost in one of the most dangerous places on Earth—and their fierce determination to survive. **BY KRISTIN LEWIS**





**AS YOU READ,  
THINK ABOUT:**

How does the author describe the landscape?

**D**eath Valley is the hottest place on Earth. The searing heat sucks the air out of your lungs and scorches the bottoms of your feet. It's so dry that a corpse can shrivel into a mummy. Every year at least one person dies here.

It was in this desert **inferno** that on July 22, 2010, 17-year-old Gina Cooper, her mother, Donna, and their friend Jenny Leung, 19, became stranded. Lost, with no cell phone service and very little water, their chances of survival were slim . . . and getting slimmer by the moment.



**Gina Cooper (left) and Jenny Leung**

Nevada. Donna was eager to show Jenny the spectacular sights of the West. Already they'd seen the Grand Canyon, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Now Donna wanted to show her Death Valley. Gina decided to come along, and the three set out for Scotty's Castle, a historical site and museum from the 1920s.

Death Valley National Park is a place of staggering beauty and devastating extremes. The more than 3-million-acre park is a geological wonder,

having been twisted and mashed over hundreds of millions of years by volcanoes and earthquakes. Rocky snowcapped mountains jut thousands of feet into the sky, while vast salt flats and sand dunes sizzle in the sun on the valley floor below. Summer temperatures soar well above 120 degrees Fahrenheit. (The record is 134.)

These extremes are brutal but also fascinating, which is why nearly 1 million people visit the park each year. Most come during the cool winter months. Donna, Gina, and Jenny knew that visiting in July meant extreme heat. But it would be a short trip, mostly in

Donna's air-conditioned car. So Donna packed food and water for the day, and stocked the car with maps, a roadside hazard kit, tools, blankets,



**Scorpions are one of many creatures that manage to survive in the hostile environment of Death Valley.**

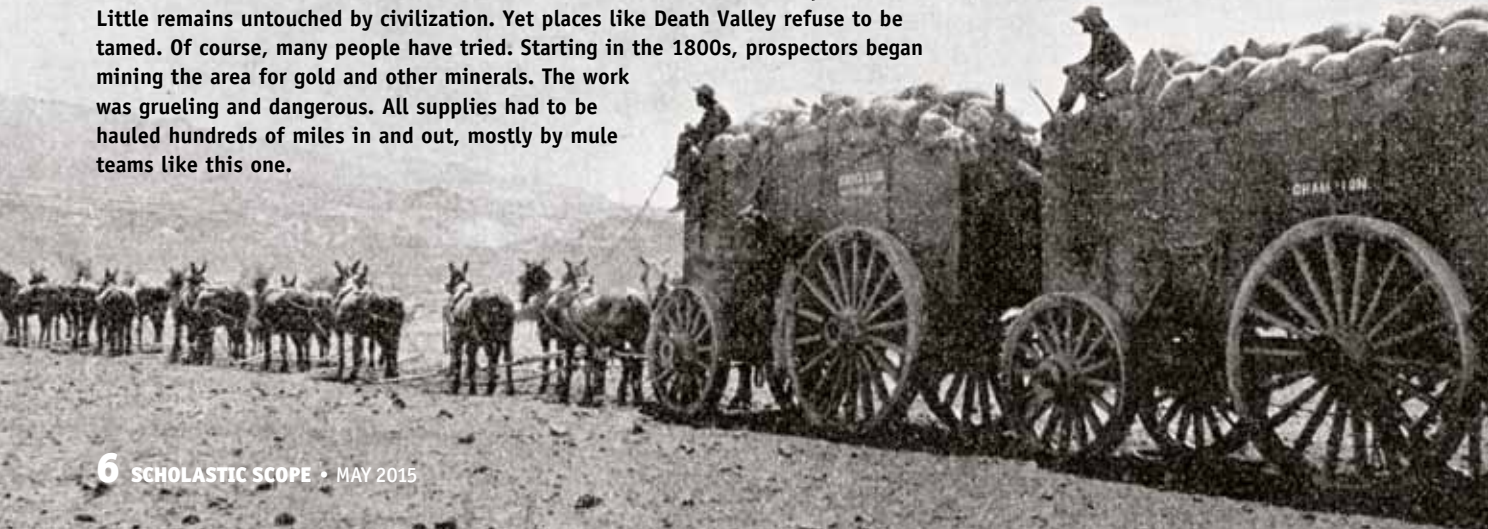
**Blazingly Hot**

Like so many disaster stories, this one begins unremarkably: with a plan for a pleasant day trip.

Jenny, a student from Hong Kong, was spending the summer with Donna, who lived in Pahrump,

**UNCONQUERABLE INFERNO**

From coast to coast, the lower 48 states stretch across some 3 million square miles. Little remains untouched by civilization. Yet places like Death Valley refuse to be tamed. Of course, many people have tried. Starting in the 1800s, prospectors began mining the area for gold and other minerals. The work was grueling and dangerous. All supplies had to be hauled hundreds of miles in and out, mostly by mule teams like this one.



COURTESY OF DONNA COOPER (COOPER AND LEUNG); SHUTTERSTOCK (SCORPION)

phone chargers, and a first-aid kit.

Little did she know they would soon be in a fight for their lives.

## What Went Wrong?

As planned, the women spent a few hours at Scotty's Castle. They left for home around 3 p.m. On their way out, they passed a sign for the Racetrack—one of Death Valley's star attractions. It's a large dried-up lake bed called a *playa*, scattered with rocks that seem to move on their own, leaving striking tracks in the dirt behind them. The women decided they shouldn't miss the chance to see it.

They drove.

And drove.

And drove.

They came to an intersection of dirt roads called Teakettle Junction. That must have been where they took a wrong turn, because they began gaining elevation, winding up into the mountains. They tried to head back the way they'd come, but with each passing mile became

more lost. "Everything looked the same," Donna says. "It was awful."

Only the park's main roads were shown on their map. So they turned on the car's GPS. With cool certainty, the GPS delivered directions: *Turn right in 500 yards. Continue straight ahead for 1 mile.*

To their dismay, it soon became clear that the GPS was useless. Such mapping systems are **notorious** for leading travelers astray in remote places like Death Valley. The year before, a woman had gotten lost there following her GPS. She survived, but tragically, her 6-year-old son did not.

Hours went by. The women had driven hundreds of miles. The fuel tank drifted toward empty, as did their supply of drinking water. Darkness fell, and a blaze of stars tore open the sky. Around 10 p.m., the car sputtered to a stop.

They were out of gas.

By now, their friends and families were gripped by worry. Among them was Donna's eldest daughter, Sky, 21, who lived in Florida. Sky had just had surgery, and

when her mother failed to call and check in, Sky knew something was terribly wrong.

## Grim News

Around 6 a.m., Donna, Gina, and Jenny awoke from a long and frightening night in the car. Looking around, they realized how truly desperate their situation was. Yet they remained clearheaded.

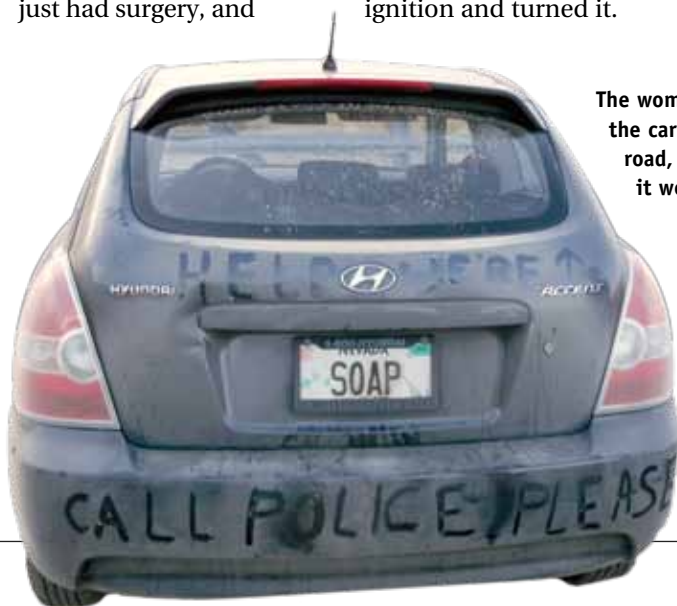
They decided that Gina would set out on foot to look for signs of life. While she was gone, Donna and Jenny foraged for food. They found some pine needles, which are nutrient-rich, and some cactus, though these proved too difficult to eat, even using Donna's knife.

Two hours later, Gina returned with grim news: She had seen car tracks but no people—only parched and barren land. By now, only a few sips of precious water remained, and the heat was growing steadily more **oppressive**. Gina begged her mom to try starting the car again. It seemed pointless—the car was out of gas—but why not?

Donna put the key in the ignition and turned it.



The women left the car on the road, hoping it would be seen.





Jenny walks to the trees, where the camp (right) would provide desperately needed water.



*Vroom!*

The car sprang to life.

## The Search Begins

Back in Florida, Sky, frantic with worry, hacked into her mom's credit card statement online, hoping for some clue as to her whereabouts. She saw that her mom had purchased a T-shirt at Scotty's Castle the day before. Immediately, Sky contacted the California Highway Patrol (CHP) and a search was launched.

Scouring the 5,200 square miles of Death Valley—a region the size of Connecticut—is a slow and painstaking process. Already, the women had been missing for 24 hours. Finding them as soon as possible was critical.

Meanwhile, Donna, Gina, and Jenny found themselves on a road, if it could be called a road, that was utterly insane: a series of steep hills that rose and fell sharply, one

after the other. Donna gunned the car up each one, then let gravity take them down. "If we got stuck between hills, I knew we were done for," she remembers. "We'd never be able to climb out."

Gina gripped the passenger handle in terror; on one especially violent bump, it ripped right off in her hand.

And then they saw it: Off in the distance was a stand of trees—a splash of glorious green in a sea of **desolate** brown. They'd actually glimpsed the trees the day before, after they'd lost their way.

Now, their lives depended on making it back to those trees. Because where there are trees, there is water.

They drove until they ran out of gas, this time for good. Thankfully, the trees were only a short hike from the car. But every step was agony. It was at least 125 degrees. The superheated rocks on the

ground burned their feet through their shoes.

The human body is not made to withstand such high temperatures. Sweat pours forth, leading to dehydration. Heart rate speeds up. The brain becomes addled, making it difficult to think, much less make lifesaving decisions. Heatstroke sets in and organs begin to shut down. Without treatment, death will follow.

But Donna, Gina, and Jenny were not about to give up.

They arrived at the trees and discovered something incredible: three trailers and a small covered porch. "The chance of finding that in the middle of Death Valley was one in a million," Gina says.

The crude campsite would become their lifeline.

Gina broke into one of the trailers, using tools she **doggedly** retrieved from the car. They found stale oatmeal, cans of beans, beer, and some jerky so old it had turned white. It was slim pickings, but Donna was over the moon. "I thought, OK, I can keep us alive for two weeks on this," she says.

They found two mattresses and dragged them out to the porch. That night, any sleep was hard-won in the unrelenting heat.

In the morning came what would prove to be the best find of all: On the back of one of the trailers was a hose.

They turned it on, and to their utter joy, hot water gushed out. "It was the worst water I'd ever tasted but also the best," Gina says.

That day, the women had a lot to do. They explored the area, looking for anything they could use. They broke into the other two trailers and found a radio. Gina hooked it up to the car battery, but the heat was too intense to stay in the sun long enough to raise anyone on it.

By then, Gina was sick with dehydration and exhaustion and felt unable to eat. Donna coaxed her into swallowing a few bites of oatmeal.

The day wore on, and the women prepared for another night in the wilderness.

## Rescued!

On July 25, two CHP pilots, Tyler Johns and Scott Steele, were scouring the area from their helicopter. Their mission had been reclassified. It was no longer a rescue. It was a recovery—there was little hope of finding the women alive.

The pilots were about to give up when they decided to take a final pass over one of the most remote parts of the park. And that is when they saw it: Donna's car.

Down in the camp, Donna was helping Gina bathe when they heard Jenny screaming. Gina sprang from the water and, wearing a towel, ran outside to see Jenny wildly waving a yellow blanket.

There, in the sky, a helicopter was flying straight toward them.

They were saved.

When Johns and Steele landed, they were overjoyed to find the women alive. The pilots arranged for a man known as Lizard

Lee, who lived up in the mountains, to bring gas and show them back to the main road. Lee, the only resident for hundreds of miles, is a volunteer for the park service, patrolling the region for



Donna learned survival skills from a teacher she had when she was 8 years old. She credits him with saving their lives.

anyone unfortunate enough to get stuck there. In fact, Lee had spotted the women days earlier but had lost track of them.

**Giddy** joy overtook the women as they raced out of the park. When they pulled into a gas station, it was as though they'd arrived at the finest restaurant in the world. Gina and Jenny tore through the aisles, grabbing nachos, hot dogs, chips, ice cream, soda—anything they could get their hands on—and shoveling the food into their mouths with wild abandon.

## Looking Back

It's been five years since that terrible ordeal in the desert. Today, Gina and Jenny are both in school. Donna still sends Christmas cards to Johns and Steele. She has also become friends with the owners of the campsite that saved their lives.

Gina looks back on what happened with a sense of pride. She says it changed her, made her more confident.

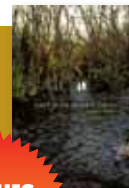
Having survived something so horrible, she says she's prepared for anything life may throw at her. "You have to be thankful for every day you get," Gina says. ●



From left: Tyler Johns, Gina, Donna, Jenny, Scott Steele.

## WRITING CONTEST

What makes Death Valley so fascinating? What makes it so dangerous? Answer both questions in a well-organized essay. Support your ideas with details from the article and, optionally, the video. Send your essay to **DEATH VALLEY CONTEST**. Five winners will each get a copy of *Lost in the River of Grass* by Ginny Rorby. See page 2 for details.



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