

Killer Mountain

Mount Everest's Deadly Allure

• Dov Levy

For almost a century now, people from every corner of the globe have been drawn to the challenge of conquering the world's tallest peak. Despite the luster of the challenge and the thrill of conquering it, Mount Everest holds a dark secret: the frozen, still unburied bodies of those who died trying. Some have even become famous landmarks in a macabre, mute, testimony to the ferociousness of this deadly mountain.

Since the commercialization of Mount Everest began in the early 1990s, the popularity of climbing the world's tallest peak has exploded. Hundreds of people gather each year to take up one of the sporting world's ultimate challenges: reaching the summit... and returning... alive.

Towering 29,035 feet above sea level, the summit of Mount Everest is indeed the highest point on planet Earth. Ever since it was first recognized as such, it has fascinated people everywhere... and dared them.

The first recorded effort to reconnoiter the mountain took place in 1922. Two years later, the first attempt was made to reach the top. It was not until 1953, however, that Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay made history by reaching the summit. Since then, scaling Everest has become increasingly easier. In 1990, just 18% of summit attempts were successful, but in 2012 that figure was 56%.

However, the history of climbing Mount Everest has a far more sinister side as well. In fact, the story of lives lost to Mount Everest actually predates the first successful climb. To reach the peak, "summiters" fight a combination of forces that seem to gang up against them in a diabolical conspiracy. Even more dangerous than the ascent is the descent. As of early 2015, there have been 4,142 climbers who have reached the summit (if you count multiple summiters, the peak was conquered 7,001 times). Of those, 267 people died on the way there or back. Since 1990, the average mortality rate for those attempting the climb

has been 3.6%. That's actually relatively small considering the extreme dangers involved. Not only that, but the number reflects a *decrease* in the mortality rate over time thanks to better gear, weather forecasting and more people climbing with commercial operations.

Still, with the number of climbers arriving at Everest each climbing season—in 2013 a record 658 people went up—the body count is virtually guaranteed to continue growing. And "body count" is the correct term, since many bodies of those who fail are either lost or too impractical and too difficult to recover. Perhaps 50 bodies out of 250 have been retrieved. Like sailors at sea, mountaineers on Everest know in the back of their minds that if they die on the way, their play-yard becomes their grave.

Wave Hello to the Pilots

The average cruising altitude of commercial jets is about 30,000 feet. At that height they would barely clear Mount Everest. It juts into the jet stream, those steady winds that boost your plane ride and cut down travel time when you're flying west to east. In fact, Mount Everest actually enters the stratosphere!

Everest lies on the border between Nepal to the south and Tibet to the north. The latter has been under Chinese occupation since 1950. (Politics play an important role on Mount Everest, as Chinese policy can restrict access to climbers at times. This is one of the



This image of Mount Everest (center) was taken from the international Space Station in 2004. The effects of the jet stream are visible as it blows snow and ice particles off the peak, creating a cloud to one side.

reasons that in recent years the south route to the top has generally been more popular than the north route.) It is part of the Himalayan mountain chain, the highest ridge in the world. The Himalayas account for nine out of the world's top ten peaks. (The second highest, K2, is located in Pakistan.)

The jet stream is all-powerful on Everest. It dictates precisely when climbers can attempt to reach the top and have a shot at surviving. For most of the year, the winds howl over the peak at speeds surpassing 110 MPH—hurricane force. And the temperature can hover at -100°F. Couple that with heavy snowfall that can deposit several feet in an eye-blink, and climbing Everest during that time is a guaranteed one-way trip.

Instead, climbers concentrate on the tight climbing season, from mid-April through the end of May. During this six-week period, the arrival of the monsoon shifts the jet stream north of Everest, creating conditions that are more hospitable to humans... relatively. During the climbing season winds may be down to 50 MPH and the temperature at a "mild" -20°F. Still, guides closely track the weather on a day-to-day basis to decide when to go ahead, even in the warmer season.

(There is a second window of opportunity during September, when the subsiding monsoon again shifts the jet stream away. However, the snowfall is heavier then,

offsetting the gains in lower winds and higher temperatures. Few mountaineers try to scale the mountain in the fall.)

Climbing to the peak is a four day affair... after flying to Kathmandu and then Lhotka, hiking for seven days to the base camp and then spending several weeks to acclimate. The first day's hike gets them to Camp I, the next day to Camp II, also known as Advanced Base Camp. Then they move on to Camp III where oxygen is needed to survive the night's sleep. Day 3 involves the climb to Camp IV on the South Col (a *col* is a low point in a mountain ridge, often used as a pass between the peaks).

Those who feel ready to go on then look for the 6-to-16-day window of opportunity for summiting. The final push and descent back to Advanced Base Camp takes another day. The weather has to be just right if they want a shot at surviving. When everything looks right, they will enter the Death Zone.

Life in the Death Zone

Beyond the presence of the jet stream, the cold and the wind, the sheer height presents the greatest danger to climbers. Americans know that when they fly from a city near sea level, say Los Angeles or New York, to Denver, their bodies will need some time to adjust. Denver is called the Mile-High City because its



The peak of Mount Everest in all its beguiling beauty. Right: The most popular route to the top, using the Southeast Ridge. More than 15 routes have been identified for reaching the summit.