

Pushing the boundaries

DOM JOLY

The comedian, columnist and travel writer tells **Angela Sara West** about braving the Congo, deserts and celebrity-filled jungles

Pulling pranks on unsuspecting celebrities and members of the public on his pioneering Trigger Happy TV show, screened in over 80 countries, means boundary-pushing funnyman, Dom Joly, hears his globally-famous catchphrases worldwide.

"I get 'HELLO!' shouted at me in more languages than you might have thought possible," he tells me. "And I still don't have a good comeback!"

His edgy exploits as a serial globe-trotter, seeking dangerous travel spots to satisfy his interest in the places most people avoid, has seen him hit some of the most hostile environments on earth: North Korea, Syria, Chernobyl... "I'm addicted to wanderlust. There is no bigger thrill for me than the first moments in a new destination, trying to work the place out and get a feel for it. I then embark on an adventure that allows my books to write themselves," he says.

Joly is also drawn to destinations with a dark past, and adores sharing stories of his amazing off-the-beaten-track adventures in his books and travelogues, aiming to challenge people's perceptions of places often misrepresented and misunderstood.

In his quest to visit the world's most unlikely tourist spots, he has skied the segregated slopes of Iran and taken in Chernobyl "before it became trendy".

Beirut-born Joly grew up in a warzone, with shells landing literally on his back doorstep, and went to the same school as Osama Bin Laden. His war-torn childhood and subsequent travels are both a source of inspiration for his comedy TV material, along

with his books, which captivantly recount some of the scariest, strangest and most downright dangerous places he's encountered on his travels.

With a distinct taste for deserts, he's done the Sahara, the Mojave, The Gobi and the legendary Empty Quarter. The appeal? "I find deserts enormously relaxing," he explains. "They're the only places where I unwind. They are definitely my happy place."

Fearless Joly believes everyone should get out of their comfort zone and 'lose themselves' for a month. "Head to Morocco if

“ The Congo was hair-raising, Syria is a staggeringly beautiful country, and North Korea is like visiting another planet”

you're a lightweight; Algeria, if you're serious about it," he advises.

The unrelenting explorer describes his latest book, *The Hezbollah Hiking Club*, recounting tales from his epic hike with two pals trekking the Lebanese Mountain Trail, from the Israeli border to the Syrian border, as a "love letter" to Lebanon.

The highlights of reconnecting with the country so close to his heart? "I loved visiting the Hezbollah Resistance Museum, a kind of alternative Disneyland, and the Qadisha Valley, the jewel in Lebanon's Crown."

He encourages readers to visit his homeland, but why should it be on our travel radar? "Lebanon, at its best, is a combination of the

South of France, California and Switzerland. Think pine forests, beaches, skiing, Roman ruins and the food... oh God, the food!"

He's felt most frightened while 'monster hunting' in the Congo, trekking through forests to a machete-wielding tribe whose permission he needed to reach a lake which is home to a mythical monster. It was no laughing matter when they got drunk on "jungle gin" and, after one attacked him, a petrified Joly escaped by canoe. "I'm most uneasy when I feel a complete loss of control. The Congo was hair-raising and very difficult to travel through as a solo traveller."

Cambodia, Syria and North Korea are among his favourite destinations, despite once being forced at gunpoint to go for tea after rejecting an invitation from a lorryload of Syrian Bedouin! "Mainly because there aren't many other tourists about, although Cambodia is getting there. Syria is a staggeringly beautiful country and North Korea is like visiting another planet."

Joly's experience on 'The Island' off Panama with Bear Grylls is the hardest thing he's ever done. "The biggest high was just surviving. I didn't eat a thing for two weeks and lost two and a half stone, which was a bonus. By day ten, I had lost all energy and was pretty useless, plus things weren't helped by being eaten alive by sandflies."

And how was his experience down under, on 'I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out Of Here'? "Compared to the 'The Island' it was like an exotic spa holiday. It was the ultimate technology and social detox. I didn't have to worry about anything for 21 days - except spiders and Gillian McKeith!"

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Dom Joly's book, *The Hezbollah Hiking Club: A Short Walk Across The Lebanon*, is out now, priced £20, from stanfords.co.uk. Dom will be speaking at Stanfords' Travel Writers Festival at Destinations: The Holiday and Travel Show, 30th January–2nd February 2020 at Olympia London. His tour, *Holiday Snaps: Travel and Comedy In The Danger Zone*, visits 52 venues next spring, starting in Kent in February. awaywithmedia.com