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Nepal 1999

The climbing year in Nepal has been one of mixed fortunes as far as summit success and weather were concerned. The pre-monsoon conditions were particularly fine but there were few expeditions on the ground to take advantage of them. Conversely, the post-monsoon weather was notably poor bringing an abrupt end to a large number of expeditions with aspirations for the higher peaks. The unreliable post-monsoon weather in recent years has given rise to some very pessimistic mutterings from Nepal regulars who have said that in the foreseeable future they will confine their efforts to the spring season.

As ever, commercially organised expeditions dominated most of the activity on peaks such as Everest, Cho Oyu, Ama Dablam, Baruntse and Pumori which means that standard, well prepared routes remain the order of the day.

PRE-MONSOON 1999

Everest 8848m/8830m (Tibetan side) Although not Nepal news, the discovery of the body of George Leigh Mallory at c8520m on the north side of Everest overshadowed most other events on the mountain and resulted, in my opinion, in much unsavoury publicity and picture publication with little regard to the Mallory family. Since the disappearance of Mallory and Irvine in June 1924 there has been much speculation as to whether they actually reached the summit. This discovery has done little to resolve the matter.

In the intervening years two discoveries added fuel to the controversy and kept public interest alive. In 1933 Wyn Harris discovered the axe of Sandy Irvine below and before the First Step, whilst in 1975 a Chinese expedition reported finding a corpse sitting frozen close to where they established their Camp 6. Many concluded that this must be the body of Irvine after which several attempts to find the body were made. In the spring of 1999 a well-organised and predominantly American expedition set off to find the remains. The expedition was, however, part sponsored by the BBC and fuelled by the enthusiasm of Graham Hoyland, a BBC producer and nephew of Howard Somervell. It was Somervell who had given a Kodak camera to Mallory in 1924 to use on their summit bid.

Helped by fine weather and little snow cover the expedition was able to locate the Chinese Camp 6 on 1st May. Searching the fall-line below camp they located several bodies before the American, Conrad Anker, discovered that of Mallory. The body of Sandy Irvine was not found – nor unfortunately was the camera which might have conclusively resolved the issue of whether they reached the summit in 1924. The search, I am sure, will go on as the world and especially North America have been in an Everest feeding frenzy

ever since the disaster of 1996 and the publicity generated by book publications, lecture tours and the IMAX film.

In reality spring 1998 and 1999 were in numerical terms the most successful ever on the mountain. Between 5 and 29 May 120 climbers reached the top of Everest and, as might have been expected, the majority of these were members of commercially run expeditions climbing the standard routes on the Tibetan and Nepalese sides of the mountain. It was reported that 6000m of fixed rope was in place on the standard north side route!

Although few ascents were noteworthy some were not without wider interest, particularly that of Appa Sherpa who reached the summit on 26 May with an American client. This was Appa's 10th ascent, all without oxygen, and he equals the record of Sherpa Ang Rita.

Italian mountaineer Sergio Martini climbed Everest in May and so completed the 8000ers. It must be pointed out that Martini has admitted to stopping short of Lhotse's summit in poor weather conditions so the claim is disputed. Everest statistics of course are endless; in fact there is now a dedicated web site listing them. To help pass endless hours of poor weather at high camp or mountain hut here are just a few: On 29 May Cathy O'Dowd became the last person to climb the mountain during the spring season and the first woman to climb the mountain from both sides. A Chinese/Tibetan team put ten climbers on the summit in their bid to climb all 8000ers by 2002. They were helped by Tsering Dorje and Pemba Tashi who reached the summit in May, making it their tenth 8000er climbed together. By the end of the season 1173 ascents of Everest had been made by 875 climbers from a total of 57 countries. In total 165 climbers have died on the mountain, 40 of whom were descending after reaching the summit. Finally, 52 different women have climbed it and there have been 47 ascents by 42 British mountaineers.

One aspect of Spring 1999 and one that gives cause for concern is the number of commercial expeditions operating with inadequate planning, preparation and equipment. The very best commercial outfits operate to high standards, use the best equipment and highly trained staff. They also have in place contingency plans and procedures, including radios and medical equipment for when things inevitably go 'pear shaped.' On the other hand there are plenty of operators offering 'cut price' Everest expeditions who, by any standards, operate without regard to a 'duty of care' either to their clients or to local staff. Increasingly this is becoming a problem on the mountain. The costs of running a good operation are high. Increasingly there are complaints that cheap outfitters are relying on the planning, preparation and equipment of the best companies to bale them out when things go wrong. Spring 99 on Everest was no exception. The best advice as ever seems to be 'buyer beware.'

There was little activity on other routes on the Tibetan side although an Indian Expedition led by Mrs Santosh Kumar *née* Yadav, the first woman to climb Everest twice (92 and 93), made the third ascent of the Anglo-American-Canadian route on the Kangshung (East) Face. They reached the summit via the SE Ridge on 28 May.

Everest (Nepal Side) Twelve expeditions had permits for the spring season. Once again records fell thick and fast: Colorado climber Pete Athans made the

first ascent of the season, climbing the mountain for the sixth time, setting the record for a non-Nepalese. British climber Graham Ratcliffe also summited making him the first Briton to climb the mountain twice and from both the north and south sides. More amazing was Babu Chhiri, a high-altitude Sherpa and father of six, who spent a little over 21 hours camped on the summit (6-7 May), without supplementary oxygen or apparent ill effect! On 26 May Babu returned to the summit, guiding a Swedish couple, making his 9th ascent. Several other Sherpas climbed the mountain twice in the same season.

Lev Sarkisov from Georgia became, at the age of 60 years and 121 days, the oldest man to climb the mountain – beating the previous record by one day! At the other end of the continuum was Arbin Timilsina, a 15-year-old Nepalese from Pokhara, who attempted to become the youngest to climb Everest. His attempt failed at the South Summit when upward progress was delayed by a queue of climbers held up by the Hillary Step and he found his oxygen supplies running dangerously low.

Annapurna (8091m) There was one serious and successful ascent of the mountain. A joint Basque-Korean expedition led by Juanito Oairzabal. Finding the original French Route too dangerous they opted for the 1980 German line which goes to the Central Summit. After establishing three camps, Oairzabal and six others reached the main summit. This was Oairzabal's fourteenth 8000er. Kami Dorje Sherpa died after summiting.

Cho Oyu (8201m) There were several ascents of this popular 8000er on the Tibet/Nepalese border. The American Women's Century Expedition put Amy Camp Bullard, Kathryn Hess and Georgie Stanley on the summit. Other ascents were made by three members of a Swiss/German expedition and four members of the Sri Chinmoy Expedition, an American and Canadian group. Two Mexican climbers, Andres Calderón and Alejandro Reyes, also summited.

Dhaulagiri (8167m) American Ed Viesturs and Finn Veikka Gustafsson helicoptered to Dhaulagiri base-camp on 30 April. Acclimatised after an ascent of Manaslu, they reached the NE Ridge directly rather than climbing from the col at its foot. From a camp on its crest they established a higher camp at 7250m and on 3 May reached the summit after eight hours' climbing.

Lhotse (8516m) A Czech expedition led by Sona Vomackova reached the summit via the South Col on 12 and 13 May. On 22 May two Japanese climbers from an expedition led by Konishi Hirofumi reached the summit via the West Face. On the same day Dr Minoru Doya from Tokyo with Man Bahadur Gurung and Phura Chhiri reached the summit from the South Col.

Manaslu (8163m) A total of 14 climbers reached the summit after climbing the standard NE Face Route between the 22 April and 7 May. The first to summit after establishing the route were American Ed Viesturs and Finn Veikka Gustafsson. They later helicoptered to Dhaulagiri base camp.

Makalu (8463m) All four expeditions attempting the mountain in the spring managed to put climbers on the summit. Swiss guide Andre Georges reached the summit on 14 May, followed on 16 May by Michael Groom and Dave Bridges. Ginette Harrison became the first British woman to climb the mountain when she reached the summit on 22 May (via the French Spur) in the company of Australian, Hamish Robertson. A Danish Guide, Michael Jorgensen, leading

a commercial trip for Himalayan Guides became the first Dane to reach the summit. Unfortunately an anchor failed while he was rappelling and he fell to his death. Finally Alan Hinkes managed, after many attempts, to climb the mountain – his eleventh 8000er. He reached the summit on 23 May with Sherpa Dawa Chhiri. Swiss climber Marcus Stofer summited on 30 April via the Messner Couloir.

Kangchenjunga (8586m) A Korean expedition was successful on 12 May when Park Young-Seok reached the summit with Sange and Jangbu Sherpa via the 1955 Route. This was Young-Seok's tenth 8000er.

Thamserku (6608m) At 5am on 25 April, four days after arriving in the Khumbu and the day after arriving at base camp, Catalan climbers Joan Quintana and Carles Vallès set out to climb the N Face of Thamserku. At 7pm, after resting at a bivouac that afternoon, they embarked on a 22-hour non-stop push up the face, the crux coming at 8am the following morning with a compact M5 wall and an 85° goulotte of around 45 metres at the same grade. At 10am they arrived at the foot of a sérac, the prominent feature of the top part of the face. Here they rested for an hour before climbing the sérac and reaching the plateau above. From there it took another two hours to reach the summit, which they did at 5pm. They made a 30-abseil descent of the route up, using ice-screws, deadmen, abalakovs and stakes, reaching base camp at 8am the next day, 27 April. Three days later they were back in Kathmandu, a proposed round-trip of only ten days for a major new route on a moderately high mountain. There has been considerable speculation in Spain on the veracity of the climb. While Carles Vallès has a well-established record in the Himalaya, Quintana's levels of fitness and experience have been questioned. On their return from Nepal, the two men were awarded the Piolet de Oro by the Spanish Mountaineering Federation (FEDME) of which Quintana is a Vice President. While Quintana did not sit on the committee which made the award, no documentation was required or submitted substantiating their claim. In fact, no photographs, other than tight close-ups potentially taken elsewhere, were made available to the Spanish climbing press or the *American Alpine Journal*, which had proposed to Carles Vallès that he write an article on the climb. The proposal was withdrawn when more information became available. Spanish journalists have also pointed out that the ascent was made without prior acclimatisation. It was Quintana's first trip to the Himalaya and previous claimed ascents by him have been contested. At the very least, a substantial question-mark must remain over this ascent until these matters have been resolved. (See Plate 51)

POST-MONSOON SEASON

Even by recent standards the post-monsoon season was a poor one. The monsoon failed to finish as expected at the end of September making it especially difficult on the high peaks, with no summit successes reported on any of the 8000-metre peaks. It snowed more or less throughout October with especially high snowfall in the Everest region. By mid-October the snow-line was fast approaching Lukla. Many expeditions were abandoned early and many groups,

trekking and expedition, needed helicopter evacuation from remote valleys such as the Hongu.

Ang Rita Sherpa (55), famous for climbing Everest 10 times without bottled oxygen, has announced his retirement from high-altitude climbing. Recently he had been suffering from a severe chest infection and suspected TB. He last climbed the mountain in 1997 via the North Ridge and was honoured by the Nepalese Government with the title of 'Snow Leopard' for his unrivalled achievement.

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy efforts of the post-monsoon season was an attempt by members of a huge British army expedition to climb all 18 trekking peaks. The 180 members, in groups of ten, set about repeating the standard routes on all the peaks described in Bill O'Connor's book *The Trekking Peaks Of Nepal*. Despite the poor weather they made a fair stab at them, especially as many of the soldiers had very limited climbing experience. Predictably, peaks such as Hiunchuli, Singu Chuli, Kusum Kangguru and the true summit of Lobuje proved peaks too far, but on the rest they achieved success. Logistically, on the other hand, it appears to have been very successful and the party at Lukla will be remembered for a long time by those of us who were there!

Ama Dablam (6828m) There were several ascents of this most popular peak towards the end of October. Fixed ropes from camp 1 to summit made it a viable proposition despite the poor weather earlier in the season.

Baruntse (7168m) Another popular peak and increasingly so with commercial expeditions. Recognised as a softish-touch 7000er it now appears in many mail order mountaineering catalogues. Unfortunately in this post-monsoon season only failures were reported. Despite relatively quick and easy access to base camp via Lukla and the Mera La, heavy snowfall brought a premature end to all of the expeditions operating on the mountain. With failure also came recriminations of poorly organised and led groups taking ill-clad porters into remote places and providing little in the way of support, clothing and shelter. In one case there were also complaints from Western climbers and Sherpa staff of locals being left to fend for themselves after the Sahibs had been evacuated by helicopter.

It would seem that companies offering expeditions to high peaks have yet to learn their lesson. In recent years there have been many reported cases of porters being left to look after themselves and/or die in terrible conditions after the 'clients and their leader' have flown. The remedy is simple: before you book on a commercial trip ask the question, 'What happens to local staff if evacuation or hospitalisation are needed?' Whilst if you are organising your own trek or expedition ensure that you have enough insurance cover to get locals out safely.

Cho Oyu (8201m) No ascents were reported. However, well-known French climber Marc Batard and Phurba Sherpa were avalanched from a height of 7700m and were carried some 70-80m before escaping without injury. Batard said later that Cho Oyu would be his last Himalayan climb! Almost.

Dhaulagiri (8167m) Ginette Lesley Harrison was killed in an avalanche whilst attempting Dhaulagiri. Ginette was Briton's most successful woman Himalayan climber. She reached the summit of Everest in 1993, Cho Oyu in 1996 and Kangchenjunga in Spring 1999.

TREKKING PERMIT FEES: SOME CHANGES

The Nepalese Government announced that trekking permit fees to some areas will be waived from the end of the 1999 post-monsoon season. These are the Everest, Langtang and the Annapurna regions. Other areas such as Dolpo, Humla, Makalu, Manaslu and Kangchenjunga will still require a trekking permit. The entry visa situation has also been simplified. A two-month visa costs \$30 from any Nepalese Consulate or Embassy and can also be obtained at Kathmandu airport on arrival in Nepal.