

NEPAL: THE MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR INDUSTRY IS UNDER THREAT



The thrill of climbing Mount Everest is an experience that many tourists hope to achieve, from adrenaline junkies wanting to experience Nepal to advanced mountaineers looking for the ultimate challenge, and many pay tens of thousands of dollars for the privilege. The goal for many is to follow the southern route taken by Hillary, under the guidance of the local Sherpas or course, but the Sherpas are refusing to take any more visitors up the mountain after a recent icefall killed thirteen of their colleagues and left three missing. They say the risks are too great and they want better life insurance to protect their families in case of future tragedies.

Some tourists may wonder why they are suddenly striking now, but these Sherpas are desperate to see changes in insurance and relief funds.

It is easy for travellers to see the only positives of Sherpa life and a trip to Mount Everest, perhaps looking upon this as a one-off tragedy on an otherwise safe mountain. Sherpas earn between \$3-7000, greatly above the national average of \$700, and it is true that Everest is getting safer because of advancements in avalanche science and equipment; however, there are still large numbers of potentially inexperienced climbers on those slopes at one time and these Sherpas are constantly putting their lives in danger. Some say that the ever-present threat of an avalanche is part of the risk of mountaineering and the Sherpas know what they are getting involved in but it is unwise to get complacent about the mountain, seeing it as a great bucket-list trip rather than a dangerous expedition, and there are two sides to Sherpa life. The downside is that this above average income is earned over a two month season and has to support their families for the whole year. Now they are understandably saying that enough is enough; they want better insurance and security for the families they might leave behind and will not go back up the mountain until changes are made.

It is essential that the Nepalese government makes long-term changes to support the Sherpas and the tourism industry - without guides there are no more safe trips up Mount Everest. The demands are for revenue from the trips to be used to increase insurance funds and provide relief for the families of the dead and injured. These expeditions can cost anywhere between \$50,000 and \$100,000 but only 11,000 of that goes to the government for a climbing licences, meaning only a small percentage of the cost currently has the potential of helping the Sherpas. By increasing this number perhaps these insurance funds and relief funds can increase and support the local community.

So far, the government has said that “most” of the demands will be met and there is hope that they will get the desired support that will let them return to work; however, it is important to remember that this is not just a one-off tragedy but a wake-up call for tourism at Mount Everest and a sign of its possible future. The Sherpa community is in mourning and some believe that the families may not allow their loved ones to go back to Everest because the risks are just too great.

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