The Future of Himalayan Adventure

By Dave Coustic

Just about anybody can walk up a hill if it is small enough, but mountains can be another matter. Perhaps that is one way to define the difference between the two words. However for the richest mountaineering experience the objective should never be a pushover. If the success is in doubt then the achievement of the goal is that much sweeter.

I have been climbing for most of my life, starting at the age of ten I seem to recall. Even in those days access to the more popular hills, and mountains if I want to continue distinguishing them, was becoming difficult. By the year 2067 the European government had complied with the dictates from the World Union in Caracas and severely limited access on the grounds of conservation. Now that the pressure of numbers was so great, the problems of litter, rescues and erosion had all contributed to more and more restrictions. The resurgence of some of the more fanatical religious types had also been a factor in the case of some of the higher and remote mountains. Many peaks soon had lengthy waiting lists and others were completely off limits. On top of this the cost of travel became increasingly prohibitive.

This would have left Nepal and some other poor countries with a loss of revenue but they had been considerably helped by the world taxation system. However the biggest way they earned income was from the licence fees for computer ascents of their peaks. Back in the middle part of the 21st century much discussion had taken place about how users of computers should pay for the benefits they gained from what might be called the underlying asset. Eventually agreement was reached on a scale of charges, which ranged from the simplest computer game right through to a full expedition.

As a result much of my time has been spent on climbing walls, frequently with the add-on facility of virtual reality. This has meant I have been able to climb, or at least attempt, just about any route. All the classics are available at most virtual reality climbing centres, though some of the major routes can be a bit pricey.

To celebrate my fiftieth birthday my regular climbing partner, Paul, and myself decided to go the whole hog and use the recently opened SuperSimulator in Sheffield. Here we have set out to climb Everest by the Southwest Ridge. This full assault was what Paul and I were now embarked upon and we knew when we had booked it that we would have to give it our all.

Travel simulators were very popular, and I knew that several of my colleagues and neighbours had used them for a week's holiday on an uncluttered beach, returning relaxed and tanned. All this of course happens without the possibility of travel delays or unfinished hotels and yet experiencing the holiday as if it was real.

The forecast for our trip was pretty good, though of course forecasts for any mountain areas are never too reliable, and those for the Himalayas could be quite wrong. We had chosen to have a forecast as accurate as it would have been for such a trip rather than have guaranteed good conditions. So it looked as if Paul and I were going to be lucky. We had saved a long time for this trip to Everest and it was quite an investment in both time and money.

Starting out from Namche Bazaar we made the normal approach to base camp over a couple of days. I had heard of plenty of people who had started nearer the mountain and higher up, but problems of acclimatisation were a major factor and we did not want to take any of the new wonder drugs. As with the weather forecast this was to be an attempt in classic style of the 1970's, when Himalayan mountaineering shook off its siege like tactics of earlier days, but before some of the later technological aids came along to ease matters. The local environment was from the same period, so that the villages and tea-houses were not spoilt by the large numbers of trekkers and mountaineers who were later to overwhelm and westernise such a unique lifestyle.

The local Nepali people were every bit as friendly as I had ever imagined and it was great to take our time absorbing the atmosphere.

Base camp was much as I had expected from the books I had read and the photos and the films I had seen, but at least it was fairly free of debris. I had also spent some time studying the holographic images which were available. A full holographic display system was still too expensive for most individuals but for a small outlay one could spend a long time wandering through the archives of the British Library (3-D section). This was achieved by using the local library's holographic unit and downloading the relevant images. A great way to spend a wet evening and learn more about how those future projects would really look.

We made a final weather check, decided it was favourable and off we set with heavy loads but light spirits. Here we were, on the mountain at last, after all the years of dreaming and months of planning. As we climbed up the views became more and more spectacular and we made good progress on near perfect snow. We paused from time to time to take photographs, using replica film cameras.

Early starts in the cold and at high altitude never seem to get any easier and both of us struggled to get organised. No super-electric stoves for us, we were sticking to the technology of the 20th century. I must say I had been tempted by electricity. It was a remarkable development when batteries became so powerful that it was feasible to pack more energy space for space than into a gas canister, and with the ability to melt snow and boil the resulting water at incredible speed.

From our final camp at the South Col we made the summit bid. It was hard work at this altitude. I had thought I was pretty fit and had been training over a long period with regular trips into the mountains including some long alpine routes. However there is nothing like a lack of oxygen to slow you down. We had reached the foot of the Hilary Step when we first noticed the weather was beginning to show signs of a change. Nothing to speak of at first but it was clear that there was a fair chance of a storm within the next 48 hours. We concluded that there would be no problem to make the summit, and still get back to a reasonably low altitude before nightfall.

'Wow! This is fantastic. We really are on top of the world.' Maybe not an original comment but that is more or less what we each said as we reached the top and took the obligatory photos.

It is often after the completion of a climb that problems start. After a hard ascent, whether technically or, as in this case, physically, it is all too easy to relax too much; this is how mistakes can arise. Some 200 metres below the summit somehow a crampon came off and I slipped. I was at the upper end of the rope and we were moving together so this was really a no-no. I was slow off the mark and it took longer than it should have before I managed to self-arrest - not before I had hit something solid.
'You alright?' shouted Paul, once I had come to a stop some 30 metres above him.
'I think so' I replied tentatively, but then as I tried to move again. 'Shit! My knee's none too good.'
'Can you make it okay?' came Paul's understandably concerned reply.
'Yes, I think so. I'll have to anyway.'

I thought back to some of the epics that had taken place in the last century during the era of pioneering lightweight alpine style ascents. Two of the incidents which came to mind were Doug Scott descending the Ogre with two broken legs and Joe Simpson after his accident on Siula Grande. I would have to use these examples to keep me going. Although my knee was badly twisted I could walk after a fashion, but it would be a slow process. Had this happened within an hour or two of civilisation the problem would have been minor, but up here any incident such as this is very serious.

Despite 'only' being a simulator this was nevertheless a very real situation. The SuperSimulator is all too able to make most scenarios remarkably realistic. Avalanches, snowstorms and even falls of

up to 30 metres can all be produced rather effectively, and of course cold temperatures and high altitude are easily produced.

I made it down to Paul and we took stock of the situation. I would go ahead with the rope to give me some protection, but we would continue to move together on most of the descent. From time to time however we came to steeper sections or patches of hard ice and here Paul needed to belay me. Of course the first result of this was that time passed all too quickly and darkness was upon us before we had reached a spot a few hundred metres above the South Col. We found ourselves a reasonable spot to dig in for the night, but it would not be comfortable.

We did not really sleep, but just dozed, and it was part way through the night that we realised the wind had got up.

'Sorry, Paul, looks like I might have blown it this time.
'Maybe the storm'll pass quickly.'
'Yes, let's hope so.

The next day the storm was in full spate and we were unable to leave our snowhole. We made a couple of brews to keep ourselves as rehydrated as possible but did not have huge resources of gas.

Another uncomfortable night passed while the storm continued unabated and we were now nearing disaster.

Perhaps one key difference between our attempt and that of Mallory and Irvine, for example, is that I can dictate this account and know it will be found. But when we defined the parameters for our booking of the simulator we elected for full reality - no rescue would be possible.