

Sarah Bunch was on a family holiday in Beruwala, Sri Lanka, when life on the island was turned upside down by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami.

“Just after breakfast my sister Naomi flushed the toilet, and our apartment flooded. We threw a few things onto the bed to keep them dry and called reception to say we had a plumbing problem. It was 8.30am, and we had no idea that we had actually just been hit by the first wave of a tsunami.

Reception called back and shouted at us to get out of the apartment and go to the lobby in the main hotel building. We had no idea what was going on, but did as we were told.

When we opened the door, there was water up to the fourth step. Mum came out of her apartment - she was panicking because my dad and brothers weren't with us. They had gone on a fishing trip organised by Fernando, the taxi driver who had been with us all week.

We started wading toward the main hotel a few hundred yards away. When we reached it, the waiters were scrambling around, trying to help everyone to safety.

About 200 people had congregated in the lobby. We followed a crowd to the back balcony, which was supported by big columns and looked out onto the sea.

No one knew what was happening, but when we saw helicopters overhead we realised that it was something big, and it was coming from the sea. We began to get really worried about the boys.

As we watched, the sea rose high and engulfed the bar on the beach. Everyone was shouting and running back inside, afraid that when it reached us the wave would split the columns and the balcony would collapse. For me, that moment was the most frightening part of the whole experience.

My dad and brothers found us in the lobby a few minutes later. Their trip leader had overslept and taken his time over breakfast, so when the first wave hit they were all still in the cafe.

My brother Adam described how they had been looking at a tiny island off the shore when the water suddenly receded. He said you could have walked out to it, where seconds before there had been a stretch of sea. They knew then that there was something really wrong. No one had time to bring anything - they just ran up toward the hotel, away from the beach.

After about fifteen minutes in the lobby there was a gas leak and we were evacuated to the steps at the front of the hotel. Outside, staff were handing out water and biscuits, and everyone was wondering why. Then a wave came crashing round the sides of the hotel, and we found ourselves stranded on an island.

In between second and third waves we were moved again, this time to the hotel's spa. Meanwhile, Fernando had driven down to try to find my dad and brothers. He found us at the spa, and took us with his own family - including his fifteen-year-old daughter, Tharani – inland to Kandy, a nearby city. As we drove away I worried about a top I had borrowed from my flatmate, thinking 'it will be ruined, she's going to kill me!' It's so silly, but I couldn't stop thinking about it.

We stayed with Fernando's sister-in-law for three days, until we could get a flight home. We had lost almost all our possessions, but my parents still had their mobiles, so they were able to let family members know we were safe. Fernando's family were so kind, supplying us with everything we needed. He was determined to make sure we had a good time, and took us to all the sights, including an elephant orphanage!

We were incredibly lucky to have people around us who got us to safety quickly. Some people were stranded on trains, and up trees. One mother from our resort injured her leg smashing a window to get herself and her children out of their bungalow. Thankfully, they all escaped.

Our passports had been kept in the hotel safe. Driving through the country to collect them on our way back to the airport, we saw people searching through the ruins of their homes. It was so sad - there were ruined boats that had been tossed up onto the roads, and people with searchlights, looking for bodies.

Everyone had been told not to go back to the resort but Dad, being Dad, wanted to see if we could salvage anything. The bungalows were demolished beyond recognition - you would never have thought there had been proper buildings there just days before - but amazingly I found my friend's top amongst the wreckage.

On the way home, a lot of people on our flight had injuries - cut faces, arms in slings. We were given letters explaining that help would be available when we landed. At Heathrow, the police were giving out clothes and checking people off on lists, and there were counsellors on hand. As we walked through arrivals a reporter came over and spoke to my dad - the interview was shown late that night.

The first task when we got home was to contact friends, family, and our insurance company.

Some of my friends had called the helpline to find out if we were safe, but weren't able to get any information, so they were very relieved to hear from me.

I haven't been back to Sri Lanka since, but I want to, to support the tourist industry there. The effect on people like Fernando was massive - he earns his living driving tourists around, and his livelihood was wiped out by the tsunami.

Because of that, Dad didn't want to donate to the official tsunami appeal - he asked for donations at his company and arranged for the money to be sent directly to the village we had stayed in. It bought four new fishing boats and some bicycles – things that helped some of the people there to earn a living again.

We still keep in contact with Fernando, and I write to Tharani – just little letters about what each of us is doing. It was a massive event in all our lives, and I just feel I want to stay in touch.”

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1061 words

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Sarah's sister Naomi is my friend and former housemate. Naomi put me in touch with Sarah to arrange the interview for this assignment.