

BOOK REVIEW

KHUMBU Gateway to Mount Everest Pathways to Kinship

By Peter Laurenson, Bateman Books August 2021, hardback, 220 pages, \$69.99.

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Reviewed by Kathy Ombler, freelance journalist.

Spoiler alert – I am quite in awe of this book. There are so many layers; stories within stories, and then there are the photos. Page after dramatic page reflect the majesty of the world's highest mountains, the poignancy of the people who live among them, and the journeys of the father who took his three sons, one at a time, to see this special place.

Here is the essence. Climber, adventurer, photographer, writer, family man and *Backcountry* Editor, Peter Laurenson, has developed a deep affinity for the Khumbu region of the Himalaya, and for its Sherpa people. Few New Zealanders have spent as much time in Khumbu. Since his first visit, in 1988, he returned to Khumbu six times, with each visit lasting several weeks, to explore both the main trekking trails, and more remote valleys and challenging high passes.

As for the layers, during these visits Peter developed a special connection with one particular Sherpa family. And he has taken his sons, each when they turned 15, to share his journeys, in something of a rite of passage. Over more than 30 years he has witnessed the changes wrought by tourism, as both trekking and commercial climbing of Everest have proliferated, tiny villages have become major settlements teeming with guesthouses, and attitudes from and towards tourists have changed. He was there in 2006 during the Maoist rebellion and again, in 2015, just after a massive earthquake shook the great mountains of the Himalaya.

We learn of the Sherpa culture, how and why these people live in remote Khumbu, and we get to know Peter's special Sherpa family. Nepal's recent history is recounted, first hand. Serious topics are discussed: tourism and commercialism and the related breakdown of a traditional culture; climbing and guiding ethics and whether rich people really should be crowding and queuing for their personal glory on Everest. Peter addresses these and other issues with thoughtful, intelligent, sincere writing. He's particularly concerned about global warming, thus it is with some guilt that he retains hope for just one last, long haul journey, to take his partner Cathy to meet their Khumbu kin.

Of all the layers, it's the 'pathways to kinship' that really speaks to me:

'Let me,' said Peter, taking the upset toddler onto his knee as her mum toiled over the fire, cooking dinner for the guests in the family's Jorsale teahouse. At the time Peter was a new dad himself, and missing his son Ben. That was in 1995, the toddler was Phura Diki, her mum Nima Sherpa and dad Pasang Dorje Sherpa, and the moment sparked the beginning of a family friendship now spanning nearly three decades. Each time Peter returned to Khumbu he and his sons spent time with the family and their lives became intertwined, as the respective families matured. In recent years Peter and his partner Cathy have sent financial support, including to Phura now studying nursing in Australia.

Peter's travels with his sons differed, each according to personality, fitness and their reactions to altitude (including Peter's own issue with the dreaded 'Khumbu cough'). They all had their struggles. They certainly tackled some staunch trekking, and used guides and porters only on the most serious adventures. Having been a mother of teenagers, I'm seriously impressed! But the trips were about so much more than hiking at altitude, as the boys themselves reflect in their dad's book:

Ben: 'Khumbu is not just a region of massive scale and breath taking beauty ... it is a place that fostered a lasting bond with my Dad, in a time that we both really needed it.'

Ed: 'It was a very emotional moment when Dad and Pasang Dorje hugged. The happiness that spread across Pasang Dorje's face was amazing, the same with Nima. I was blown away by their unconditional generosity to us. It has and will continue to guide the way in which I interact with and treat people.'

Will: 'Meeting Pasang Dorje and Nima Sherpa in their dirt floored, single-room house definitely put my cushy suburban life into perspective.'

If you're into alpine adventure, you'll be happy just reading of the treks and climbs in this book. There's a chapter for each of Peter's seven trips to Khumbu, a kind of trekker's diary merged with wider commentary about this special place. For me the many unfamiliar place names created rather a blur at first, but it gets easier as you read on. Peter's detailed maps help, there's one for each chapter showing the area he explores in that visit. Also, on several panoramic images Peter has written the names of major peaks, trails, villages and passes. By the end of the book you will know Khumbu like the back of your hand.

If you're worried those superimposed place names will detract from a good photo, don't be, there are ample more. Peter is a celebrated mountain photographer and this book represents 31 years of his capture of Khumbu's essence; soaring peaks, high lakes and deep valleys, tents and teahouses, gompas and prayer flags, yaks and vultures, Sherpa homes and lifestyles. We can be glad he was first there when respectful visitors were still welcomed into gompas (religious buildings) and the valleys not so crowded with trekkers. Especially heart-warming are Peter's portraits with his Sherpa family, their smiling eyes and radiant faces testimony to the joy of being together.

It's kudos to Peter that Everest expedition leader and climber, Guy Cotter, who probably knows Khumbu as well as any living New Zealander, agreed to write the book's foreword. Of the photography, Cotter wrote: 'The images are wonderful to the point I find myself looking so deeply into them that I feel I am actually there again, slightly short of breath, but full of gratitude.' Could there be a greater compliment?

Cotter also wrote of how the Sherpa people often become lifelong friends with the trekkers and climbers 'who take the time to know them', a clear endorsement of Peter's openness to cross-cultural kinship.

Peter also designed his book, nailing the nitty gritty; a clear layout, detailed captions, the aforementioned maps and a thorough Index that's set out in categories to enable easy searching. I also love the evocative chapter headings, 'Beyond the Dirt Strip' for example, four simple words that say so much. If there is a negative (tongue in cheek) the book is so big and heavy! But needs must, justice must be done to that amazing imagery; be prepared to read it at a table.

Peter and Cathy were to travel to Khumbu in 2020 when the pandemic struck. Instead, Peter completed this book, a blessing in disguise says Guy Cotter. I have to agree. *KHUMBU* is so much more than a stunning visual tome. In discussing kinship, and modern-day changes to Sherpa life, Peter sends serious messages for us to ponder, not least the need to engender understanding and respect for all humanity, no matter their culture or status.

Peter writes of the hope that this book will be a celebration of Khumbu and not a memorial to a bygone golden age. Let me also hope there will be another chapter to somehow add, the one that describes when Cathy meets Nima.

