

Traveller writes about close encounters with adventure and danger!

With a curiosity to see the world, Sharon Cracknell craves to visit every country in the world.

She embarked on her travels in 1999 and has been travelling nearly every year since. Her second book *Secret Lands, Petrol Clams and a Bagful of Bolivar* is a memoir of her visits. She talks to **Sue Wilkinson**.

Please tell me about yourself?

When not travelling I live on a lovely cobbled street on the outskirts of Leeds facing a vicarage and church. My dad lives nearby and is a supporter of my unconventional lifestyle.

Each year I find a temporary work contract in finance (yawn!) which then funds my next overseas adventure. My travels are my life. All my friends and family have been subjected to thousands of photos and stories. They brace themselves when I leave as I seem to attract much mishap and misadventure whether it be surviving an earthquake at Everest Base Camp or facing a five-year prison sentence in Indonesia!

When I'm home I like my early morning runs and walking in the Yorkshire Dales. Since lockdown I have been walking outdoors.

What inspired your travels?

I was bored with my life! I was working nine to five for the Prudential, thinking there must be more to life when a friend announced she was quitting her teaching position and going to Australia for a year. That planted the seed and I soon had my own around the world ticket – first destination Australia.

I've never stopped since. It changed my whole outlook on life. Gone was the wish to further my career in financial services which was replaced with a craving to see more of the world. The remarkable people I meet

and the amazing places I visit inspires me to travel even more.

What countries have you travelled to?

My first worldwide travels were to Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and North America.

This was followed by an overland truck adventure through southern Africa and since then I have visited more than 15 other African countries including Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Malawi.

South America is also a favourite continent of mine which I have seen much of Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Chile and Ecuador.

I've travelled through Central America, Central Asia, South East Asia, China and Pakistan. I've taught English in Indonesia, managing to be arrested twice, resulting in me fleeing the country on a boat to Singapore on Christmas Day, narrowly missing the Boxing Day Tsunami!

What are your favourite places in the world?

Australia to live as the lifestyle and weather is much more agreeable with me than the damp English weather.

Mexico is another country I could live in with its beautiful beaches and colourful cities but I would need to improve my Spanish speaking skills.

Thailand and Vietnam for their delicious food. Namibia in Africa for its stunning and varied landscapes and Iran for the most friendly people.

Nearly every night in Iran I was invited into stranger's homes for tea and halva.

Lastly, the Hunza Valley in Pakistan and Nepal for the amazing hiking with spectacular scenery, glaciers and mountains.

Was it always your intention to write a book?

No. An incident led to my writing "career" in 2013 when I was travelling through West Africa on an overland truck.

Two of my fellow passengers, Lynn and David, were



Mexico with its colourful cities and beautiful beaches is a place Sharon could live (photo: PA)

from the Blue Mountains, Australia, and we got along famously. I had been unable to contact my parents for quite some time on this particular journey from Senegal to Ghana due to lack of Internet cafes. At that time I didn't travel with any mobile phone or laptop. Upon reaching Accra, the capital of Ghana, I was able to see my inbox for the first time in two months. The news was shocking. My mum, who had been battling cancer for four years, had now been diagnosed with numerous brain tumours and her mental health had deteriorated rapidly. The news came as such a blow as days before I left home my mum received an all clear result from an all over body scan.

I booked the next flight out of Accra. For the next six months my dad and I nursed my mum, who, being such a strong woman, battled on

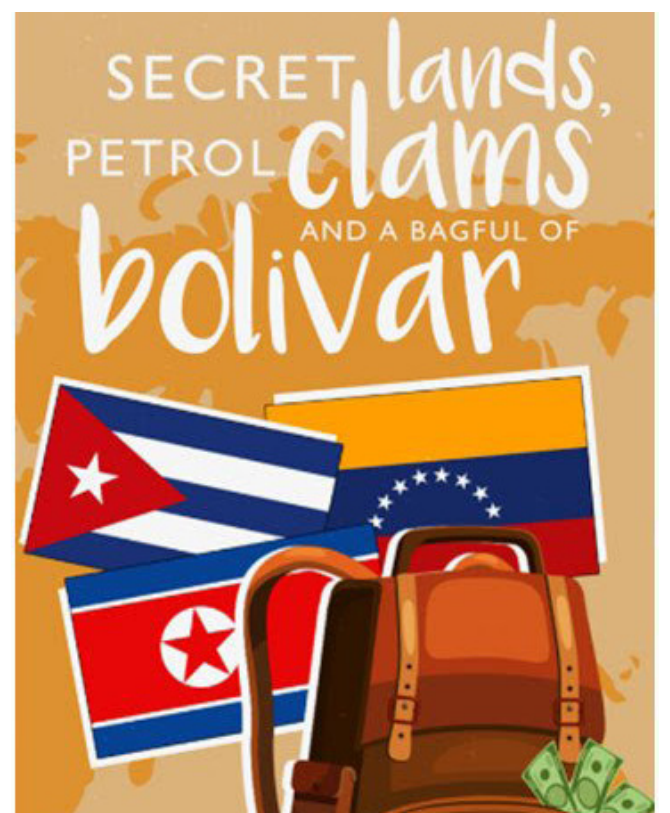
through the most horrible affects the cancer was having on her body and mind. Sadly, she passed away on the 14th October 2013.

Lynn and David had kept in constant contact with me via email and knowing my current situation they asked if I would like to house and cat sit for them while they go travelling again for six months in January 2014.

Being a prolific traveller myself since 1999 it didn't take much convincing for me to accept their offer.

Having been entertained by all my travel emails throughout the years, my friends kept telling me I should take this opportunity to write a book and a book I did write. My first book titled *Pringles, Visas and a Glow in the Dark Jesus* was published in September 2015.

My travels since have taken me to Venezuela, Colombia, North Korea, the





Sharon Cracknell has itchy feet and has travelled across the world since 1999

Danakil Depression in Ethiopia, a trek up Mount Toubkal in Morocco and to the time-warped Cuba which all feature in my sequel book *Secret Lands*, *Petrol Clams* and *a Bagful of Bolivar*. In 2019 I made the decision to skip my usual three month travels to a handful of random countries and got myself another 12-month visa to live in Australia again.

This time, I swapped the Blue Mountains for Emerald Beach on the East Coast and hopped on a plane in December 2019.

The timing couldn't have been any more fortuitous as I dodged the horrific spread of coronavirus in the UK resulting in all the lockdowns and restrictions. I lived happily in my writer's retreat at Emerald Beach away from infected people and wrote my book.

Please tell me the most adventurous tales from

your travels?

The most intriguing has to be North Korea. Before even entering the country my friend Matt and I had to attend a 90-minute briefing at the offices of Koryo Tours in Beijing.

Strict instructions were given regarding the removal of any inappropriate images on phones, books and cameras.

Eleven days of obeying commands, eating when we were told to eat, walk where we were told to walk and bowing when we were told to bow. To celebrate the 70th Anniversary National Day we also witnessed a Military Parade and attended the opening night of the Mass Games. Kim Jong Un was sat just metres away from us

Storm chasing in the States brought a close encounter with a tornado. Speeding in the rain along

country lanes in Throckmorton in Texas, Brad our driver screeched to a halt and turned round, drove a few yards then did it again. Unbeknown to me we were in the "bear's cage" right under the forming tornado.

We could've ended up like the cow in the film *Twister* getting sucked up into the tornado funnel!

What/where will you do/go next?

I'm hoping to do a trek in Jordan later in the year – Dana to Petra, pandemic allowing. I want to visit Sri Lanka, Jordan, Tibet, Mongolia, Canada, Bhutan, Russia, Madagascar, Iceland, not to mention most of Europe!

Where can we find your book?

Secret Lands, *Petrol Clams* and *a Bagful of Bolivar* is out now and available from all good bookshops including Waterstones and Foyles.



Sharon wrote her second book while living near Emerald Beach in Australia