



No mountain too high

REACHING the top of the world can be a bittersweet experience: the goal of months, if not a year, of intense training, the stay at the summit is often necessarily brief.

“Everest is amazing, but the moment you reach the top, you only have 10 or 20 minutes to enjoy it,” says Nikos Magitsis, Greece’s most experienced mountaineer. “You can’t afford to be happy on the top for long. It’s very important to keep body and mind focused on the descent, which is sometimes more dangerous and challenging than the ascent.”

The only Greek to have scaled the highest summits of each of the world’s seven continents, Magitsis will on March 26, along with six other Greek climbers, embark on a new mission: to scale the 6,189m of Island Peak, or Imja Tse, in Nepal’s Khumbu Himal range. Magitsis first started climbing with his local mountaineering club, on the Pilio peninsula of central Greece, when he was 14.

High standards

“With each passing year, my targets and goals went higher and higher,” the 41-year-old says.

In 1994, after 10 years of climbing in Greece, he went on his first foreign expedition - to Mt Kilimanjaro and Mt Kenya, the two highest peaks on the African continent.

The African trip involved his first surmounting of one of the so-called “seven summits”. The last, Mt Elbrus in Russia, he climbed 14 years later.

His many expeditions have served to put Greece’s topography into perspective. “We live in a very low-lying country, where the highest point is Mt Olympus, which is only 2,919m.”

For high-altitude climbers like Magitsis, Olympus is like a hill, meaning that they have to go at least once a year to Nepal for training, flying into the town of Lukla (2,860m), the starting point for those wishing to climb Everest.

Magitsis counts Everest as his most challenging, and Carstensz Pyramid, in



western Papua in Indonesia, the most difficult climb. To reach the base camp of the latter, climbers have to pass through dense jungle, where it is extremely difficult to communicate with the local tribal people, and avoid the Grasberg mines, the largest gold mine and third largest copper mine in the world.

“After all that comes an 18-hour climb of vertical rock to the base camp,” says Magitsis, who has been to the Indonesian peak five times.

Brrr...

Subzero temperatures of up to -60°C and winds of 120kph are some of the natural barriers Magitsis has encountered.

“On top of Vinson Massif, the highest point in Antarctica, we had -50°C and winds of over 80kph, so that means a wind chill factor of -100°C!”

Magitsis says that mountain climbing has become a way of life as well as a living for him. “That means that I train every day by climbing, running and biking in the Greek mountains, and two or three times a year I go climbing abroad in ranges like the Himalayas, Andes or Caucasus.”

It’s an expensive hobby, mostly financed out of his own pocket and, occasionally, through sponsorships.

And the cost totally justifies the purpose. “Everyone has to pay something for his hobby - it’s what they like and

love doing,” he says.

Do his fellow Greeks appreciate the fact that they are surrounded by mountains?

“It’s true that foreigners appreciate our mountains more,” Magitsis says, “but in recent years I’ve noticed more and more Greek people seeking recreation in the mountains and taking care of them. This is very promising.”

Higher education

A PASSION for mountain climbing and highland pursuits in general led Nikos Magitsis to establish a school for outdoor sports in 1990. Its offerings range from activities in the Pilio region to expeditions to the world’s highest mountain peaks.

“We support people from the first step until the end of the trip,” Magitsis explains. “We put them through a

training programme which lasts from six to 12 months, and accompany them to the summit, should they wish.”

Mt Everest, he says, is the most exacting in terms of preparation, requiring daily, sometimes twice-daily, bouts of training.

An expedition to the world’s highest peak can also cost a mountain of money, anything from 29,000 to 39,000 euros, and can last up to 60 days.

Everything down to the last detail must be practised in all conditions, including learning to tie knots in the dark while wearing thick gloves and erecting tents in rainy and windy weather.

It’s not a sport for everyone, he points out. “You have to be in excellent physical and mental condition, strong in the mind and soul. You also have to realise that being at high altitudes is often psychologically difficult.”

On top of the world

NIKOS MAGITSIS was born in 1968, in the village of Agria, located on the Pilio peninsula near Volos. He has a degree in physical education and sports from the Democritus University of Thrace.

Apart from his mountaineering expertise, he is also a specialist in rock climbing, sea kayaking, mountain biking and winter skiing. Magitsis has completed more than 35 survival expeditions all over the world, in mountains, seas and deserts. He is the only Greek to have scaled the seven highest mountains on the seven continents, a venture that began in 1994 with

Mt Kilimanjaro and ended in 2008 with Mt Elbrus. When he’s not engaging in his hobby, he manages the sports department of his native Agria municipality.

Where the ‘Seven Summits’ are located

Africa	Mt Kilimanjaro (Tanzania) 5,892m
Antarctica	Vinson Massif 4,892m
North America	Mt McKinley (Alaska, USA) 6,194m
Asia	Mt Everest (Nepal/China) 8,848m
South America	Aconcagua (Argentina) 6,962m
Oceania	Carstensz Pyramid (Indonesia) 4,884m
Europe	Mt Elbrus (Russia) 5,642m