

# Producing a Coffee-Table Book A Photographer's Challenge Worth Sweating For

by Peter Laurensen



Dusk from Kala Patthar  
(5,545m). Mount Everest is the  
black pyramid left of centre.





**Ama Dablam (6,856m), viewed from 4,800 metres, above Base Camp.**

Since February 2020 I've been writing about photographic locations worth sweating for here in NZPhotographer – wonderful places that demand a little pain in order to enjoy the gain. Places that take more effort to reach than the immediate-gratification-selfie-seeking hordes are prepared to make. This article is, for me, about the ultimate worth sweating for destination. In fact, it encompasses seemingly endless magnificent photographic locations visited over a 32 year journey, culminating in a hard-back, coffee table format book with a difference.

Set in Khumbu, the region to the south of Mount Everest in Nepal, home to the Sherpa people, my 220 page book is entitled KHUMBU Gateway to Mount Everest Pathways to Kinship. Containing over 200 images and about 45,000 words, it's impossible for me

to tell you the whole story in an article like this and nor do I wish to – hopefully a description of it might be enough to encourage some readers to want to buy a copy! Either way, as photographers like me, I think that many of you will find it interesting to read about what it takes to produce such a book. Aside from the satisfaction derived, getting powerful images off devices and in to print, it allows compelling story telling and a special kind of reader enjoyment.

My love affair with Khumbu started back in May 1988, when as a 26-year-old, I first visited Khumbu on my O.E. Since then I've been back another six times to Khumbu, plus three other times to Nepal, twice to the Karakoram, twice to Tibet and twice to northern India. All these trips informed the experiences and thinking that comes together in my book.



**My son Will approaching Luza (4,410m) at sunset in December 2017.**

1988 was the year I really got in to photography. In anticipation of my imminent O.E, in 1987 I attended a basic night course at Wellington High School that introduced me to how to manually use an SLR camera – setting shutter speed and F-Stop to get the right exposure and composition. Digital didn't exist back then, and learning how to manually shoot film and slides really was a great foundation for me. During 1988 I took thousands of images, plenty of them not working out – I actually over exposed quite a few of my Khumbu images on that first visit, as I grappled with the extremes of light and shadow that you encounter in the high mountains. But I learnt heaps too and honed my technique with several of the images from 1988 featuring in my new book.

I became Dad to Ben in 1994, Ed in 2000 and Will in 2002, each son joining me on visits to Khumbu as they turned 15 which I mentioned in my interview in issue 24 which touched on my passion for capturing Khumbu.

I first started trying to write about my Himalayan experiences back in 1996, under a working title Pilgrimages to the Roof of the World. That got no publisher support but did result in my first website, which has since died. My first coffee table style book - Occasional Climber: A journey to Mount Clarity followed in 2013 with my current website occasionalclimber.co.nz coming soon after where you will find a lot of information and images about the Himalaya and Khumbu.

In February 2017 I was invited by Shaun Barnett to join him on a tramp in the Ruahine Ranges. Shaun is one of

New Zealand's best known backcountry photographer/writers and he knows our backcountry better than most, so his trips tend to be real gems. I've been on quite a few with him since and we've become good friends. Shaun helped me shape the concept of KHUMBU Gateway to Mount Everest Pathways to Kinship and then agreed to be my editor in 2018.

Inspired by having such skills backing me, I started writing in earnest in 2019, had a final visit to Khumbu in December 2019 (luckily just ahead of Covid-19), then completed my work mid 2020. This included actually designing and laying out all my text, pictures and maps in InDesign, which really bought the book to vivid life. The design process also formed an essential part of editing and unifying my own work. Selecting 224 images from the thousands I'd taken over the years, then working out how these best fitted with the narrative, was a mammoth task.

This still wasn't enough initially to secure publisher support. My first attempt, following a wait of about two months, resulted in a 'no, there isn't a big enough market and there is too much work still to do in culling back text and images by about ten percent'.

At this point I realised that my book might never see the light of day in the form I aspired to, so at great expense I had several prototypes printed so that I could at least hold a copy in my hands in the form I wanted it to be; and so I could give each of my sons a copy and also let me 102-year-old Grandad see it before it was too late.





**At their 130 year-old Tibetan-style home in Jorsale in November 1995.  
From left: Phura Diki, Lakpa Tenzing (cousin), Pasang Dorje, Pasang Chhuldin, and Nima.**

As it turned out, producing these prototypes was a game-changer, allowing me to demonstrate far better the potential of my project. I secured Bateman Book's support in October 2020. Having actual printed prototypes also made final fine-tuning more accurate and complete. With the Bateman team's backing I was then able to secure publication grants from both Federated Mountain Club's Mountain and Forest Trust and New Zealand Alpine Club's Dow Hall fund which, aside from helping financially, gave me a real confidence boost in terms of peer credibility and endorsement.

Around this time Guy Cotter agreed to write his foreword for my book. Guy is one of New Zealand's leading mountaineers and mountain guides. He is also Director and CEO of Adventure Consultants, who guide on Everest and other nearby peaks, so Guy knows Khumbu and quite a few Sherpa better than most, making him ideally qualified to write the foreword.

If you get hold of a copy of KHUMBU Pathways to Kinship (there's one up for grabs if you submit your own 'Worth The Sweat' photos' to the competition!) you'll immediately see that it's very visual. I can take good photographs, but there are already lots of books filled with nice photographs of parts of the Himalaya so I knew that if my book was to deserve a reader's attention it had to be more than just another visually beautiful coffee table production.

What distinguishes my book from others is its multi-layered story. Spanning seven trekking journeys over more than thirty fascinating years, it's a journey through tourism expansion, the emergence of guided climbs to the summit of Mount Everest, economic and technological development, and environmental and cultural change.

And trekking in the mighty Himalaya is really just the entre! On my second visit to Khumbu, in November 1995, I stopped at Jorsale village for the night and ended up staying at a teahouse. There I met a little Sherpa girl named Phura (who was just a few months older than my son Ben) along with her mum Nima and dad Pasang Dorje. That night marked the beginning of a friendship, spanning two countries far apart, which has slowly grown as our families themselves have grown over the decades. So my story is also about a journey of kinship between a Kiwi family and a Sherpa family; and a journey shared by a father and each of his three sons. The combination of time spent and personal contact with my Sherpa friends has also helped me to include lots of fascinating information about Khumbu and the Sherpa people.

With help from Wellington-based Roger Smith at Geographx we created a map of Khumbu, which features in the book's Introduction. At the risk of blowing my own trumpet, I haven't found a better 'at-a-glance' map of Khumbu. You can easily locate all the trekking trails and view points, passes, major



**Window on a different life - a young boy from Dingboche considers a picture of my boys and me in April 2006.**





Looking north-east to Cho La and south to Khumbi Yul Lha, from 4,950 metres on the Everest Wifi highpoint above Pangka.

glaciers, rivers, peaks, and villages, plus heights in metres above sea level.

While my book is not intended to be a comprehensive trekking guide, I do think that a sense of place is important and that readers will appreciate knowing clearly what they're looking at and reading about. To further assist this, for a selection of the many stitched panoramic images featured in the book, I've added peak and place names (as seen above). That said, there are many other images included primarily for their aesthetic rather than their informational qualities.

With the arrival of Covid-19 last year, I worried that the pandemic would inevitably delay completion of my book. In actual fact, Covid-19 turned out to work well for this project. Firstly I used the seclusion of the initial nationwide lockdown to build the maps and select and consistently process images from 32 years of photography (spanning film, slides and pixels, and five different cameras!) – so that when viewed in the same book, they all have a cohesive feel. Secondly, Covid-19 became an unexpected 'circuit breaker' that provided a poignant point to end my story – actually even better than my planned conclusion, which was to be a trip with my partner Cathy to finally meet my Sherpa friends and therefore close the 'kinship' loop. That trip will now happen post pandemic and post publication.

As events unfolded last year, it dawned on me that, just as Covid-19 had become a 'circuit breaker' on humanity's fossil-fuel-powered, insatiable consumption and shameful wastefulness, even since the evidence of our planet's human-induced warming has become indisputable, Covid-19 had also pushed pause on what was looking like death by unrestrained economic endeavour for the essence of Khumbu.

The final Chapter is now titled 'A New Dawn', because that is indeed what we all now face. Whether this new dawn is luxuriant and restorative, or bleak and destructive, depends upon us all. The choices we make will determine the global outcome; and the same can be said for Khumbu.

My hope is that KHUMBU Pathways to Kinship (available to order from [www.batemanbooks.co.nz](http://www.batemanbooks.co.nz) from 2nd August) will help to inform and encourage readers to make those choices that will sustain and nurture the unique and very special place called Khumbu, that I have come to know and love. More photos can be seen at the links below.



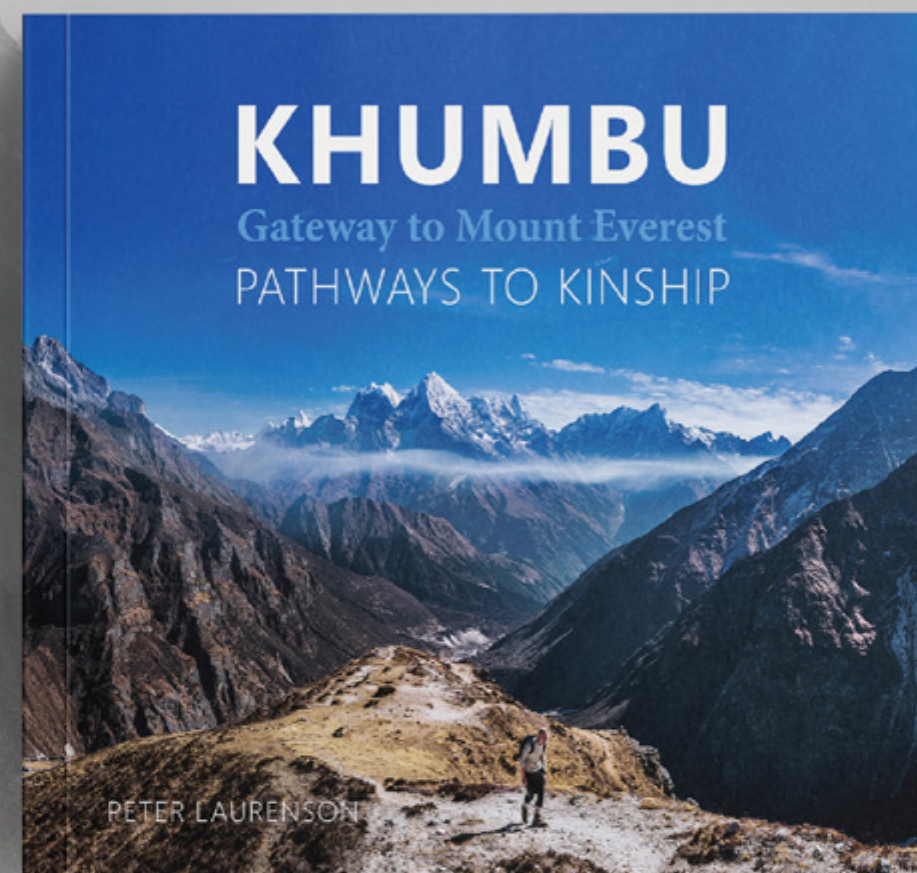
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[excio.gallery/occasionalclimber-khumbu](https://excio.gallery/occasionalclimber-khumbu)

**YOU HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO WIN A COPY OF KHUMBU GATEWAY TO MOUNT EVEREST PATHWAYS TO KINSHIP IN THE 'WORTH THE SWEAT' PHOTO COMPETITION WHICH RUNS 1<sup>ST</sup> – 20<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST OVER ON OUR FACEBOOK PAGE.**

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**KHUMBU** Gateway to Mount Everest PATHWAYS TO KINSHIP