

CIRCLING EVEREST

TEXT BY DICK SMITH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DICK AND PIP SMITH

ANGA SHERPA had a huge grin on his face. He was looking down on the 8874-metre summit of Everest from the co-pilot's seat of my aircraft, and getting a new perspective on a mountain that had dominated his life.

As a boy, he had walked in its awesome shadow daily on his way to the Hillary School and more recently, as a captain with Royal Nepal Airlines, he had flown nearby. But he'd never been as close to it as he was now, and his elation was obvious.

I knew exactly how he felt. Two days earlier, on 15 October 1991, I'd spent an hour circling the summit. The weather was so clear I could see the footprints left by Spanish mountaineers who had reached the peak the hard way the previous day.

The experience was unbelievable and I felt privileged to be one of the very few people to obtain permission from the Nepalese Government to fly over the summit. But my flight had a serious purpose. Between taking photographs, my wife, Pip, and my friend and co-pilot Frank Young and his wife, Leonie, were gathering weather data to assist four balloonists – one an Australian – in their attempt to make the first unpowered flight over Everest.

We also intended to provide support for the balloonists on the day of their historic flight, but unfortunately they could not obtain approval for us to depart from Kathmandu Airport before dawn. This was imperative because the team intended to take off at dawn and it was a 30-minute flight from the airport to Everest. Naturally we were disappointed, but we had been able to gather plenty of weather information during five flights in the days before the successful balloon attempt on 21 October. We were also happy that the balloonists were able to use film shot from my aircraft in a documentary on their flight.

On top of the world! That's how I felt as I looked down on the 8874 m summit of Mt Everest. It brought home the incredible challenge faced by Tim Macartney-Snape and Greg Mortimer when in 1984 they became the first Australians to reach the summit. They climbed a new route on the north face, on the left in the photograph. The right skyline was Tim's route on his 1990 Sea to Summit expedition.





Perfect weather during the first of my five flights over Everest meant I could even see the footprints (opposite) left by Spanish mountaineers who had reached the summit the previous day from South Col, the route used by most climbers. In the background is the Rongbuk Glacier, snaking towards the mountains of Tibet. Conditions weren't quite so clear when Anga Sherpa (right) joined me two days later, but that did nothing to dampen his enthusiasm. A pilot himself, Anga had often flown near Everest but never as close to it as he was now. My altimeter (below) shows just how close to the summit we were. It read 29,920 feet (9120 m), so we were just 246 m above the roof of the world.

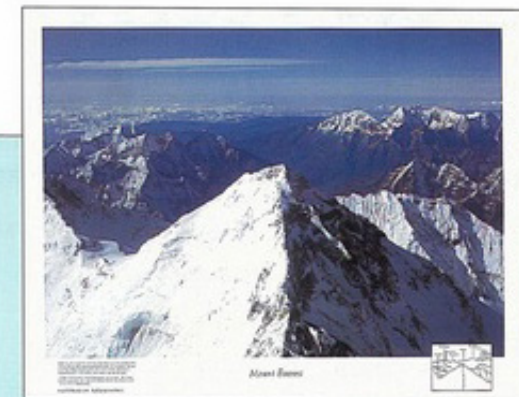


While collecting details of wind speed and direction at various altitudes and relaying them to the balloonists at Gokyo, 45 km south-west of Everest, via two-way radio, I became aware of the poor communications in the area.

There was no direct communication by normal aircraft radio between Kathmandu and the Sir Edmund Hillary airstrip at Lukla, 40 km south of Everest, which is used by many of the 11,500 trekkers to the famous Khumbu area each year. This worried me because it means pilots leaving Kathmandu often have no information on the sometimes very different – and severe – weather conditions at their destination, putting them and their passengers at unnecessary risk.

We take such communication for granted in Australia, but the Nepalese cannot afford it. I decided that on my return to Australia I would try to rectify the situation, and I have since offered the Nepalese Department of Civil Aviation AG assistance to acquire a solar-powered repeater station that could be installed on a hill 60 km south of Everest. It would give aircraft flying to Lukla direct radio contact with Kathmandu at all times.

If the Nepalese Government agrees, AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC will set out to raise the necessary money. I'm sure that Society members and other Australians who have enjoyed the majesty of Mt Everest at close quarters will be happy to support this project. It seems a small price to pay for the privilege of experiencing the Himalaya.



DURING OUR STAY in Kathmandu, we had dinner with the Australian ambassador, Les Douglas, and his wife, Una, and met Dr Sanduk Ruit of the Nepalese Prevention of Blindness Program, who told us of the fantastic work being done to restore the sight of thousands of Nepalese through cataract operations.

The program is being hampered by the high cost of importing the special intra-ocular lenses inserted during cataract surgery. A \$500,000 fund-raising drive – supported by Professor Fred Hollows – is now under way in Australia to establish a lens factory, eye bank and research clinic in Nepal. As well as manufacturing lenses for home use, the Nepalese hope to export some to generate more income for the eye program.

When I heard about this, I decided that I would have one of my aerial photographs of Everest – showing the summit and the spectacular mountains to the south – made into a poster to raise funds for the factory. If you would like to take part in supporting this worthy cause, please buy one of these magnificent full-colour posters. All the proceeds will go to Nepal Eye Program Australia, the organisation raising funds for the factory.

Copies of the poster are available for \$10 from AG shops or, for an extra \$3.50, by mail order from AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC, PO Box 321, Terrey Hills, NSW 2084.