
IAN WALL

Nepal 2020-21



A woman guards oxygen cylinders for a patient after refilling them at a factory during last spring's Covid-19 surge in Kathmandu. (*Alamy/Navesh Chitrakar*)

Just as the spring 2020 mountaineering season was about to get underway in Nepal the world was overwhelmed by Covid-19. It was poor timing, since the authorities were hoping to celebrate Visit Nepal 2020, a widely heralded tourism drive. Many countries were imposing lockdowns or restricting movement and Nepal was no different, closing its borders to international travellers on 22 March. Rumours also emerged that the government was about to restrict movement within the country, with domestic flights grounded and roads closed. Many Nepalis left the capital to return to their villages, many of them people employed in the travel and tourism industry, including the mountaineering service industry. A nationwide lockdown was announced for 24 March. Life came to a sudden standstill and for the time being everybody followed the government's order.

Tourists had been arriving from early March and many trekkers were already in the mountains. It took a while for information about the lockdown and travel restrictions to be disseminated in trekking regions but as news spread there were two reactions. One was an urgent need to get back to Kathmandu and on to home countries. The other was to carry on with the

trek and deal with the fallout once back in Kathmandu.

With roads, domestic and international airports closed, many were trapped, unable to get clear information. The Trekking Agencies Association of Nepal in coordination with the ministry of tourism and the Nepal Tourism Board initiated a transport plan for the return of trekking groups to Kathmandu. Several embassies organised repatriation flights. These were organised by chartering specific carriers and so new tickets had to be purchased since existing tickets were not transferable. Those who chose to continue with their trek ignoring travel advice found themselves in difficult situations with visas expiring. There was a lack of hotel accommodation as hotels and restaurants were closed, as was the immigration department. In the lively tourist hub of Thamel, the shutters came down.

The Smith family from Aberdeen set off on their EBC trek in mid March from Salleri in lower Solu Khumbu just before Nepal imposed its lockdown. Julie, Chris and their young children trekked to Lukla, where they became stranded for three months before lockdown eased and they could continue. Their movements were restricted to their teahouse and they weren't allowed into Lukla. They occupied their time in the grounds where the children could play. Eventually they completed their trek visiting Gokyo with two Nepali friends who accompanied them most of the way and were able to reassure local people the family had not just flown up from Kathmandu but had, in fact, been in the region for months and had had PCR tests in Lukla.

Within a few weeks of lockdown, daily wage earners were feeling the strain. Street vendors, porters and small business owners were running out of money, meaning no food and in some cases no home as they were unable to pay rents. As always in Nepal there was little help from those elected to protect citizens and that lack of support was plugged by many voluntary organisations. Food kitchens were set up to feed the poor, not only for people but for street animals which no longer had the waste from hotels to rummage through.

Although resilient Nepalis have found ways to overcome hardship in the past, this time it was different: an estimated 200 businesses have permanently closed in Thamel. As usual in Nepal the population is divided between those who accept the situation and have the backup to weather the storm and those who don't. Many Indian migrant workers who returned home have not yet come back to lift their shutters and hotels have had to close, including, surprisingly, some of the biggest and best established businesses in town. However, Kathmandu and Nepal generally remain vibrant and optimistic and there is still a lot of renovation of old buildings going on with many new structures more in keeping with the architecture Kathmandu was once famous for.

Change of Government

Just before Christmas 2020, prime minister K P Sharma Oli dissolved parliament following splits in the ruling Nepal Communist Party and elections were announced in two stages for April and May. This decision had the



Ian Wall with the late Ang Rita, the 'Snow Leopard', still the only person to have climbed Everest in winter without oxygen. (*Ian Wall*)

endorsement of the president, an old ally of K P Oli, but in February Nepal's supreme court overturned the dissolution as unconstitutional. Oli was forced to form a caretaker government while the conflict played out on the streets: all this in the middle of a pandemic. Further legal action resulted in the NCP itself being divided into its old constituent parts and the Maoist faction led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal withdrew its support in the spring. By July K P Oli had run out of options and was forced to resign, to be replaced by the Nepali Congress veteran Sher Bahadur Deuba, the fifth time he has been prime minister. Oli's tenure was marked by an apparent swing towards China, which tried to mediate between the various communist factions. Deuba's return to office signals a cooling of that relationship.

The Death of Legends

One of Nepal's best-known climbers, Chhiji Nurbu Sherpa, passed away in August 2020. He was the managing director of Highlight Expeditions and recognised as one of the top Nepali climbers summiting 13 out of the 14 8,000m peaks. His first 8,000er was his home mountain of Makalu, climbed aged 27. He climbed K2 twice and Everest five times. He had recently been on Everest in winter with Alex Txikon, reaching 8,000m and suffering frostbite. The circumstances surrounding his death were not publicised. Chhiji Nurbu was 40 years old.

It was also with great sadness that the mountaineering world learned of the death of Ang Rita Sherpa, the Snow Leopard, in late September 2020. Ang Rita Sherpa scaled Everest 10 times without bottled oxygen. Born in 1948 in Yilajung, a small village in Khumbu, Ang Rita first worked as a porter in 1963. In total, he achieved 19 summit successes on 8,000m peaks by the end of his career in 1999: 10 times on Everest, four times on Cho Oyu, four times on Dhaulagiri and once on Kangchenjunga, all completely without bottled oxygen, with the one exception: during 1983 he slept at the South Col on oxygen. In 1984, he opened a new route variant via Everest's south buttress with the Slovaks Zoltán Demján and Jozef Psotka. On 22 December 1987, Ang Rita succeeded in making the first and so far, the only winter ascent of Everest without supplementary oxygen. In bad weather, with Korean Heo Young-ho, the two climbers were forced to bivouac at 8,600m. 'We spent the whole night just below the summit,' Ang Rita recalled later, 'doing aerobic exercises to keep our body active which is the only way to survive there.'

In October 2020 Ngawang Tenzin Jangpo Rinpoche, spiritual leader at Tengboche monastery died at the age of 85. He had been the abbot of the Buddhist monastery for 64 years, since 1956. Ngawang Tenzin was born in Namche Bazaar in 1935, reportedly on the same day as the Dalai Lama, 6 July. As a child he insisted that he owned a house in Tengboche. The monks of the monastery subjected him to a test. They presented him with a collection of objects. Ngawang seized those that had belonged to Lama Gulu, the builder of the monastery. Since then, he had recognized as a *tulku* and the reincarnation of Lama Gulu. The monastery burned down in January 1989 but the Sherpa community rebuilt it with financial support from several organisations including Sir Ed Hillary's Himalayan Trust. The monk was critical of the commercialisation of Mount Everest. 'Climbing Everest has become a fashion. All people want to do is reach the top,' wrote Ngawang Tenzin Jangpo Rinpoche. 'The Sherpas of Khumbu may not know everything, but they are suffering the consequences of the people's greed.'

Autumn 2020

While most tourists avoided Nepal during the spring season one or two groups managed a few successes during the second half of the year. From 1 September 2020, due to a sharp increase in Covid-19 infections, only Nepali returnees, diplomats and employees of UN aid organizations were allowed to fly into the country. Nepal also banned all UK residents from entering the country. According to the department of tourism, permission was granted for expeditions to Luja Peak (6726m), Cheungyari-2 (6506m), Ama Dablam (6814m), Surma Sarovar (6523m), Rokapi (5467m), Manaslu (8163m) and Thapa Peak (6012m) for the winter season 2020. Luja, Manaslu and Thapa Peak were Nepali expeditions; the others were foreign.

In the late summer of 2020 a government spokesperson announced that an 18-member expedition from Bahrain had received a permit for Manaslu and for the purpose of acclimatisation Lobuche East as well. The team of the Royal Guard of Bahrain arrived in mid September on a charter flight, entered a one-week quarantine programme and then headed immediately for Khumbu. An unfortunately timed press release in Bahrain back in April 2020 as to the ambitions of the expedition caught the Nepali government on the back foot and in an attempt to smooth the situation the commander of the Royal Guard, Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, had relief supplies sent to those Nepalis most seriously hit by the pandemic. The expedition went on to complete both objectives but not without controversy. A video clip emerged showing a backpack being unloaded from a helicopter while a mountaineer also disembarks. The video clearly showed this taking place at camp one on Manaslu. Seven Summit Treks, the expedition's agent, didn't respond to enquires as to whether the climber was part of the Bahraini team. They reached the summit – or at least the high point the fixed ropes reached just below the actual summit – on 15 October 2020. The expedition was preparation for an attempt on Everest in spring 2021.



Despite the pandemic, the Nepali government gave the go-ahead for the busiest Everest season on record, banning mention of the Covid-19 outbreak at Everest Base Camp. (*Lhakpa Sherpa*)

Not content with letting one high-profile team into Nepal, the government went on to grant permits for Ama Dablam to Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah Al Thani, a member of the Qatari royal family. Known as Moe Al Thani in the climbing world, the prince was the first Qatari to climb Everest in 2013.

As a result of pressure from mountaineering agents in the tourism sector the Nepal government opened the country for foreign tourists to go mountaineering and trekking on 17 October 2020 but strangely enough not

for other tourism purposes. As a result, permits were also issued for teams to climb Baruntse, Gyalzen, Himlung and Manaslu.

Cho Oyu was first climbed via the north-west flank but when the Chinese increased the price Nepali guides proposed a new and technically straight-forward route on the south side of the mountain for clients of commercial expeditions but to date this has not yet progressed.

Earthquakes can reduce the height of mountains in an instant. After the big earthquake hit Nepal in 2015, scientists suspected the height of Everest might have changed. Both China and Nepal decided to mount independent expeditions and using all available technology measured the true height of the world's highest mountain. Despite delays in releasing the results, for obscure political reasons, the new official altitude as of 2020 is 8,848.86m: an increase of 86cm from the 8,848m that was declared in 1954.

Winter 2020-21

Two young Nepali friends, Tenji Sherpa and Vinayak Jay Malla, have between the two of them summited Everest (once without oxygen), Lhotse, Manaslu, Ama Dablam, Cholatse's north face, Lhakpa Ri and Nuptse. Malla also has experience climbing in the European Alps as well as in India. They went unsupported to Manaslu although the winter veteran Simone Moro, from Italy, was also there, along with Iñaki Álvarez and Spanish climber Alex Txikon. Eventually both teams were forced to descend without success. Vinayak and Tenji gave the mountain a good shot but after several weeks trapped by bad conditions had to withdraw to base camp and eventually Kathmandu. Meanwhile, back in Khumbu, at least 14 climbers summited Ama Dablam on 14 January 2021, including the Qatari prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah Al Thani and his team.

Although K2 is definitely not in Nepal, the success of the Nepali team in making the first winter ascent (see Pakistan notes, pp260-7) certainly had an impact there, where wild scenes of celebration greeted the returning heroes. The 10 Nepali climbers from three different expeditions chose to work together and in a remarkable show of solidarity the leaders waited 10m below the summit for everyone to catch up so they could take the final steps together to the summit singing Nepal's national anthem in unison. Nims Purja made the ascent without supplementary oxygen. This demonstration of unity was for ordinary Nepalis in obvious contrast to their political leaders, who have spent recent years paralysing the government.

Success on K2 undoubtedly put Nepali climbers on the mountaineering world map as a force in their own right. Nepali climbers have played a significant role in many major expeditions to the greater Himalayan peaks, from Everest in the 1920s, Nanga Parbat in the 1930s, and several first ascents of 8,000m peaks in the 1950s, including Everest. Despite their contribution to mountaineering, Nepali mountaineers have often been written out of its history. The attention they got for K2 was well deserved.

Spring 2021

As the winter season drew to a close all eyes were on what would happen in spring. Reports of a large number of permit requests were appearing in the press, people were optimistic but the pandemic continued and there was a political decision to be made, would the country open to mountaineering or remain closed?

Commercial expeditions and their clients have long laid siege on Everest. However, in recent years, a new business model has been fine-tuned that came to fruition on K2, the perfect platform to execute this new approach, which will generate huge profits for those companies who adopt it. It basically involves getting the most climbers to the summit as quickly and reliably as possible. The main agency, Seven Summit Treks also extended its two for one approach. Most agencies already provide the option of including Lhotse but spring 2021 saw Annapurna and Dhaulagiri included on the itinerary with helicopter transfer included in the price and on hand to ferry clients from base camp to Pokhara for a short rest before the Dhaulagiri element of the package. The success of this approach was proven on Annapurna, regarded as the deadliest 8,000m peak, when 67 clients reached the summit on the night of 16 April 2021. To ensure the 'quickly as possible' element, ropes were fixed for the entire route, including sections that are not normally equipped. This resulted in Seven Summit's rope fixers running out of rope at 7,400m, just above camp four. With progress halted, clients had to retreat back to camp four until the company helicopter came to the rescue with more rope and oxygen.

As with all service businesses, success relies on the provider being able to read and deliver consumer demands. In this case the lure was based on attractive opportunities, easy solutions to overcome technical difficulties, maximum safety and a high percentage chance of success at a very competitive price. It's an example of the old adage: 'Stack 'em high and sell 'em cheap.' In a bid to keep costs down all agencies running expeditions on Annapurna agreed to contribute to manpower and other resources required for fixing the route.

Yet no matter how good the infrastructure is, how well planned the itinerary and how skilled and strong the team, it still comes down to weather and mountain conditions on the day. Those few days around 16 April proved ideal in allowing such large-scale success. One client from Taiwan suffered superficial frostbite and decided he didn't want to commit to the effort of descending the dangerous section between camp three and camp two. So he hired the Seven Summit helicopter to take him to Kathmandu for a few days before returning to Dhaulagiri to join the other members of the Annapurna team. All clients were obviously pleased with their success; it seems these days, perhaps for the majority, that adventure is only meaningful if the adventure is illuminated. As for ethics, that will be a never-ending debate. In the end Dhaulagiri was not to be; there was a surge in Covid-19 cases and other issues so the expedition was abandoned just above camp two.

No doubt the huge profits agencies enjoyed blurred any anxiety about 'what if'. What if the weather broke while clients were high on the mountain? What if some of the avalanches clients witnessed had taken a slightly different fall line? What if helicopters were grounded and the ropes and oxygen supplies had not been delivered at the critical moment? There is still a high level of risk in this style of mountaineering. Mountaineering has no rules or regulations, and we like that, but this approach has raised ethical and safety questions within the guiding world.

Pandemic Everest

Nepal, like other countries with a high number of people employed in tourism, has found itself in a difficult situation over the last 12 months. Lockdown brought great hardship to millions of people who earn an income as daily wage earners. Nepal has no welfare and the loss of income for over a year meant great pressure was exerted on the government by the large trekking and expedition agencies and hotels to open the country for mountain tourism. Many of the owners of these organisations make large annual financial donations to political parties. With the combination of mountain tourists anxious to get into the mountains, the agents looking for financial rewards and the government considering the impact of another closed season on the national economy, the government backed down and Nepal opened for mountain tourism while, inexplicably, other forms of tourism remained closed.

The spring 2021 season saw the highest number of clients ever recorded on Everest expeditions with the ministry issuing 408 permits. This was despite several major international outfitters cancelling their operations due to concern over the pandemic. The north side of Everest remained closed to international expeditions although there was one Chinese team granted permission to attempt the mountain from Tibet. Due to concerns over the spread of the virus it was decided to send a party of Chinese guides to the summit to keep the southern mountaineering teams out of China for fear of infection. However, this expedition was abandoned before it left base camp.

Despite a quarantine regulation being imposed in Kathmandu for foreign arrivals, tourists were seen wandering the streets of Thamel before moving on to their mountain destinations. Early in the season Everest ER, the health facility supported by the Himalayan Rescue Association and situated at Everest Base Camp, reported an unusually high number of people arriving and seeking medical attention for 'AMS issues'. Symptoms of the virus and AMS are very similar and those with severe symptoms were immediately evacuated to Kathmandu by helicopter. Although many expeditions were testing their own clients for the virus there was no government authorised testing facility at base camp and so from very early on in the season the government denied there was a health problem within the base camp communities, a position it maintained right through to the end of the season.

Base camp took on an unusual atmosphere this season with each expedition having its own individual patch of moraine with a strictly controlled



A wide shot of Baruntse, location of the major new route *Heavenly Trap* from the Czech climbers Radoslav Groh and Měrek Holeček. (*Měrek Holeček*)

perimeter area cordoned off. Clients and staff were kept inside their area and the usual inter-expedition partying did not, more or less, take place, although there were reports that some compounds were a lot louder than others.

Yet while base camp covers a considerable area and physical distancing is straightforward, at higher camps there are limitations on available space and in many situations, especially if the weather deteriorates, expedition clients mix and share tents and other facilities. As the season progressed more and more people were evacuated with AMS or pneumonia-like symptoms only to be tested for and diagnosed with Covid-19 once back in Kathmandu. Many of those evacuated and other members still in base camp did not have the recommend insurance and so they continued to be registered as AMS sufferers, thus disguising the true number of positive cases coming from Khumbu. Not only did the government refuse to accept what was becoming obvious based on the numbers testing positive after leaving EBC, it reacted to the situation by enforcing a news blackout. Clients, expedition operators,



A wide shot of Baruntse, location of the major new route *Heavenly Trap* from the Czech climbers Radoslav Groh and M \acute{a} rek Holeček. (M \acute{a} rek Holeček)

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hospitals, medical staff and the media were all under some sort of government warning not to publish any news connecting the virus and Everest.

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A top of *UFO Line*, Holeček's companion piece in the Hunku valley on the north-west face of Chamlang (7321m) climbed in 2019 with Zdeněk Háek.

On 7 May, 12 Sherpas from Seven Summit Treks reached the summit, including Kami Rita, who got his record 25th summit. This opened the gates for the rest of the teams to start their summit bids. The first summit occurred during the good weather window around 12 May and all of that team and their infrastructure were back in base camp before the first impact of Cyclone Tauktae hit Nepal from the west of India a few days later. Another weather window opened around 20 May but at the same moment Cyclone Yaas was forecast to hit the eastern region of Nepal towards the end of May. This prompted a rush of activity: some teams decided to go for the summit during the short weather window while others were caught in their rotation programmes and weren't in the right place at the right time so hunkered down for the storm to pass. Others decided to call it a day. A large number of teams were rolling Lhotse onto the back of Everest and some of those expeditions decided to cut short that element while yet again other teams decided to take the risk of an ascent before the storm hit hard, as it was predicted to do.

Provisional reports suggest 534 people stood on Everest's summit from the Nepal side in 2021, none from the Tibet side. As the season ends, four deaths have been recorded, two foreign nationals and two Sherpas. On 2 June Sherpa climbers recovered the body of a Swiss climber who died above 8,000m on Everest while descending from the summit. This is not the first time that such a rescue has been carried out at that altitude. In 2017 Dawa Finjhok Sherpa and team recovered the body of an Indian police officer who died the year before from 8,400m.

It goes without saying that this season has created a huge amount of controversy both in the Nepali media and the wider world. On one side was the government and agencies keen to open Nepal and generate income,

there were daily-wage-earning Nepali staff crying out for work, the clients wanting to come. Then there were those people who wanted to keep Nepal closed. More outspoken critics have accused the clients of being insensitive to Nepal's situation and the situation of the communities through which they passed, of being wealthy, arrogant and egoistic and adopting the attitude of former imperial nations. Less has been said about the government or the agents that facilitated the situation. It is estimated the government generated \$4.2m dollars from Everest in spring 2021. Had they acknowledged the health situation at Everest Base Camp, they might well have been under more pressure to close the mountain but if they had then they would have likely been obliged to offer carry-over permits as they did after the earthquake in 2015.

On a more specific note, there were many questions and accusations focussed on the amount of oxygen used on Everest when the general population was being denied access to basic health care with hospitals running out of oxygen supplies. On the face of it this would seem to be a reasonable point. However, oxygen for altitude is provided via a regulator capable of delivering a maximum flow rate of four litres per minute. Covid-19 patients require a 10 to 15 litres per minute. The medical mask and cannula system doesn't fit on current high-altitude regulators, the medical masks need to be disposable or allow sterilisation but modern altitude masks are not able to be sterilised in the same way. And at a cost of \$300 they would be prohibitively expensive for Nepali hospitals to consider.

Less than 14km away from Everest as the bearded vulture glides is Baruntse (7125m) in the Makalu Barun National Park. On 19 May, during the spell of fine weather, M \acute{a} rek Holeček and Radoslav Groh set off to climb a new route on the north-west face in pure alpine style. They reached the summit on 25 May (See 'Heaven's Trap' on page 3) but by then the weather system blowing in off the Bay of Bengal was creating violent winds, low temperatures and a serious amount of snowfall. Their situation became extreme as they spent their sixth night out just below the summit in these extreme elements. Next day they managed another 100m of descent but the ridge they were descending is technical and to attempt it in whiteout conditions would be to tempt fate as both sides were heavily corniced. By Saturday 29 May the weather had improved and the pair were able to complete their descent of 1100m through unstable snow conditions down to less technical ground from where they were evacuated by helicopter back to Kathmandu. They received medical examinations but apart from minor frostbite and a huge loss of weight the two were remarkably well after their ordeal and 11 nights spent in atrocious weather conditions. They called their route *Heavenly Trap* (1300m, ABO+, VI+, M6+, 80°).

The route on Baruntse is a sobering counterpoint to the route Holeček climbed in 2019 on the north-west face of nearby Chamlang (7321m) with Zdeněk 'Háček' Hák. A longstanding objective with multiple attempts, the north-west face rises for two kilometres above the Hunku valley with sustained mixed climbing and few spots for a bivouac. The two Czechs climbed



The glacial approach to the foot of Baruntse's north-west face. For images of the climb see pp3-14. (*Márek Holeček*)

loose rock, hard mixed and bullet-proof ice to reach the top of the face in four days and the summit on 21 May. Two days later they were back in base camp. They called their route *UFO Line*, to commemorate the ascents of Doug Scott and Reinhold Messner, who reported seeing a UFO. Both agreed it was the hardest climb they'd done in the high mountains and graded it initially ABO, before offering a more comprehensive grade of 2,500m, ABO, M6, WI5. It's worth pointing out that the new route on Baruntse was ABO+. What a contrast to Everest.

Doug Scott (1941-2020)

It would not be right to conclude these notes without mentioning Doug Scott. Doug will be remembered as one of the 'hard men' of modern mountaineering. His skill in difficult situations and tenacity on technical ground was at a level rarely seen. His list of first ascents in the Nepal Himalaya is extensive with the south-west face of Everest in 1975 being the best known. But there was another side to Doug: he was a caring and compassionate human being. In recognition of the support Nepali porters



Doug Scott, remembered in Nepal for his relentless efforts to support the nation's disadvantaged through Community Action Nepal. (*Ian Wall*)

and Nepali expedition colleagues gave Doug on his many expeditions, he founded Community Action Nepal (CAN) in 1989, initially to improve the working conditions for lads working in the mountain tourism sector. Later CAN developed a support mechanism for remote hill communities in which his friends and their families live. He strongly believed that if villages could provide good education, health care and some form of income-generating activity there was a good chance that seepage of local

people into the cities of Nepal could be reversed. CAN still operates and those communities, the CAN staff and many of the Nepali people with whom Doug came into contact with will sadly miss his warmth, dry sense of humour and his contribution to helping to improve their daily lives.

On a personal note, I would like to add that without Doug I would never have moved to Nepal and been able to lead the life that I so enjoy today. I am forever indebted.