

# The Sacred Mountains of Bhutan

## *Reprints of Past Articles*

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Twenty-one snow-shrouded peaks in Bhutan, all over 7,000 metres, which have for centuries afforded the country an impassable natural protection and been the essence of its “Shangrila” image could now be almost worth their weight in gold, with mountaineering fast developing as the main activity of Bhutan’s tourism. “Our virgin mountains are everything today’s mountaineer could hope for”, says BTC General Manager, Jigme Tshultim, indicating a tray-full of correspondence on his desk from veteran climbers and major mountaineering institutes all over the world, requesting permission to attempt some Bhutanese peaks.

Not so surprising a fact... what could be more attractive to a mountain-lover than an untouched peak in the Himalayas itself? But if Bhutan’s serene peaks appear to draw expeditions and dollars to them it will not be a random exploitation of the “fast buck”. Besides the systematic, professional exploration of mountains as financial assets, the mountaineering policy indicates a profound reverence for nature’s significance in Bhutanese culture and the spiritual dependence of some Bhutanese on their mountains and the deities who are believed to reside on them.

With the overall policy of the Government encouraging revenue generation His Majesty the King commanded H.E Lyonpo Sangye Penjor, Minister for Communication and Tourism, to introduce the commercial development of mountaineering, initiating the present system of organised expeditions. Still within the policy of controlled tourism, “selected peaks will be introduced to climbers”, says Jigme Tshultim, “but only very gradually: one mountain every two years”.

The history of mountaineering in Bhutan before 1983 is very sparse. In the earliest recorded British expedition in 1937, F. Spencer Chapman and Pasang Dawa are believed to have climbed Chomolhari. Chomolhari was climbed again in 1973 when three members an Indo-Bhutan army team reached the summit. In 1983, two groups attempted Jitchu Drake (about 7,000 m), a Japanese group of women climbers led by Mrs. Junko Tabei,

the first woman on Everest, and an Austrian group led by a Kanchenjunga veteran, Mr Sepp Mayavi. Another four expeditions came to Bhutan in 1984 to attempt Jitchu Drake, Namshila in Lunana (6,000 m), and Kangbum (or Gangphu - almost 6,000 m). Expeditions are escorted to a mountain after it has been professionally surveyed and routes selected. Gangkar Puensum, (7.541 m), which has been surveyed by two Japanese teams will be attempted next year by expeditions from the Himalayan Association of Japan and Kyoto University. Among the applications for future expeditions, Reinbold Messner, an international mountaineering figure, and Dr Corchen, President of the Explorers Club, USA, are expected next year. As a financial resource, mountaineering has great potential, says Mr J. Tshultim. Expeditions come in groups of seven to 20 and normally take about six weeks. Every member of the group pays USD 85 (Nu about 950) a day, excluding the royalty paid for the expedition-Nu.18,000 to Nu.52,000.

Other benefits from mountaineering expeditions include cash income for villagers in the vicinity of climbing routes who hire labour or pack animals, and sell domestic produce - a contribution to the development of rural economy. Firewood is supplied to the expeditions by the villagers. According to Mr J. Tshultim, there is enough dead wood to provide fuel for about five years and villagers have been instructed not to cut fresh wood, to preserve to ecology. “We will provide other types of fuel when this is exhausted”, says the BTC General Manager.

The significance of mountaineering, however, is by no means confined to terms of profit and loss. It is a highly respected sport where participants believe in it to an obsession. It is also a serious sport, where risks are far greater than most others. Whole expeditions have been lost on mountains whose natural characteristics attract the special breed of tough athletes-the mountaineers.

The Chomolhari expedition in 1971 lost three men on the mountain and the recent Italian group on Jitchu Drake lost two young climbers. But as most mountaineers believe, “the greater the danger more attractive the challenge”. A gratifying effect of the introduction of mountaineering in Bhutan could be the emergence of Bhutanese climbers of international standards. As “mountain men”, with physique, stamina, lifestyle tempered by the mountains themselves the only absentee, perhaps, is formal training.

And it is not too distant a realization. The BTC has four guides trained in basic mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling. It is now a policy of Tourism to train all guides in a basic course in mountaineering say the General Manager and the organisation is looking at possibilities of courses in Japan and France. Trained guides, Yeshey Wangchuck and Singye Dorji, joined an expedition to Namshila and reached the summit, and the recent expedition to kangbum comprises two Bhutanese guides Yeshey Wangchuck and Nim Gyeltshen.

And potential? In 1970 Lt. Chachu (now Major Chachu) of the RBA, accompanied the Indo-Bhutan expedition to Chomolhari. A popular local story describes how the untrained Bhutanese man, who was at first puzzled even over his bootlaces, climbed without much difficulty along with the trained mountaineers: among the most impressed was Expedition leader, Capt. Kumar, who expressed healthy respect for Major Chachu's natural prowess. Capt. Kumar's report also describes the last leg of the climb where Major Chachu, stopped before the top and refused to step foot on the summit for a unique reason: "Chomolhari is sacred".

Bhutanese mountains are a part of Bhutanese culture, and the introduction of peaks to climbers is done in consultation with local beliefs. On the command of His Majesty, H.E Lyonpo Sangye Penjor and BTC, General Manager, Jigme Tshultim, met in June this year with the people of Lingshi and Thimphu dzongkhag to discuss the sacrecy of Bhutanese mountains and the effect of mountaineering on local feelings. According to Mr Jigme Tshultrim, while the people are glad to cooperate with tourism in most areas, they expressed some reservation on Chomolhari, which has now been temporarily closed to climbers. Says Naro Gup, Phub Thinley: "Chomolhari is the residence of 'Chomo' the deity who watches over our herds. We have a monastery on Chomolhari where we got to worship. The people of Soi perform an annual ceremony for Chomo."

As per His Majesty's command, mountains will not be introduced at the cost of spiritual disappointment of the people, and official policy reflects this priority. This, however, might be a matter of time. As Japanese team leader, Mr Sagahara Nagahisa says: "Hundreds of years ago our shepherds were disappointed with the "intrusion" on the mountain by climbers. It is common everywhere".

## Mountaineering in Bhutan: Protected Peaks

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Though Bhutan did briefly open up for mountaineering in the early 1980s, by the mid 1990s climbing peaks above 6,000m was prohibited and in 2003 Bhutan mountaineering was banned altogether.

This was done primarily to respect the beliefs of the local communities who attached strong spiritual value to the mountains, and wanted to protect the peaks for their own culture and for future generations.

As a result, Bhutan is home to Gangkhar Puensum – the highest unclimbed peak in the world. As the ban shows no signs of being lifted, it is likely to remain unconquered for many years to come. However if you want to go mountaineering in Bhutan, don't despair. There are still plenty of high-altitude treks and high passes that you can explore. And as there are so few other visitors in this remote country, you'll have them all to yourself as well.

One of the most scenic treks is the Druk Path which links the capital Thimpu with the town of Paro in the east of the country. The route passes through traditional villages and some spectacular mountain scenery as well as passing beautiful monasteries, perched high up in the mountains on the way.

During the trek you'll climb to an altitude of over 4,000m, which may not be a mountain peak but will still give you some great views and give your legs a good work out. The trek can be completed comfortably in around five days, but you can take more time if you want to make some detours on the way.

Another great region for trekking is around the traditional valley of Gantey. Home to some of Bhutan's most beautiful monasteries and religious sites, this area is ideal for exploring on foot. If you want to go mountaineering however, Bhutan may not have a huge number of opportunities to conquer Himalayan giants, but what it has on offer is fairly spectacular and will more than make up for the lack of giant peaks.