



All packed up with cold places to go ... Everest hopefuls (from left) Mark Campbell, expedition leader Alex Harris, Sean Disney, Robin Walshaw and Anton Erasmus, together with photographer Sean Wisedale, packed their bags and set off for Tibet yesterday.

SA five set off to climb Everest in toughest possible way

By **NIKKI WHITFIELD**

Five young men left Johannesburg yesterday afternoon to begin their quest to plant the South African flag on Everest's 8 848m summit.

The group - expedition leader Alex Harris, Sean Disney, Mark Campbell, Robin Walshaw and Anton Erasmus, with cameraman Sean Wisedale - set off for Tibet on the day the Dalai Lama arrived in South Africa.

"We take it as a sign," quipped expedition leader Harris at an airport press conference yesterday. "Maybe this means the expedition will be blessed."

And it seems it'll need all the

blessings that come its way. Dogged by a lack of cash since the inception of the expedition three years ago, the group will set off for Everest without sherpas to help lug their gear to base camp or help them up the mountain.

They intend climbing the tricky north face, which claimed the life of ace British climber George Mallory, and will not use oxygen to help their bodies battle the rarefied air.

It's more ethically correct to go without oxygen and, anyway, it's too expensive, they said.

The group hope to set off for the summit around mid-October, depending on the weather window - Everest is now in its post-

monsoon, pre-winter season - and their acclimatising period.

Summitting would probably take between 18 and 20 hours, Harris said.

Asked if he was familiar with the north ridge - regarded as somewhat more technically difficult than the south ridge, the route Ian Woodall team chose in May - Harris said: "The north ridge is probably the most famous in the world.

"We have studied it well and we also have a liaison officer who knows the route who will come with us to advance base camp."

But one thing's for sure - four of the men will need extra

woollen caps to keep their heads warm.

All except Sean Disney are freshly hairless after opting to part with their tresses while out one night.

"I hope they come back with a bit more hair," said Mark Campbell's mother, Christine. "They look like a lot of convicts."

The trek has the blessing of the Gauteng government's department of sport, recreation, arts and culture.

MEC Peter Skosana was at the press conference yesterday to wish them well and to mention that the expedition would help the development of the sport of mountaineering in the province.