STANDARDS IN SPORT: EXPEDITION TO EVEREST

To climb Mount Everest, rising 8,848 metres above sea level, is the dream of many. In the 2013 season (which ended in June), it came true for 600 people, more than half of those were Sherpa. Without the mountaineering skills of this Himalayan people, expeditions to the world's highest peak would not be possible and this has been the case since 1953, when Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first stood on top of the world.

The world's top attraction

For decades, only the most accomplished alpinists and Sherpas attempted to climb the mountain known as Chomolangma in Tibet and Sagarmatha in Nepal, and whose borders run through its summit. In the early 1990s, guide companies began to organise expeditions to the Himalayan outpost, and they often fill up fast. In addition to its obvious appeal as the world's highest point, Everest is not considered one of the most difficult of the fourteen 8,000+ metre peaks in the mountain range, though conditions at that altitude make any form of sustained effort excruciating. Expedition organisers say they take great care to make sure their would-be summiteer clients have the mountaineering skills and experience to ascend safely. "We recommend having climbed Mont Blanc, Denali, Aconcagua, and an 8,000 [metre]," says Gordon Janow, director of programmes and a founder Alpine Ascents, based in Seattle, US. The company's mountaineering school provides training to those who have the desire, but not yet the skills.

Though people are generally fitter today than in the past, "we only take those we know have the skills and experience," says Simon Lowe, a director of Jagged Globe, based in Sheffield, UK, also a pioneer in guided expeditions to Everest. The vetting process is also important because it is "unfair", he says, to mix people of different levels, reducing the chances of the group making it to the top.

A costly pursuit

In addition to experience and fitness, an expedition to the mother of all summits also comes with a steep price tag. The guide companies contacted for this article offer the destination for sums that fall in a close range: $65,000 (Alpine Ascents), $63,000 (Chamonix-based Himalayan Expeditions), and $58,000 (Jagged Globe). "We think it's a reasonable price, it means our clients won't be restrained by logistics, and this in turn leads to higher success rates," says Simon Lowe. He has seen dozens of Indian would-be summiteers having to be turned away because of local companies' cutting corners.

"Guided expeditions can cost anywhere from $20,000 to $100,000, depending on many factors, which can be confusing," says Alan Arnette, a journalist and alpinist who scaled Mount Everest in 2011 at age 54, and has climbed the Seven Summits (the highest peaks in the seven continents) to raise awareness for Alzheimer's disease.

The expense covers a number of fixed costs, such as the permit ($10,000), liaison officer ($3,000 per team), icefall route management ($500) and rope fees ($350); and other services that vary from company to company, such as the guide-to-client and Sherpa-to-client ratios, some



A scene from the 2013 season on Everest, by Jagged Globe operations manager and guide Matthew Parkes.

Matthew Parkes / Jagged Globe

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Mountain Hardwear athlete Ueli Steck, pictured here in 2013 on his way to the top of the world, with Simone Moro and photographer Jon Griffith.

Mountain Hardwear

companies providing each client with a climbing Sherpa; and the number of oxygen bottles, with seven bottles per person, at $500 a piece, a typical number.

It used to be cheaper to take the north route, from the Tibetan side, instead of the south route, via Nepal, because of lower permit fees. But the China Tibet Mountaineering Association (CTMA) has since raised prices, making the two routes comparable. The south side remains the most popular, in part because of its facilities, which go from icefall maintenance to a medical clinic and wifi connections. The north side is more technical.

An expedition to Everest also takes time, from six to eight weeks. The season opens around April 1 and closes around June 1. Before attempting the 8,848-metre (29,029 ft) peak, climbers spend many days acclimatising to the altitude, trekking up to high camps to adjust their bodies, and returning to lower camps for periods of rest. During that time, porters hoist equipment to the upper camps while Sherpas attend to repairing the ropes and ladders.

Modern facilities

Progress in technology and equipment has made the highest mountain in the world more accessible, safer, and, one might even say, more comfortable. Many things have improved over the years, says Russell Brice, New Zealand mountaineer and founder of Himalayan Expeditions (Himex), who has been leading expeditions to Everest since 1974. He cites radio and satellite phone communications, weather forecasting, improved oxygen systems, better training for the Sherpas, better understanding of the mountain and rope fixing standards. He also mentions quality of food and helicopters for emergency evacuations, "but they have also raised new problems of when and where they should be used".

Reliable, real-time weather forecasting, now available every 12 hours, is the single most important improvement for Gordon Janow (Alpine Ascents): "Before, our only option was to send someone up the mountain to look at the sky."

Quality food, somewhat surprisingly, is a perk cited by several guide companies. Appetite at high altitudes is enormous, says Mr Janow, who feels it is important to offer varied meals so that people eat more, stock up on more calories, and have more energy. It's also "something to look forward to" during the long process of adjusting to the low oxygen levels at high altitudes.

Many aspiring summiteers invest in acclimatisation tents, or chambers to speed up the process, but it is difficult to know how useful they are. Alpine Ascents leaves it to its clients to decide, "at their own risk," says Mr Janow. "We have clients who have used them and successfully summited. But they might have been able to reach the top without."

Clothing and equipment have also been optimised over the years, with garments that are lighter, more comfortable and less cumbersome. The single most important piece of equipment that has made climbing easier is the boots. The sophisticated layers of different materials, walls and gaiters have "made frostbite less frequent," says Mr Lowe of Jagged Globe.

The issue of infrastructure

For nostalgics and purists who dream of a pristine mountain, Everest is not the place to go. The ladders and ropes, the medical clinic and helicopter services mean there are no more "solo" or independent ascents to Everest, says Mr Lowe.

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Infrastructure is a common subject of contention in the world of high mountaineering. The ropes on Everest make the climbing easier, says Gordon Janow, but he, like others interviewed, doesn't recommend adding any more. Plans to upgrade the Hillary Step are also meeting strong resistance. "I do not support a ladder on the Hillary Step in any form," says Alan Arnette. He insists climbers should have this level of basic rock climbing skills before coming to Everest. "If a climber is going too slow or having extreme difficulty on the Step, then they may be in danger of a tragic event on the descent from the summit and should turn around to save their own life or avoid a rescue that would put others at risk." He says the situation is different on the north side, where a ladder does exist, but is quite difficult. "That section requires expert skills to climb. Without the ladder, almost no summits would occur on that side," says Mr Arnette.

Summit windows and overcrowding

Paradoxically, better weather forecasts have created bottlenecking on the mountain, as everyone scrambles to take advantage of the same auspicious summit weather window. These favourable climbing days occur when the jet stream winds at the peak slow down to less than 48 km/h (30mph). On May 19, 2013, 150 people reached the summit, this year's record, according to a report published by Mr Arnette on his website.

Difficult weather conditions in 2012 led to long lines at the Hillary Step, which were blamed for several tragic events. Overcrowding is a problem "when operators do not work together, or if there are limited summit days, which happened in 2012," says Mr Brice of Himex. Everest attracts many people but it is a large mountain, says Mr Arnette, pointing out that "some commercial operators such as International Mountain Guides and Himalayan Experience have twice as many Sherpas as clients, a turn around from previous years."

Though there is much grumbling that Everest attracts many who wouldn't be there if they didn't have the money, neither the guide companies nor the administrations seem willing to do much to reduce the crowds. To begin with, few believe raising the price of the permit will stop affluent mountaineers from tackling the trophy peak. Russell Brice doesn't see any hope in the Nepalese changing their regulations, pointing out that "the government has failed on three occasions to rewrite the country's constitution, so what hope do we have of changing the mountaineering rules". Some say that guide companies should be held accountable for increasing the level of risk of an already quite perilous adventure. "If a formal inquiry were conducted after every fatal accident, that would be good because we would all learn from it, but more importantly, it might inspire guides to think twice if they risked a heavy fine for improper decision-making," says Mr Lowe.

This raises once again the issue of competence and experience in high altitude climbing. In the past, recalls Mr Janow, mountaineers learned to climb with a mentor and at some point they would attempt to summit Everest. Now, the process has been reversed: people decide they want to climb the world's highest peak, and then go about figuring out how to do it.



Under Armour's Nick Cienski training to summit the world's 14 highest peaks, all in 2014.

Mission 14

Nick Cienski's 14 Summits

Nick Cienski plans to raise awareness for human trafficking and child abuse by summiting the world's 14 highest peaks in one year. The accomplished athlete also has a strong track record in performance apparel design, as Under Armour's senior projects director and formerly at Salomon Sports and Arc'teryx. He will be wearing clothing he designed, a kit of 14 garments all made with Cocona, from first layer to outer layer. A TV-reality online set-up will broadcast his feats in real time, with help from his wife Sandi who will be at all the camps. "The hardship I will endure is similar to the hardship the women endure," says Mr Cienski to explain the link between his project and the plight of women and children living in poverty around the world. But the ambitious project can only be achieved with the help of heavy organisation, involving helicopter drop-offs and custom-built trucks. "It's all about speed and therefore controversial," he concedes.

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