

# THE SHERPAS OF KHOMBU

THE Sherpas of Khumbu are probably the finest high altitude climbers in the world. At the moment they can't compete technically below 20,000ft with say a Swiss guide, because they haven't had the training with rope, ice-axe and crampons which are the acquired skills of a mountaineer.

But once the real effects of altitude begin to tell, the Sherpa comes into his own. Particularly carrying heavy loads. No one knows more about heavy packing than a New Zealander; but the Sherpas carry the same loads as you or I might on a long tramp every single day of their lives, at altitudes higher than the summit of Mt Cook. Because all the permanent villages in Khumbu are over 12,000ft and a few of the summer grazing huts are as high as 16,000ft.

I said the Sherpas of Khumbu, because there are Sherpas of a sort all over Nepal. But with the exception of some from the higher villages of Solo—a district adjoining Khumbu—they don't appear to have the same ability to carry loads on a high mountain, and lack practical experience on snow and ice.

Now, Khumbu is the small district around the Nepal side of Mt Everest. The total population isn't more than about 2,200 Sherpas who live in seven permanent villages. Their houses are solid and well built, and they need to be because sometimes the snow lies deep in winter. The average Sherpa house in Khumbu is built of roughly cut stone mortared with yak dung and clay. The rafters and beams are of pine, and the roof consists of pine planks held down by large flat stones. Sometimes the roof is made of flat slabs of rock.

Most houses are two storied, the bottom story for the animals and the top story for the family. In some houses there are several rooms upstairs separated by wooden partitions, but generally everyone seems to sleep in the same room.

When I was staying with a Sherpa called Tashi in the village of Kumbung, I shared a room with his family of six. Eventually the fleas—which are a feature of Sherpa houses—forced me to pitch a tent in his backyard. Occasionally there'd be a great blitz of the fleas and lice. Rugs and bedding would be taken outside and the bugs picked out and placed in small bowls of water. I noticed that as a mark of favour a Sherpa girl would put her boyfriend's head across her lap and pick out the livestock from his long hair.

But to get back to the house, I remember vividly the stairs. For there are no windows on the ground floor to let in the light, and coming into the dark stall out of the blinding glare outside was always a moment of confusion. I used to grope for the stairs, and then carefully climb them for they were as steep as a step ladder.

When I reached the landing I met the bitter smoke from the fire, because there's no chimney inside a Sherpa house and everyone is always coughing and rubbing their eyes. Some houses are smokier than others. Tashi was very amused one day when we were visiting a neighbour, and the smoke was so bad I had to lie down on the floor to get some air . . .

But on the whole the houses were warm and comfortable, and after several months in a tent or amongst the buzzing flies of a Nepalese village, they were everything I could ask for. By the

*The text, slightly abridged, of a talk broadcast from the YA stations by PETER WEBSTER*

main window of a house is a long seat often covered in brightly coloured woolen rugs, and the end nearest the fire is reserved for the most senior guest. The fireplace is the most important part of a Sherpa's house and the cooking is just too simple. There are large iron cooking pots, and these are filled with water and potatoes to be boiled.

Potatoes are the staple diet of the Sherpas, and what they did before these were introduced from Darjeeling about eighty years ago I don't know. When the potatoes are cooked they are just tipped steaming all over the floor, grabbed and peeled. It always amazed me to see the amount of hot potatoes a Sherpa could put away in a short time. I could never keep up, and every now and then someone would notice this, peel a potato for me and hand it over in a grubby hand, but with a big smile.

The Sherpas also eat rice whenever they can afford it; but none grows in Khumbu and they generally make do with potatoes. It is possible to grow barley, however, and the ground flour is roasted and made into tsampa which is the staple food of the Tibetans—and of the Sherpas when they're on the move. The Sherpas just mix a little water with the tsampa and produce a sort of stodge which I found difficult to get down on its own. But mixed with yak's milk and a little sugar it's delicious and the most sustaining food I know. When climbing I used to mix it very thinly with my tea.

The Sherpas eat meat as well, and every house has an old sun-dried leg of yak, sheep or goat, green with age, hanging in a cupboard. This meat is called shakum by the Tibetans and Sherpas, and it's cut off in strips to make a highly flavoured potato stew called shakpa. There are few green vegetables, although Tashi used to produce something which looked and tasted very like grass.

Sherpas may vary their diet according to their means; but they all drink chang, a sort of beer. I didn't like chang at first; but I do now. In fact after three months' travel with Sherpas, I became quite a connoisseur of the various types of chang. Chang, by the way, can be quite intoxicating; but in Khumbu there is always someone to help you home.

The Sherpas came to Khumbu from Tibet. In fact, they were immigrants, who for some reason or other decided to leave their own country, cross the Himalayas and settle in Khumbu. Now that the potato has improved the economy of the Sherpas in such an amazing way, more and more Tibetans are coming over the passes to live in Khumbu, although it takes about a generation before their children are accepted as Sherpas. I don't think it's generally realised that Tenzing's parents were immigrants from Tibet and his mother, when I met her a short time before her death two years ago, couldn't speak a word of Sherpa language which is a dialect of Tibetan. But now Tenzing is of course considered to be a Sherpa in every way, although as a boy he was classed as a Tibetan . . .

I said earlier that the Sherpas were magnificent load carriers at high altitudes. Now what is it that makes the Khumbu Sherpa so outstanding on a high mountain? Well, it isn't just



TENZING

*Sherpas must be tough to survive*

the fact that he is used to carrying heavy loads, because almost everyone in the hills carries loads. The usual coolie load is about 120lb. It's just amazing to see the short wiry Nepalese carrying a load almost as heavy as himself up those never ending hills.

All loads in Nepal are carried by means of a namlo or headband and I adopted this method myself when I travelled through Eastern Nepal three years ago. It's just about the best way ever devised of carrying an awkward weight over rough ground. You can sling a namlo around a cane basket full of odds and ends, or use it to pack a heavy load of firewood. Another thing, if a hold gives way and the load feels as if its going to take you with it—just a flick of the head and the whole thing's gone. Better to lose your load than to go down with it.

At any rate, all the Sherpas carry loads pretty well from the moment they can walk, and so they get used to carrying things at higher altitudes than the Nepalese who live down in the foothills below 7,000ft. There's no piped water up in Khumbu and all the water is carried from mountain streams or springs in wooden casks by the women and girls. When they're full, these casks weigh as much as 80 pounds, and in some villages the water may be as much as half a mile away from the houses and has to be carried over steep ground . . .

Living and carrying at these altitudes is also a matter of survival. Because if anyone gets ill at these heights they die very quickly indeed. Many visitors to Khumbu remark how fit the Sherpas seem to be. I agree they're fit all right—but it's the survivors who are fit. Tenzing for example is one of a family of thirteen—seven brothers and six sisters. All his brothers died years ago and only two of his sisters are still living—and the others didn't die of old age either. A woman has to be strong to survive giving birth to a child at 16,000ft in a yak-herder's hut and so does the child. Infant mortality is high, so there is a very definite survival of the fittest. The fittest for the mountains and the cold, because when the Sherpas go down to the plains of India they pick up all sorts of diseases unknown in Khumbu . . .

But it's not enough just to survive and the Sherpas have met another challenge. This is the 19,000ft Nangpo

La Pass leading from Khumbu to Tibet, which they have to cross to carry out their trade. For the Sherpas take grain and cloth in exchange for salt. This rock salt from Tibet is highly valued in Nepal; people say the salt from India hasn't the same strength giving properties. And I believe it's through carrying loads over this Pass that the Sherpas have developed into the magnificent climbers they are. They take yaks over the Nangpo La; but every person carries a load as well as the animals. And it's hard work carrying a heavy load over a snow covered pass at 19,000ft.

The most extraordinary story I've heard about crossing the Nangpo La concerned Dawa Tenzing, the well known sirdar of the successful Kanchenjunga Expedition. Tashi told me that some years ago Dawa Tenzing became very ill indeed and his relatives decided that he should be taken to see the nearest doctor. Now the nearest doctor was in Tibet, and so all his relatives and friends got together and carried him over the Nangpo La. Dawa Tenzing was treated by the doctor and survived, but perhaps if he was strong enough to survive such a journey, he would have recovered in any case. But just think of having to cross a 19,000ft pass if you were seriously ill. As I said before standards are different there.

With the exception of Dawa Tenzing, the well known Sirdars such as Tenzing, Ang Tharkey, Pasang Dawa Lama and Gyalzen live in Darjeeling. The Sirdars find they're more in touch with the outside world in Darjeeling where it's easier to arrange treks and climbs. The Secretary of the Himalayan Club used to be the Sirdars' main contact with climbing parties, although Tenzing has recently formed his own union in Darjeeling and this is the power now . . .

Some Sherpas have been born in Darjeeling and although perhaps more educated than their country cousins they're quite useless when it comes to carrying loads on a high mountain. They not only have little ability on a mountain; but they've also lost the natural charm and manners of the yak-herders from Khumbu.

Bazaar life in Darjeeling is perhaps more pleasant for these milk-bar cowboys, but it's no substitute as a training ground for climbers to the bleak pastures and the grim crossings of the Nangpo La.

The Sherpas must have been tough before they ever came to Khumbu. They were a people who crossed a high and difficult pass from Tibet with yaks to settle in valleys of Nepal where no one had lived before. With the potato, life became easier. Monasteries such as Thyangboche were built and there was enough money to keep the monks. Then came the pre-war Everest expeditions and men like Dr Kellas, who was one of the first to realise the climbing ability of the Sherpas. The climbing as much as the potato altered the whole economic life of Khumbu. The Sherpas became as it were, an army or mercenaries engaged in a constant war against the Himalayan giants, who took a steady toll of lives.

Acting as porters to European expeditions, they came in close contact for the first time with people from all over the world and this had its effect upon their outlook. Thus when Tenzing climbed Everest with Hillary, the world suddenly realised that the Sherpas were no longer content to grunt and sweat under a weary load. They now want status and some measure of fame as well.