

Pete Fulham's Personal Story Of The Tragedy In Sharm el Sheikh

We were originally planning to go on holiday in the UK in our caravan, however our son Matthew had said that he didn't want to go in the caravan and would rather stay at home. With this in mind we started to look for cheap holidays abroad (but were somewhere different from the Costa's). It would be Matthew's 18th birthday in the middle of our selected fortnight (which was why we wanted Matthew with us and it was also likely to be the last family holiday he would want to come on with us). We eventually settled on the Red Sea resort of Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt. Matthew liked the idea of going somewhere different, Devan and Julie hoped to see dolphins in their natural habitat and Ashley and I were keen divers, and the Red sea is supposed to have some of the finest diving sites. The place seemed to have something for all the family.

Our family group consisted of me, my wife Julie, Matthew (17), Ashley (16), Thomas (14) and Devan (12).

We started our 14-night Holiday in Sharm el Sheikh on 17 July 2005. We were staying at the Ghazala Gardens Hotel. The hotel claimed to be a four star, but I would put it at a three star. We were all inclusive, which meant that the children could get whatever they wanted as and when they wanted it.

The first part of the week went well, Ashley and I were diving everyday until the weekend when we were going to give it a break to spend some time with the rest of the family. Julie had spent the time sun bathing and swimming in the pool and keeping an eye on the children. On the Tuesday we all went on a diving boat trip, Ashley and I diving and the others doing some snorkeling off the boat. Devan had found a friend called Danny. Thomas had a couple of friends and Matthew had spent the first two days reading the latest Harry Potter book (bought for Devan). He had also made some friends (Chaz (Charith), David Sawyer, Hannah Lloyd, Georgina Lloyd, Daniel Hearne and Derry Holland.

On Thursday night the group had purchased tickets to a club that allowed them entry for two nights. When I spoke to Matthew on Friday he said that they had had a brilliant time and had not got back to the hotel until four in the morning. Matthew said that they planned to go back there that night and he needed to get his wallet from the security box. We went to the box and I suggested that he just take the money he needed, in case he lost his wallet or it got stolen. So he took a £20 note with him, I wished him a good time and that was the last time I saw my son.

In the early hours of Saturday 23rd July I woke up and got a drink of water from a bottle at my bedside. Seconds later there was a loud noise like thunder and the room shook. The windows in the room then shattered and crashed onto the bedroom floor, the door and its frame to the room also came in. Fortunately the curtains had been drawn and this had stopped the window glass flying everywhere.

I woke my wife and told her that I thought a bomb had gone off, to get dressed and make sure she put some shoes on. I then went to our children's room that our sons Matthew and Thomas were sharing. Thomas was sitting up reading and was very frightened and Matthew's bed was empty and not slept in. I told Thomas to get dressed and go to our room. I went to our other children's bedroom and told Ashley and Devan to get dressed and also come to our room. When we were all together, we made our way out to the swimming pool area. I was concerned about Matthew but Julie, my wife, reminded me that he was going into Naama Bay to go to a club with his friends (as they had the night before) and so should be safe.

As we came out, some people were carrying a sun bed towards the back of the hotel by the swimming pool and placed it down just outside of our accommodation block. On the sun bed was Hannah Lloyd. Hannah was black from head to toe where she had been burnt from the explosion. She had an injury to her neck that a lady (who said she was a nurse) was trying to stop bleeding and a large gash several inches long in her leg. My son Ashley and I went back to the rooms several times to collect towels, sheets, water and any other items that could be used for first aid. The items included things such as plaster strips, and scissors to cut the sheets into bandages. The nurse managed to stop Hannah's neck from bleeding after a while. I bandaged Hannah's leg with the help of the nurse. Another lady (possibly her Mum) came over to Hannah and said that we should cover her over; both of us said that she shouldn't be covered because that might cause the material to stick to her skin.

When Hannah was stabilised, the nurse asked me to keep talking to Hannah to try and keep her conscious as she was going to see another casualty. I thought Hannah was one of the group of friends

that Matthew had made that holiday. So I asked Hannah if she had seen Matthew, she said no. I then asked if Matthew had been with her she said yes. I asked a passer by to look after Hannah and continue to talk to her to try and keep her conscious until medical aid arrived.

In the meantime the rest of my family had moved away to the back of the hotel, onto the small football pitch, along with the other guests. The people there were gathered into small groups of friends and family.

The nurse had moved on to the other casualty (a young Sri Lankan boy) who was lying on the floor, she was trying to resuscitate him, but when I arrived it was obvious from his injuries that he was dead and was unlikely to be revived. I later found out that this was 'Chaz' (Charith Jayawardene) one of the people that Matthew had made friends with and had particularly taken to. Charith wore a thick gold link chain around his neck which I remember seeing as he was lying on the ground, that I later found out had been stolen, somewhere between being moved from the hotel and the morgue.

I was now worried about Matthew, as Hannah said he was there and not in the town as we had thought/hoped. I crawled over the warm smoking rubble shouting his name but I didn't get a reply, nor could I find him. After spending some time looking in the darkness behind the reception, I decided to crawl through the remains of the Pizzeria, in the hope that maybe Hannah was mistaken and he had gone to the town, and was now outside the front of the hotel.

I remember seeing the wreckage of some cars and dead bodies lying all around. Some were covered and some were just lying there in the position they had been killed. I had to look at them to confirm it wasn't Matthew, which was pretty difficult. In particular I remember a male who had one foot with a training shoe on and his other leg just ended at the ankle but you could see all of the tendons attached to his ankle from his leg muscles where his skin had been burnt off. There was also a couple of young girls black from burns and one with the upper rear of her skull missing as if it had been sliced off. It was awful to see, and obviously my mind was on what Matthew would be like if I found him here.

Whilst looking and shouting for Matthew, another English guy came over to me and we hugged each other, I told him I was looking for Matty and he said he was looking for his two sons who were supposed to be in the town. (I saw him later that morning when he told me he had heard from his two sons and that they were safe). I shouted into the crowds that had gathered in the road for Matthew for a while but there was no answer.

I was getting concerned for the rest of my family, to get back in to the hotel I had to go down the side of the hotel and climb over a gate and wall to get into the grounds as I could not get back the way I had come. I went back into the rooms as I was passing them and grabbed a few personal items of clothing etc. and put them into a small bag and then made my way to the rear of the hotel to find my family. I passed the spot where Hannah had been and there was just a patch of blood left on the floor.

All the surviving guests were on the small football pitch at the rear of the hotel. A couple that had not been injured had started to make a list of all the British people on the field and also of anyone who was missing. There was no one from the tour company around, just some Egyptian people who couldn't speak too much English. This made it very difficult to find out what had happened (I know it was obvious) and what was going to happen to all the families. It was obvious we couldn't stay here at the Ghazala Gardens but there was no one around to inform us what was happening and the families were all concerned, especially as when the sun rose the temperature would soar and there was no available shade.

During the time until light broke, I made several more trips to search the rubble for Matt and several trips (along with others) to bring out blankets and pillows to make people more comfortable. At some point someone suggested that if it was safe to get to our rooms we should pack what we could ready to move on later. So we went back to the rooms and packed all of the stuff we could.

As the sun started to rise I went to search the rubble again for Matthew. When I got there the Egyptians were going around with body bags. I remember seeing a pair of legs from the waist down being placed in a bag and then a whole arm and hand, the Egyptian then bent over to get something else from between the rubble. I'd seen enough, I decided to go back to my family before he lifted that body part out too.

We were now really concerned for Matthew. I hadn't found him, he could have been taken away injured or dead, he might still be trapped under some rubble, dead or alive, but what was worse was the thought that he could have been blown to pieces and been put into one or more of the body bags or not found at all.

We as parents were now getting very concerned about our children that were with us because the temperature outside during the night was still around thirty degrees and once the sun rose in the sky the temperature would start to soar into the forties plus in the shade. Everyone on the field would have no protection from the intense heat the sun would generate. It was not until the sun had been up about an hour or two that we saw a holiday company representative. They had been busy all night arranging buses and accommodation for everyone.

Our hotel was the Renaissance Golden View Beach Resort. A beautiful five star hotel, but it was just unreal for us, because we were traumatised and worried sick as we didn't have Matthew with us and we didn't know what had happened to him or where our boy was. The reps were very helpful but obviously very busy too. The people that had been sent to the hotel had to sign in, and then got took to their respective rooms. We dumped the bags in our allotted two rooms and made our way back to the reception in the hope of getting some news. In the reception we met three couples that had been staying at the Ghazala Gardens. Fortunately they were all-OK and hadn't lost anyone and they were going to leave that evening (Saturday) on a special flight laid on by the tour company. They introduced us to a hotel employee called William who could speak English.

William looked after us, and let us make some phone calls to our friends and relatives at home, from the hotel back office. He also introduced us to the hotel's doctor who also spoke good English. I explained our concerns regarding Matthew and that we didn't know where he was, and we couldn't get through by telephone to the hospital, as all the lines were jammed. The doctor offered to take me in his car to the hospital in Sharm El Sheikh, as the phone lines were constantly busy. I accepted his offer, and went to the hospital to hopefully find Matthew (injured).

We were allowed into the hospital and went upstairs to the wards, a woman came up to me and invited me have a drink and some food and then said that she was a reporter. She then followed the doctor and I as we went around the hospital looking for Matthew, which I found particularly invasive. I asked her to leave me alone as I was looking for my son. Eventually we came to a corridor outside one of the wards that had an injured English person in it. A lady from the British consulate introduced herself and told me that the only English person injured here was a young girl called Georgina Lloyd, the sister of Hannah. She said that Georgina was sleeping at the moment, and I certainly didn't want to disturb her. The lady from the consulate told me that when she had spoken to Georgina, she had said that she, Hannah, Matthew, Chaz and David Sayers had been together near the pool and reception when the explosion happened. The consulate lady also said that Hannah had been medi-vac'd to Cairo because of her injuries. I know knew Matthew had been in the hotel at the time of the explosion and my worst fears were that he had probably been killed.

The doctor then took me out of the hospital and over to the mortuary. The people looking after the mortuary said that there was no point in looking there at the bodies as they had five females and two male bodies; the males had already been identified as an Italian and a Czechoslovakian. But I questioned where the rest of the injured and dead were, because I had seen Charith dead along with a number of others. I was then told that there was another facility at a place called El tour where some of the injured and dead had been taken. We returned to the hotel.

When I got back to the hotel and met up with my family, I saw one of the diving instructor's that Ashley and I had been diving with the previous few days. She came over smiling thinking that we were OK and safe, and I told her that Matthew (who didn't dive) was missing. She was shocked and sad about our loss. She then introduced us to the Executive Chef of the Renaissance who was her friend. His name was Hector. He was a lovely man and throughout our stay made sure that we were OK. That night we went to one of the many restaurants in the hotel and tried to eat, but neither my wife nor I could eat, but I recall the children eating most of a pizza and chips between them. Unfortunately no one had informed us who was paying for the hotel, food and drink. We signed for the food and drink. But we were left worrying overnight about how we were going to be able to afford to pay for the hotel, food and drink. Our worries were eased the following day as the holiday rep said that the tour company would cover the expenses.

The following day (Matthews 18th Birthday) we went to breakfast and again didn't eat much. During the day we were introduced to someone called Roger from the Consulate and also a trauma counsellor provided by the holiday company, called Bernie. Much of what was said then is still a blur. We only knew that there had been no news regarding Matthew.

On the Monday Roger took Bernie the trauma counsellor and all of us, down to the incident room at the Marriott hotel. The incident reception room was a very large room with a few long tables placed around the walls with some food and soft drinks placed upon them. In one corner there was a large round table with chairs. We were shown to this table and asked to sit down. Whilst there Roger the man from the consulate got organised and gave us some Egyptian money to see us through as everything we had was in the security box at the Ghazala Gardens reception. He said that the Ambassador was here and would like to talk to us.

The British Ambassador came out to talk to us, and I asked him face to face "What realistically were our chances of finding Mathew alive" he replied by saying that "It looked pretty grim and we shouldn't hold out too much hope". But too much hope was not, no hope. The ambassador, his entourage and Bernie left the room and left us by ourselves. I got up to stretch my legs. I noticed some documents on a table and turned them over. The top document was an email, which read, 'It has been verbally confirmed that the following people are dead from the bombing'. There was a list of names; on the list was Matthew's name. Needless to say I was very upset and angry, I felt betrayed, how could he look me in the eye and say that there was some (however small) hope, when he new all the time that he was dead even if it had not been officially confirmed.

I got my family together and we walked out of the awful hotel room to the minibus to take us back. When we got outside he tried to talk to me but I told him that I didn't want to talk to someone who couldn't or wasn't going to tell me the truth, and then ignored him. I can't express how much we needed to know the truth about Matt, if I had not read that document we would have gone away with a hope that he was still possibly alive that would have been there until possibly the following Thursday.

Later that day Roger from the consulate phoned up to say that the Ambassador wanted to come over and apologise, would it be OK. I had calmed down a little by then, so agreed. When he came over to apologise, they tried to make out that they had to put them (Matthew etc) down as dead to get them on the missing list (seems like more lies). Surely if an eyewitness says he was dead then he goes on a list of the dead! If they can't find him then he goes on a missing list. The Ambassador also would not admit that Charith was dead, yet both the nurse and I had seen him dead and informed the consulate and his name was on the same list as Matthew. Their reasoning was that until they had proper official identification of the bodies (DNA, finger prints or dental records) they could not confirm that they were dead. They were listed as missing to the public, whilst all the time they new with some certainty that they were dead. The Ambassador even went to speak on the TV saying that there was one Briton dead (Keri Davies) and ten others that they were concerned about! The communication needs to be better. It would have been much better if they had said 1 Briton confirmed dead and 10 others that are thought to be dead, but they have not been officially confirmed yet. Rather than use all the political mumbo jumbo words. Believe me if we had been told that it was thought that Matthew was dead and it turned out that he wasn't for whatever reason we would have been overjoyed, instead they were prepared to let us believe there was a chance he was alive because they didn't have their own official confirmation. I can't think how those at home in the UK must have felt (given this false hope); being told that there was only one confirmed Briton dead and concern for ten others.

This information needs to be communicated to the victim's relatives, I have spoken with some of the other relatives since coming home and they agree. Trevor Lakin the father of Jeremy (Jez) Lakin, was initially told that everyone in his son's hotel (The Hyatt Regency) was accounted for. It was only when Jez and his girlfriend didn't show up for the bus to catch the plane home later that day (Saturday), and the holiday rep went to check their room and found that their beds had not been slept in and that their clothes were still in the wardrobe and drawers that no one realised they were missing. I can't imagine how Jez's father felt. The relief of having been initially told that everyone was OK and then finding out that they were missing and therefore, probably dead. His parents flew to Egypt to try and find their son as he was now listed as missing. Again the information was initially wrong.

The children seemed to be coping well with the loss of their brother, in fact it was almost as if he was still alive to them. I guess that's the youngster's way of dealing with it. Ashley the 16 year old was a rock for us during this time effectively helping and looking after the two younger children and us. Again not showing any sign to us that he was upset. It must have been really hard for him.

On Monday or Tuesday we were assigned a family liaison officer (FLO). The FLO that had been assigned to us in Egypt was wonderful, he kept us up to date with what was happening two or three times a day, even if it was just to say that nothing had changed. We had asked if we could have a 'put me up' bed in our room as we only had a double bed for myself, my wife Julie and daughter Devan to sleep in, but it was difficult to get to sleep as Devan was 'active' in her sleep and took up more than half of the bed. That meant, that I ended up trying to sleep in a chair for most of the night. Steve the FLO immediately organised a suite for us so that we could get a reasonable nights sleep (for what sleep we could get under the circumstances).

I told the FLO about our run in with the Ambassador, and that I did not want any more lies, he promised that he would only tell me the truth. I also asked him to try and find our Matty and to let us know as soon as possible. We just needed to know where he was and when we could bring him home.

Tuesday came and went, the only information we had was that the Egyptians would not allow the British police access to the morgues to start identifying the bodies, although they had allowed the Italian police access. We spent the daytime either waiting in the reception area to meet or hope to get some information from our FLO or Counsellor or walking around the hotel grounds or in the swimming pool. This was surreal! We were in a beautiful hotel, with lovely food and drink available, except we couldn't face eating anything apart from a bit of pizza and chips and drinking water. Although the rooms were comfortable and cool, we couldn't keep our children cooped up in there all the time especially the emotional state we were in, the temperature outside in the shade was between forty and forty six degrees. There were a number of swimming pools to use, we chose one that had a pool bar that provided some shade whilst in the water. It was awful, because we had to entertain our children, pretend to smile and laugh whilst being torn apart inside because we did not know where our Matty was or what had happened to him

On Tuesday we were told that Charith's parents had flown in to find their son. We asked via our FLO and Bernie if they would like to meet. They must be worried sick and I knew that Charith had died. I also knew that the group of friends had been having a good time and we wanted them to know that too. It might help them to know as it had us that they were having a good time with their newfound friends.

A meeting was arranged and we met the Jayawardene's on Wednesday. We spent a couple of hours together talking about our children, what they were like, what they did and what their hopes had been, they were a lovely couple. We exchanged contact details for when we got home. Charith's father was going to go to El tour to see if (with the aid of their FLO) he could identify Charith's body. Charith's mother went back to their hotel whilst he was gone. When he came back he said he had seen Charith and identified him. They both left to go back to their hotel ready to go home on Thursday.

By Wednesday afternoon it was all too much. Julie and I had all but given up hope of finding out where Matthew's body was, and had decided to take the next available flight home. I can't express how hard that decision was, we felt like we were abandoning him. All we wanted was to find him and bring him home. The next flight home was not until Thursday evening. Bernie and the tour company My Travel made the arrangements.

Thursday came, we spent the day pretty much the same as Tuesday and Wednesday. We had been living out of our suitcases, so there wasn't much to pack. Later that afternoon our cases were ready to go. As we were about to pick up our cases to get onto the bus to take us to the airport, our FLO Steve, telephoned to say he had some news and that he needed to talk to us face to face. Needless to say we opted to miss the flight so that we could talk to him. When he arrived at the hotel he told us that the British police had gained entry to the El tour morgue and that they had found a body that matched Matthew's description and clothing. He also said that he was in one piece but he had lost his left eye and ear. At least we had found him pretty much whole and not blown to pieces. This was a particularly sad time for us as it confirmed (what we already new, but even so dared to hope was different) that Matthew was indeed dead yet it also brought some peace to us as we were now sure we had found him.

On the news of finding Matthew our counsellor suggested that we have a meal and a bottle of wine. To be honest we didn't feel like eating or drinking, but agreed anyway. We went to the hotel's Italian restaurant and ordered a bottle of Egyptian wine (about £12-£15). On tasting the wine, it was awful and Bernie tasted it and agreed. We asked if they had another bottle of different wine. The waiter came back with a bottle of Beaujolais; this too was rough but went with it. We ate our meal and I asked for our bill (Bernie was paying hers via her company credit card). I was about to sign it when I noticed that the wine we had was charged at £90 plus tax! I queried the amount as we had originally chosen a

£15 bottle of wine and expected that the wine provided would be in the same ballpark of (£10-£20). The waiter confirmed that the price was correct. This really upset Julie and I, we didn't even want the wine let alone pay £100 for a bottle that you could get in UK supermarket for £3-£4. We felt that the tour company would think that we were taking them for a ride. The trauma counsellor didn't do anything to help; she just paid for her meal. The waiter asked me to sign for the meal and that we could sort out the wine tomorrow with the wine manager. We went back to our room and I spent most of the night upset and worrying about the £100 bill. The following morning I found Hector, the Exec Chef, and explained what had happened the night before. He said that he already knew and that there had been a meeting about it. He explained that imported alcohol had a 300% import duty put on it by the government. I told him that when the second bottle was shown to me I assumed that it would be around the same price, not nearly ten times as much and the waiter had not told us that the wine was that expensive. He said he would get the wine manager to come and talk to me about it. The wine manager went through the same explanation as Hector had given me, and I told him that we were not warned of the jump in cost. The outcome was that the hotel was prepared to half the cost of the wine, to which I agreed. On looking back, I feel that the trauma counsellor should have stepped in and offered to take the cost of the wine on her account and then sorted it out with the hotel and the tour company. I had already had enough distress without this!

On Friday we were told that we could go to El Tour and see him if we wished, which I said I did. El Tour was a journey of about an hour and a half through the Sinai Mountains and desert. The hotel's executive chef had provided us with a box of fruit and some water for the journey. Bernie had offered to look after the children. When we arrived at El Tour, the place was a building site, literally, with builders, police and soldiers hanging around outside (although we had been warned that it was hospital under construction we still couldn't believe that this tip was where our sons body was being held). The access to it was a dirt track littered with building rubble. The mortuary had scaffolding all around and access was via some makeshift wooden steps.

The procedure is for the FLO to view the body and explain the injuries and what the body would look like. Julie didn't think that I should look at Matthew's body but I felt that I needed to. The FLO came out and said that they strongly thought that I shouldn't view Matthew, and then went on to describe his injuries and what he would look like if I went to see him. The injuries described were far worse than we had been told at the hotel and the description of what his body would look like if I chose to look at him was awful. It was a hard decision, but I opted not to see him, I don't think he would have wanted me to see him in that state and I knew Julie didn't want me to. And I would remember him then as he was.

Julie and I then had to spend an hour with the local Egyptian prosecutor (I guess he was like our Coroner). We had to go through all of the things that we thought would identify him (again) via an interpreter. The prosecutor seemed to be happy that we had identified Matthew's body. When I asked, when we could take him home, the British police said that the British Coroner would not allow any bodies to be released until they had been officially identified. This meant a further wait until DNA, dental records or fingerprints had confirmed that it was Matthew.

The FLO on the journey back asked if there was anything else they could do for us. I asked if we could visit the Ghazala Gardens, now that it was daylight and I wasn't running around on adrenalin looking for Matthew. The FLO's arranged for us to get inside the grounds. Although there was still a lot of rubble around the majority of it (particularly at the front) had been removed, most of the shattered glass had also been swept up. The windows in the rooms were being replaced and we were told that they hoped to have the hotel up and running again by the end of September! The FLO's were amazed saying that if it had been in England it would of taken six to eight weeks to go through the place looking for forensic evidence.

We came back to the hotel feeling relieved that were 99% sure we had at least found Matty and that it was now a matter of time to get him back to the UK.

The next available flight home was not until Sunday, so we spent Friday afternoon, Saturday and Sunday much the same as the previous days.

We left for home Sunday evening arriving home around 05:30 on Monday morning after another few surreal days in the hotel.