

The Height of Avarice

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR to the New York Times

By MICHAEL KODAS

© The New York Times, June 26, 2007

When China announced its plans to pave a highway to the Mount Everest base camp in Tibet as part of its 2008 Olympic preparations, adventurers around the world winced at the latest encroachment into the Himalayan wilderness. Mountaineers who have already been to Everest, however, were more likely to greet the announcement of the "blacktop highway fenced with undulating guardrails" with little more than a shrug.

Despite an elevation of more than 17,000 feet, it's been a long time since the Chinese base camp has resembled a wilderness.

A multistory hotel has been open for years now, just an hour's walk from base camp, with hot meals, cold beer, soft beds and a telescope aimed at the mountaintop. A giant cellular phone tower constructed by China Telecom a mile from the base camp provided phone service all the way to the summit during much of the just-completed spring climbing season.

An official from the Tibetan Mountaineering Association welcomed the paving of the Everest highway, saying that "climbers will be able to save their energy for climbing." But the reality is that they already do. While on the Nepal side of Everest, climbers walk for a week to get to base camp, on the Chinese side almost all of the climbers have been arriving in vehicles for decades.

China's state-run Xinhua News Agency reported the road is being paved to ease the Olympic torch's trip to the summit during what is planned as the highlight of the most ambitious torch run in the history of the Games: an 85,000-mile, 130-day journey that will cross five continents. But Chinese climbers already took the torch to the top of the mountain during a dry run of the Olympic climb in May. Other mountaineers reported that the large Chinese team tested several torches to see which would burn best in the thin air. So why would they need a paved road to get the torch to the summit next year?

In mountaineering terms, a new highway is built on Everest every year - new ropes and ladders fixed all the way to the summit allow an ever-increasing number of climbers with an ever-decreasing average level of skill and experience a chance to reach the summit. While some mountaineers may bristle at the idea of a paved, two-lane road to the mountain, hundreds of Tibetans and Sherpas in one of the poorest regions of Asia, for whom the highway will provide employment opportunities, will certainly see the announcement as good news.

Advocates for Tibetan independence, however, probably won't. Many have complained the torch climb is just another way for the Communist government to plant its flag on a state that was independent until 1951. The Tibetan cause has become tightly tied to Western mountaineers in the last year, after scores of climbers on another Tibetan peak, Cho Oyu, reported seeing Chinese soldiers firing on Tibetan refugees trying to cross into Nepal, killing a Tibetan nun. But, like most roads into the mountains, this path seems less about taking a torch or a flag into the wilderness than about bringing money back from it. In 1996 - the year of the disaster on Everest made famous in Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air" - some 98 climbers reached the summit. Nearly 600 made it in the latest climbing season. And by far the greatest increase in visitation has been on the Chinese side of Everest, turning the Chinese base camp into something of a frontier town. During my last visit, in 2006, more than 80 large tents spread out like a tenement at the end of the road to base camp, all of them filled with Chinese and Tibetans offering liquor, bunks, meals and gear. Prostitutes and pimps openly propositioned Western mountaineers, and Tibetan pony carts, like colorful, miniature stagecoaches, offered rides to the monastery at nearby Rongbuk. Doctors told me that in addition to the traditional frostbite and altitude sickness, they now treat plenty of venereal diseases and wounds from base-camp brawls.

The Chinese government seems more than aware of what lies behind the wholesome image they project on the mountain Tibetans call Chomolungma - the "Goddess Mother of the Universe." When the climbers testing the torches showed up at the mountain last month, they brought a piece of equipment thought unprecedented in the history of Everest climbing: rifles, carried by the sentries posted at the barracks guarding the entrance to the camp.

There will be protests, of course, but one thing is clear: By creating a new level of ease in reaching the base camp and the summit, China is about to turn Mount Everest into the first arena, and profit center, of its Olympic Games.