

EVEREST

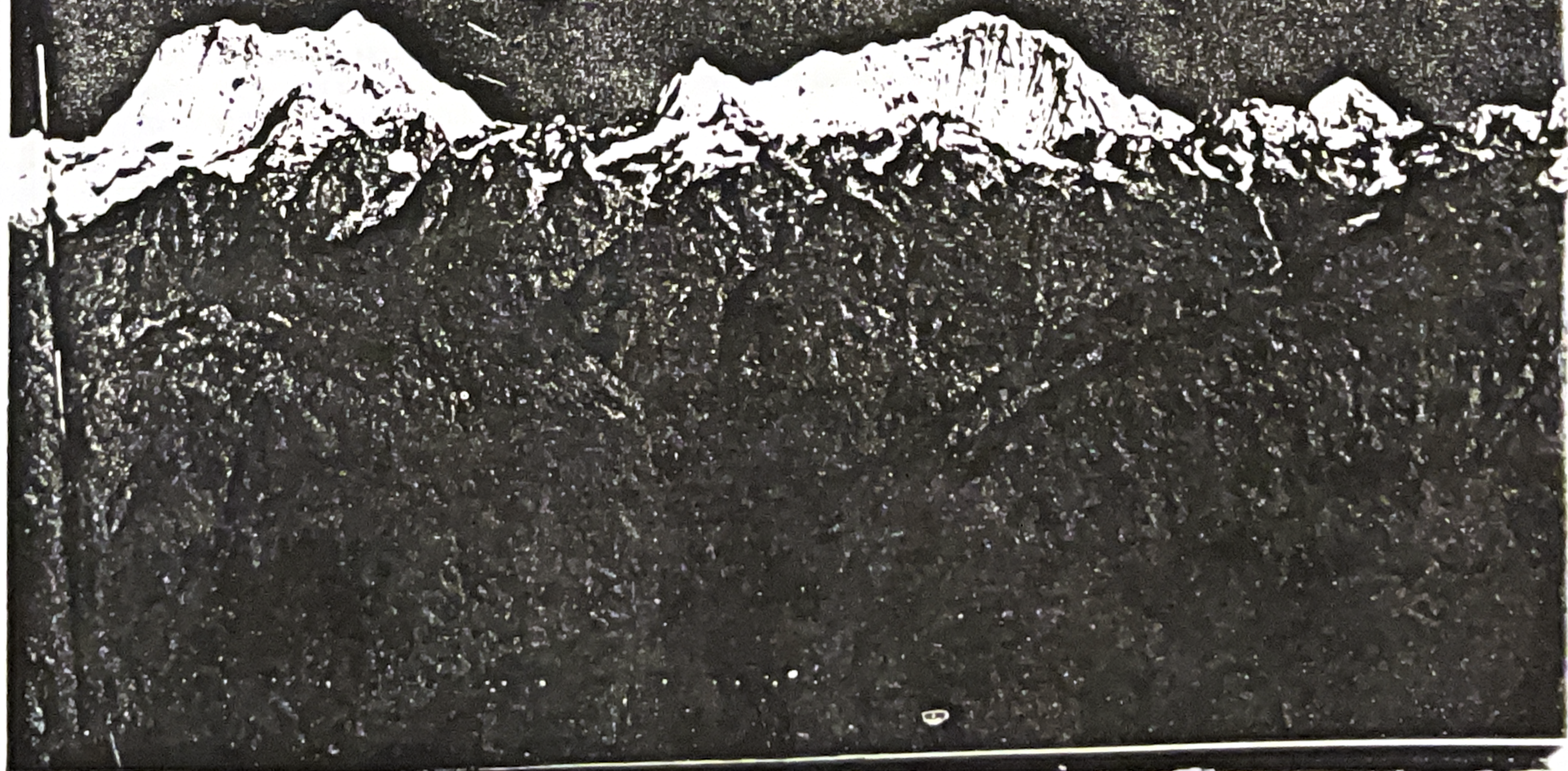
Getting to the tops of mountains, as far as I'm concerned, is strictly for the birds. Those gritty people who are made for scaling a mountain, say they indulge simply "because it is there." But illustrious peak-seekers of the past at least had more sensible reasons: Moses ascended to bring down the Ten Commandments, Prometheus went up to fetch fire, and Hannibal sneaked up on the Romans from behind.

Getting me to join the cloud-bound crowd in their strenuous sport would give my wife a monumental laugh. I normally balk at visiting friends above the second floor in buildings without elevators.

My mountaineering has always been on a high plane—airborne. In the course of much travel on air routes, I've flown over the Alps, Andes, Rockies, and other unchallenging heights. I've gazed at these massive lumps of earth and been delighted at the ease and comfort with which I gained the same glorious summit views as those intrepid climbers who had to struggle onward and upward.

I got my first look at the Himalayas recently while flying from Calcutta to Kathmandu. On the horizon, hundreds of miles from our 727, Nepal's snowfringed backdrop, forming its northern border with Chinese-dominated Tibet, came into sight. There in the midst of the world's biggest collection of natural

by Jack Goldfarb



skyscrapers towered the tallest cloudsplitter of them all—Mount Everest. At least the flight attendant assured me it was there, but the sun's rays reflecting on the snowy crests produced a blinding effect as dazzling as the Himalayas themselves.

To me, a five and a half mile trek overland through rocks, ice, and snow isn't at all inviting. Yet piled into one huge heap, the rocks, ice, and snow of Everest—five and a half miles straight up—attract scores of enthusiasts each spring who want to look down on the world from 29,028 feet. I'll skip that pleasure.

But by the time our airplane flew in over the brown pagoda roofs of Kathmandu, I learned from a fellow passenger that there were local flights that "climbed" Everest my way.

Early the following morning at an unnatural hour, I taxied from the Soaltee Oberoi to the airport only to find the Everest flight delayed, waiting for the wintry mist to lift. Everest is best viewed just after sunrise and just before sunset. During the rest of the day, if the sun is shining, the glare on the snows causes a blinding "whiteout." This January dawn the haze was taking its leisurely time to move off while the passengers impatiently stamped their feet to keep them warm.

Suddenly the mist was gone. The "mountaineers" scrambled across the apron to manfully climb the modest flight of stairs into the 44-seater airplane.

Inside the aircraft, it was every man for himself as the riders bickered for the seats on the left hand side, where Everest was to appear as we flew eastward. But the pilot immediately explained he would make a U-turn about 150 miles out, after which each side of the plane would end up getting an equal eyeful. The captain also invited everyone into the cockpit, a few at a time, that is, where he would be pleased to answer any questions.

This gracious gesture reaffirmed my belief in the advantages of mountain climbing by airplane. I couldn't imagine a troop of mountaineers slogging across the blustery glaciers of Everest, sagging under the weight of oxygen tanks, canned sardines, and sunburn cream, with the expedition leader taking time out to inquire, "All right, you guys, what would you like to know?"

Meantime, most of my fellow height-seers were too busy loading cameras, testing light metres, and studying maps to notice we had lifted off the plateau of Tribhuvan Airport and were already over the green hills hedging in Kathmandu Valley.

Soon the dramatic skyline of the Himalayas unfurled before our eyes. That is, before the eyes of the viewers on the left. On the right-hand side, I had to content myself with puny-sized foothills and trickling streams.

As we made our climb up to 20,000 feet, the excitement grew on the other side of the aisle. Cameras clicked and whirled and mountain-spotters ticked off the colossal peaks on the "scorecard" maps thoughtfully provided by Royal Nepal Airlines. The parade of pinnacles reduced all conversation to a flurry of whispers: *Gosainthan, Dorje-Lakpa, Phurbi-Ghyachu, Chhoba-Bhamare* — Nepali names hardly suited for excited whispering by foreigners.

With the left-hand windows eclipsed by passengers' heads, I turned my attention back to my own window. There the most fascinating sight on the tinted plastic sun filter was a transfixed stowaway fly, wondering how he ever soared up to this altitude.

Accepting the captain's invitation, I got in line to visit the cockpit. When I entered, the plane was on automatic controls. I understood why when I saw how busy the pilot and copilot were, replying to the barrage of passengers' questions. The pilots needed all four hands to point out peaks, landmarks, and panel instruments.

Mount Everest at 29,028 feet, is at once awesome, dramatic, unforgettable. Its steep rocky south face is sparsely covered with snow.



I asked a question of my own. "Didn't they mind all these questions?"

"Most people who come here," answered the pilot, "travel a long way to see our country and our mountains. We appreciate that."

Our little turbo-prop was scudding along at 270 miles an hour in the direction of the Eastern Himalayas where the gigantic range swings south along the Sikkim border. To the North lay Tibet and China. To the South and further East were India, Bangla Desh, and Bhutan. Somewhere around here, it was said, you could find the legendary Shangri-La, land of "Lost Horizon". But before I could ask the pilot about that one, he pointed to a pyramid-shaped peak flanked by two slightly lower mountains. That was it. Mount Everest. Its steep black south face sparsely covered with snow, a wind-blown panache of cloud trailing from its cap, Everest was at once awesome, dramatic, unforgettable.

The Nepalis call it *Sagarmatha*. The Tibetan name is *Chomolungma*. And to the Sherpa people, it is "the mountain so high no bird can fly over it." Nor could we. Nor dared we. The Chinese authorities in Tibet are very touchy about aircraft approaching their borders. Not long ago, the Nepalis, after a boundary dispute (long since settled), banned all flights and even Himalaya-hiking for several years to avoid antagonizing their Communist neighbour.

The great rocky peak moved closer and closer, taking on majestic proportions. The early morning sunlight, tinting the upper crest, edged it in pink gold. We were close enough now to make out the blade-sharp ridges and frozen rivers of snow-topped ice.

Everest was only 20 miles away. The two adjacent mountains Lhotse and Nhuptse, like menacing guards, barred the way to the "supreme highness." As we drew nearer, the pilot had to hold the two-engined craft firmly against the buffeting winds. Finally, at 14 miles, he veered into a tight U-turn.

I veered too, lurching back toward my seat while the turbulence shook the plane to its wingtips. The flight attendant helped me sit down and to quieten my nerves, he told me a little story.

He had been working one of these flights a few years back when the pilot decided to deviate from his normal course and treat the passengers to a real close-up. He maneuvered the plane to within seven miles of Everest's summit, a daringly close distance. While the crew members' hearts pounded, the passengers remained unaware of the altered route and the risks involved. The winds ripped at the plane, 'howling in protest at the violation' as the steward put it. But the captain handled the plane magnificently, and all went well.

A postscript to the story was that shortly afterwards the same pilot crash-landed on a routine airline flight at New Delhi airport. All the passengers escaped with their lives, but the pilot was killed.

The flight attendant's tale wasn't very comforting. To divert him from other unhappy endings or yarns about Abominable Snowmen, I asked him to point out the route that climbers usually took up Everest. He indicated *Namche Bazar* far below, traditional starting place for expeditions. His finger on the window traced a line up the frozen face of Lhotse, then curved across the South Col "bridge" to Everest and, pausing for a "final assault," poked forward along a straight ridge. Planting his fingertip smack on Everest's peak, he declared, "From Kathmandu to here the trek takes sixty days!"

But less than twenty minutes later we were on our smooth descent to Kathmandu's airport. From a nearby hilltop, the huge, all-seeing eyes of Buddha, painted on Swayambhu Temple dominating the town, watched us ride down to terra firma.

