



More SA climbers to take on Everest

By CHRIS BARRON

AS IAN Woodall and Cathy O'Dowd arrived back in South Africa on Friday, five more South African climbers were preparing for another Everest assault.

They, however, intend to tackle the technically more difficult north side of the world's highest mountain, and will do so without the help of either oxygen or Sherpas.

Their attempt will take them in the footsteps of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, the British climbers who disappeared close to the summit during their ascent of the north ridge in 1924.

Woodall and O'Dowd went up the south side, along a route pioneered by Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Norgay Tenzing when they became the first to reach the top of Everest in 1954.

Four of the five climbers, team leader Alex Harris, 25, Sean Disney, 24, Anton Erasmus, 27, and Mark Campbell, 25, are members of the Mountain Club of South Africa. The fifth climber is Robin Wallshaw, 24.

Although the Mountain Club was recently maligned by Woodall as being unable to "organise a piss-up in a brewery", they are at pains to stress that their expedition is neither a

grudge thing nor an attempt to prove Woodall wrong.

In fact they have been living with the idea of summiting Everest for three years, but have been held back by a failure to get the kind of sponsorship that Woodall — to the surprise of local climbers who had never heard of him before — managed to arrange.

Even now, just two months before their intended departure on August 17, they are still short of R200 000. One of the reasons they have opted for the north ridge is that permits are much cheaper. The Woodall team paid \$10 000 (about R43 000) each for their places on the permit, whereas Harris and his team paid \$5 500 (about R23 650) for all five of them.

They hope to reach the top sometime between the beginning and middle of October, making the most of a two-week window of opportunity from the end of the monsoons to the onset of winter.

A truck will take them up to Base Camp at 5 200m, and they will use yaks to transport their gear from there to the Advance Base Camp at

6 700m. The dash to the 8 848m summit will take place from Camp Three, a tiny ledge cut into a 40-degree ice slope at 8 300m.

They hope to cover the 1,5km horizontal and 548m vertical distance in about nine hours, leaving them time to get back to Camp Three before nightfall.

Their biggest obstacle will be a vertical rock and snow climb of 30m at 8 630m where there is so little oxygen that climbers call it the death zone.

It was between Camp Three and the summit that three Indian climbers died recently.

It was only when the route up the northern face was closed to foreigners, after the Chinese take-over of Tibet in 1951, that attempts to summit Everest switched to the south in Nepal.

Following Hillary's opening up of the southern route, this way to the top became something of a highway, with traffic jams of up to 30 climbers at a time tramping along its well trodden path to the summit.

Harris said that while his team would dearly love to reach the top, "our primary objective is to get back safely".

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED . . . Sean Disney, Anton Erasmus and Alex Harris, who want to climb Everest from the north side Picture: CATHY PINNOCK