

# Traffic jam on top of the world



**60 years since it was tamed, Everest is full**

**W**IND rips across the ridge that leads to the summit of Mt Everest.

Imagine the force if you were strapped to the outside of a plane in flight. That's how it feels on a pleasant day on the world's balcony.

And think that down both sides of this narrow ridge is a vertical fall of 3.5km. If you slip, you won't stop till bits of your body land on the glacier below.

You will become one of the 250 or so who died trying to conquer Everest. (Nine of those died in the season just ended.)

You might also end up one of the 120 whose bodies remain frozen in situ. Like Green Boots, believed to be Indian climber Tsewang Paljor, who lies curled in an ice cave that the living pass. Or Australian Craig Nottle who fell at 8000m in 1984.

No wonder this highest point on Earth — 8850m above sea level — was claimed as the kingdom of serious mountaineers, mostly men, who appear to the rest of us on that point between bravery and insanity. It was up there with the most difficult of natural challenges.

There may be harder mountains to scale, tougher conditions to overcome, but the others aren't Everest — "Sagarmatha" in Nepalese, the goddess of the sky.

Sixty years ago this month New Zealander Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay "knocked the bastard off". Being the first to succeed, it was them versus Everest.

Their famous route is now taken by hundreds in the few days of the climbing season when summitting is

Ruth Lamperd

humanly possible. This year more than 500 summited.

The growth market up Everest is not in the "hardcore climbers". It is made up now of people willing to pay big dollars for the experience.

There's talk of erecting a ladder to ease congestion on the final obstacle, a near-vertical 13m cliff known as Hillary's Step. On busy days climbers wait hours to ascend.

There was news of fighting at Base Camp. Abandoned gear. Rubbish of the Western world.

If you're to believe the reports, Mt Everest sounds more like a tacky tourist destination than an icon of human endeavour.

But is it really? There are many haters on both sides. The resource-rich commercial adventurers see their way as more responsible. The hardcore mountaineers see theirs as most befitting the Everest aura.

Australia's most accomplished climber Andrew Lock, laments the effort to tame the mountain — the excess of stuff people now use to get to the top and the disrespect shown by too many humans littering in a white, wild wilderness.

Piling on things to help you go higher, faster or deeper, you can overcome anything in nature, Lock says. "And if you tie enough ladders together you could climb to the moon."

People who summit say things that make it to famous quote lists.

This from the first woman to reach the top, Junko Tabei, in 1975: "I can't understand why men

make all this fuss about Everest — it's only a mountain."

But fuss fades up in the Death Zone. People are very small. All of them.

— from the oxygen-tank-free to the newcomers reliant on the fullest of support — are just trying to survive. And it doesn't matter who you are, physically it pushes everyone.

One company suggests Everest should only be attempted if back home you can ascend 1200m carrying 20kg in no more than three hours. That's equivalent to walking to the top of Mount Donna Buang carrying a three-year-old, in

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half the time taken by the average day hiker.

A climber likened the experience in his ascent to the Everest crest as feeling as if he had become nothing but a set of lungs, barely conscious of doing anything except breathing in and out to stay alive in thin air.

The first person with a disability to summit Everest, Australian Paul Hockey, was criticised by some die-hard mountaineers. He was ignored, berated and bad-mouthed for his attempt, up the less travelled, north face from Tibet. He went with an expedition company and paid for the privilege. He almost died on the way down from bleeding on his lungs.

He is frustrated at the hate he says his accomplishment drew. He points out the set lines laid by sherpas in the decades since Sir Edmund and Norgay in 1953.

They're there on the common routes up to help climbers avoid that long drop to death.

"But it doesn't matter whether you're in the hardcore brigade or in a commercial expedition like I was, we are all clipped on to the same lines," Hockey says. "Up there, we're on the same big lump of rock and ice, but it's like some of the others have climbed a different mountain."

As frontiers went, it was a doozy. Now, there is litter — more than 50 tonnes of it — left by climbers who either don't understand the value in leaving only footprints, or those who feel so close to the edge of life they don't care.

Queensland University of Technology researcher David Savage hasn't climbed Mt Everest, but he's spoken to lots who have. He returned to Australia last week, after spending most mornings of the previous four months gazing at the mountain while drinking his morning coffee.

He interviewed 300 people on expedition to either Base Camp or attempting the summit.

He wasn't surprised to hear many of the amateurs led by professionals were ticking off a box on their bucket list.

He also was not surprised that so much rubbish lay on the mountain's treacherous slopes.

"Would you be thinking about your rubbish if you're at the top, exhausted, struggling to survive and

you still have to go down?" Savage says.

Savage surveyed climbers on their attitudes and behaviours, and two base categories: those who identified with being mountaineers wanting a challenge, and those who were adrenaline junkies.

Savage says the raw data seems to support his original hypotheses, that climbers are no different to anyone else. They climb for the same reason some of us watch sport, or collect stamps. Because they like it.

It's a fact, however unfair, for extreme feats to be diminished once people start making money from it. Now photographs are published that show a zig and a zag of scores of climbers following the line up Hillary's route.

For Everest, commercial tours started in 1993. It's gone further now. Savage discovered one American-based company had dropped its price per person to from \$50,000 to \$35,000 in an attempt to corner market share. At that price, profits would be marginal, he says.

These reports disappoint Lock. But he reminds that Mt Everest is a big mountain. Those on the easier routes aren't there for the climb or the challenge of setting a target where the outcome is uncertain.

"They're there for their personal reasons, whatever they are — satisfaction,

kudos," Lock says. Six hundred will go for the summit in the same two to three day window. "All the focus is on the summit, but they won't tell you that they shared that moment with 50 other people."

"I would go back to Everest tomorrow, but I wouldn't climb the route the maniacs go. I'd go in a different season on a different route."

The beauty and wilderness is still there, on the other side of the mountain.

Hockey was lucky. He spent 20 quiet minutes at the top with his guide. It was white-out for 10 minutes, then everything cleared, his pain rewarded with the best view on Earth.

Since infancy, he'd had only one arm. He rode motorbikes and attained three black belts in a martial art. Still people kept telling him his limits.

The North Queensland tour bus driver and motivational speaker figured nobody could say that to him again, he could make it to the top of Mt Everest.

He believes some people are still doing the climb for the right reasons and nobody has a right to bring them down.

"They're the ones that can answer 'yes' to this question: Would I still do this if nobody else ever knew I had?"