

Death, fame and the lure of the mountains

Is the heroic mountaineer who takes on superhuman challenges really just a selfish misfit? As this year's toll mounts, climbers themselves admit that it is a dangerously addictive pleasure.



Queue for the top: On 22 May, around 300 people lined up to reach Everest's peak.

In 1923, a journalist asked the explorer **George Mallory** why he wanted to climb **Mount Everest**. "Because it's there," he replied simply. At that time, no one had ever reached the top of the world's tallest mountain. A year later, he and his climbing partner died trying. But his words remain immortal.

Today, mountain climbing is a booming industry. Around 800 people scaled Everest last year. Last week, a photo of hundreds of climbers waiting to reach the summit went viral online.

"It was like standing in line on a busy weekend at a ski resort," said the filmmaker Dirk Collins, who was there with the National Geographic Society.

And yet mountain climbing is far more dangerous than skiing. **Eleven people** died climbing Everest this **season**.

The mountain is 8,848m tall. At such high altitudes, the air becomes thin and the body cannot get enough oxygen. This can lead to altitude sickness, exhaustion and death.

Most climbers bring oxygen tanks to help

them avoid this problem. But some have blamed the high number of deaths this year on the crowds, which force people to spend longer in the dangerous conditions at the mountain's peak.

Elsewhere in the Himalayas, a search for eight missing climbers on **Nanda Devi** is nearing its end. The group disappeared on 26 May, the day before an avalanche hit the mountain. Yesterday, five bodies were spotted by Indian rescuers.

The group was being led by the experienced adventurer Martin Moran, who had led more than 40 Himalayan climbs. Yesterday, an Indian official said the group "knowingly risked their lives after changing their plans without informing the authorities".

So why take these risks? For Mallory, the need to reach the highest point on the planet was "instinctive: a part, I suppose, of man's desire to conquer the universe".

Transports of joy?

Climbing is no longer about exploration or

science; it is about saying you have done it. If the worst happens, that is little comfort to the family and friends you leave behind. In a new book, the adventurer David Roberts writes: "[Climbing] has given me the most piercing transports of joy I have ever felt." But when he came home, he was "at a loss to articulate what I had learned about myself – or about any other important matter". It is pure, dangerous, selfish ego.

"Selfish? No," writes author and climber Francis Sanzaro of the people who lose their lives on mountains. "Unable to see with absolute sobriety how dangerous their path is? Likely. But again, that doesn't make them selfish, only human. Dying happens to someone else, until it doesn't." And, in the end, "the people who loved them didn't do so in spite of their love for climbing, but because of it".



Q: What do we know?

A: A group of 12 climbers, led by Martin Moran, was given permission to scale the eastern peak of Nanda Devi. The group split up, with four climbers turning back due to bad weather.

Moran and seven others continued. They were last in contact on 26 May. The four other climbers were rescued safely on Sunday and have been assisting in the search for Moran's group. Five bodies have now been found.

Q: What do we not know?

A: Whether they belong to the missing

climbers, although it is assumed so. Rescuers also believe that the three other missing climbers are dead. We also do not know whether the deaths on Everest this year can be attributed to the high volume of traffic. While some say yes, others say that it takes a series of poor decisions to lead to a death, not one single cause.

YOU DECIDE

1. Would you like to climb Mount Everest one day?
2. Is it selfish to do something you love, even if you know it is dangerous?

ACTIVITIES

1. Class debate: This house believes that Everest should be closed for good.
2. Find out more about a famous climber, explorer or adventurer from history. Write a short profile of their life and achievements. Try to include something they have said to explain the motivation behind their adventures.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"Nobody climbs mountains for scientific reasons."
Edmund Hillary, the first person to climb Everest

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

George Mallory – An English mountaineer who attempted to be the first to scale Mount Everest in 1924, alongside Andrew Irvine. Both died during the attempt, although their bodies were not found until 1999. It is not known whether they reached the summit before their deaths.

Mount Everest – The world's tallest mountain,

which straddles the borders of Nepal and China. On the Nepalese side, there are no limits to the numbers of licenses sold to those who want to climb the mountain. Temperatures can drop to -60C. The first known people to climb the mountain were New Zealand's Edmund Hillary and the Sherpa, Tenzing Norgay.

Eleven people – Two died by falling. The rest died of altitude sickness, exhaustion or a heart attack.

Season – Usually, just a few weeks in May when the weather is clear and stable. This year, the weather was particularly bad, which is why so many people attempted to reach the summit in a single day.

Nanda Devi – At 7,816m, this is the second-tallest mountain in India and the 23rd-tallest in the world.

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