

Snapping up an ice career

Twelve years ago James Finlay nearly lost his life through Hodgkin's Disease but survived to become an accomplished landscape photographer. This is his story...

By Kate Gee

A chance meeting with Arctic explorer Dave Mill led to the opportunity of a lifetime for photographer James Finlay when he was invited to join Dave on his solo and unsupported walk to the North Pole. "I didn't really think about it, I just said 'yes' and then later thought about the consequences of what physically happens to your body in that environment," he says.

James began training for the expedition in January, carrying a 40-pound backpack half an hour to the gym, working out for an hour and a half, then carrying it home again, and by March was in shape for the trek.

Throughout the trip James was astounded by what he saw. "Flying over Elsmere Island, which is the northernmost island in Canada, the views are incredible. There were four of us in the team on the ocean, we stepped out of the hut and there was the ocean about 20 yards away completely frozen. The nearest other person was about 1,000 miles away. You feel very privileged to be there and experience the environment of the Arctic.

"My favourite picture of the exhibition is the colour one of the pressure ridge. We had walked three miles into the Arctic Ocean, it had taken about three hours to get there and it was freezing, extraordinarily cold, your eyes naturally water and the tears freeze so it's hard to open your eyes, but at the same time the beauty of just standing there is very humbling. The silence is incredible but broken by explosions of ice breaking up and you are walking on an environment that is always moving. It's totally unique, it's like walking on

an escalator going the wrong way because the ice is always moving at about two miles an hour in the opposite direction from the one you are going in, and you are not going fast anyway."

James remained back at the base camp to photograph the stunning landscape, while Dave forged ahead on his solo expedition. Though the ice was breaking up dangerously around Dave, James soon found a novel way of lifting his friend's spirits. "When Dave was walking I tried to give him a boost by satellite phone and he mentioned that he was listening to David Gray's album *White Ladder* so I set to task and managed to get hold of his manager and a week later Dave was talking to David Gray while he was on the ice and it really gave him a boost," he says.

The photographs that James took will be on display in the Getty Images Gallery in London from July 11, alongside those of photographer AH Robinson in an exhibition called *After Vista*. "The creative idea is the ever-changing landscape. AH Robinson shot in a landscape format in the early 1900s, his photographs are mainly of the UK, of places that people couldn't get to then. Now most of us can travel abroad and go round the world but the Arctic is still an inaccessible place to most of us so I have images of a place that today people still can't get to."

But things could have turned out very differently for 34-year-old James. Some 12 years ago while he was at university in Pittsburgh, he noticed a lump the size of a pea on his neck. In a couple of weeks it was the size of a golf ball and he was swiftly diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma, a form of cancer. Six weeks of daily radiation followed, but



'The beauty there is very humbling and the silence is incredible but broken by explosions of breaking ice'

James was determined to continue with his studies to keep himself focused "I remained extremely positive about the situation and I wanted to be doing something rather than sitting round mooping," he explains.

His determination and positive attitude meant that within a year of his initial diagnosis, James had graduated and been offered a prestigious position with international advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather. After a brief stint in the company's Chicago offices, he was transferred to London where he spent the next five years scaling the corporate ladder with his sights set on running their London offices one day. With yearly trips back to Pittsburgh for scans, James was finally given the all-clear in February 1996. After consultation with friends and colleagues and particularly his doctors who strongly recommended he take a break, James handed in his notice to O&M. "I

was very reluctant to leave advertising, it was something I'd spent years training for and really enjoyed, but I just knew I had to get my body rested and back in shape again."

So in January 1997, James embarked on a world trip, beginning in the Himalayas. "When I was ill in hospital I said to myself 'the day that I am fit and healthy and have got rid of this cancer, I am going to go somewhere where I can see the top of the world,' and Mount Everest seemed the best place." From Nepal, his trip took him through seven countries in Africa, where he climbed Kilimanjaro, around Australia and New Zealand, and across North America.

On his return to London, James was keen to show friends his photographic record of his travels and so impressed were they with the images he had captured, they persuaded him to display them to a wider audience. So to celebrate his 30th birthday, James hired a

room at the Chelsea Design Centre, hung 40 of his favourite photographs and threw a party. Throughout the night, friends and colleagues admired his work and offered to buy copies of the prints, and James began to see a potential career developing.

He also attracted the attentions of Denise Prior of the Royal Geographical Society. "Within ten minutes she said 'I have to get these up at the RGS', so my freelance career kicked off on my 30th birthday," he says. James admits that having cancer totally changed his perspective on life. "It changed my view of the world, I found that I started to look at detail and really tried to soak up these wonderful vistas. I realised that there is more to life than sitting behind a desk, and I discovered a passion for photography and image," he says. "I want to see more of the world before I die - bring back these images to tell people about it."

