

**Seasonal Stories  
for  
the Nepalese Himalaya**

**2004**

**by Elizabeth Hawley**



## **Spring 2004: Everest Attracts Even More Climbers**

### **Russians Scale Two Complex North Faces**

### **Spaniards Attempt First Ascent of a Newly Opened Lower Peak**

Last spring, in the 50th anniversary season of Everest's first ascent, a record number of men and women turned up to climb to its summit, and it was assumed that the numbers would decrease after that. Wrong assumption. The number of *teams* was slightly less, but not of *climbers*. In comparison to last May [2003], when a mere 260 people, foreigners and Nepalese, men, women and one 15-year-old child, stood on the summit of Everest, and on a single day, the 22nd of May, 114 summited, now, in 2004, the overall total rose considerably to 323 people. However, they were more evenly scattered over various days this time, with just 62 on the busiest day, 16 May.

As in every spring, Everest attracted by far the largest number of expeditions of the season, and all except one followed standard routes on the north and south sides; the exception was a large Russian team on a difficult new line directly up its vast north face. At the same time, a smaller Russian group made the first complete direct ascent and descent of the north face of Jannu, a high 7000er in far eastern Nepal.

In another, tragic, way this spring's Everest teams exceeded those of a year ago: the number of climbers' deaths. Last year, only three people died, all of them men and two of these were Sherpas. This year no Sherpa perished but seven other climbers, including two women, did: five had just been to the summit, another was trying to rescue two of these summiters, and the seventh collapsed while struggling to surmount the final 150 meters to the top. They were an American summitter, Nils Antzana, on the South Col route, and on the North Col route, a Bulgarian, Hristo Hristov; another Bulgarian, Mrs. Mariana Maslaova, who never reached the top; two South Koreans summiters, Jang Min and Park Mu-Taek, and Baek Joon-Ho, their leader, who climbed up from their highest camp to save them and then also died; and a 63-year-old Japanese woman, Mrs. Shoko Ota.

Two other summiters also died this spring: American Jay Sieger and Vladislav Terzyul, Ukrainian, who had gone to the top of Makalu together and were beginning their descent. Sieger apparently died when his head struck some rocks, but the body of veteran 8000-meter summitter Terzyul was not found, so what caused his death is unknown.

One of the season's most important climbs was the ascent of Everest's great north face by a new direct line from a spot near their advance base camp at 6200 meters to the 8850-meters-high summit. During a one-month-long ascent, the leader, Victor Kozlov, and 14 other climbing members from Russia, faced nearly all the types of problems a mountain can involve. To overcome them the team employed three Sherpas to help carry supplies of rope, tents and gear to camp 3 at 7800 meters. From that point the members began their use of bottled oxygen and

continued to use it almost all the way up to 8500 meters, with some exceptions: not everyone slept on it, and no one used it while fixing rope above camp 3. Total amount fixed: roughly 5000 meters from 6300 to 8500 meters.

They found problems from the very start of their climb. From base camp at 5600 meters to advance camp at 6200 meters, the problem was the danger of falling stones. Then came technical problems. Just below 7100 meters, where they pitched their first camp on the face, they found a small, nearly vertical couloir. From this camp 1 to camp 3, it was not very steep, but there were exposed rock slabs like slate roofing, alternating with patches of snow, which meant that climbing here was difficult for men wearing crampons.

The face from camp 3 to camp 4, from 7800 to 8250 meters, was steep grey rock followed by the famous yellow rock band; camp 4 was placed on a small rock ledge. The steepness continued for the first 200 meters above camp 4, then eased off to their final camp, also on a small ledge, at 8600 meters. Above this camp 5, the steepness resumed, and here they discovered a serious barrier: the climb became extremely difficult because the vertical rock crumbled, making it nearly impossible to fix rope. One of the team's four climbing leaders, Pavel Shabalin, gained only 50 meters' altitude in one day using belays from camp 5.

To continue on this direct vertical line would have required at least two more days of very dangerous climbing to surmount the next 50 meters, so they decided to traverse left 100 meters, then circle back around to the top of this crumbly area to return to their direct line above camp 5. From here to the top there was no real difficulty and on three successive days, 30 and 31 May and 1 June eight members arrived at the top. The two on the 1st of June were the only summiters from any Everest team that day and the last ones of the season. They had succeeded in forging a new line to the top of the mountain.

The Everest team made no attempt to descend the face. Another Russian expedition, led by Alexander Abramov, had summited on 24 and 25 May via the standard northern route, and at 8300 meters, where that route's last camp is normally pitched, they left for the face team a tent with sleeping bags, food, gas, and oxygen bottles. The tent was, in fact, used by only the first summit party on the night of the 30th; they were exhausted from having fixed rope below their camp 5 and then trying to force their way up the crumbly rock section. The second and third summit groups descended past the tent all the way to advance base camp, and one member of the 3rd summit party even continued down to base camp.

Some uncommon details of successful Everest expeditions on standard routes:

A Greek expedition sent one climbing team to the north side and another to the south to carry to the top their flags of the 2004 Greek Summer Olympic Games. They were the first Greek expedition ever to attempt Everest, and both parties succeeded in planting their flags at the highest spot on earth.

Another team on the north side had a novel sendoff. It was the first to go to Everest from the Indian navy, so the Indian defence minister, George Fernandes; the navy chief of staff, Admiral Madhvendra Singh; the expedition leader, a submariner, Commander Satyabrata Dam, and the 13 other expedition members

got into a Russian-built submarine and submerged to a depth of about 75 meters in the Arabian Sea for the official launching ceremony.

Sherpas on the normal climbing route from the Nepalese side included one with a prosthesis on his leg, and another who claimed a new speed record in his ascent. Nawang Sherpa, 32, lost his left leg below the knee in a motorcycle accident six years ago, but that didn't prevent him from getting to the top of the world this spring with an American, Thomas McMillan, who had arranged for him to have a high quality U.S.-made prosthesis fitted three years after his accident. Nawang went to Everest last year and climbed as far as camp 2 testing his artificial leg. Now was back, and with McMillan and three other Sherpas, became the second amputee ever to reach the summit. (The first was an American, Tom Whittaker, who summited six years earlier, but Nawang had lost much more of his leg than Whittaker had.)

The speed climber was Pemba Dorje, who claims he raced up the 3500 vertical meters from base camp on the Khumbu Glacier to the summit in only 8 hours and 8 minutes during the night of 20/21 May, climbing entirely alone and using artificial oxygen only above the last camp at 7900 meters.

For this 27-year-old climber, it was his third ascent. He was now well acclimatized: he had just made his second ascent by the same route on the morning of the 16th in the company of a Swiss, Rupert Heider, and two other Sherpas. Furthermore, he said, had spent about six months training intensively in Kathmandu before arriving at base camp on 7 April. Nearly every day, he had cycled at least eight kilometers and jogged from one edge of the city to another; he had also gone rock climbing.

The announcement of this astonishing feat was received with some scepticism and was immediately challenged at base camp, in a satellite telephone interview with a newspaper reporter in Kathmandu, by Lhakpa Gelu Sherpa, renewing a controversy they had last year. Pemba Dorje made his first speed-ascent last spring and reported then that it took him 12 hours and 45 minutes to climb from bottom to top. Lhakpa Gelu said four days later that he himself had just spent only 10 hours and 56 minutes to do the entire ascent. Pemba Dorje charged Lhakpa Gelu with lying and insisted that it was he who had made the fastest ascent. Lhakpa Gelu countered with evidence to support his own timings, and after investigation, Nepal's tourism ministry concluded that this man's claim to the record was valid. This spring again, the ministry was looking into the validity of a speed-climb claim and in the meantime was not revealing which specific details they were trying to check nor what information he had given them.

Some details do seem to merit looking into since, unfortunately for him, no one else was on the summit with him—indeed no one else was on the summit at any time on the 21st—so there was no one to confirm what time he was there or any other details. Pemba Dorje said that when he stood on the summit at 2:00 a.m. that day, he saw lights from two or three headlamps of climbers coming up from the Tibetan side. Based on his knowledge of that side from his own first ascent of

Everest, he judged these climbers to be a little above the highest camp, which is normally at 8300 meters.

But there are two problems with this: there almost certainly were no climbers above that altitude at 2:00 a.m.; on the 21st there was one man, a Bulgarian searching for his missing team-mate, and he was there at around 5:30-6:00 a.m., when it was no longer dark. And even if there had been someone, that person could not be seen from the summit, according to others who have climbed to the top themselves. They explain that a small ridge not far below the summit obscures a view of anyone in 8300-meter area of the north side.

The scepticism that was voiced when the news of Pemba Dorje's ascent broke was not based on these factors, which were not generally known, but on the question of whether anyone could lop four and a half hours off his elapsed time of a year before. He said he had put himself through a rigorous training regime, but could that have cut his time by one-third?

One record that no one disputed was set by a well-known modest Sherpa, Apa, who this spring achieved his 14th Everest ascent at the age of 42. His nearest rival, Chuwang Nima Sherpa, who is five years younger, scored his 11th success this spring. Apa may not be unusually fast, but he is very strong. He has said that he does not climb Everest to set any kind of record but to earn good money to support his family by doing the only kind of work he knows.

Another record in number of ascents was set by an American, Gheorghe Dijaurescu, who has acquired the habit of climbing Everest in the spring via the standard Tibetan-side route. He became the only non-Sherpa to have gone to the summit every year for six consecutive years.

A useful permanent improvement to the standard northern route was a new ladder placed at the bottom of the Second Step at about 8600 meters. It was installed by an expedition led by Russell Brice, a leader of teams on this route every spring. His ladder is wider than the old one, which was put there by Chinese climbers in 1975, and significantly longer. The old one was four or five meters long; the length of this new one is eight meters.

The other historic climb in the Nepalese Himalaya this season was the successful ascent and descent by a direct route via the north face of Jannu by another Russian team (with one Kirghizstani member) led by Alexander Odinstov. This very probably was the first ascent of the north face direct. A Yugoslavian (now Slovenian), Tomo Cesen, claimed to have accomplished this solo in one continuous push from base camp in the spring of 1989, but after his account in the following year of having summited the south face of Lhotse solo was discredited, there has been grave doubt about his Jannu success. In any case, by his own account, he did not descend the face but came down the less difficult northeast ridge instead.

Since 1975, nine expeditions had been on this extremely steep (80-90 degrees in places) face of 7710-meter Jannu, which is officially known as Khumbhakarna, in addition to Cesen's one-man effort. The ninth was led by Odinstov himself last autumn, when his eight-member team reached 7200 meters and then abandoned the attempt because of snowfall, strong wind and the low temperatures on the north

side of any Nepalese Himalaya in autumn when direct sunlight shifts around in a southerly direction (the autumn 1975 team had called it “the wall of shadows.”)

This spring Odinstov returned with seven members besides himself. Six of these men had been with him in 2003, and they now had more experience of the route, knew a better site for their base camp and which points were especially dangerously exposed to falling rocks and ice avalanching.

Without using any bottled oxygen or Sherpa help, they moved slowly upwards, Odinstov reported, using a total of about 75 ice screws and 300 rock pitons to fix about 3375 meters of rope; in some sections the rock was bad enough to require two and even three pitons at a single place. In two areas, one just below and above 6500 meters, the other near 7300 meters, they had to make lower and then higher camps 2 and camps 4 because of the many hours of effort needed to fix the route. To make a place for camp 3 at 7000 meters, they had to work in shifts of three members for eight hours per shift, working in relays cutting ice and removing stone, for four or five days. Their slow progress was also due to the impossibility of climbing this face with mittens on their hands, but going without them meant their fingers became very cold, so every two meters—or sometimes even less—they had to pause and rub their fingers to get them warm again.

They had arrived at their base camp on the Jannu Glacier at 4700 meters on 3 April. They pitched their highest camp, their second camp 4, at 7400 meters on the 14th of May. Now for a rest and then the summit push. But now Jannu was hit by a prolonged period of snowfall and strong winds, so it was not until the 26th of May that their first members reached the top.

Two members, Dmitri Pavlenko and Alexander Ruchkin, left the 7400-meter camp at 5:00 a.m. on the 26th, finally gained the summit at 3:00 p.m. and returned to camp at 6:00 p.m. The final 70 meters was rock covered with dangerous powder snow, and the top itself was a snow cornice difficult for rock climbers to surmount.

Three more Russians, Sergei Borisov, Gennady Kirievsky and Nikolai Totmyanin, followed them on the 28th, and were able to move much faster since the way had been opened by the first two summiters. Next day, as they descended all the way to base camp, they cleared the mountain of all their tents and contents, plus as much fixed rope as they could recover—a lot of it was stuck in snow that had melted and then frozen. The “wall of shadows” was finally successfully climbed in both directions.

While the Russians were laboriously working their way up Jannu, to the north, on Nepal’s border with Tibet, a six-member team of Spaniards were the first people making an attempt by any route on the 7264-meters-high Dome Kang (or, to give it its official name, Domekhan). Led by Carlos Soria, they made their base camp on 18 April at Pangpema, the normal site for base camp for climbers going to Kangchenjunga’s north face, and approached Dome Kang from the south via the Jongsang Glacier, working their way over a difficult unsettled rocky area, and pitched their first high camp 14 kilometers from and 800 meters higher than base, at 5350 meters. Their aim was to reach their summit via the mountain’s east ridge.

They did gain the ridge but were unable to follow it all the way to the summit. Their second camp was placed at a col, known as Jongsang La, on the ridge at 6100 meters. They managed to move from there westwards towards the summit, but finally stopped at 6650 meters exactly one month after they had arrived at their base. Now the clouds moved in covering the way ahead, and snow started to fall. Furthermore, by now their time was running out.

From the Jongsang La the summit ridge was a very complicated mixture of rock, snow, and broken pieces of ice, making it impossible to keep to the ridge. They sometimes moved on the ridge itself, sometimes on its south side, and sometimes on the north side's big hanging glacier.

On the 18th of May, they realized that they did not have sufficient time left to spend four or five days more to solve the next problem of the last 600 meters up to a plateau. They want to come back next year to solve this problem and finish the climb to the top. They would follow the same route, but they would give themselves more to time to do it.

## **Autumn 2004: East Face of Jannu Still Unclimbed**

### **Japanese Succeed on Two Previously Unattempted 6000ers**

#### **The Usual Flood of Climbers Attempt Cho Oyu and Ama Dablam**

Slovenia's best known active climber of Himalayan near-vertical faces was unable to achieve success on the east face of Jannu. Plans to "conquer" four virgin peaks, one in the summer and three in autumn, were fulfilled on two of them, Chhiv and Purkhang in the western districts of Mustang and Manang, by two different Japanese teams. The normal autumn flood of climbers on Cho Oyu in the first part of the season and on Ama Dablam later in the season caused some Ama Dablam climbers to complain about the crowds.

At times during the autumn it seemed as though the only Nepalese Himalaya being climbed were Cho Oyu and Ama Dablam, especially in late September-early October, when most of the 52 Cho Oyu parties were returning from their attempts at the same time as many of the 29 Ama Dablam groups were arriving. But there actually were 58 other teams going to Everest (only two parties—with no success) and to 24 less well known mountains, some groups seeking to make first ascents or to pioneer new routes from Chhiv in the northwest to Jannu and Janak in the far northeast of Nepal.

The best known climber on these pioneering efforts was Tomaz Humar from Slovenia, who went to Jannu. Jannu, also known as Khumbhkarna, not far from Kangchenjunga, has a forbiddingly precipitous east face which Slovenians seem to have become obsessively determined to scale. Its main summit is 7710 meters high, while its east face tops out on the east summit at 7468 meters. Every team that has aimed to climb it has been Slovenian. None has yet succeeded.

Humar, 35 years old, famous for his spider-like ability to scale nearly vertical walls, had demonstrated his exceptional abilities in earlier climbs in Nepal on Ama Dablam and Nuptse in Khumbu, Bobaye in the far west of Nepal, and—most notably—solo on the unclimbed south face of Dhaulagiri I in 1999. This season his goal was to make the first ascent of Jannu's east face all the way—and to do it solo. But he had to abandon the effort at 7000 meters where, in its present condition, the face had gotten "harder and harder, riskier and riskier as I went higher and higher."

Before tackling the face, Humar acclimatized to 6000 meters on an east pillar with his Croatian friend, Stipe Bozic. Then to the face. But the face was "totally different" from what he had seen in pictures of the 1992 attempt: now there was black ice and above that many big mushrooms covered with powder snow, which made them very dangerous.

His ascent from advance base camp at 5400 meters lasted for four days. On the first day, 27 October, he crossed a high glacier shaped like an amphitheater where powder snow avalanches were falling constantly and depositing chest-deep snow, and where there were very deep crevasses, many at least six meters wide.

But one a mere two meters wide, and this he jumped across. Then to get out of this areas of avalanche debris, he started up an ice and rock debris pillar at the southern end of the face, up 30 meters of a face of an overhanging section with a series of very dangerous and difficult obstacles where he was hit hard by an ice “candle” that luckily did him no damage. He bivouacked at 6000 meters late that afternoon.

His second bivouac the next day was only 200 meters higher. Here he now had to climb a system of what he called overhanging rock cracks, 20 meters high; they must have been something like upside-down crevasses. He had to climb up inside them and then over onto the outside. They were like polished granite and gave very little friction, so it was impossible to fix any rope. This was a “very risky” area. Next came a number of mushroom ridges, a “nightmare” of ups and downs past both the mushrooms and avalanching. At 6200 meters he found a narrow rock ledge and bivouacked there, half hanging over the edge.

On the 29th, Humar was finally able to climb very fast and in six hours had scaled a face of 80-90 degrees and then had to work his way up a very thin couloir covered with black ice under powder snow which he had to laboriously clear away. Each side was a huge balloon of powder snow and at the top of it were cauliflower cornices.

Here he fell three times but carried on, then traversed 20 meters to the right side on a mushroom to end up bivouacking at 6850 meters in a snow-hole which he dug deep into a mushroom on a ledge. He left his gear here and tried to find a route beyond, but he could gain just 25 meters in four hours. He returned to his snow-hole and spent a very cold night there; 100 km/hour winds were blowing “very fresh air” into it and down his throat. But he was confident that next day he would be able to reach the shoulder on the southeast ridge which leads to the top.

But “a nightmare came early in the morning [of the 30th] when I tried to reach this shoulder” only 20 meters above but “unreachable” through the mushrooms. He could find no way past them in five attempts up different couloirs and mushrooms. After four and a half hours of these futile efforts, he gave up at about 7000 meters.

So at 1:00 that afternoon, he packed up his gear and headed down, found a way through fog, and after 4:00 p.m., through falling snow. He fell five times on rock pillars, and at one place below had to jump two crevasses. He could not follow his own tracks because avalanches had filled them in, but he managed to arrive safely at advance base camp after nightfall in six hours’ descent. He spent the night there and was down at his base on the 31st.

He said that he has no plans to go back to Jannu’s east face again. He would not declare the route to be impossible, but it is simply too dangerous in its present condition.

Like Humar, all of the earlier teams on the east face had no Sherpas or bottled oxygen with them, but not all actually did any climbing, two for tragic reasons. Slovenians’ first bid was made in the spring of 1991, when the two members attained an altitude of 7050 meters, then gave up because of a

combination of bad weather, frost-nipped toes, exhaustion and no more gas for cooking. In the following spring, a three-member team moved over towards the left and reached 7100 meters, at a point where the face meets the southeast ridge; they then turned back safely. But that autumn one member of a six-man party on their approach to base camp went for a swim in a river, slipped and drowned; his teammates never went to the mountain.

In the autumn of 1993, two of a three-member group got to 6800 meters, then abandoned the climb because of dangerous avalanching. In 1996 both members of a two-man team disappeared without trace during their acclimatization climb on nearby Kabru; fog closed in around them and they were never seen again. In the spring of 1998 eight members waited for weeks at the bottom of the east face for constant avalanching to cease but finally abandoned hope and actually did no climbing. Four years later, four other Slovenes spent two weeks at advance base camp just beneath the face, where at first fog obscured the face and soon snow began falling, and avalanching sent them home too.

North of Jannu, the first attempt ever made to climb the mountain that was dubbed the Outlier by climber-explorers early in the 20th century, but is officially named Janak, was made by a two-member Romanian team led by Constantine Lacatusu. Their plan was to scale this 7044-meters-high peak north-northwest of Kangchenjunga on Nepal's border with Tibet via its southwest ridge, but they managed to get no farther than a rock tower close to the bottom of the ridge.

On 11 November, three weeks after having established their base camp at 4800 meters, Lacatusu and his climbing partner Ioan Torek made their bid to reach the summit from their third high camp at 6200 meters. They climbed all day 300 meters up the right side of the tower and then gave up this line: they were now in a serac area with powder snow impossible to fix with rope, so they returned to camp. The next day they attempted the tower's left side, moved up beneath overhanging seracs, and reached 6400 meters only to find again impossible powder snow. They abandoned the climb.

Lacatusu summarized their attempt: "the first part of Janak was technical, and we climbed that, but the second half was dangerous and we didn't climb that." The technical part was "very nice" and he and Torek "would like to come back and finish what we started." Next time they would have more manpower and more rope to fix.

The only successful first ascent in the autumn was achieved by a 5-member Japanese team led by Takeshi Wada on Chhiv, a 6655-meter mountain in Nepal's Mustang district. They climbed the northeast ridge, and four members summited on 18 September. Wada said it was a very easy climb except at about 6300 meters the ridge, covered with snow, got quite steep (60-70 degrees) and 300 meters of rope had to be fixed here. (The team fixed a total of 1000 meters on the route.)

In the summer, another Japanese party had been highly successful on Purkhang, 6120 meters high in Manang district north of a popular so-called trekking peak, Chulu West. Of its 11 members, eight, plus six Sherpas, succeeded via the west ridge on 18 August. Above their only high camp at 5450 meters they

first had to cross numerous crevasses—they used a ladder to get negotiate one—surmount an icefall, and, at 5700 meters climb a 100-meter high ice wall 65 degrees steep. They had a long summit day: they left high camp at 3:40 a.m., were on the summit at 2:45 p.m., and returned to high camp at 8:00 p.m.

The fourth virgin mountain that climbers had plans for was Langmochen Ri, which is 6811 meters high southwest of the Khumbu village of Thami. Two Americans, William (Rusty) Escapule and Tom Togami, first went to acclimatize on Parchermo nearby. There had been heavy snowfall for two days just before they got there, and the day after their arrival a huge avalanche swept nine people—three Americans, three Frenchmen and three Nepalis—down its north face. Escapule and Togami joined in the strenuous rescue effort. They were now very tired when they went to look at Langmochen Ri, and besides the snow conditions were too dangerous to try for the summit. They made no attempt to go above base camp, but it is a “beautiful mountain, a great mountain to climb.”

Six expeditions tried to forge new routes on four mountains, but only one of them was successful. A six-member Slovenian team led by Uros Samec went up a new line on a 7351-meter mountain just south of Cho Oyu. Although it is officially called Pasang Lhamu Chuli, it used to be known as Jasamba or Cho Aui and has been successfully climbed twice from its west side. This autumn’s group attacked it from the south, up the southeast face to the south ridge.

Their route presented technical difficulties in the mid-section of the face above a big snowfield; here they encountered rock and this ice leading to a couloir 60 degrees steep which in turn led to the summit ridge. The first part of the ridge was also a problem: it was narrow, covered with snow, in one section badly corniced, and was 90 degrees steep at its beginning. But three members, Rok Blagus, Samo-Matijja Kremelj and Samec climbed the face, pitched a camp there and two days later, on 24 October, were on the summit.

The best known of all Nepalese peaks, Mount Everest, had only two teams this autumn, Dutch and Ukrainian, both on Tibet’s standard route via the North Col and both unsuccessful. First to arrive were Werner de Jong’s Dutch team of seven members—but two did no climbing and left earlier than the others—and two Sherpas who had previously summited Everest. The team fixed 1800 meters of rope but needed more, the snow was so deep the Sherpas refused to climb very high because, they said, they were too tired, and there was avalanche danger. Three members went to camp 1 at 7000 meters, but only one of them, Harry Kristra, went on up and slept in camp 2, which the Sherpas had pitched 550 meters higher but refused to stay in. When the Sherpas did not join him the next day, 18 September, as expected, Kristra made no attempt to go higher. The expedition’s climb was over.

The Ukrainians were also only two, led by the Himalayan veteran Sergei Bershov with a newcomer to the Himalaya, Sergei Shalygin. Climbing with artificial oxygen, they managed to reach about 8000 meters on 7 October before a serious problem stopped them: all the ropes fixed by last spring’s expeditions and the Dutch were buried under the deep snow, there were no Sherpas to fix new ropes even if they had had any, which they did not, and they were having to make the

route through the snow entirely by themselves since the Dutch had given up and left the mountain before the Ukrainians reached the North Col's 7000 meters. Furthermore it was very windy. They gave up the struggle.

A major problem for the Everest climbers was that there was nobody else around: there were none of the big commercial expeditions that come in the spring with numerous Sherpas to establish the route by fixing hundreds of meters of rope much of the way to the top. But for many on Ama Dablam, which stands 6812 meters high in the shadow of Everest's southern side, the problem was that there were too many people. One leader said he was going to tell Nepalese tourism ministry officials that they must limit the number of people to whom they issue Ama Dablam climbing permits. (However, the government is most unlikely to act on his advice since the fees are a major source of its foreign exchange earnings and foreign climbers' expenditures are extremely important to their Sherpas, the trekking agencies who assist teams, and many lodge keepers in mountainous areas.)

Some Ama Dablam teams were very small with just a member or two and perhaps one Sherpa. And not all of the 29 expeditions were on the mountain at the same time—they were spread out over a month—but they did bunch up at times. And two consisted of 30 and 31 members each; the larger one, which was led by an American, Dan Mazur, was assisted by nine Sherpas.

Mazur's expedition sent a total of 38 people to the top over seven days. On a single day, the 24th of October, which was just when a number of other parties were also summiting or trying to, this team put seven members and three Sherpas on the summit.

The British leader of the other of the largest team, Henry Todd, had 30 members and two Sherpas in his party. The members arrived at base camp and left the mountain at different times, and of his 19 successful members, plus two Sherpas—who went to the top three times—18 summited on six different days between 26 October and 17 November. He said he tried to minimize the impact of his sizable group by, for example, not pitching tents that would be left empty much of the time but would take up space badly needed by other climbers, and by having his members summit in relatively small numbers each day. Furthermore, his team was based at a camp apart from others' bases, and when some members arrived at Ama Dablam, other expeditions had already moved off the mountain.

Nevertheless there were complaints. A German leader was unhappy about some climbers in Mazur's team: he said that 15 in a bunch ascended from one camp to another very slowly, and the slowest did not know how to use a jumar properly, tried to climb a small face but fell on the rope. The German leader and Mazur's deputy leader attempted to speed up their progress by hauling their rucksacks up by rope. This problem greatly delayed the German team's arriving at their second high camp and getting past them to reach the third camp.

A member of an American team, Dan Starr, reported that he had almost been hit by a falling rock loosened by a climber above him. He was at what he described as the most dangerous part of the climb, a chimney leading to the yellow tower and

the site for many parties' camp 2. His own group did not pitch any second or third camp because no space was available, and they were not only ones who had to skip a camp, usually camp 2. This meant this American group's summit party of three members had to set out for the top from camp 1 at 5775 meters extremely early in the morning and only one, Starr, a mountain guide, managed to gain the summit. His descent was slowed by having to wait for others coming up the mountain at its bottlenecks.

The leader of an international expedition, Luis Benitez from the U.S., summarized the general situation on Ama Dablam in harsh terms: "too many teams were not led properly or responsibly but too cheaply." Some teams' Sherpas took food, fuel and even a set of crampons from others' tents for their own members. One leader reportedly apologized for the stolen crampons, but others were apparently unaware of what their Sherpas were doing.

The Nepalese tourism ministry must restrict the number of Ama Dablam permits it grants in a season, Benitez stated, because the mountain is getting so overcrowded that it has "almost reached critical mass."

On Cho Oyu, 8201 meters, there were nearly twice as many teams as on Ama Dablam, but they did not have this kind of crowding problem. There was a lot more space with none of Ama Dablam's narrow-ridge bottlenecks to confront them.

Remarkably few deaths occurred during the autumn and none in summer: only one on Cho Oyu and two on Annapurna I. Cho Oyu has a history of very few fatal accidents: only 35 climbers have perished on it—an extremely small death toll considering the thousands of men and women who have been on the mountain and roughly 1500 who have reached its summit. But this autumn a young Spanish Basque, Xabier Ormazabal, climbing independently and going for the summit alone, died while he was descending after having reached at least 8100 meters and perhaps the top.

Another independent climber, Miss Eloise Barbieri from Italy, had become acquainted with Ormazabal and was the only person who knew much about his movements. She watched him through binoculars as he went for the summit on 13 October, a very windy day. He was entirely alone on the upper reaches of the mountain while the weather worsened. She saw him reach the summit plateau at about 8000 meters, disappear out of sight for an hour and a half and then reappear. This time span is fully consistent with his having reached the highest of several small peaks before coming back into sight, which he did at 1:00 p.m.

Two hours later he had descended about 200 meters and then sat down for an hour, resumed his decent but now moved down only a few meters at a time, intermittently falling over, until 5:30 p.m., when night fell; he had descended to about 7700 meters. On the next day, falling snow made it impossible to see anyone or anything from afar; on the day after that, the 15th, when he had not come into camp, a searcher went up to look for him. His body was found at 7550 meters.

The only others to die this autumn were two Japanese who were killed by avalanching on the notoriously avalanche-prone north face of Annapurna I. The mountain has the worst ratio of deaths to summiters of any of Nepal's eight

8000ers: 56 people, including this Japanese pair, have died on it, and more than half of these (29) were on the north face, while only 131 climbers have ever reached the top.

The Japanese who died were a four-member team's leader Michio Sato and team-mate Hideji Nazuka, who were at 6200 meters on 10 October when a big block of ice suddenly broke loose from the glacier on the feature known as the sickle, fell onto a sloping snowfield and set off a major avalanche. This mass of snow and ice carried Sato and Nazuka 500 vertical meters with it. Their bodies were recovered an hour and a half later.