

WHO CLIMBS EVEREST?

(Excerpt From *Tales From the Top of the World: Climbing Mount Everest With Pete Athans*)

by Sandra Athans

Everest is not a mountain for beginners. Mountaineers who attempt Everest have usually scaled other peaks in the Himalayas and other high mountain chains. 1

Most climbers make the journey as part of an organized group. Companies sometimes sponsor, or pay for, Everest expeditions. For instance, The North Face, a company that makes outdoor equipment, has sponsored Everest expeditions to test its climbing gear. The National Geographic Society, an educational organization, has sent climbers and camera crews up Everest to make documentary films. Sometimes climbers help scientists conduct experiments on the mountain. 2

Some people pay money to have experienced guides lead them up Everest. But that doesn't mean just anyone can sign up and pay to go to the top. Guide organizations insist that their clients have previous mountain climbing experience. Clients must also be in top physical shape. 3

Most expeditions on Everest include Sherpas. The Sherpas are an ethnic group that originated in Tibet and then moved to Nepal. They practice Buddhism, a common Asian religion. Climber Tenzing Norgay was a Sherpa. Many modern Sherpas are expert mountaineers who work for mountain climbing expeditions. Sherpa staff members set up climbing ropes, carry gear to high camps, assist with medical needs and rescues, cook meals, and more. 4

Adjusting to Thin Air

Scientists measure the altitude, or height, of landforms by their distance above the sea (sea level). At sea level, it is easy to breathe because the air is rich in oxygen. The higher you go above sea level, the less oxygen the air holds. We say the air at high altitudes is "thin" because it has less oxygen. 5

At about 5,000 feet (1,524 m) above sea level, our bodies begin to sense a change in oxygen levels. People must breathe more deeply and quickly to get the oxygen they need. Above 8,000 feet (2,438 m), people can begin to suffer from high-altitude ailments. These include headaches and coughs. 6

To keep from getting sick on Everest, climbers must acclimatize, or adjust, to the low oxygen levels. Climbers make forays, or short climbs up and down sections of the mountain, instead of trying to climb to the top all at once. Forays help climbers acclimatize to the high altitude. 7

Climbers Be Wary

Hold on to your balaclava! Wind gusts on Everest can exceed 250 miles (400 km) per hour. The winds come from the jet stream. This strong current of air sometimes roars across the top of the mountain. To avoid the worst of the jet stream, climbers usually tackle Everest in early May or September. At those times, the jet stream blows north of the Everest region. 8

On Everest, deadly snowstorms can kick up quickly, without warning. One of the worst storms ever recorded occurred in 1996. The storm engulfed the upper part of the mountain in snow. It killed eight climbers. Journalist and mountaineer Jon Krakauer described this “murderous storm” in his best-selling book *Into Thin Air*. 9

Altogether, bad weather has led to more than twenty deaths on Everest. Even though climbers know the dangers they might encounter, they believe the rewards of climbing Everest outweigh the risks. 10

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