




I was here

It's the highest place on Earth, and one of the most dangerous. A year after the earthquake that killed 19 climbers, photographers Mathias Braschler and Monika Fischer captured mountaineers in the seconds after their descent and asked: was it worth it?



Everest, left, draws climbers from all over the world. 'I need to make sure they're mentally engaged,' says Richie Hunter, below, a mountain guide from New Zealand. 'If we don't give off a positive vibe, they'll pick up on it'

On our summit day, there was not a single footprint to be seen on the final ridge. As I reached for the summit pole, decked with fluttering Buddhist prayer flags, the tears were freezing solid on my cheeks



here are still only two lists compiled by Everest obsessives: the list of those who reach the top, and the list of those who die. In recent years, the second of these has got longer. Sixteen sherpas were killed in a Khumbu icefall avalanche in 2014. Nineteen climbers from many nationalities died in Nepal's "megaquake" last year, as blocks of ice the size of shopping malls were shaken from the sides of nearby peaks.

My name is on the first list. Twenty years ago, in the fabled (and fatal) season of 1996, I summited Everest from the northern side. It felt pretty wild to be up there. On our summit day, there was not a single footprint to be seen on the final ridge. As I reached for the summit pole, decked with fluttering Buddhist prayer flags, the tears were freezing solid on my cheeks. I became the fifth Briton to climb Everest from this side, the same route which killed mountain pioneers George Mallory and Andrew Irvine in 1924.

Climbers talk about "feeding the rat" - their hunger for risk, for challenge, for fear. Everest still delivers that. Our water bottles had frozen in the crushingly cold temperatures you hit at 8,000 metres and beyond, committing us to a 16-hour summit day without fluid. In the final hour of an epic retreat to the high camp - my oxygen bottle out of gas, my body close to critical dehydration, physical exhaustion shutting down muscles I didn't even know existed - I could not remember my own name nor the name of the mountain I was on.

The margins get terribly thin up there. I came back down with four minutes of summit footage and two frostbitten fingers. My rat was happy, for a while. Nine days earlier, a massive storm had swept the mountain, killing eight climbers, the worst loss of life on a single day on the mountain up to that point. A total of 15 people died that spring. The rollercoaster ride of folly and survival described so vividly by climber Jon Krakauer in his book *Into Thin Air* drove itself deeply into the American consciousness - so deeply that it was recently turned into a major Hollywood film. The mountain has become bigger than itself.

This year I was back on Everest, as writer in residence for the Sheffield-based expedition company Jagged Globe. We flew into the rugged airstrip of Lukla, a white-knuckle experience in its own right. There weren't many trekkers around this time; tourism and megaquakes don't sit well together. A night in a cosy Nepali

teahouse loses some of its charm when you know the rock walls around you have only just been rebuilt, and the hefty beams over your head are still splintered right through.

Climbers, of course, are made of sterner stuff. When we arrived, 34 teams were hauling their tons of gear up to base camp, and 289 summit permits had been issued. Roughly 700 sherpa support workers - high-altitude climbers, porters, ice fall doctors, cooks - were also on their way up. Then there are the lodge workers, the yak drivers, the helicopter pilots and the shopkeepers in the villages along the way. Countless Nepali families depend on Everest for their livelihood.

Is it strange that climbers continue to come even as the fatalities rise? Veteran Everest blogger Alan Arnette has spotted a revealing trend. "Everest seems to attract more climbers after a tragic year," he wrote recently. "The years following the largest death tolls to date - in 1996, 2006 and 2014/15 - were followed by a record number of climbers. The more Everest takes lives, the more people come."

Who are they, these individuals who travel half way around the world to risk their lives in a game of high-altitude roulette? Are they the same people who run with the bulls at Pamplona, who go wing-suiting out of helicopters at the weekend? Are they adrenaline junkies and ego-trippers looking for a £45,000 thrill?

Not if the climbers I was with were anything to go by: Ian, Mary, Nick, Richard, Steve, a hundred years of mountain experience between them, grounded, extremely fit and savvy. Almost 400 British climbers have ascended Everest to date, but that wasn't going to put them off. For them, it would be a first.

They were matter of fact about the risks. Nick Talbot, for instance, was not only returning to Everest after sustaining serious injuries in the previous year's earthquake, he was doing so with lungs damaged by cystic fibrosis. I asked Nick to estimate how much less lung function he had than the other team members, and he said 15%. Up there, at 8,848 metres, that 15% could easily mean the difference between life and death. But Nick summited - as did Steve and Mary - in the company of David Hamilton, an impressive leader from Glasgow who has now been "up top" an astonishing eight times. They were assisted by five sherpa climbers under the direction of Sirdar Pem Chhiri. As is the case with all commercial expeditions, the sherpas had taken on the

lion's share of load carrying and trail breaking.

Base camp was well organised and clean. One of the successes of recent years has been the tightening of rules, so that teams are obliged to take all their rubbish (and human waste) away with them. The corpses have also, for the most part, been buried in crevasses or brought down.

The chat around the mess tent table was about the biggest change of all - towards sherpa-led and sherpa-owned expeditions. "All the western teams will be out of here within the next 10 years," one expedition leader told me. "We're approaching the end game. The local guys can do this for half price and they've got the expertise."

What do you get for your money? You get no guarantees, but there is a grungy glamour to climbing Everest. You may well find yourself rubbing Gore-Tex-clad shoulders with the elite of the mountain world. Climber Melissa Arnot (six times on the Everest summit, and the first American woman to reach the top without oxygen) and Ueli Steck (twice winner of the Piolet d'Or, climbing's ultimate prize) walked casually into the dining room of our lodge one night, causing the chatter to fall away to a star-struck hush. Money can't buy you a place on the starting blocks of an Olympic 100m sprint, but it can buy you a place at Everest's top table.

For such a big mountain, it's ironic to see how important the small print has become on the contracts that bind climbers to their expedition companies. These days, writs flutter about the slopes of Everest like the crows that make a healthy living from base camp scraps. Very wealthy people can get angry when they don't get what they think they've paid for, or when nature demonstrates that she cannot be tamed.

Accusations of cheating also roll around, with all the predictability of the annual monsoon. In the closing days of each climbing season, there are fewer eyes around to scrutinise summit claims. This year an Indian couple were accused by other mountaineers of faking a summit shot. Such disputes are rarely resolved.

Everest keeps its secrets. And that rat is still up there - waiting patiently, with glittering eyes, calling those, like myself, who are too foolish to resist. I am planning to return in 2017. Watch this space.

Matt Dickinson is the author of *The Everest Files*, a series for young readers published by Vertebrate Publishing. »



Greg Paul: 'I've been trying to get to the world's highest point for four years. I've spent all my savings and had both knees replaced'



Tracee Metcalfe: 'My duty as a doctor is to keep the climbers and sherpas healthy; there'll either be nothing for me to do or a whole lot'

Jaco Ottink



Andreas Friedrich



Son Dorjee



Phurpa Tashi



Richie Hunter, 31, mountain guide from New Zealand on his first ascent, pictured page 21; he and the others photographed here summited on 13 May this year

The challenge for me is to maintain momentum for all the climbers. It's not just sleeping and eating well, I need to make sure they're mentally engaged. If the guides don't give off a positive vibe, they'll pick up on it.

You become a close family; I build a trust and rapport with each climber. We'll often have a heart-to-heart and talk about important personal things. When people are maxed out, their history comes alive. Often that's a reason they've come. But not everyone has a sob story and I don't want to encourage that, because that's not what Everest is about. It's not recovery or therapy; it's the biggest challenge of their lives and people work really hard to get here.

Greg Paul, 61, entrepreneur from Utah, US, photographed previous pages, left

I've been trying to get to the world's

highest point for four years. It's been a lifelong dream; I've spent all my savings and had both knees replaced.

In April 2014, my attempt was aborted by the Khumbu icefall. I started to feel it was my lot in life to enjoy the journey but never make it to the top, yet I had confidence in my sherpa, Nawang Tenjing.

Friday 13, the day I summited, will always be lucky for me now. We were the first in our group to summit. It was so windy we had to sit down so we didn't get blown over. We hugged, and I was just stunned to be there, given the weather. We were in a whiteout, a windy snow storm on the highest mountain in the world. I wanted to take pictures, but didn't dare take the camera out.

I've known Nawang since 2012. I got to know him on Ama Dablam in Nepal. It can be hard to get to know people here: you feel awestruck by the surroundings and everything is overwhelming. I got to know him better the following year; we didn't have much language in common, but we had movie nights at base camp

watching Indiana Jones and Tomb Raider. When last year's earthquake destroyed Nawang's family home, I helped raise money. I felt it was the least I could do. I'm hoping he'll be able to come to Utah in the winter. I've got him taking English lessons and we practise on Skype.

Tracee Metcalfe, 42, doctor from Colorado, US, photographed previous pages, right

Other climbers can push themselves to the limit, but I have to be careful and stay aware of my exhaustion levels. Normally a doctor doesn't go to the summit, so they're rested. The best place for them to be is base camp, so they can communicate by radio; it was unusual that I got to do this.

My duty is to keep the climbers and sherpas healthy; there'll either be nothing for me to do or a whole lot. I always worry a disaster will happen and I'll have 10 injured people.

At base camp, it's bloody noses and blisters, and someone always seems to get a boil on their butt because their backpack is rubbing. Many

sherpas don't have access to dental care. I'm not a dentist, but often antibiotics do the trick. I see a lot of colds and there's a dry, high-altitude cough we call the Khumbu cough.

The lack of oxygen and the cold, harsh environment make it hard for people to heal properly, and you're out of breath just walking around. Someone who has never been in these conditions before would find that extremely hard. But we have hot meals three times a day, and a shower - even if it's temperamental.

Jaco Ottink, 42, Dutch business manager living in Sydney, above

When I was 23, I climbed my first of the world's "seven summits", in Alaska. I wasn't thinking I'd climb every summit, it was more that I love the mountains and it's somewhere I can be by myself. But it has been a dream to climb Everest. It's not like I want to be away from my family - I've got three kids - but once in a while it's good to do something for yourself. I had 2,000 photos of them on my phone to look at and certain

songs I'd listen to, like U2's I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For.

Everest is, by far, the most challenging summit, and more mentally than physically, because of the duration; it takes 50 days. When you start at base camp, you might have some knowledge of Everest - but when you're actually there, it's 100% different. It's fascinating walking the first stage, through the Khumbu icefall: you're walking through ice bricks which can be between a metre and 50m high, and which can collapse within a second.

An hour and a half before I reached the summit, it started to snow and the wind was terrible. My left eye was frozen, so I tried to put on new goggles, but they froze, too. Five minutes felt like an hour, and there was a point where I said to my sherpa, "If the weather is like this, we need to turn around." I had made a promise to my family to arrive at the summit, but I had also promised them I would come home safe.

My sherpa had summited five times before and he said, "It's just

around the corner, you can go for it." You build up a good relationship in a short time, and it's all about trust. When I reached the summit, I felt only spend two minutes up there as the wind was so bad. Then you go down, knowing that 80% of accidents happen on the way back.

People criticise climbers for using sherpas and oxygen to get to the summit, but in the end, it's my journey. It's my legs that are moving.

Andreas Friedrich, 54, commercial pilot from Munich, Germany

You don't come to Everest and think, "I'll try to climb it and if it doesn't work, I'll walk away." I did it fully planning to make it to the top. It's a different kind of determination from climbing any other mountain on the planet. I spent two years training physically and mentally.

The hardest part wasn't the summit, it was just before that, high inside the area called the Death Zone. When I got to the summit, I was waiting for that

feeling of being overwhelmed to replace the adrenaline, but there were no emotions.

I felt the imminent presence of death on the way back down. The next campsite was still far away and there was no one behind me. I was hardly able to walk. I was totally depleted. It was so tempting to sit down on a boulder and wait for eternal sleep. But I felt something whip me all the way down. It was like he was behind me like a shadow, and I had to outperform him.

When I decided to climb Everest, I knew I needed to establish some kind of spiritual connection to the mountain, to not only stand on it, but understand what was driving me to its summit. Since then, I've tried to revisit those last moments before reaching the summit with the help of a psychologist. Even so, I'm starting to feel the temptation to go back and climb one more time...

Son Dorjee, 54, Andreas Friedrich's sherpa; 12 Everest summits

I've been a sherpa since 2004 and

I like the work, although it's very dangerous. I'm always happy to be on top of the world, but this year was the most difficult, because it was so windy. I was thinking, "We can get there, but how are we going to come down?" I was nervous. I'm starting to feel old now, so maybe I'll only do it two more times.

Phurpa Tashi, 45, head sherpa and record holder with 21 Everest summits

We respect the mountains here the way we would respect a god. It's very important to our economy that people from other countries come here to climb mountains. Every time I get to the top, I feel very proud, and happy to see all the other people who have made it. As a sherpa, each time is different, whether you're guiding a climber or fixing the ropes. I'm always very worried about getting people back to base camp.))

Interviews by Mathias Braschler and Martha Hayes



Everest base camp with, left to right in the background, the peaks of Lingtren, Khumbutse and Changtse

Sunset on Nuptse,
7,861 metres, seen from
Everest base camp



Gyalsen Dorjeo, 28,
a rope-fixing sherpa
and veteran of four
Everest summits

