

**Seasonal Stories
for
the Nepalese Himalaya**

2012

by Elizabeth Hawley

Spring 2012: Climbers to Everest's Summit From Nepal Are Not Alone

Everest Without a Permit: Chinese Are Just Like Westerners

The concentration of large numbers of people very high on Everest on two days, the 19th and 25th of May, was most unusual, and the fact that the large majority summited from the Nepalese side, rather than about half of them on the Tibetan side as in previous years, was also unusual.

The vast crowds heading for the top of the world on the Nepalese side on just two principal days were responding to weather forecasts predicting that favourable weather conditions, notably light winds, would be concentrated on these two days. Furthermore, strong winds at very high altitudes had already prevented the Sherpas who were fixing ropes on the route from taking the lines all the way to the top until the 18th.

Contributing to this situation on Nepal's side of Everest was the relatively low numbers on the northern, Tibetan side. In recent years, the numbers have been roughly the same on each side, while the fee for a climbing permit in Tibet was considerably lower than that charged by the Nepalese government. But the Beijing authorities have been raising the price on their side to the point where they are now about equal. Adding to the drawbacks of climbing in Tibet are constant hassles with Tibetan yak drivers and miscellaneous additional fees charged for yaks and various other items, plus the uncertain political situation in Tibet, which means uncertainty about the date when visas would be granted to enter Tibet. Now it is more convenient to climb in Nepal and no costlier, and about two-thirds of climbers struggling to get to the summit on their final day were in Nepal.

This shift away from Tibet might not be a permanent trend. The considerable media attention to this spring's crowding on Nepal's side has become widely known, so more people may possibly decide to go to Tibet despite the problems there, not realizing that the concentration on just two days in Nepal was due to the unusually brief expected weather windows. (Weather conditions on the north and south sides can be surprisingly different.) But when they compare the prices, and consider the problems with going to Tibet including unpredictable border closures, they may well stick to Nepal.

The situation with Cho Oyu, also on the border and not far from Everest, is rather different. It is much less difficult to scale from Tibet, so climbers and expeditions organizers simply do not consider the Nepalese approach to the top. But Cho Oyu faces the same problem about opening and closing the border—it is likely to arise this autumn because of top Central Committee membership changes due then—but this very seldom occurs. Because of the uncertainties about permits for Tibet, some commercial organizers have eliminated Cho Oyu from their programs and substituted another mountain, Manaslu or Makalu, in its place. But most will return to Cho Oyu when possible.

The total number of Everest summiters from both sides this past spring was just under 500. This contrasts with the totals in previous seasons: in the spring of 2010, there were 531 summiters, and the following year the total was 529. Among those who managed to summit this spring were the first Latvian woman, Ms. Olga Kotova, and the oldest woman from any country, 73-year-old Tamae Watanabe from Japan. She had been to the top when she was 63 and said will return when she is 83. (The age record for men—indeed for both sexes—is 76 years, 340 days set by a Nepali, Min Bahadur Sherchan, in May 2010.)

The leader of a large Everest expedition of mixed nationalities, Marty Schmidt from New Zealand, led one group of his members out of their highest camp at 11:00 pm on 18 May, but they did not manage to reach the summit until 15 hours later, an unthinkable length of time a few years ago. Problem: they had to wait for a period of three hours at the bottom of the Hillary Step for descending climbers to leave the Step. A prolonged wait at an altitude of about 8800m can lead to serious health problems, such as high-altitude sickness and frostbite, especially if a climber who is using bottled oxygen experiences a sudden cut-off in the flow of oxygen into his system.

David Hahn, a well known American mountaineer for whom this season's ascent of Everest was his 14th, views the great line of people heading up to the summit on 25 May as "frightening from the point of view of a leader: it takes away the ability to lead...It's really dangerous." He watched people who clearly had never before walked on rock with crampons on their boots. So why does he keep returning to Everest year after year? He shrugs while conceding, "there are too many reasons this is not mountain climbing any more—but why not keep going?"

Amongst the hordes of people atop the mountain from Nepal's side were a Mexican, David Pastor, and his Sherpa, Mingma Tenzing. They were a special pair: they made a continuous climb up and down the mountain, with pauses along the way. They left BC at 1:00 am of the 25th, reached C2 at 5:30 am and stayed there an hour. At 6:30 am they started up again, arrived at C3 at 10:30 am, stayed half an hour, and left at 11:00 am. On their way up to C4, they waited half an hour for a Spaniard's body to be brought down, then resumed their climb and reached C4 at the South Col at 2:00 pm. They stayed in C4, waiting for the summit party of the big expedition to which they belonged to leave for the top, and at 8:20 am on the 26th set out with them. Pastor now had stomach trouble, "but I kept going," he said, and they were on the summit at 4:16 am on 26 May in perfect weather, and Pastor had recovered from his stomach problem. They were on oxygen from 7300m to the summit and stayed on it till they returned to 7300m.

They stayed on the summit only long enough to take a few photos, then down to C4 at 7:15 am, left C4 half an hour later, and were back in C2 at 10:54 am. They stopped in C2 to eat dal bhat with some Sherpas and left C2 at 5:00 am. They were safely down in BC at 7:30 am. Then, while Mingma Tenzing stayed in BC, Pastor left at 1:00 pm for Pheriche village, where he arrived at 5:30 pm to rest in the local lodge.

Occasionally people go to Everest without a climbing permit; sometimes they get caught and sometimes not. They have always been from North America or Europe, to my knowledge. But in mid-May, a 38-year-old Chinese man, Wang Tian-Han, who was well outfitted for a Himalayan ascent, was discovered to have climbed on the Tibetan side as high as C2 at 7790m on 18 or 19 May. He was forced to descend by four students from the Tibet Mountain School at Lhasa, who brought him down through C1 with his wrists tied together. It is not known what punishment he received for this unauthorized bid.

Nor is it known why he had gone to the mountain in the first place. He had already made a successful ascent on 17 May 2002 with a Tibetan assistant, Rinchen Phuntsok, after they had set up the usual number of camps on the same route. Perhaps this time he wanted to make an ascent without an assistant and without using any bottled oxygen. In any case, he was forcibly stopped in his tracks.

When climbers are just back in Kathmandu from their summit failures, they normally are serious about the undesired outcomes. But this spring, when a small Italian-Romanian-Slovakian expedition to Kangchenjunga related the unfortunate outcome of three members' summit bid, they couldn't stop laughing about it.

The world's third-highest mountain, Kangchenjunga on Nepal's eastern border with India, is not a single giant peak, but a long ridge with three summits well over 8000 meters high. The northern summit, 8586 meters above sea level, is the highest, but the middle and south summits are still formidable. This season, four climbers from Italy, Romania and Slovakia had the main summit as their goal, but when they got to their fourth high camp at 7600m, they didn't know where they should go.

One of them, Peter Hamor from Slovakia, liked the looks of a couloir as a way to gain more altitude, so he went for it. The other three, Mrs. Nives Meroi and Romano Benet, Italians, and their Romanian team-mate, Horia Colibasanu, were not so lucky or so clever; they chose a different way.

Hamor found himself atop the main summit. His team-mates did not: while still going higher and higher, they came to realize that they were approaching the middle summit, not the highest. They retreated to C4 and made no further attempt to "conquer" Kangchenjunga.

Back in Kathmandu, Mrs. Meroi, the team's leader, recounted the saga of the wrong route to an interviewer in the presence of the other members, and when she got to the punch line, going the wrong way, she laughed and laughed and laughed. She clearly found it hilarious that three highly experienced Himalayan mountaineers, who had a combined total of 27 8000-meter summits to their credit, had gotten into this kind of situation. Her laughter was infectious: everyone joined in.

Autumn 2012: Numerous Victims of One Avalanche on Manaslu

Another Avalanche on Annapurna I Kills Uzbekistanis

It was 4:30 in the morning on 23 September, and all the climbers on Manaslu were asleep in their tents, when an avalanche of considerable force swept their third high-altitude camps. A serac fell from a ridge above, causing a slab avalanche that carried quantities of snow and ice down the mountainside with it. Eleven people perished. Among them were Himalayan veterans: Gregory Costa, Remy Lecluse and Ludovic Challeat from France, Alberto Magliano of Italy and the Nepalese Sherpa, Dawa Dorje, from Pangboche.

In addition to killing 11 climbers, the great blast of air from the avalanche also did great damage in other ways: it destroyed all of the Magliano team's tents in the next lower camp; another expedition's nearby tents, with climbers still inside, were shifted five meters lower by the blast of wind; there were numerous injuries including one man's fractured vertebra and another's serious bruising from being swept down 300-400 meters and coming to rest in a crevasse. A number of climbers and even a few Sherpas were unnerved by the event, and families back home clamoured for their return; most of these climbers left the mountain immediately. Many others descended to base camp to settle their nerves and to take stock of the situation and decide whether to go back up again.

The highly experienced Himalayan mountaineer, New Zealander Russell Brice, who was leading a team on Manaslu at the time, believes that this mayhem could have been avoided or at least minimized. He observed that the fatal avalanche path on 23 September was the same path as that of an earlier one before the teams arrived. Furthermore, the event of the 23rd occurred after new snow had accumulated. If the affected teams had been alert to this, they would have placed their tents at C3 200 meters to the right and been in a safer location, he thought. But in any case, they should not have been up there with that amount of snow on the mountain.

As luck would have it, there were an unusually large number of teams on Manaslu this autumn. A goodly proportion of them would normally have been on Cho Oyu climbing the popular route on its less difficult Tibetan side. But with an extremely important meeting of the topmost Communist party leadership due to take place in Beijing in November, the authorities closed Tibet to all climbing expeditions well in advance, during the summer, to preclude any "Free Tibet" banners or t-shirts being displayed by foreigners. The result was that a total of 47 expeditions crowded the northeast face of Manaslu, more than twice as many as the 22 teams in the same period last year.

Unfortunately Manaslu was not the only mountain on which climbers died. Two Uzbekistanis were fatally buried on the afternoon of 7 October on the north face of Annapurna I by a torrent of large and small blocks of ice raining down on them from the Dutch rib, the German rib and the couloir between the ribs. The men

were completely buried deep in an ice cave, and the ice was compressed the next day, making it impossible to retrieve their bodies.