

How Climbing Mount Everest Works

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Mount Everest as seen from the nearby mountain of Kala Patthar.

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Mount Everest is literally located at the top of the world, rising 29,035 feet (8850 meters) above sea level. As soon as it was crowned the world's tallest mountain, people inevitably had to climb it. And just as inevitably, many of them failed. While more than 2,200 people have succeeded, nearly 200 have lost their lives attempting the climb.

So why climb Everest? The most famous answer to this question came from climber George Mallory: "because it is there." Though he was likely responding in frustration after being asked the same question dozens of times, his answer succinctly cuts to the heart of the matter.

In this article, we'll examine the history of climbing Mount Everest, see what routes most climbers use and find out what climbers take with them to survive the trek.

Everest hasn't always been considered the king of mountains. It wasn't until 1852 that a Bengali mathematician and surveyor named Radhanath Sikhdar determined that "Peak XV" was actually the highest point on the earth. In 1865, Sikhdar's discovery was confirmed. India's Surveyor General Sir Andrew Waugh renamed the mountain Mount Everest after Sir George Everest, the previous Surveyor General and the person overseeing the original survey that listed "Peak XV."

The Nepalese who live to the south of Mount Everest have always known that it was special. They called it *Sagarmatha*, which is translated variously as "goddess of the sky" and "forehead of the sky." The Tibetans living north of the mountain called it *Chomolungma*, or "mother goddess of the world."

Politics kept would-be climbers out of Everest for many years following its discovery, because neither the Nepalese nor Tibetan governments welcomed strangers into their countries. But in 1921, after much diplomatic negotiation, Tibet opened its borders and the first of many British expeditions began on the mountain's north side.

Take a look at the next page to learn about the first expeditions to explore Mount Everest.

Everest Expeditions



One of the first Everest expeditions included British nationals George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine. Their 1924 expedition was Mallory's third trip to the mountain. In a 1922 attempt, climbers reached record altitudes before deteriorating weather conditions forced them to turn back. During that attempt, an avalanche killed seven Sherpas.

On the morning of June 8th 1924, Mallory and Irvine left the highest camp on Everest bound for the summit. At 1 p.m. they were seen climbing the mountain, behind schedule but still making progress towards the top. After that, they were never seen again. In 1999, a team of investigators located Mallory's body on the north face of Everest around 27,000 feet. There is some debate over whether Mallory and Irvine made it to the top, but most believe that they did not.

In 1949, the political situation around Everest reversed and Nepal opened its borders, one year before the Chinese government closed Tibet. Climbers shifted their approach to the south and in 1953, someone finally made it to the top. Edmund Hillary, a New Zealand mountain climber and beekeeper, and Tenzing Norgay, a Sherpa, are the first people credited with reaching the Mountain's summit. Theirs would be the first of many notable firsts on Everest:

- In 1963, James Whittaker became the first American to reach the summit of Everest.
- In 1975, a Japanese woman named Junko Tabei became the first woman to summit.
- In a truly incredible first, American Erik Weihenmayer became the first blind person to scale Everest in 2001. [Click here to read more about his amazing journey.](#)

If you're interested to know how climbers reach the peak of Mount Everest then you need to read about ice climbing and watch video from Discovery's Fearless Planet.

Next, we'll look at all of the gear that Everest climbers take with them to understand what it takes to get to the top.

Forming Mount Everest



IMAGE COURTESY U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Roughly pyramid shaped, and covered by glaciers, Mount Everest is part of the Himalayan mountain range, which runs along the border of Nepal and Tibet.

The Himalayas are **fold mountains** formed millions of years ago by **continental drift**. At one time, the Tethys Sea separated the Indian subcontinent from the Asian continent.

Over time, the Indian subcontinent drifted into the mainland and the sea was pushed upwards to form a series of parallel ridges, or folds. Incredibly, the tallest mountains in the world were once ocean bottoms and still contain marine fossils.

The Himalayas are a relatively young mountain chain, having formed a mere 60 million years ago, in contrast to much older mountain chains like the Appalachians. In fact, the Himalayas are still growing. Continued shifting means that the Himalayas rise between two and six centimeters per year. All of this geological activity creates instability and generates occasional earthquakes.

Gear and Supplies