Tough, amiable, and business savvy, the people of Nepal’s Khumbu region have gotten rich from high-altitude tourism, shepherding trekkers through their homeland step by tortuous step. Now some wonder if their success has come at too high a price.
Decorum demands the correct headgear for the summer festival of Dama, one of the Sherpas' most elaborate ceremonies. Buddhist monks don saffron-hued headwear while laymen favor cowboy-style hats introduced by tourists.
Traditional Buddhist chants and self-denial take a backseat to Bob Marley and the pleasures of the pool hall for a young Sherpa in Namche Bazaar, the tourist gateway to Khumbu. Many local youths forgo diplomas for jobs in the trekking industry.
While Sherpa men work the trails in the latest high-tech gear, many Sherpa women still harvest wheat and keep house in the traditional angga dress they've worn for centuries. But like the men, women now wear running shoes much of the time.
Civil strife holds up foot traffic at the entrance to Sagarmatha National Park, as porters and their cargo await inspection. Concern over a civil war with Maoist rebels cut the number of trekkers visiting the park by 20 percent last year.
Nearly 50 years after they were first raised, prayer flags fly high over the village of Khunde in memory of Sir Edmund Hillary’s first wife, Louise, and their daughter Belinda. They died in a 1975 plane crash on route to Mount Everest. Hillary paid for their burial by building a clinic for the Sherpas.
or some strange reason, my vivid stories about walking five miles through the snow to get to school never seem to impress
my kids, so from now on I'm going to tell them instead about
Lhakpa Sherpa, a student at the high school Sir Edmund Hil-
Iary founded in Khumjung, Nepal. Lhakpa hopes to go
to college and become a doctor. To make sure he gets there, the
16-year-old walks five hours to school on stony mountain trails each week, much of
the trip almost straight up. "In the monsoon, I walk in rain. In winter, I walk in snow.
It's always hard." But then, with a Sherpa's talent for finding the bright side, he adds
that "going back home is downhill, so it only takes three hours."

Life would be much easier if there were a yellow school bus to take Lhakpa back and
forth. But the fundamental fact of life for the Sherpas, an ethnic group of devout Bud-
dhists living in northeastern Nepal, is that there is no bus, no car, no bicycle, and nary an
inch of paved road within the 425 square miles that make up the Khumbu valley, the Sherpas'
traditional home beneath Mount Everest. The Sherpas in Khumbu go everywhere on foot, with
their property on their backs—or their yak's backs, if they are rich enough to own the local
beasts of burden. If after arriving via a twin-engine paddle jumper at the tiny airstrip in the
nearby village of Lukla, you ask a Sherpa how far it is to the imposing monastery at Tengboche, the answer is given not in distance
(6.3 miles) or in altitude (4,300 feet higher up), but rather in time: "Tengboche? You'll get
there on the fourth day." It takes most Westerners two days to trek to the nearby market town
of Namche Bazaar and about six more days to get to Everest Base Camp.

When a Sherpa family in Khumbu wants to
build a new house, much of the structure—
from floorboards to corrugated aluminum
roofs—must be carried from the lowlands up
the rugged trails on somebody's back. With the
current yen for Western-style amenities, a toil-
et and a kitchen sink might move up the
mountain as well, in a porter's bamboo basket,
sometimes followed by yet another porter lag-
ging a rooftop solar heating tank that will pro-
vide the latest fashionable Sherpa luxury: running hot water.

But if walking is the Sherpas' fate, it has also
been their fortune. The first ascent of Mount Ever-
est, 50 years ago this month, sparked a tourism
boom that draws more than 20,000 visitors each
year to hike amid the planet's tallest peaks.
Strong, communal, and adept at business, Sher-
pas play a role in the tourism trade rivaled by
few indigenous peoples in the world. They serve
not only as high-altitude porters for well-heeled mountaineers but also as guides for the larger
number of trekkers who explore the region by
hiking at altitudes under 18,000 feet, without
any technical equipment. Sherpas own most of
the 300-plus lodges and hotels and many of the
companies that organize the treks.

Playing out their lives on the world's highest
stage, winning friends with their warm smiles and
calm competence, mountain-climbing Sherpas have become famous. Some scientists
believe that Sherpas may be blessed with genetic
features that help them thrive two miles or more
above sea level. Their lifelong adaptation to low-
oxgen conditions makes it easier for them to
survive in the thin Himalayan air. They breathe faster and thus can take in more air per minute
than lowlanders can.

Because of their reputation as climbers, the Sherpas are surely the best known of the 30 or
so ethnic groups that make up the Nepalese pop-
ulation. Hardly anyone below 12,000 feet has
ever heard of the Sherpas' neighbors, groups
such as the Rais, the Tamangs, or the Magars.
But the word "sherpa" is so familiar it has
become a generic term for a faithful assistant, a
porter, or a guide. Almost every Sherpa in the
trekking business has a story about a client who
turned to him and asked, "How long have you
been a sherpa?" And Sherpa isn't just an ethnic
identification; like other minority groups in
Nepal, Sherpas often use their ethnic name as
their last name as well.

Most of the 70,000 or so Sherpas in Nepal
aren't involved in the climbing or trekking
industries. It's mainly in the Khumbu region that
tourism has transformed Sherpas' lives in a
generation. The influx of Westerners has brought some of the comforts of modern life to
the larger villages. In Namche Bazaar, there are
pool halls and pizza parlors, CD shops and video
rental counters. Tourism has made the Sherpas
of Khumbu rich; or at least, considerably richer
than most of their neighbors. In Nepal as a
whole, where 80 percent of the population are
subsistence farmers, per capita income is about
$1,400 a year. Sherpas involved in tourism can
average five times as much. One result is that
Sherpas now do less of the heavy lifting on the
trail. A Sherpa will organize and lead the trek,
but the gear and supplies are carried by a less
paid porter from other local groups, especially
the Rais, who come from villages a week's walk
to the south.

My friend Nima Nuru Sherpa is one of thou-
sands of Sherpa success stories. When he was
born on a tiny Khumbu farm eight years before
the first ascent of Everest, his family grew pota-
toes like everybody else, "You know, raising
potatoes is hard work, such hard work, and you
don't make much money," Nima says. But
by the time he was a teenager in the late sixties,
getting into the mountaineering business was
ever Sherpa boy's dream. "I was a porter. I car-
rried 45 pounds all the way to Camp II on Ever-
est. That's 22,000 feet, without oxygen! I was
a hotel waiter. I was a cook. I did everything."
to the handsome stone monastery at Tengboche to visit its well-known head lama, or rinpoche (a title that means "precious one"). The Sherpas’ revered venue sits at 12,700 feet, atop a ridge that offers perhaps the most breathtaking sunrise on Earth. As night gives way to morning, the pink glow of dawn glistles on the snowy peaks of eight surrounding mountains, with Everest (29,035 feet) and its close neighbor Lhotse (27,890 feet) as the jewels atop the jagged crown. Having seen that view, I am in a suitable state of awe as I remove my hat and shoes to enter the lama’s private apartments.

The rinpoche, 68, is considered to be the reincarnation of the monastery’s first lama. Thus he enjoys a level of comfort unknown to most of his followers. He sits on a cushioned sofa at a polished wooden table, with a bright reading lamp over his shoulder to illuminate his scripture and a hot plate to keep his tea warm. Feeling chilly at one point, he gestures silently to a younger monk, who wheels an electric radiator and turns up the dial. When I ask thelama specific questions about Buddhist beliefs, he refers me to his website, www.tengboche.com.

And yet the rinpoche expresses considerable concern about the encroachment of modern ways on Sherpa traditions. "When the Sherpas were farmers, we lived in harmony with nature," he says. "Now most people are in the trekking business, and that business goes down or up based on outside events. Is this better?"

"In the past we had no telephones here," the lama goes on. "And it was no problem to be without a telephone. But now we have had telephones. We came to need them. Then when the telephone repeater was bombed [by the Maoists], suddenly it was a big problem to be without. Is this better?"

WHERE SHERPAS ROAM

The first Sherpas probably crossed the Himalaya from eastern Tibet in the 1600s, settling in the region below Everest. Today some 70,000 Sherpas live in northeastern Nepal, but it’s the 10,000 or so who reside in the Solu-Khumbu region (right) who have benefited most from the mountaineering boom—and created a certain Sherpa mystique.

HONORING THE PEAKS

Tensing Norgay, the Sherpa who climbed Mount Everest with Hillary, said he scaled the mountain the way a baby climbs into the lap of its mother, according to his son Jamling Norgay, also a climber. Sherpas urge their clients to ask the mountain deity’s blessing with offerings of rice and incense at Base Camp. The peak is a kind of holy ground sacred by Sherpas.

CASHING IN ON TOURISTS

Buddhist legend holds that Everest is home to a goddess bearing a bowl of food and a mongoose spitting jewels. Everest has indeed brought prosperity to the region. Sherpas not only profit from the tourist industry, they earn most of it, from the yak to the local airlines.

COPEING WITH THE MAOISTS

Since the Maoist uprising in 1996, more than 7,000 people have died in clashes with civilians or the Royal Nepalese Army. Operating mostly in poorer western and central Nepal, the Maoists have little support among Sherpas. Yet the violence has led to a curfew in Namche Bazaar. A cease-fire was declared in January.

FOR GENERATIONS THE SHERPAS NEVER TRIED TO CLIMB EVEREST UNTIL A STEADY STREAM OF “PEAK BAGGERS” FROM THE WEST MADE IT PROFITABLE.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

es, say most Sherpas I spoke with. The Sherpa people, they will remind you, have always used outside influences to their advantage. "The fact that we were separated from the rest of Nepal, way up in our high country, made it easy for the Sherpas to preserve our culture," says Ang Rita Sherpa, a graduate of the Khumjung school who now heads Hillary’s foundation, the Himalayan Trust, in Kathmandu. Over a steaming bowl of soup, a pungent potato stew, Ang Rita points out that, despite their remote geographic setting, the Sherpas kept open minds about ideas from the outside—maybe because they are outsiders themselves.

"Sherpa" means "person of the east." The first Sherpas are believed to have walked from eastern Tibet in the 16th century, crossing the Nangpa La pass to reach the southern slopes of Everest. They settled in Khumbu and Pharak, in the valleys and precipitous canyons of the Bhote Kosi river and the Dudh Kosi or "milk river," an apt name for a torrent that churns and foams like a vanilla milk shake in the monsoon months of summer. Gradually, the Sherpas moved into the lower, gentler hills of the Solu region south of Khumbu and Pharak, where milder temperatures make farming more productive.

In the remote villages of the Solu-Khumbu region, largely beyond the reach of the Hindu majority in lowland Nepal, the Sherpas formed a distinctive culture. Their language—still thriving today—has Tibetan origins. Their pervasive religious faith, the Nyingma sect of Mahayana Buddhism, promotes the idea of compassion for all human beings; thus the Sherpas developed a social structure much less rigid than the caste distinctions common among Hindu Nepalese. Tradition taught Sherpas that some of the mighty mountains just over their shoulders were the abodes of the gods, to be respected from afar but not intruded upon. And so for generations they never tried to climb Mount Everest or the other great Khumbu peaks—until the steady stream of "peak baggers" from the West made mountaineering a profitable enterprise.

"Three decisive innovations made the Sherpas what they are today," says Ang Rita. "British travelers brought potato plants to the Himalayas in the 19th century, and the Sherpas recognized that this could be a staple crop for the Khumbu climate. In the 20th century the introduction of iodine made an important improvement in public health [by eradicating goiter, which was widespread until the 1960s]. And the Westerners who wanted to climb the high peaks gave us the foundation of a tourist economy that has produced more wealth than agriculture or trading ever did."

Sherpas began migrating to Darjiling, India, more than a hundred miles east of Khumbu, in the 19th century to find construction jobs around the summer resort set up for British officials in northern India. When the first British mountaineering expeditions headed to Mount Everest in the early 20th century—traveling from...
A Sherpa guide (bottom, at left) points out the peaks to Austrian trekkers outside a Namche Bazaar lodge. To avoid altitude sickness, most visitors spend a day getting acclimatized in Namche, elevation 11,300 feet. Rush hour consists of a few yaks—the freight cars of Khumbu—tumbering past a cybercafé, a lifeline for the electronically wired. The café’s owners also run a grocery store, a lodge, and an outdoor equipment shop.

Lightbulbs replaced kerosene lamps when Namche Bazaar got electricity from a hydroelectric plant in 1983. Televisions came later. A contemplative Buddhist painting competes with Jurassic Park for the attention of Temba and his mother, Ang Doshi, of Khunde. “There’s less talk among family members,” says Temba’s brother, Ang Rita. “But there’s no entertainment here except ceremonies and festivals. TV helps people pass the time.”
northeast India through Tibet because Nepal was closed to foreigners until 1949—they hired strong young Sherpas in Darjiling to be porters. A Sherpa contingent became essential for every climbing expedition; when the British expedition of 1953 became the first to reach the roof of the world, the final assault team comprised one New Zealand climber, Edmund Hillary, and one Sherpa, Tenzing Norgay.

The conquest of majestic Mount Everest caught the imagination of the world, bringing an unprecedented number of climbers to Khumbu each spring and fall. It also brought the Sherpas a generous and indefatigable benefactor in the person of Hillary (see "My Story," page 38). To speed construction of the hospital in the village of Khunde, Hillary oversaw the construction of the airstrip on a dramatic mountainside in Lukla—a runway that has had the unintended result of fueling the massive tourist trade. Quickly, each of Khumbu’s 25,000-foot-plus peaks was topped, with Sherpas playing a central role in the expeditions. Even more crucial to the Khumbu economy was the development of the trekking and tourism industry, in which Sherpas lead tourists on week-long treks from Lukla to popular destinations like Kala Patar and Gokyo, stopping at inns and cafés along the way.

"Those boys out there, most of them, are planning for jobs in the trekking industry," says Malini Bhattarai, the headmistress of the Khumjung school, as we watch the high school boys booting a soccer ball around the school’s hard-mud playing field. "But if the trekkers don’t come, where are the jobs?"

The trekkers almost stopped coming in 2002. They were deterred not only by the events of September 11 but also by the state of emergency the Nepalese government declared in November 2001 after negotiations with the Maoist rebels failed. Nepal’s ferocious domestic insurrection was launched in 1996 by a secretive, self-styled Maoist known as Comrade Prachanda. He wanted to replace the constitutional monarchy with a socialist republic. Prachanda put together an army, apparently several thousand strong, of impoverished rural farmers who were frustrated by an unresponsive government and see civil war as the only solution to the sheer misery of their lives. In the western regions of Nepal, people live on what they can grow, never seeing a penny of the tourist income that pours into trekking regions of the country or the foreign aid that flows to Kathmandu. The Maoists, both men and women, attacked police, soldiers, and other government employees, hacking all their victims limbs one by one with farm sickles. The rebels regularly looted banks and bombed bridges and communications facilities; they kidnapped teachers and thus shut down the schools in rural regions. The Royal Nepalese Army reacted with large-scale assaults on rebel hideouts by helicopter-borne infantry units. Since November 2001 more than 4,000 people have died, most of them alleged Maoists killed at the hands of security forces.

The rebels publicly stated that they would not target tourists; while some trekkers were forced at gunpoint to make "contributions" to the rebels, there is no evidence that tourists were killed by the insurgents. Sherpas told me countless times that the Maoist rebellion was restricted to western Nepal and had no impact on life in Khumbu. Perhaps they don’t want to scare away tourists, but this reassurance is demonstrably untrue. The influence of the insurgents on Sherpa country is plain for anyone to see.

In the seemingly peaceful Khumbu town of Namche Bazaar, soldiers in green fatigues patrol the streets with automatic weapons over their shoulders, enforcing a curfew that has essentially ended nightlife. Even the centerpiece of social activity in Namche, the Friday night movie—it’s actually a video shown on a large-screen TV—has been suspended because of the curfew. The headquarters of Sagarmatha National Park, on a green meadow at 11,600 feet, was once a popular tourist spot. The park was created in 1976 to protect the area from environmental degradation, turning virtually all of Khumbu into a state-regulated area. It offers trekkers their first clear view of Mount Everest, the mighty peak floating above a fluff of cloud to the northeast. But today the park headquarters is a forbidding place, surrounded by sandbags, barbed wire, and tens of soldiers on the lookout for Maoists.

The frightening stories about the Maoist insurrection have had a serious effect on tourism. I saw the downturn in graphic terms in the office of Kamal Jung Kunwar, the acting chief warden of Sagarmatha National Park. He had a hand-drawn chart on his wall showing the number of tourists entering the park over a 15-year span. Year after year the tourist figure went up—from 8,135 in 1987 to a record total of 25,292 in 2000. By the end of 2002, the number had plummeted by 39 percent. Guesthouses sat empty beside the mountain trash bins, and water bottles went unsold in the shops; Sherpas waited beside the Lukla landing strip for clients who didn’t come.

The fighting has taken a toll on Sherpa life that goes beyond economics. To preserve forest cover, the government has banned Sherpas from cutting any living tree for firewood within the borders of the national park. But now environmental concerns take second place to national security: Last year the army cleared a ten-acre forest of around park headquarters, to deprive the rebels of a place to hide.

"It was so sad to see those trees go," says Kunwar. "It hurts to think how long it will be before we have forest here again. At this altitude it takes 20 years for a new tree to grow just five feet."

In the spring of 2002 the rebels blew up the telephone repeater station at Patala, shutting down telephone service to and from Lukla-Khumb. "It would be easy for the government to replace the repeater," Ang Rita Sherpa says. "But if they did, they couldn’t defend the new one. So we have lost our telephone connection. It’s as if we had to go backward in history."

If the cease-fire holds, or even if it doesn’t, Sherpas are optimistic about the future of the tourism industry. "The last two years have not been good, but this year will be different," says Nima Nuru Sherpa. "This will be the 50th anniversary of the climbing of Everest! We are sure that a record number of visitors will come."

When it comes to predicting what will happen as more and more Sherpas leave Khumbu, there is less optimism. The strong sense that educational opportunities are better in Kathmandu and other large cities has fueled an exodus among young families; no longer is there a purpose to learning to measure how big this movement has been, because there are no reliable census figures for the Sherpa population. But the trend is clear. Only 10,000 or so Sherpas remain in Solu-Khum-bu. The rest have scattered to towns and villages across northeastern Nepal and India. Thousands now live in Kathmandu, where most of Nepal’s trekking and climbing agencies are headquartered. Farther afield, there’s the Sherpa rock band in New York City, the Sherpa restaurant in Tokyo’s Shibuya district, and Sherpa hiking guides in mountain resort areas all over the world.

Many Sherpas fear that this modern diaspora will dilute the traditional culture. "When someone in the family dies, the Sherpa way is to keep the body at home for two or three days to mourn," Ang Rita says. "But if you live in Kathmandu and rent a house belonging to a Hindu, he wants to get a dead body out of his house immediately. So it is really not a Sherpa home anymore."

I began to understand the implications of the Sherpa dispersion when I trekked through a forest of birch and rhododendron at 11,400 feet to the quiet village of Thamo, a collection of four
Trekking pays, but it also costs. Newfound income enables some parents to send their children to boarding schools like Mt. Kailash in Kathmandu (below). But Sherpas must now contend with litter, erosion, and forest degradation caused by the demand for fuelwood and lumber. Many are working hard to address the environmental toll, with reforestation projects (bottom) and periodic trash cleanups in villages and along the trails.

Aung Gelu Sherpa, a pilot for a Sherpa-owned airline, prepares to fly from Kathmandu to the airstrip at Lukla, where most visitors begin their Everest adventures. Kathmandu locals practice their moves on a wall at the Pasang Lhamu Mountaineering Foundation. It was named after Gelu’s sister, the first female Sherpa to summit Everest, who died on her way down. “People didn’t believe a Nepalese woman could do it,” says Gelu.
dozen rectangular homes perched like colorful Lego blocks on a steep slope about a 90-minute walk from Namche. It's hard to imagine a more dramatic place to live. Just to the east looms the majestic white pyramid of 18,901-foot Khumbila, to my eyes, the most beautiful peak in the whole Everest region—and one most sacred to Sherpas. Across a gorge to the west, a half dozen hundred-foot-high waterfalls crash down the cliff face to the tumbling Bhote Kosi river.

On a chilly, misty day in mid-September, nearly all the residents of Thamo are out in their fields harvesting the potato crop, pulling a year's sustenance from the soil. In a potato field down by the river I meet Pasang Namgyal Sherpa, a tiny figure with a latte brown face and wispy white hair that sticks out here and there from his red felt cap. Pasang, 74, introduces me to his wife, Da Lhamu, 73. The couple invite me in for Sherpa tea, an astringent brew made in a wooden churn with salt and melted yak butter. It's an acquired taste that I will never acquire, even though Da Lhamu hovers around me all afternoon with the teapot, repeating an insistent Sherpa phrase that obviously means "Drink up! Drink up!"

Their home is a classic Sherpa farmhouse. We step over a high wooden threshold into a gloomy first floor full of sacks and baskets holding potato tops, turnips, cornmeal, and a stack of drying yak dung, to be used as cooking fuel. Up a wooden staircase—so steep it is really a ladder—we come to a single room, where benches around the walls for sitting or sleeping, and an open hearth in one corner that provides what little heat and light the house has to offer. There are two small lighbulbs in the ceiling, powered by a hydroelectric plant the Austrian government finished in 1995 as a foreign aid project a few miles upstream. Pasang tells me he only uses them at night, which keeps the electricity bill down to about two dollars a month. The house has no clock, but it does have a calendar, nailed to a beam, indicating when the new moon and the full moon will come. On those two days each month, Pasang forges farmwork and stays in to read and chant scripture.

Pasang and Da Lhamu have about 12 teeth left between them, but their smiles gleam as they tell me their life stories—born in Khumbu, married in Khumbu, farm in Khumbu—and proudly list their possessions. They have several terraced fields, totaling about four acres, plus three cows and three zopkios, a male yak-cow crossbreed.

"I had 11 sheep too," Pasang says, "but I had to sell them because I'm getting too old to keep the dogs away from them."

"Well, if you're getting old," I ask, "who's going to take over this farm?" With that the cheery smiles disappear. The couple's son, it turns out, had taken a job on a climbing team and died in an avalanche in the autumn of 2001. An exact number of how many Sherpa climbers have died on mountain-climbing expeditions is hard to come by, but one estimate, 84 died from 1950 through mid-1989. Of the 175 climbers who have died on Everest, a third have been Sherpas. Most Sherpas probably have lost a friend or relative to a mountaineering accident. A few high-altitude porters stop climbing after a friend's death. But most see it as an inevitable hazard and gain, motivated by the money the job brings in.

Pasang and Da Lhamu's only surviving child is their daughter, Phuti. She married a fine man and had two beautiful children, Da Lhamu says, digging out the family photos. "But she's gone to Kathmandu. We won't see her back here!"

Phuti introduces me to the most important reasons she lives in Kathmandu: her daughter, Dawa, 6, and her son, Paldep, 5—both resplendent in the crisp gray uniforms, with red and orange trim, of the Unique International High School. They are in the elementary school there, studying both in English and Nepali. "The schools at home are no good," Phuti says decisively. "And it is a 90-minute walk, for my little children. Here they have a 20-minute bus ride."

Not everything about this decision is desirable, Nuru concedes. "Our children do not know the Sherpa language, or very little, anyway. When we take them to Khumbu, they don't know the names of the mountains." The children, their father notes sadly, did not even recognize the name of Pasang Lhamu Sherpa—the first Sherpa woman to reach the summit of Everest—when they saw the bronze statue honoring her on the main street of Boudhanath.

"We want to pass on our beautiful culture and traditions," Nuru says. "But it is not so easy here."

The couple tell me that they definitely intend to go back to the Sherpa homeland—but not for many years. Their daughter, they say, is "like being cold and wet," Phuti says in guilty tones, as if this confession makes her a bad Sherpa. "In Thamo the only job I could get was as a porter," she goes on. "Carrying kerosene cans, 15, 20 kilo, for 50 rupees [65 cents] a day. It rained. It snowed. I was cold, wet, tired, all the time." That was 16 years ago. "In Kathmandu it's easier. Here, I worked in a tea shop—and I rode there on the bus!"

It's this dispersion of young people, rather than the modern influence of tourists per se, that worries many Sherpas. After all, back in Khumbu, the old ways still persist in many aspects of Sherpas' daily life. Their washing machine is the rushing river. Their dryer is the sun. The kids use round pebbles as marbles and play catch with potatoes. With rocks and branches, Sherpa farmers construct diversion channels beside the mountain streams to drive the waterwheels that grind their grain into flour. The same streams are used to spin the prayer wheels that dot Sherpa country. "In Khumbu, our traditions are maintained," Ang Rita Sherpa says.

Indeed, a National Geographic Society-funded study on the impact of tourism on the Solu-Khumbu region by Stan Stevens, an associate professor of geography at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, found that Sherpas are not much concerned about tourists' direct role in cultural change. The Tengboche monastery is thriving. And some religious festivals have been rescheduled to off-season periods when few tourists are around. Most Sherpas seem able to blend the new with the old as easily as the farmer I saw at a tiny bar in the village of Beni; he was sipping alternately from a tall bottle of Carlsberg and from a shallow cup of chang, a thick, home-brewed beer.

Sherpas are particularly good at juggling tradition with modernity when it comes to their health care. Thanks largely to such organizations as the Himalayan Trust and the Sir Edmund Hillary Alpine Foundation, medical and dental care are available, almost for free, at several clinics in Solu-Khumbu. The Sherpas use these facilities regularly, but that has stopped them from a continued reliance on herbal medicine, on faith healing, and on the Sherpa shamans known as lamas.

"People are absolutely multimedia when it comes to medicine," says Heather Culbert, a Canadian doctor volunteering at Khunde. "They come in here and get vaccinated against measles or polio, and then they go to the monastery and get an amulet from the lama to ward off the same disease."

The one medical tool that no doctor can offer in the roadless precincts of Solu-Khumbu is an ambulance. "Sometimes we get someone who broke his leg, or was...

(Continued on page 71)
Living on the edge is a way of life in Namche Bazaar, perched on the brink of a chasm. Residents tend intricate terraces planted mostly with potatoes. Introduction of the crop, probably in the 19th century, helped move Sherpas away from trading to a more settled lifestyle.
Shoppers often walk for days to stock up at Namche Bazaar’s Saturday market. They return home with everything from goats to solar panels, as well as the latest knock-off running shoes and parkas carried in from neighboring Tibet.
gored by a yak, and is carried in on a board by his friends," says Culbert. "But most patients come to the hospital on foot. Even very ill patients walk here. It's the only way."

Last fall, a woman trekked the three hours from the village of Phortse to Khunde hospital, gave birth to twins an hour after arriving, and walked home with the babies on her back two days later. "Sometimes women have their babies on the trail before they get here," Culbert says. "And they turn around and walk back home. The delivery is over, so who needs a doctor?"

On the steep, rocky mountain trails of the Sherpa country, new mothers walk with farmers, yak herders, mail carriers, kindergartners, great-grandmothers, and exhausted, sweating porters bent low under the weight of their cargo on their backs.

The Sherpas have brought all manner of modern innovations up the mountain trails. So why is there no room in Khumbu for the automobile, or the roads it could drive on? I posed that question to almost every Sherpa I met. The consensus view is that roadlessness is an essential element of the Sherpa condition. "If we rode a bus in Khumbu, would we still feel the steepness of our mountains?" asks Nima Nuru Sherpa. "Would we still hear the waterfalls coming down our cliffs? Would we stop and say a prayer when we passed a mani [prayer] stone?"

Still, Khumbu's lack of roads began to bother me, perhaps because I too was struggling up and down muddy mountain tracks every day I was there. And so I decided to take the matter to the reincarnate rimpoché at Tengboche monastery. "In my home state of Colorado, we have paved roads that cross narrow mountain passes as high as 14,000 feet. It wouldn't be impossible to build roads through this region. Why don't you do it?" I asked.

The rimpoché listened to my outburst with a pained look on his face, then answered, politely but firmly. "If Solu and Khumbu were in America," he says, "I have no doubt that there would be a road system through these mountains. That is what you do. But here, there will never be a road—not in my lifetime, not in our children's lifetime. We are Sherpas. We walk."