

The Journey



The author's psychological thrillers have been translated into more than 20 languages. He could have done with a few on his first epic adventure.

The traveller

Michael Robotham

The journey

London to Kathmandu, Nepal

The year

1988

On the radar

He won the British Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger award in 2015 for *Life or Death*. His latest novel, *The Secrets She Keeps*, is out next month.

Michael Robotham's trip "wasn't all high drama"; in Turkey, he shared a moment of lightness with young locals (above)



MY adventure began above a London travel shop in May 1988. Sixteen of us gathered for a meeting, eyeing one another with a mix of hope and trepidation. Would this holiday bond us for a lifetime or make us want to strangle one another in our sleeping bags?

The next day, we climbed into a soft-top Bedford truck with seats down either side, to start a four-month journey across two continents, from London to Kathmandu.

As with many adventures, the moments of adversity are the most memorable. We entered Iran the day after an American missile shot down a passenger plane and immediately sensed paranoia and hostility. When our truck was waved down at a military checkpoint, teenagers brandishing Kalashnikovs confiscated our beach photos, magazines, playing cards and chess sets, shouting and waving their guns with each new discovery.

In Isfahan, the hotel pools were drained and the bars closed but most Iranians we met were friendly and grateful that tourists had come to see their beautiful country.

In the months that followed, we were tear-gassed in Pakistan, placed under houseboat arrest in Kashmir and stranded by an earthquake in Nepal. But it wasn't all high drama. We camped on a beach at Gallipoli and sat around a fire singing Eric Bogle's *And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda*, feeling the spirit of the Anzacs all around us. Waking early for a swim, I dug my toes into the sand and found spent rifle shells

In Jordan, we rode on horseback into Petra, the "rose-red city half as old as time", and I pictured myself as Indiana Jones discovering a lost world. We crossed the desert of Wadi Rum, following in the footsteps of Lawrence of Arabia. I drank sweet tea with a Bedouin tribesman who offered me three camels for my wife. He seemed hurt when I turned him down.

In Syria, we visited the waterwheels of Hama and the Souk al-Madina in Aleppo and beheld the crumbling majesty of Palmyra – all now obliterated or destroyed. In remotest Pakistan and India, children wanted to touch our white skin and perhaps receive a pen or a pencil for school.

Our leader was Ian Stevenson from Brisbane. Barely 26, he had a calm authority that got us across borders and out of trouble without ever paying bribes. He's one of my oldest friends and my youngest daughter's godfather. Today, he runs Conservation Lower Zambezi, protecting the wildlife and natural beauty of Zambia.

Every few years, he calls and says, "It's about time we had another adventure."

"Where do you have in mind?"

"How about Namibia or Mozambique or Colombia... or Peru?"

The trip from London to Kathmandu sparked a wanderlust in me that has never left. Since that adventure, I've been like Bilbo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*, always desperate for another escapade or quest. Great journeys are like great novels: they answer questions you never thought to ask. ●