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U.S. tourists swim 14 hours to survive Caribbean shipwreck

'We both processed the possible ways we might die,' Kate Suski recalls

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Dan Suski and Kate Suski, shown here in 2009, swam between 12 and 14 hours to reach dry land after the boat they chartered sank off the coast of St. Lucia. The captain and first mate were also rescued. (Courtesy of Dan Suski/Associated Press)

The fishing trip off the rugged north coast of St. Lucia was supposed to last all day, but about four hours into the trip, the boat's electric system crackled and popped.

Dan Suski, a 30-year-old business owner and IT technician from San Francisco, had been wrestling a 90-kilogram marlin in rough seas with help from his sister, Kate Suski, a 39-year-old architect from Seattle.

He was still trying to reel in the fish when water rushed into the cabin and flooded the engine room, prompting the captain to radio for help as he yelled out their co-ordinates.

The waves kept pounding the boat that the Suskis had chartered from a local company in the eastern Caribbean island called Reel Irie. It was April 21 around noon, and the trip was supposed to be a highlight of their sunny vacation.

As more water flooded the boat, the captain threw life preservers to the Suskis.

"He said, 'Jump out! Jump out!'" Kate Suski recalled in an interview Thursday with The Associated Press.

The Suskis obeyed and jumped into the water with the captain and first mate. Less than five minutes later, the boat sank.

The group was at least 13 kilometres from shore, and waves more than twice their size tossed them around.

'We both processed the possible ways we might die. Would we drown? Be eaten by a shark?'

—Kate Suski

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"The captain was telling us to stay together, and that help was on its way and that we need to wait," Kate Suski said.

The group waited for about an hour, but no one came.

"I was saying, 'Let's swim, let's swim. If they're coming, they will find us. We can't just stay here,' " she recalled.

Contemplating various ways to die

They began to swim, but the Suskis lost sight of the captain and first mate amid the burgeoning swells. Soon after, they also lost sight of land amid the rain.

"We would just see swells and grey," Dan Suski said.

A plane and a helicopter appeared in the distance and hovered over the area, but no one spotted the Suskis.

Several hours went by, and the sun began to set.

"There's this very real understanding that the situation is dire," Kate Suski said. "You come face-to-face with understanding your own mortality ... We both processed the possible ways we might die. Would we drown? Be eaten by a shark?"

"Hypothermia?" Dan Suski said.

"Would our legs cramp up and make it impossible to swim?" she continued.

The brother-and-sister team swam for 12 to 14 hours, talking as they pushed and shivered their way through the ocean. Dan Suski tried to ignore images of the movie *Open Water* that kept popping into his head, referring to the story of a scuba-diving couple who was left behind, while his sister couldn't stop thinking about sharks.

"I thought I was going to vomit I was so scared," she said.

Barely able to walk after reaching land

When, exhausted, they got within nine metres of land, they realized they could not get out of the water.

"There were sheer cliffs coming into the ocean," she said. "We knew we would get crushed."

Dan Suski thought they should try to reach the rocks anyway, but his sister disagreed.

"We won't survive that," she told him.

They swam even more until they noticed a spit of sand nearby. When they got to land, they collapsed, barely able to walk. It was past midnight, and they didn't notice any homes in the area.

"Dan said the first priority was to stay warm," she recalled.

They hiked inland and lay together, pulling up grass and brush to cover themselves and stay warm. Kate Suski had only her bikini on, having shed her sundress to swim better. Dan Suski shed his cotton shorts, having recalled a saying when he was a kid that "the best-dressed corpses wear cotton."

They heard a stream nearby but decided to wait until daylight to determine whether the water was safe to drink.

Captain, mate rescued after 23 hours in water

As the sun came up, they began to hike through thick brush, picking up bitter mangoes along the way and stopping to eat green bananas.

"It was probably the best and worst banana I've ever had," Dan Suski recalled.

Some three hours later, they spotted a young farm worker named Benoit walking with his white dog. He fed them crackers, gave them water and waited until police arrived, the Suskis said.

"We asked if he knew anything about the captain and mate," Kate Suski

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said. "He said he had seen the news the night before and they hadn't been found at that time. I think we felt a sense of tragedy that we weren't prepared for."

The Suskis were hospitalized and received IV fluids, with doctors concerned they couldn't draw blood from Kate Suski's arm because she was so dehydrated. They also learned that the captain and mate were rescued after spending nearly 23 hours in the water, noting that their relatives called and took care of them after the ordeal.

'Never looked forward to the sunrise so much'

St. Lucia's tourism minister called it a miracle, and the island's maritime affairs unit is investigating exactly what caused the ship to sink. Marine Police Sgt. Finley Leonce said they have already interviewed the captain, and that police did not suspect foul play or any criminal activity in the sinking of the ship.

The brother and sister said they don't blame anyone for the shipwreck.

"We are so grateful to be alive right now," Kate Suski said. "Nothing can sort of puncture that bubble."

Upon returning to their hotel in St. Lucia earlier this week, the Suskis were upgraded to a suite as they recover from cuts on their feet, severe tendonitis in their ankles from swimming and abrasions from the lifejackets.

"It's really been amazing," Dan Suski said. "It's a moving experience for me."

On Saturday, they plan to fly back to the U.S. to meet their father in Miami.

Once a night owl, Kate Suski no longer minds getting up early for flights, or for any other reason.


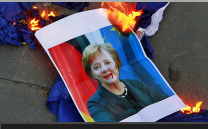





"Since this ordeal, I've been waking up at dawn every morning," she said. "I've never looked forward to the sunrise so much in my life."

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