



Skeletons on the Zahara: A True Story of Survival

By Dean King

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Everywhere hailed as a masterpiece of historical adventure, this enthralling narrative recounts the experiences of twelve American sailors who were shipwrecked off the coast of Africa in 1815, captured by desert nomads, sold into slavery, and subjected to a hellish two-month journey through the bone-dry heart of the Sahara. The ordeal of these men - who found themselves tested by barbarism, murder, starvation, death, dehydration, and hostile tribes that roamed the desert on camelback - is made indelibly vivid in this gripping account of courage, brotherhood, and survival.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Some stories are so enthralling they deserve to be retold generation after generation. The wreck in 1815 of the Connecticut merchant ship, *Commerce*, and the subsequent ordeal of its crew in the Sahara Desert, is one such story. With *Skeletons on the Zahara: A True Story of Survival*, Dean King refreshes the popular nineteenth-century narrative once read and admired by Henry David Thoreau, James Fenimore Cooper, and Abraham Lincoln. King's version, which actually draws from two separate first person accounts of the *Commerce*'s crew, offers a page-turning blend of science, history, and classic adventure. The book begins with a seeming false start: tracing the lives of two merchants from North Africa, Seid and Sidi Hamet, who lose their fortunes—and almost their lives—when their massive camel caravan arrives at a desiccated oasis. King then jumps to the voyage of the *Commerce* under Captain Riley and his 11-man crew. After stops in New Orleans and Gibraltar, the ship falls off course en route to the Canary Islands and ultimately wrecks at the infamous Cape Bojador. After the men survive the first predations of the nomads on the shore, they meander along the coast looking for a way inland as their supplies dwindle. They subsist for days by drinking their own urine. Eventually, to their horror, they discover that they have come aground on the edge of the Sahara Desert. They submit themselves, with hopes of getting food and water, as slaves to the Oulad Bou Sbaa. After days of abuse, they are bought by Hamet, who, after his own experiences with his failed caravan (described at the novel's opening), sympathizes with the plight of the crew. Together, they set off on a hellish journey across the desert to collect a bounty for Hamet in Swearah. King embellishes this compelling narrative throughout with scientific and historical material explaining the origins of the camel, the market for English and American slaves, and the stages of dehydration. He also humanizes the Sahrawi with background on the tribes and on the lives of Hamet and Seid. This material, doled out in sufficient amounts to enrich the story without derailing it makes *Skeletons on the Zahara* a perfectly entertaining bit of history that feels like a guilty pleasure. --*Patrick O'Kelley*

From Publishers Weekly

When the American cargo ship *Commerce* ran aground on the northwestern shores of Africa in 1815 along with its crew of 12 Connecticut-based sailors, the misfortunes that befell them came fast and hard, from enslavement to reality-bending bouts of dehydration. King's aggressively researched account of the crew's once-famous ordeal reads like historical fiction, with unbelievable stories of the seamen's endurance of heat stroke, starvation and cruelty by their Saharan slavers. King (Patrick O'Brian: *A Life Revealed*), who went to Africa and, on camel and foot, retraced parts of the sailors' journey, succeeds brilliantly at making the now familiar landscape seem as imposing and new as it must have been to the sailors. Every dromedary step thuds out from the pages with its punishing awkwardness, and each drop of brackish found water reprieves and tortures with its perpetual insufficiency. King's leisurely prose style rounds out the drama with well-parceled-out bits of context, such as the haggling barter culture of the Saharan nomadic Arabs and the geological history of Western Africa's coastline. Zahara (King's use of older and/or phonetic spellings helps evoke the foreignness of the time and place) impresses with its pacing, thoroughness and empathy for the plight of a dozen sailors heaved smack-hard into an unknown tribalism. By the time the surviving crew members make it back to their side of civilization, reader and protagonist alike are challenged by new ways of understanding culture clash, slavery and the place of Islam in the social fabric of desert-dwelling peoples. Maps, illus.

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From [Booklist](#)

This shipwreck-and-survival saga occurred in 1815 in the wind-tortured territory of the modern Western

Sahara and was promptly written down by American brigantine captain James Riley. So popular it appeared in six different editions, Riley's account is revived here with the benefit of author King's journey to retrace, in part, the 800-mile desert trek of Riley and his shipwrecked crew. King provides animated descriptions of the desert environment while covering the events Riley related, which included being sold into slavery. The dramatic incidents are supported with relevant details, such as the way the body reacts to dehydration and sun poisoning. Perhaps the story's most intriguing element is the mutual understanding that developed between Riley and his eventual master, Sidi Hamet. A debt Hamet owed to his father-in-law propels the entire drama, as Hamet spirits his slaves through lands of scimitar-swinging brigands for ransoming to a Western consul. This is both a forcefully visceral and culturally astute account. *Gilbert Taylor*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Rose Bennett:

Book is to be different for every grade. Book for children until adult are different content. We all know that that book is very important for people. The book Skeletons on the Zahara: A True Story of Survival seemed to be making you to know about other know-how and of course you can take more information. It doesn't matter what advantages for you. The reserve Skeletons on the Zahara: A True Story of Survival is not only giving you a lot more new information but also to become your friend when you truly feel bored. You can spend your spend time to read your reserve. Try to make relationship while using book Skeletons on the Zahara: A True Story of Survival. You never truly feel lose out for everything if you read some books.

Lena Garcia:

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Carol Stripling:

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