

Fame & Fortune

My holiday home is in a war zone

Desmond Morris has visited 107 countries and sold a Gainsborough for £100,000, *John Wright* discovers

Desmond Morris, 92, is a zoologist, television presenter, surrealist painter and author of more than 90 books. He found fame in 1967 when *The Naked Ape* became an international bestseller, selling more than 12 million copies. Since 1956 he has presented 500 weekly *Zoo Time* shows for Granada TV. Today he lives in Ireland near his family.

Did your childhood influence your attitude to money?
I grew up during the Depression in Purton, Wiltshire. During the war there wasn't much money or much to buy but I was allowed a halfpenny to spend on sweets.

My father wrote fiction but couldn't sell his work. A well-known friend said, "I'll publish them under my name and you can have the money" - and when they did that they sold immediately. It showed that with a name you could sell things, and that really upset him.

Desmond Morris and friend on *Zoo Time* in 1961, below



I remember the sound of his typewriter tapping, but in the end he gave it up and opened a tobacconist's and confectionery shop.

What was your first job?

Playing drums in a jazz group in Swindon. During the war the musicians had gone off to fight. I was 14 and we played for troops stationed nearby who had a dance evening; my earnings for the night were £1. When I finished my education I was conscripted into the Army.

Do you use cash, debit cards or credit cards?
I use the debit card but I'm old-fashioned and always have some cash.

Well-travelled: Desmond Morris at home, above



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university, I noticed it was curled under at the bottom to fit the frame. I uncurled it and to my astonishment it said, "Thomas Gainsborough" and it had a date. So I took it to a museum and they said it was fake. They photographed it because there were fake Gainsboroughs around and they wanted a record of it.

Many years later, a man writing a two-volume monograph on the drawings and watercolours of Gainsborough asked to see it. He said that it was a very important Gainsborough, a preparatory work for a major work that's been lost; it's now known as "the Morris Gainsborough". I sold it for £100,000.

Have you ever been ripped off?
An art gallery once sold some of my paintings and then didn't pay me. They went bankrupt.

Have you gambled?
I gambled \$1 in Las Vegas, so that I could say I'd been gambling in Las Vegas. I was filming there and watched all these people losing their money and I did it to prove I wasn't going to become a sucker.

Have you ever splashed out?
I'm not a splasher; for me, that's using money badly. People who splash out on a Lamborghini are going to sit in a traffic jam in a car that can do 300mph. What is the point?

We did miss the swimming pool we had in Malta, so I built a 40ft indoor swimming pool in an extension of my house in Oxford and I was splashing out in both senses. It cost a fortune. A ceiling had to be replaced, a pitched roof put on; there was always a leak or it had to be cleaned. But it was lovely because for the past half-century I was able to swim almost every day.

How did you spend the continuing royalties from *The Naked Ape*?

I gave the rights to my mother. She had the money coming in each year and she'd say, "I shan't spend it, dear! I'll keep it for you," and I said, "No, you've got to blooming well spend it." That sense of security in knowing she'd never be in serious financial difficulties was why I think she lived to 98.

Desmond Morris's latest book *Postures: Body Language in Art* is out now. An exhibition of his paintings will be held at the Beaux Arts Gallery, London, in June and July

Does money make you happy?

Yes. I wrote *The Naked Ape* in four weeks, and when it was this big bestseller out of the blue it meant for the first time in my life I had a lot of money. I said to my mother, "I'm going to live it up in the Mediterranean, buy a big house and a boat to search around the coastline and spend all this money." She said, "No, dear, you must save it," because she'd had a terrible time when my father died in 1942. "All he left me was an overdraft."

It took me five wonderful years to spend it. When there wasn't much left I started work again and had enough to buy a house in Oxford. I've never been interested in money in itself, just as a means of exploring. My wife and I went around the world seven times and visited 107 countries.

Have you invested in property?

Not invested. I've not done very well with property. I haven't been able to get into our holiday apartment in Famagusta, Cyprus, since 1974 because it's in a war zone, a huge city

Splashing out on a 300mph car that's going to sit in a traffic jam. What's the point?

surrounded by men with guns. I've still got the deeds but it's derelict. I also had a beautiful 27-room villa in Malta I regret selling for £50,000 (worth more than £600,000 today). If I'd leased it I could've lived there in the sunshine in my old age.

Have you saved for your retirement?
Good God, no.

Have you done any lucrative appearances?

Giving lectures about my scientific work was lucrative - though I didn't do it for that reason. I introduced the concept of body language in the Seventies, and people in huge companies were aware that it was part of their negotiations. The lecture agency would fly me out to Bermuda, Hawaii or Tokyo. Delivering a lecture paid me several thousand pounds.

What's the best thing you ever bought?

The best thing I ever bought was a Gainsborough for a shilling. It was just after the war and the contents of bombed houses were put up for auction. I was painting but hadn't enough money to buy new frames, so I bought old frames at an auction in Marlborough, Wiltshire. I took the paintings out and used the frames. That was what I was after.

One was a watercolour landscape and I kept it. Years later, when I was at

Standard Life

