

## To Climb a Mountain

For people who dream of climbing to the top of the world, there is only one place to go. At 29,035 feet above sea level, Mount Everest is the highest mountain on Earth.

Mount Everest is located on the border between Sagarmatha Zone, Nepal, and Tibet (a region of China). It is part of the Himalayas, a mountain chain in Asia that includes nine of the world's ten highest peaks. In English, it is called Everest after Sir George Everest, a British surveyor who in the 1900s spent over thirty-five years conducting a geographical survey of India. In Nepal, they call the mountain Sagarmatha, or Goddess of the Sky. In Tibet, it is known as Chomolungma, or Mother Goddess of the Universe.

In 1852, the height of the mountain was first recorded at 29,002 feet by Radhanath Sickdhar, a mathematician analyzing data from the survey. He conveyed the news to the Surveyor-General, exclaiming, "Sir, I have discovered the highest mountain in the world." The news generated a great deal of excitement worldwide. But rushing out to explore the mountain was quite another matter. The weather on Mount Everest is forbidding. June through September is monsoon season, and the mountain is subjected to violent snowstorms. In the winter, winds on the mountain reach over 175 miles per hour, or hurricane force. Temperatures can reach 76 degrees below zero. Windstorms can happen at any time, hurling stones, sand, ice, and snow through the air. The extreme climate led many to label Mount Everest as unclimbable. Nonetheless, some fearless adventurers were determined to reach the top.

Unfortunately, there were political barriers that banned or greatly limited access to the mountain. Westerners were not allowed to enter the region. In the early 1920s, the British finally obtained permission and began to explore the mountain in earnest. At first, local people would not help them because they considered the peaks sacred and would not climb them. However, foreign expeditions brought money into the region, as well as new ideas. A group of people of Tibetan descent, called Sherpas, found work as porters and guides for the explorers.

The British organized preliminary expeditions to survey the region and determine the best route to the top. One of the men on these early expeditions was George Mallory. Asked why he wanted to climb Everest, George Mallory famously replied, "Because it is there." After participating in two unsuccessful climbs, Mallory made a third attempt in 1924, accompanied by Andrew Irvine. It was not a successful endeavor, for both climbers disappeared in bad weather. It was not until 1999 that an American climber found Mallory's body, frozen at about 27,000 feet. Whether Mallory reached the summit or not may never be known.

On May 29, 1953, Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and his Sherpa guide Tenzing Norgay made history. They became the first climbers to reach the summit. Since then, thousands of climbers have tried to duplicate this impressive feat, but only less than half have done so. In 1963, James Whittaker became the first American to reach the summit. In 1975, Japanese climber Junko Tabei became the first woman to accomplish it.

Many of these famous, and not so famous, climbs might not have been successful had it not been for the Sherpa guides. Sherpas are excellent climbers known for their expertise and stamina. They function extremely well at high altitudes, an important quality since high altitude can result in mountain sickness and lead to death. Even before the earliest attempts to climb Mount Everest, Sherpas were being hired for all climbing expeditions in the Himalayas. However, for decades these invaluable guides received very little public recognition and none of the glory they deserved. Over time, their invaluable contributions to Mount Everest expeditions have been acknowledged.

For the Sherpas, being part of expeditions is much more than just a way to earn money. Tenzing Norgay once said, "You cannot be a good mountaineer, however great your ability, unless you are cheerful and have the spirit of comradeship. Friends are as important as achievement. Another is that teamwork is the one key to success and that selfishness only makes a man small. Still another is that no man, on a mountain or elsewhere, gets more out of anything than he puts into it." Norgay's sentiments are shared by many of his fellow climbers, some of whom know each other personally. There is a kinship and mutual respect among those who brave the climb up Mount Everest.

Today, Mount Everest climbers use the latest gear and equipment. When George Mallory attempted his fateful climb, he wore a tweed jacket and knickers, loose pants cut just below the knee. By today's standards, this clothing is considered highly unsuitable for the extreme weather conditions on Everest. Unlike today's climbers, Mallory had no satellite telephone, GPS unit, high-tech boots, or tent. Nonetheless, he, like the others who would follow, looked at the colossal mountain and thought "Why not?" For some, reaching the summit of Mount Everest is not an impossible quest, but the greatest challenge on Earth.

