

Chris's life is one big adventure

From Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe, Wearside photographer Chris Blade gives us an insight into his worldwide adventures in pictures. **Cara Houchen** reports.

HE is currently the Senior Manager of Enterprise at the National Glass Centre but Chris Blade has many strings to his artistic bow.

The 48-year-old, who has an MA in glass making and design, spent years working as a glass and furniture designer after graduating from The Royal College of Art, London.

He then spent 15 years as a university lecturer before deciding to pursue his other passion, photography.

"One day I just thought 'sod this'," he said. "I went part-time as a lecturer, so for six months of the year I was free to do what I wanted."

"A friend introduced me to Charlie Hopkinson who owns Dragoman, which is an adventure travel company and he invited me to come along on the trips as a professional photographer.

"I had the pick of the crop really and because of that I've been to some amazing places."

Over the years Chris has taught himself digital photography after being inspired by his dad and his brother as a child, who were both keen snappers.

He explained: "I just picked it up as I went along and I read a lot about it, but I have an artistic background anyway and it was nice to turn my hobby into a career."

"Photography is a way of recording where I have been. Some people write diaries - I take pictures. I used to sketch but I can record so much more with a camera."

After two years juggling two careers Chris decided to quit his university job completely so he could fully embrace his new-found lifestyle as an adventure photographer.

He said: "It was too difficult to be transient across the world and then come back into the rigidity of education."

"I couldn't stand the banality and all the stuff that came with it."

Chris spent four years on and off documenting Dragoman trips in pictures and now he's sharing these images via his website.

The site displays just some of the amazing, iconic and beautiful images Chris has captured and he explained that he still has hundreds more to upload.

He said: "It's a visual tool and it gives you a glimpse into places that are inaccessible to most people."

"I've been to some amazing countries but I really loved Kyrgyzstan, it's such a beautiful country as it's so unspoilt - I really like the wilderness and the people who live in these places have such a simple life."

"Mongolia is very similar and in both countries it's common to see herds of wild horses roaming around the countryside and you can go miles without coming

across any form of civilisation - it's just stunning."

He added: "You're miles from anywhere and you feel like you belong with nature, you're closer to it."

"We take everything for granted in the West, but in these places if you want something you can't just pop to the shop and get it."

As Chris made his way from country to country he was able to experience the cultures that make these places so unique, and one country in particular that stood out was Tibet.

"It's wonderful," he said. "There are no fences anywhere, which is something that really stood out for me, they just have their own rules and people respect them."

"It's something about the history of the place, the religion and how Buddhism is so entwined in everything they do there."

And it's not just the cultures that are so different, the cuisine - which is not to everyone's taste - requires a strong stomach and an open mind.

Chris said: "I have eaten most things, but I had Cassava bread - Cassava is a woody shrub, the roots are very rich in starch, and contain significant amounts of calcium - in Venezuela and that was the worst thing I've ever tasted."

"But I've also had pickled ants and in Peru I had guinea pig. They keep them round the house and they feed them up so they get big and fat, then they roast them. It wasn't very nice, but if you can't store food the best way to keep it fresh is to keep it alive."

"Then I had dog in China, although I didn't realise what it was when I was eating it, but it was quite tasty, and duck heads in Hong Kong."

"The secret is not to know what you're eating."

Although Chris has put down temporary roots here in Sunderland he is eager to embark on his next journey and he has set his sights on the North Pole if he can get the funding.

But his love of adventure is something he wants to pass on to other people no matter what stage of life they are in.

He said: "I think everyone should do it - everyone should have a mid-life crisis in the nicest possible way!"

"It really puts things into perspective and companies like Dragoman provide a safe way to explore the world and you can then see where you fit into it."

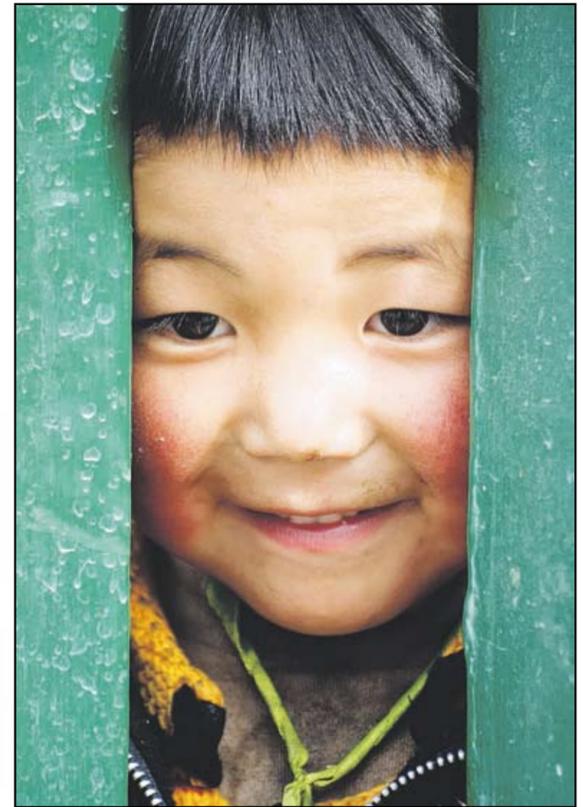
"It's important to experience life and you will never come back the same person."

He added: "I want to see the world and capture it in photographs because it's changing so rapidly and eventually certain places, cultures and communities will be gone for good."

● To see more of Chris Blade's photographs, visit www.chrisblade.com



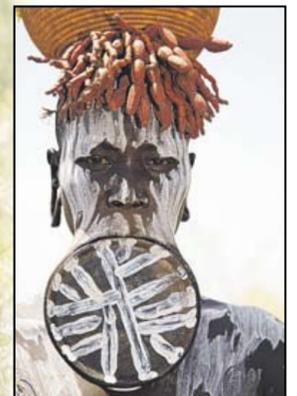
LIFE THROUGH A LENS: From left, silk spinning in Kyrgyzstan, and elderly woman in Lesotho, and tea time in Northern China. Below, charging lions in Zimbabwe. Inset, Chris Blade.



ALL SMILES: A young Tibetan boy, in Xiahe.



RELAXING BOAT RIDE: The Okovango Delta in Botswana.



AMAZING PEOPLE: Left, a Merci tribeswoman in Ethiopia. Right, an elderly man in Marrakesh, Morocco.



SPIRITUAL: A Buddhist monk in Nepal.