

Wish I was there...

taste

Everest was my high point

What or where is your idea of travel heaven?

Travel heaven for me is getting away from my regular life, which means escaping from cities, congestion, noise, mobile phones, the media, deadlines and routine.

To truly escape from everything, nothing beats trekking in remote areas. I've been lucky enough to go on some incredible treks over the years, but my favourite was to Everest Base Camp in Nepal.

What's was so great about it?

After a heart-attack inducing flight from Kathmandu to Lukla in the Himalayas, you spend the next fortnight hiking through the most stunning scenery on the planet.

For the most part, you are alone under perfect blue skies, soaking up the crisp air as you climb through meadows, forests, peaceful monasteries and finally the rugged terrain around the Khumbu glacier.

Base Camp itself is more than 5,500m above sea level and the final miles are an exhausting slog, but your reward is mind-blowing views of the highest point on earth – the unmistakable black summit of Mount Everest.

Where else has topped your travel list over the years?

New Zealand has some

JAMES HOWELL, from Southend, is a former local and national journalist and author of the *Disturbed Girl* trilogy of novels. James, 34, has travelled across the globe researching for his thrillers, *A Disturbed Girl's Guide to Curing Boredom*, *A Disturbed Girl Implodes* and *A Disturbed Girl's Redemption*, which have already sold more than 15,000 copies worldwide. James opens the book on his travel adventures with EMMA PALMER.

stunning scenery, volcano-boarding in Nicaragua sticks in the mind, Mexico was amazing for scuba diving in the cenotes – sinkholes in the jungle – and I loved the energy, culture and diversity in Brazil.

A bit closer to home, I have a soft spot for Cyprus. My wife is Greek Cypriot and we got married out there a few years ago.

Have you ever lost your passport or had any travel adventures or mishaps?

My partner and I were robbed on a bus in Colombia and we arrived in Medellin – which had the highest murder rate in the world – at midnight with only a few pesos in our pockets.

We ended up spending the night in the only place we could afford, which was some sort of brothel/drug den near the bus station. There was a wooden rack in the foyer where patrons had to leave their guns, hardcore pornography was

playing on the receptionist's TV and a pungent whiff of weed hung in the air.

The next day, when we reported the robbery to the police and told them where we were staying, they were so horrified they drove us back to collect our things and gave us a motorcycle escort across the city to a (slightly) more upmarket hostel.

The final miles are an exhausting slog, but your reward is mind-blowing views

Where's the best hotel you've stayed at?

It was in Kyoto, Japan. I stayed at a traditional guest house, set in beautifully manicured gardens. The rooms had paper walls, low ceilings and virtually no furniture and

guests had to wear kimonos.

Meal-times were announced with a gong and served in an intricate ceremony as we sat cross-legged on the floor.

Where's the best city break you've ever been on?

I was in Amsterdam on Millennium night and the whole city was one huge party zone.

Where's the most unusual, exotic or beautiful place you've had a beer or a tipple?

I took a hip flask of whisky with me when I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, in Tanzania, a few years ago.

The final ascent in the pitch dark is gruelling. I remember collapsing on the ground when I eventually reached the summit and swigging from the flask as the sun came up over the Serengeti. It was a truly unforgettable moment and it even brought a tear to my eye.

Have you ever been anywhere that didn't live up to your expectations?

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I found India incredibly frustrating. I spent a couple of months in Mumbai

and Goa while I was researching my third novel, *A Disturbed Girl's Redemption*, and the inequality is startling.

On one hand you've got gleaming skyscrapers, sports cars, gourmet restaurants and Bollywood glamour, but alongside this are sprawling slums, mountains of rubbish, horribly malnourished kids and really shocking attitudes towards women.

If you won the lotto tomorrow, where's the first place you'd jet off to?

I've already been there a few times, but I can't look beyond Thailand.

If I could go somewhere new and money was no object, I would love to see Antarctica, tour South Africa or ride the Trans-Siberian Express.

Where are you off to next?

"The maternity unit at Southend Hospital – my wife is expecting our first baby in March!"



■ On his travels – author James Howell, left, on the subway in Tokyo, below, at the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro and, main picture, at Everest Base Camp