Climbing Everest is the peak of hubris

With Sherpas treated like pack animals by the cretinous rich, the crisis of the world's highest mountain was inevitable



Climbers make their way to camp 2 on Mount Everest: 'As conditions are made safe for these blithe cretins they become more dangerous for Sherpas'. Photograph: Christian Kober/JAI/Corbis

Mountain Madness was the name of an expedition whose leader perished in the 1996 Mount Everest disaster, [chronicled by Jon Krakauer in Into Thin Air](http://intothinairmcwilliams.wikispaces.com/1996%2BEverest%2BDisaster%2BExamined) – and it was well-named. There is an explicit madness attached to serious mountaineering; a desire for pain, isolation and submission, either of man or mountain, whichever breaks first. There is something necrophiliac to it. But this is the game, and it is all the more fascinating to outsiders for being ill-expressed by those in thrall to it. Why climb Everest, George Mallory was famously asked before it killed him in 1924 and swallowed his corpse. Did he even know? He could only say, and this is thought quotable, because there is nothing else to print from his testament: "Because it's there."

Now a new kind of madness has been exposed, made partially of the above and partially – inevitably – of money. Everest has attracted wealthy amateur climbers for many years; the kind who would not make it up or down without bottled oxygen, expensive steroids, pre-laid ropes and ladders and, of course, the Sherpas native to Nepal. They lay the ropes and ladders; they carry the supplies (and sometimes beleaguered tourists) in the manner of two-legged pack animals, all the better to facilitate the disgusting Freudian apogee of these expensive holidays, which is now expressed in a word fit only for the illiterate – "summiting".

As conditions are made safe for these blithe cretins they become more dangerous for Sherpas, whose job is to loiter in the dangerous parts of the mountain and secure them for ever greater numbers of incompetents to hurry through, en route to their photographs on the top of the world. You could call the Everest selfie the ultimate selfie: the true selfie.

[A crisis was inevitable, and last Friday it arrived](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/18/everest-avalanche-sherpas-killed), an unsurprising epilogue to a job estimated as being [12 times more deadly than being a US soldier at the height of the Iraq war](http://www.businessinsider.com/everest-sherpas-have-higher-death-rates-than-all-other-careers-2014-4): 16 people, of whom 13 were Sherpas, were killed in an avalanche as they readied the slopes for the summit window in May.

Now it is properly named the worst tragedy in the mountain's history, and Sherpas are agitating for better insurance, a monument to the dead, and a rescue fund – that is, a fairer share of the spoils that come to the Nepalese government and western guides. [Many have left the mountain and will not return this year](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/20/everest-sherpas-halt-climbs-avalanche); reports from base camp tell of anger as climbers who paid up to $100,000 to "summit" feel robbed of their opportunity for ecstasy. One Sherpa said the tourists "pointed out that they have spent so much money, so how can we leave?".

This is hubris. As commercial climbing has exploded, Everest has shifted from an explicit wasteland to a moral and internal one which also serves as a perfect metaphor for the contempt in which we hold the planet.

It is not simply the ordinary exploitation of the Sherpas, which is soothed away with the knowledge that in Nepal, where the average annual wage is $700, a Sherpa can make $5,000 in a two-month season – although it is impossible to imagine this kind of death rate being tolerated if the dead were rich and white.

To climb to the summit it is usual to pass dead bodies – they are too difficult and expensive to recover – and sometimes the dying too. You could call them a macabre attraction, a monument to the magnitude of your achievement should you make it up and down. This too is sheer delusion; most climb Everest on Sherpa legs. In 2006 up to 40 people passed the [British climber David Sharp as he died in the snow](http://kashsbookcorner.blogspot.co.uk/2008/05/dying-to-climb-mount-everest.html). Edmund Hillary, the first man to climb and survive the summit, called it "horrifying", and he is right.

The prosaic question for the armchair mountaineer is, can the dying be saved? Yes, sometimes. In 2012 the Israeli [Nadav Ben-Yehuda rescued the Turkish-born American Aydin Irmak](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/25/climber-rescue-summit-everest%22%20%5Co%20%22The%20Guardian%3A%20Climber%20describes%20rescue%20near%20summit%20of%20Everest); in 2006 an entire American-led team [rescued the Australian Lincoln Hall](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/01/lincoln-hall). For this they were lauded as heroes, although such behaviour was considered mere professionalism when only those fit to do so climbed Everest – that is, before the money arrived. But more tourists claim "tunnel vision" and "summit fever". They do not pause; they are slaked on their own fantasies; they paid too much. Madness indeed.

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