

The world's highest peak has been luring mountaineers for decades despite the many risks, including the Khumbu Icefall, pictured here, on the south side of Mount Everest. Full of crevasses and ice towers that may collapse at any time, it's considered by many to be one of the most dangerous parts of the South Col route. Read more about why the mountain holds such fascination on page 70.



# Action

*From snow to rock, we've got it all covered here*

**54** SHAUN WHITE **64** WAREHOUSE PROJECT **70** FACES OF EVEREST



# FACES OF EVEREST

*The eternal desire to climb the world's highest mountain has lured hundreds each year, some to their deaths. Mountaineer and author Andy Cave explains its beautiful, fatal attraction*

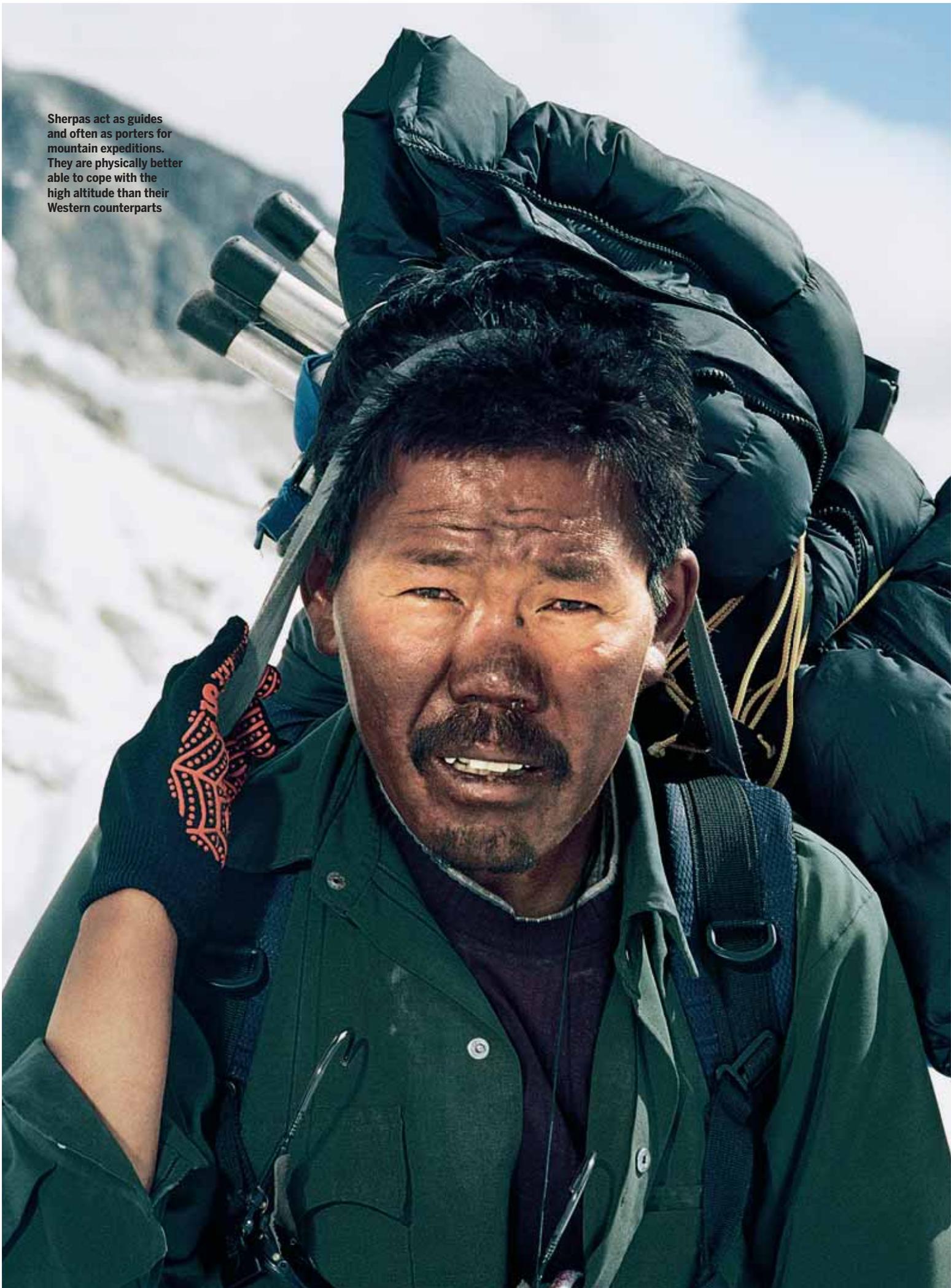
Photography: Jozef Kubica

Far left:  
Chan Il Chung from Korea  
on his return to base camp  
after reaching the summit

This page:  
American Chris Burrows,  
a cancer survivor, climbed  
Everest in spring 2007  
as part of a commercial  
mountaineering expedition



Sherpas act as guides and often as porters for mountain expeditions. They are physically better able to cope with the high altitude than their Western counterparts



# “CLIMB FOR THE FUN OF CLIMBING AND DO IT ONLY FOR YOURSELF”

*Ed Viesturs, who reached the summit of Mount Everest six times*

It hurts. Anybody who climbs above 8000m without oxygen and says it doesn't is a liar. I take six steps and then bend over my ice axe, resting my head in the snow. Babu Chiri Sherpa and my client David are doing exactly the same. A few minutes later we are standing on the summit of Shishapangma (8013m), exhausted but euphoric. The white teeth of the Himalaya run off to the curved horizon, dividing the green hills of Nepal and the endless desert of Tibet. Perhaps a longing to be close to such spectacular scenery combined with the potent sense of achievement is what drives humans to scale the world's highest peaks. To the east, the Himalayas butt into the wide-shouldered giant, Everest. I had never attempted the peak; Babu, however, had climbed it seven times without oxygen. Maybe one day.

Why does Everest persist in luring people? Although the media seem obsessed with the risk and loss bound up with mountain climbing, clearly this is not what motivates mountaineers themselves. Look at these portraits of climbers returning from the summit of Everest; look at the exultation on their faces. Yes, they look tired. The combination of sun, wind and cold has roughened their skin and they will be dehydrated. More than anyone, they understand the risks involved, and they look relieved to be back on terra firma. They have a serene aura, a glow of fulfilment, perhaps a longing to savour the moment before returning to routine everyday life. Their expressions may surprise non-mountaineers.

The truth is that the thought of standing on the highest point of the earth (8840m) is a dream for many climbers. Today, with a modest technical ability, the mountain is achievable. In the spring of 2009 alone, 338 people reached the summit, some of them with limited mountaineering experience. For various reasons, in recent years the odds of climbing the peak have

improved dramatically. Above 8000m on Everest, almost everyone breathes bottled oxygen, and the bottles used now are significantly lighter than their predecessors. Most use the Poisk system, originally manufactured for Russian fighter pilots. Each season a small army of Sherpas carry the oxygen bottles, placing them in camps for the clients. They ensure ropes are fixed from bottom to top too. Without their crucial work, very few people would reach the summit.

Also, the clothing available for today's mountaineers is made with sophisticated designs and hi-tech fabrics, and the weight of equipment such as crampons and karabiners has been dramatically reduced. Vitally, experienced leaders run logistics from base camp, making use of detailed weather forecasts via the internet, allowing them to advise climbers higher on the mountain. Choosing the right weather window to go for the summit is critical to success.

The images here convey the scale of the mountain. The landscape evokes awe, even Everest base camp, which houses scores of tents, looks insignificant perched on the edge of the vast Khumbu glacier, surrounded by snaking moraines and rock walls. Higher up the mountain, rows of peculiar-shaped ice penitents provide a testament to nature's constant ability to surprise us, the ever-changing light breathing life into this chaotic frozen world. The walls of the Western Cwm are lined with lethal hanging ice-cliffs, the valley floor is a crumpled glacier riddled with crevasses. Here is something so much bigger than human existence. Sights such as this fill us with wonder, as powerful in their own way as music or art, and their potential menace teaches us respect and humility.

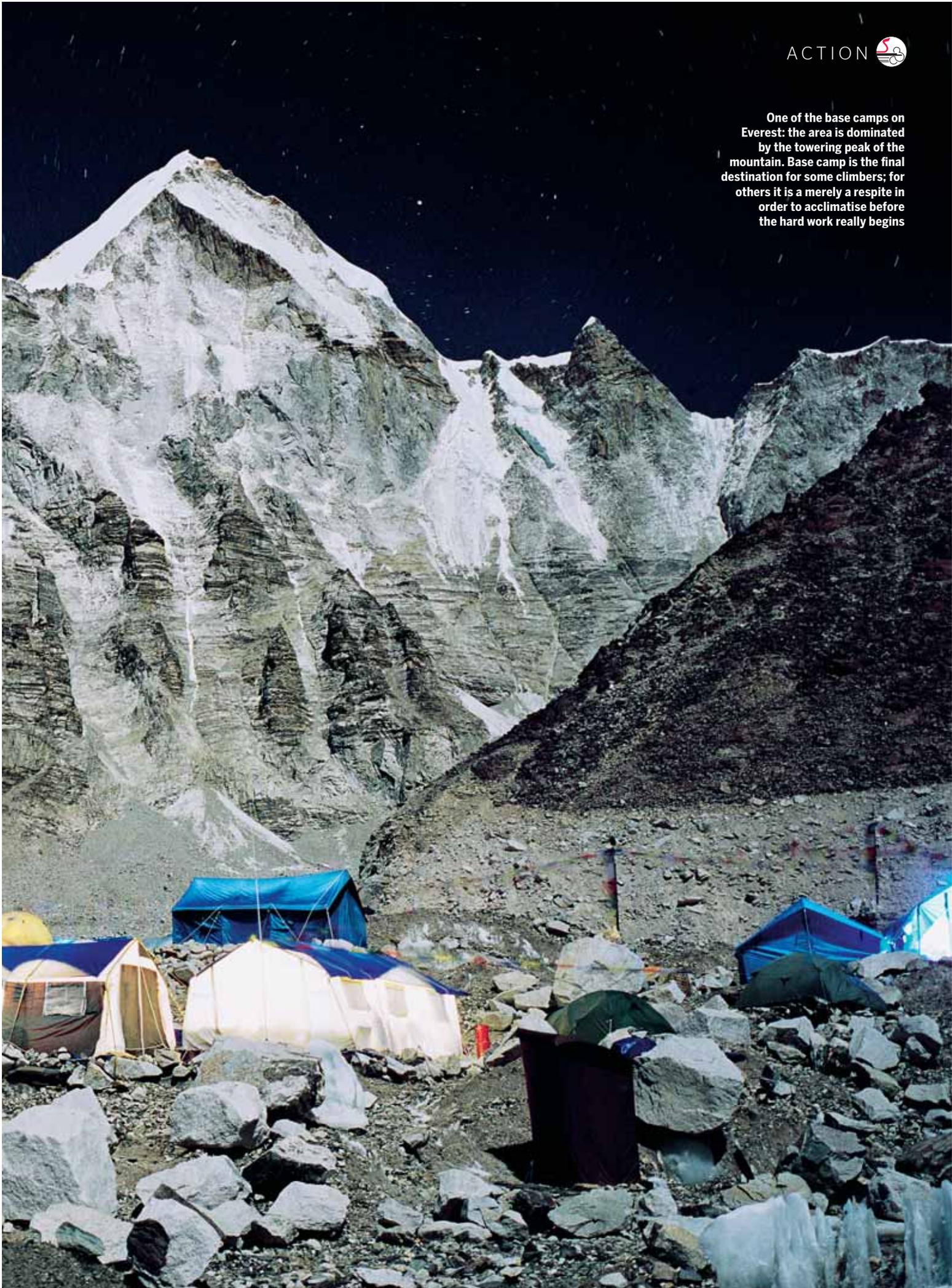
To climb on Everest is to tread through history, myth and legend. The feat of Hillary, Tenzing and team, making the first ascent in 1953, has enshrined certain features of that particular climb into mountaineering folklore, such as the 'Lhotse Face', the 'South Col' and the 'Hillary Step'.

The real romance and mystery, though, is reserved for the story of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine in 1924. The two men were attempting Everest from Tibet via the north col. The last known sighting was on June 8, through a gap in the clouds, just a few hundred metres from the summit.

Every climber has a view on the fate of Mallory and Irvine, on whether or not they reached the summit. In 1999, American alpinist Conrad Anker found



**One of the base camps on Everest: the area is dominated by the towering peak of the mountain. Base camp is the final destination for some climbers; for others it is a merely a respite in order to acclimatise before the hard work really begins**



Mallory's body on the north side of Everest, but without his camera. Scientists believed that the film in the camera could have been developed, which might have solved the mystery. Irvine's body has never been recovered.

As the saying goes: 'The first time you visit Nepal, you go for the mountains, you return for the people.' Despite the influx of western visitors, the people here welcome you wholeheartedly, and on the mountain, they are committed, capable and superb team players, repeatedly putting their own needs second to those of the visitors. The loads they carry are staggering. To spend time with the Sherpas is an opportunity to try to understand their spiritual connection with these mountains. For these people the highest peak is called Chomolungma meaning 'Goddess, Mother Of The World', or 'The Mountain So High No Bird Can Fly Over It', according to Tenzing Norgay. Perhaps the strong bond they feel with the mountain explains why they look so relaxed in photos, perhaps that and the fact that it is a familiar terrain for them, the place where they earn their livelihoods. A successful Sherpa can earn around \$4000 for two months' work on the mountain.

Maybe for Westerners, climbing mountains fills a void that exists in normal life, a spiritual and imaginative need. Climbing Mount Everest, then, is less about conquering a physical thing and more about restoring the spirit. Less about national ambition and more about something deeply personal, a triumph of the will shared with your climbing team. For Chris Burrows, a cancer survivor photographed here (see page 71), you imagine this is a very personal journey.

The normal route up Everest, via the South Col, is not a technically difficult climb by today's standards, but it still commands respect. The debilitating effects of altitude reduce the ability to make rational decisions. If for some reason oxygen equipment fails high on the mountain, the consequences can lead to high-altitude oedema, potentially lethal. The persistent cold grinds people down, and high winds on the final day

**Above right: Samantha Larson, 18, from Long Beach, California, scaled Everest in 2007. She and her father have completed the 7 Summits**

**Right: Janette Belarmino-Sardenta took part in the Filipino women's expedition in 2007. She had given birth just five months before her ascent and she named her son Himalaya**





**Left: Noelle Wenceslao, 27, also took part in the 2007 Filipino women's expedition. She suffered from acute mountain sickness during the early stages but managed to overcome it**

**Below left: Carina Dayondon, 28, the third member of the women's expedition. The trio had no experience of high altitude before the trip, which provided data for medical research**



can mean failure, as well as frostbite to any body part exposed. Despite internet forecasts, weather can change quickly up there. If a storm does come in, you have to rely wholly on your team-mates; there are no organised rescue teams on Everest. In 1996 a single storm killed eight people and it didn't differentiate between clients, guides or Sherpas. In the spring of 2009, five people died on the mountain.

Mountaineers have to accept the risks involved and put in place strategies to minimise these risks. Good mountaineers go boldly into the mountains, not blindly. And yet on Everest, in the Western Cwm specifically, the hazard from collapsing ice-cliffs, known as seracs, and avalanches is impossible to control. When returning from the summit, you are not safe until you have negotiated this spot, known on calm days as 'the valley of silence'. It stands between you and the sanctuary of base camp, the final hurdle. Legendary Sherpa Babu Chiri, my climbing companion on Shishapangma, fell into a 30m crevasse here and died. He was unroped and out taking photographs.

For many, climbing Everest will be considered pointless, but its attraction will never fade. Perhaps the desire to climb so high is bound up with human will to explore, to push the boundaries – something to be accepted, not scorned. To climb any mountain is to take a risk. If human beings had never taken risks, we'd all be sitting in caves, living like beasts.

Perhaps George Mallory understood the motivation and inspiration of most climbers when he wrote: "What we get from this adventure is sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life. We do not live to eat and make money."

#### **About the author**

*Motivational speaker Andy Cave has pioneered some of the most difficult mountain climbs in the world, leading more than 20 expeditions to the Himalayas, Patagonia and Alaska. Aged 20, he quit his job as a coalminer and climbed the north face of the Eiger in Switzerland. He is the award-winning author of Learning to Breathe and Thin White Line.*

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