



HIGH DRAMA

Words and photos
by John Kazanas

The 2007 climbing season on Everest was relatively “quiet” in terms of fatalities, and saw the highest number of summiteers ever. In contrast, deaths and rescues on Mt Everest dominated the previous year in 2006 with a record fifteen deaths. As that season was starting, near tragedy struck a large international expedition including four Australians on Mt Pumori (7165m) located opposite Mt Everest. Melbourne climber John Kazanas describes his first high altitude expedition including the amazing rescues that followed his expedition’s summit day.

After countless mountaineering trips to the Australian Alps and several trips to New Zealand, my first Himalayan climbing adventure and dream of climbing in the shadow of Everest was taking shape. Not wanting to organise my own expedition, I had booked on a commercial trip run by Dan Mazur’s Summit Climb going to Pumori (7165m), Nepal. Wanting to climb something more difficult than a trekking peak, Pumori offered a challenging route, sustained semi-technical climbing, and high altitude exposure at over 7000 metres whilst having Mt Everest “in your face”. As all the trips I had done to that point were small, light, and fast mountaineering ascents, I had reservations about joining a large expedition and climbing with big groups on fixed ropes with people I knew little about. However it was too good to pass up.

Arriving for the first time in Kathmandu was an experience in itself. First stop was all the gear shops in Thamel. Pumori is around 1000 metres higher than most trekking peaks and only twelve kilometres from Mt Everest, so it experienced Everest like conditions requiring Everest-like specialised gear. The previous year the Summit Climb team had endured temperatures as low as forty two degrees below zero!

The trip included several Australians such as Philip Ling from Sydney (a leader in training with Summit Climb), John Percy (originally

from Melbourne) now in the UK, and Jay Riley, the expedition leader from Cairns. There was a real international flavour with people from Canada, U.S., New Zealand, South Africa, Holland, Sweden, U.K. and Germany. However, to my surprise only half of the members were “climbers” and the rest had simply done snow slogs like Aconcagua in South America and Kilimanjaro in Africa. Most had simply “trekked” on snow slopes and lacked pure mountaineering or climbing experience. So immediately I wondered how they would cope on what I considered a technical mountain that had ice walls, crevasses and sustained climbing.

After flying into Lukla (2800 metres), it took seven days and seventy kilometres of acclimatised walking following the Everest base camp trail to reach Pumori Base Camp (5300 meters), which was down the road from Everest base camp. We were the first commercial expedition at the start of the climbing season so we generated a lot of interest. Along the way we were treated to amazing views of the Himalayan range and including Ama Dablam (6856m), Kangtega (6685m), Lobuche (6145m), Nuptse (7861m) and of course Everest and Pumori which revealed themselves the closer we got. Just outside of Namche Bazar we saw Everest for the first time, which even from thirty kilometres away still looked amazing with its huge plume blowing off the summit.