

Is Mount Everest an overcrowded tourist trap?

BY STEPHEN WILLIAMS

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Traffic chokes the Hillary Step on May 19, 2012. Some climbers spent as long as two hours at this 40-foot rock wall below the summit, losing body heat. Even so, 234 people reached the top on this day, although four climbers died.

The route to the top of the world has become too crowded.

The first American to reach the summit of Mount Everest was James Whittaker, who accomplished that towering feat in 1963. As he stood at the summit, accompanied by his Sherpa guide, both men were very much alone.

Fast forward to 2013, when a team from National Geographic Magazine trekked up the mountain to mark the anniversary of Whittaker's quest; they found that in 2013, the challenge isn't nearly as....challenging.

A crowd of climbers slog up the Lhotse Face, heading toward Camp IV, last stop before the summit. Loose regulations and a boom in commercial guiding over the past two decades have made Everest far more accessible to experts and novices alike. (ANDY BARDON PHOTOGRAPHY/ANDY BARDON PHOTOGRAPHY)

According to an [article in the current National Geographic Magazine](#), about nine out of ten who reach the summit now are guided "clients," people who pay up to \$120,000 for this "tour." Not that climbing Everest is easy, even under those conditions: Ten deaths were reported in 2012, including three Sherpa guides. But today--as if the altitude, the winds, the lack of oxygen wasn't enough to deter them--climbers walk up trails that are polluted, with garbage leaking out of the glaciers and pyramids of human excrement befouling the high camps.

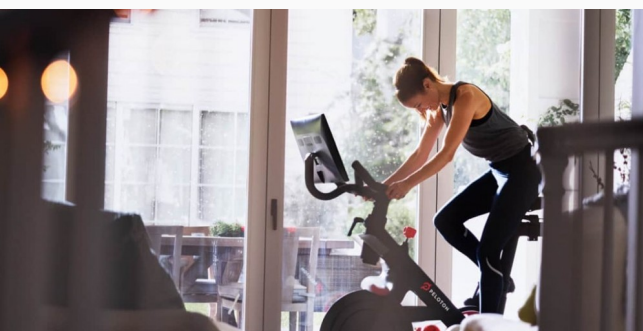
In more than a few places, climbers face a more gruesome encounter: corpses of the dead who didn't make it to the top.

The cover of the June 2013 issue of National Geographic magazine.

climbers had been caught in a storm, as others were in 1996, the death toll could have been staggering.

"Clearly the world's highest peak is broke," he writes. "But if you talk to the people who know it best, they'll tell you it's not beyond repair."

"When I arrived at the apex ..., it was so crowded I couldn't find a place to stand," writes author Mark Jenkins in the June issue of the National Geographic. "Meanwhile, down below at the Hillary Step the lines were so long that some people going up waited more than two hours, shivering, growing weak--this even though the weather was excellent. If these throngs of



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Glasses-Lovers Are Going Crazy Over This Site

Headlamps trace a path to the summit a few hours before dawn. Says one guide, "The most dangerous thing about Everest is everyone else who's trying to climb it." (KRISTOFFER ERICKSON)

There are about 35,000 visitors to the Everest region annually, and the money they spend for guides and permits is crucial to Nepal's economy, where the average national wage is less than \$900. It has become, in the words of one climber, "a commercial mountain."

The crowding has led to altercations, and worse, on the mount. In 1996, eight climbers were killed and several others stranded in a sudden blizzard near the summit.

The tragedy was documented by Jon Krakauer, a journalist and climber on that expedition, in his 1997 best-selling book, "Into Thin Air."

Crowded, yes, but still risky: Team member Hilaree O'Neill steps across a bridge of aluminum ladders lashed together above a crevasse in the Khumbu Icefall, considered one of the most unpredictable hazards on Everest. (© ANDY BARDON/ANDY BARDON PHOTOGRAPHY)

There are still memorable moments at Everest. Earlier this month, Arunima Sinha, 26, a trainee police officer from India, became the first female amputee to reach the top. Just two days later, an 80-year-old Japanese mountaineer became the oldest man to scale Everest; while in 2010, Jordan Romero, a 13-year-old American boy, was became the youngest to trek to the top.

As the Everest climb becomes more of an "extreme sport" and less of a unique, life-changing event, the crowds and queues are likely to increase. In his piece, Jenkins lays out some way to improve the climbing environment, including issuing fewer permits to climbers, restricting the

size of the climber teams to lessen congestion, and to require all climbers to remove all their waste and garbage from the mountain.

One crucial element is to ensure that climbers have the experience necessary; without the training, some just don't recognize that at some point, it might be time to turn around and go back.

"Only half the people here have the experience to climb this mountain," a Sherpa told the magazine. "The half without experience are the most likely to die."

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