SHERPA PRIDE AND SACRIFICE

Some brandish ice axes at the summit. Others hold up flags, family photos, or prayer cards given to them for protection. Snapshots like these by Sherpa climbers line the walls of teahouses and homes all over the Everest region. Although the climbing industry has taken a heavy toll on Sherpa families, it has also brought income and opportunity. Once poor, isolated villages of farmers and traders have been transformed into relatively prosperous, educated communities of Nepalis at home both in the mountains and in the modern world.

Images courtesy Sherpa Climbing; Photographed by Karen Hey
Dawa Nuru Sherpa coils rope at Camp II on Ama Dablam, perched like a spectacular bird's nest at 19,600 feet. Carrying gear from a high camp on Everest, Sonam Dorji Sherpa (far left) exits the Khumbu Icefall.
Larina Sherpa replaces rope from the previous year between Camp I and Camp II on Ama Dablam. Climbers with commercial groups will use the fixed rope to help them ascend the peak.
ESSENTIAL TASKS

Climbing Sherpas are part guide, part porter, part personal assistant, part coach, and part guardian. Duties can include hauling gear (above) or serving breakfast in bed (top right). How high their stack of money will be on payday (right) often depends on how much weight they've carried and how many trips they've made between camps. Western companies generally pay better than Nepali-owned ones. Besides paying for education and other necessities, wages from the mountains are invested in yaks, houses, and businesses such as tourist lodges.
At the annual Dahachi Festival in Phortse, grieving parents Phu Dorji and Phu Derge Yorgi are honored with khata ceremonial scarves, in memory of their son, Dari Tshering, who died of high-altitude-related causes on Everest in 2013.
A special rice dish is offered to villagers during the Dumchi festival in Phortse. Expedition-style jackets are another sign of climbing's influence on Sherpa life.
BACK HOME

Once the climbing season is over, Sherpa mountain workers quickly return to village life. In Phortse, De Nuru Sherpa (top right), who has summited Everest 16 times, shares a laugh with his mother, Daki Sherpa, at her home. Eight of Daki’s sons have worked as mountain guides. Karma Tsering Sherpa (right) once helped Edmund Hillary build schools in the Khumbu region. Today he lives next to his son, who guided on Everest, and grandchildren. Elders (above) attach prayer flags outside Phortse at an altar for Khumbila, the god of the Khumbu.
With money made in the mountains, Sherpas often send their children to boarding schools in Kathmandu in the hope that those of the next generation won’t have to risk their lives on Everest.