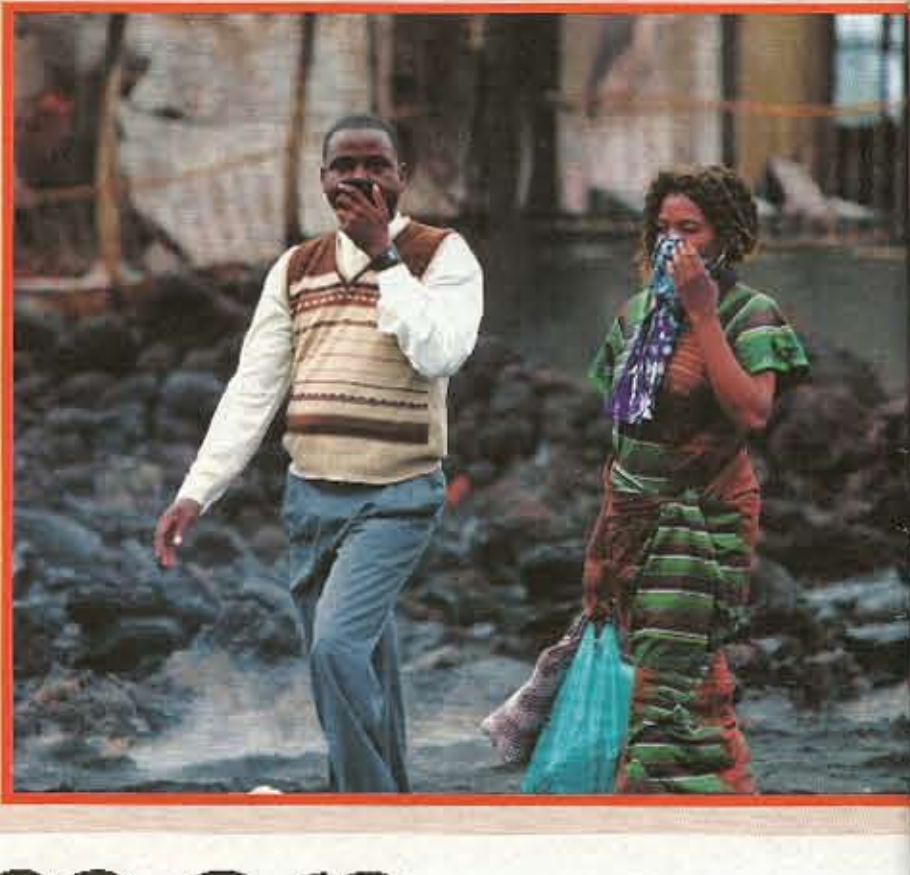


Imagine going to work and facing volcanoes and earthquakes. Meet four women who travel to the most dangerous places on earth – not because they have to, but because they want to. When there's a natural disaster, they're on standby to assist – and their work takes them to places like Iran, Algeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo



Women to the rescue!

'When faced with complete devastation, you still need to be respectful of people's culture and help out wherever you can'

The first time 25-year-old Frauke Dillschnitter, a paramedic and firefighter with the City of Johannesburg, heard that there'd been an earthquake in Iran (December 2003) was when she was phoned and told to meet at the Berea Fire Station within an hour.

'My first question was what the weather was like, and when they said minus six, I went into a flat panic,' she laughs.

'I was a bit scared before we left because I didn't really know what to expect or how I'd cope. But you learn to know your limitations. The equipment I could lift and carry around, I did. I'm past the stage of being macho, and nowadays I even take wet wipes and hand cream with me when I'm on the road working as a paramedic.'

One thing she didn't expect was that the devastation would be so complete.

'In previous earthquakes some of the buildings had

remained standing, thereby creating capsules in which people could survive. But in Iran, the city was completely flattened. Buildings had simply crumbled because of the mud and mortar they were built with. We quickly learnt that the chances of finding survivors were almost zero.'

That didn't, however, deter the team from driving to a new search area each day, setting up a mini-base station and sending in the search and rescue dogs.

'If the dogs located anything, we'd go in and dig or use specialised equipment to see if the person was alive. The air was filled with this distinctive, almost sweet, smell. You just knew there were bodies decomposing underneath the rubble. At times we had to cover our faces. On the last day we went to the city and spread out in a line, one person every few metres, walking along and practically smelling where the bodies were. We'd indicate to the military, who would then dig them up because we were still focused on finding survivors.'

Frauke still can't quite believe that so many people – nearly 90% of the city of Bam – died in so short a time.

'I expected to see more people destitute and camping out

22

to the rescue



ABOVE After the city of Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, was flattened in an eruption in January 2002, life went on as normal, despite steaming lava flows

BELOW Frauke Dillschnitter about to get her hands dirty

in the road, but a lot of survivors had taken whatever they could and left the city. In-between the rubble you could see school books with Farzi writing and you could see that some were maths and others geography books. There were also toy cars and plastic guns lying around. It was hard to imagine that just a day or two before, children had been playing there.'

Out of respect, Frauke always made sure her head was covered. 'It was weird being in a Muslim country, but you get used to always covering your head, and considering it was cold, it was useful. I did sometimes have the sense that some of the Iranian men were looking down on me or laughing behind my back because I was a woman, but then there were some who were extremely respectful of the job

'The air was filled with this distinctive, almost sweet, smell. You just knew there were bodies under the rubble'

I was doing.'

There were always small crowds of people who would gather to watch the team and offer assistance.

'They were always giving us dates and fruit juices. For New Year's Eve the government gave all the women rescuers roses. These gave our camp an almost homely feel. Although I'm not the camping type, the guys made a real effort by building a fully functioning toilet and a shower with hot and cold taps, and a drainage system! It was almost like having our own safe world, although you always knew you'd be going home while there were hundreds who'd remain.'



'Even though these people had lost everything, we still managed to find laughter in the sadness'

Not a week goes by without Nicole de Montille taking stock of her life and the experiences she had in Algeria after that country's earthquake in May 2003. She's a fire instructor, firefighter and an urban search and rescue technician.

'There are so many little moments and memories that every now and again pop into my mind. The one I remember most is standing behind a family whose daughter we had found, but whose body we couldn't remove. It was heartbreaking to hear the mother's anguish when the interpreter told her we couldn't even bring out a finger for her to bury.'

Nicole was having dinner with friends at The Pavilion shopping centre in Westville, near Durban, when she was phoned and told to mobilise immediately.

'I was trying to mentally prepare myself for a society that is

'Women rescuers are the best to send into small spaces'

male-dominated and I was very uncertain how I would be received as a female rescuer. As a team we were given a cultural briefing on the dos and don'ts, and I remember thinking that I'd forgotten to pack a scarf to cover my head, so that I wouldn't insult the people of Algeria. Thinking back on it now, I was also very nervous how I would react to the death and destruction, having heard stories from the guys who'd been on previous earthquake missions.'

Nicole was tasked with setting up safe zones in areas where the team was working in case aftershocks should set off further collapses.

'Since I knew the search camera equipment that we were using, I often ended up being the camera operator, peering at distorted furniture and shadows, trying to work out if they were caused by our camera light or if there was a human being down there. We were among the first teams with heavy rescue capability to arrive in Algeria and our main objective was to get to people who were trapped under the heavy rubble.'

'I believe that women rescuers are sometimes the best to send into small spaces because we are generally lighter, smaller and more supple than our male counterparts. We are also more empathetic and a trapped patient often responds better to a woman than to a man.'

The South Africans worked in teams of four or five rescuers and Nicole and her colleagues spent hours assisting a Russian rescue team trying to find a boy trapped inside a building. But the operation had to be abandoned when an aftershock caused the building to shift while the two teams were still inside clearing rubble.

'I never really felt nervous, just out of my comfort zone. Later there was another massive aftershock, but luckily I was



Nicole (back) takes a well-earned breather between searches

at the campsite on a sports field. The entire grandstand swayed, the running track lifted and one floor of a building about a kilometre away pancaked down.'

It's not easy to forget the smell of decay, prevalent in many of the areas she searched. However, it's the gratitude of the locals that will forever remain in her mind.

'The majority of them had lost everything, yet they still found it in their hearts to boil us water for coffee while we worked. Every day the police who guarded our campsite popped in to say hello and made sure that we each received at least one French loaf. I remember one in particular who tried his best to persuade me to leave my husband Carl in South Africa and marry him, and live in Algeria. When that didn't work, he figured that I could spend six months a year with him and six with Carl. It was quite funny, the conversations we had, because I don't speak Arabic, Spanish or French and he couldn't speak English or Afrikaans. But, through strange antics and drawings, we managed to find laughter in the sadness.'

'Doing this work helps you discover things about yourself – and those you're rescuing'

Sending a team of 50 rescuers and four search and rescue dogs halfway around the world, with two tons of bottled water and six tons of food, in a specially chartered plane that hours before was destined to go somewhere else, can be difficult at the best of times. But when it's Christmas weekend, there are no available funds and everyone's cell phones are switched off, the most optimistic person, Nothing, however, seems to faze 28-year-old Samantha Botsis, who not only manages to get the logistics right to mobilise Rescue



If the situation is life-or-death, you'll find Samantha Botsis on her cell phone

South Africa, the umbrella body that brings together

24

to the rescue

'In this situation, to get the job done you need to be a chancer and a troublemaker'

The air outside is dark and the tiny plane's pilot is wondering aloud where to land. Seated behind him, Mande Toubin is examining the life support equipment she's brought along and praying that the plane won't be shot down. It's an adrenaline buzz

she lives for, having done more than 400 similar missions into Africa to fetch injured patients as national trauma co-ordinator for Netcare.

'Some of the trips can be quite harrowing and you're 40-year-old single mother. 'I'm a bit of a drama queen so I'm happy to be involved in anything drama-ish.'

It's thanks to her that Netcare first got involved in missions abroad. Mande literally marched into her boss's office after the April 2000 Mozambique floods and arranged for a 40-person medical team to be sent.

'One donor gave us thousands of sanitary towels to take across,' she laughs. 'I don't know what we were supposed to do with them other than suggest to the locals

they use them to soak up the water!'

She sees herself as a chancer, a troublemaker who doesn't take no for an answer. Qualities she believes are vital for the kind of work she does.

'I'm not scared of anything – except flying pawns and heights! I'd rather go into a war-torn African country than climb a stepladder. I thrive in stressful situations – if something isn't stressful, I'm wondering what's wrong.'

'You're not always sure you're going to get out alive'

Mande was part of the SA mission to Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo after the volcano the city is built on erupted in January 2002.

'I didn't even know where Goma was. I thought it would look like Pompeii with everything flattened. I didn't realise that lava only flows within a certain width and everything to the left and right is left standing.'

'It took us 11 hours to drive there from Rwanda because Goma airport was under lava. Our driver insisted on driving with the lights off – he didn't want to draw attention to us at night. We were travelling over steep mountain passes and he'd switch the lights back on for a second, and you'd see buses and trucks down the side that never made it!'

In Goma, life carried on. 'You could walk across the lava even though there were fires burning and places where it was still very hot. The houses it had flowed through looked like they'd been bombed. And on both sides of the lava flow, informal traders went about their day's business.'

The town was very smoky and there was an acrid smell. 'You realise how lucky we are in South Africa – we don't have any potential for natural disasters. The people of Goma live in poverty, with no resources. Then a volcano erupts and they just carry on. So what if they have to move five metres to wash a baby in a bucket of water? They just do it. The lesson? There are people who survive on nothing, and even when they have less than nothing, they still manage to cope.'



Mande (centre) and fellow rescuers

rescuers from around the country each time there's a natural disaster internationally, but at the same time heads up her own company as a VIP events director.

'If I can get people to an earthquake zone in a matter of hours, I can surely organise any event,' she laughs. She's the first point of call after a disaster and within minutes has contacted the United Nations' virtual control centre, especially set up to co-ordinate international rescue efforts.

'I immediately mobilise the team, start liaising with local government structures, booking aircraft, organising visas and inoculations, documenting equipment lists, getting insurance, and arranging for food and funds. The most difficult part is that we have no funds and each deployment costs millions of rands. The earthquakes also always seem to happen either on weekends or on public holidays, which makes for a logistical nightmare. We needed a thousand litres of water for Iran and when I phoned the director of ABI to ask him to sponsor, he was on the golf course,' she chuckles.

'But when that plane finally takes off, it's exhilarating to

'Earthquakes always seem to happen either on weekends or public holidays'

think that, although things were hectic for a few days, the team's finally on its way!'

Samantha keeps the families at home up-to-date on the team's movements and is the liaison officer with the local media. It's also on her shoulders to bring everyone back home safely again. She does this voluntarily – and on her own cell phone account!

'It's always a high watching the news and hearing people talk about the South African search and rescue team. Just knowing I'm involved is amazing for me. My proudest moment is when the team returns home and, as they get off the plane, every single one gives me a hug.'

But it comes at a price – exhaustion. 'Whenever there's an earthquake, it's your focal point and everything else has to fit in around it. Fortunately, the logistics I work for are understanding, although it does mean I don't get any sleep. I've learnt that there really are no limits on your time. I've found out what it means to be really committed and selfless. I don't know why I do this work. I just do it. I can't imagine seeing an earthquake on the news and not being involved.'

25