

WANTED: volunteers for free* week-long holidays in Mexico

(* Will be expected to spend days in bathroom with very upset stomach)

By Jeremy Laurance

FANCY a free holiday in Mexico, all expenses paid? Or perhaps Guatemala appeals? Flights and hotel accommodation up to the value of €1,600 are on offer for 900 volunteers who are prepared to test a remedy for one of the most common holiday afflictions - travellers' diarrhoea.

In a novel twist on the usual drug company trial, in which volunteers are paid to attend a clinic and be injected with a new agent to see how they react, the Trek Study sponsored by Intercell, a US vaccine manufacturer, is instead despatching willing backpackers to a part of the world where the bacteria that cause runny tummies are rife.

Volunteers will stay in three-star hotels but can choose where they go and what they eat and drink, provided they do not stray more than three hours' travelling time from one of the centres in Mexico or Guatemala where they are required to attend for blood tests and to provide stool samples if they develop an upset stomach.

A second study is planned of travellers to India, for which recruit-

ment has not yet started. Thomas Lingelbach, chief executive of Intercell, said the company hoped to obtain a global licence for the product. "We need to show the vaccine is effective in different geographical settings, as the bacteria that cause diarrhoea are different in different regions. If we can show broad coverage against travellers' diarrhoea we estimate we could get peak sales of €500m a year in five to 10 years."

Drug trials were popular with students as a way of boosting meagre bank balances until the 2006 catastrophe in which six volunteers nearly died at Northwick Park Hospital in north-west London - and one was described by his girlfriend as looking "like the Elephant Man" - after a trial of a monoclonal antibody, TGN1412, went disastrously wrong.

That was a Phase 1 trial - the first time the drug had been tested in humans. The travellers' diarrhoea vaccine has already been tested on

humans and an initial study with 170 American volunteers, who also travelled to Mexico and Guatemala, was encouraging. Half were given the vaccine and half a placebo, and results published in *The Lancet* medical journal last year showed it reduced the incidence of diarrhoea by 75pc.

Travellers' diarrhoea lasts on average for four to five days, involves 18 trips to the toilet and leaves sufferers dehydrated and debilitated. It blights millions of holidays every year with stomach cramps, nausea and vomiting. In *The Lancet* study, 21pc of those given the placebo had a moderate to severe attack of diarrhoea compared with 5pc of those who received the vaccine.

For the new study, volunteers aged 18 to 64 are being recruited in Germany as well as the UK and 200 of the total 1,800 sought in both countries have so far signed up, according to Intercell. The British study is being co-ordinated by the

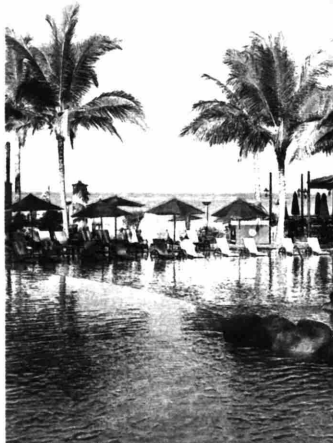
Hospital for Tropical Diseases in London and recruitment clinics have been established in Belfast, Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham, Reading and London. Mr Lingelbach said: "We don't expect any issues on the recruitment side."

The vaccine is delivered through a patch worn on the arm for six hours three weeks prior to travelling, followed by a booster dose delivered via a second patch one week before travelling. Volunteers are required to attend for blood tests and given a kit to collect stool samples.

Nigel Thomas, clinical director at Intercell, said: "We are looking for people who have already planned to go to Mexico or Guatemala and think this would add another interesting aspect. We cover their expenses - flights and accommodation - nothing beyond that."

"It is almost like going on a package holiday. They will be met by a concierge who will take them to their hotel and arrange for them to give their first blood sample within 48 hours. We need them to agree to be co-operative."

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IDYLLIC: But you might want to take note of where the loos are

Blue Christmas in US as Avatar smashes records

By Guy Adams
IN LOS ANGELES

IN ADDITION to mistletoe and wine, the average American Christmas seems to have consisted of popcorn, 3D spectacles and a tribe of tree-hugging blue aliens, as the continued success of the sci-fi film *Avatar* helped Hollywood achieve its most lucrative weekend since records began.

The James Cameron movie stayed on top of the box-office charts for a second consecutive week, selling \$75m (£52m) worth of tickets, as cinemas in the US and Canada reported total estimated box-office receipts in excess of \$278m (£192m) for the three days from Friday to Sunday.

That figure easily beat the previous weekend record of \$260.5m (£180m), recorded in July last year when the Batman film *The Dark Knight* debuted. Even accounting for inflation, it represents the biggest



AVATAR: Box office winner

72-hour take in modern history, according to Hollywood.com, an industry website which carries data going back to 1985.


Cinema-going is part of the Christmas Day ritual for many American families, and film studios often use the holiday to flood the market with eagerly anticipated new titles. This year was exceptional, however, in that the date saw three very different films achieve what amounts to instant blockbuster status. *Avatar*, in its second week of release,

was closely followed by Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*, which defied mixed reviews to post a healthy \$65.4m (£45.3m). In third was children's animation *Alvin And The Chipmunks: The Squeakquel*, which made \$50.2m (£34.8m).


Box-office analysts said the extraordinary figures were boosted by a mixture of good luck - Christmas fell on a Friday, meaning that the holiday exactly spanned the 72-hour reporting period - and the fact that *Avatar* was made in 3D, which encouraged viewers to shell out as much as 50pc more to see the title in special theatres.

The figures also reflect a long-term trend. Hollywood has defied the troubled economy this year to post record overall ticket sales. With three days left in 2009, receipts have now passed \$10bn (£6.9m) for the first time.

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