

The Metro Section

The New York Times

FRIDAY, APRIL 3, 1998

Everest, and Sherpas, Are in Vogue

New York's Cool New Guys, Thanks to Books and Films

By GLENN COLLINS

The Sherpas are bemused.

When they began settling in New York City, the famously trustworthy mountain people from Nepal who have hefted supplies (and not a few Western climbers) to the summit of Everest, fully expected the immigrant's struggle of hard work and homesickness.

But they never expected to be cool.

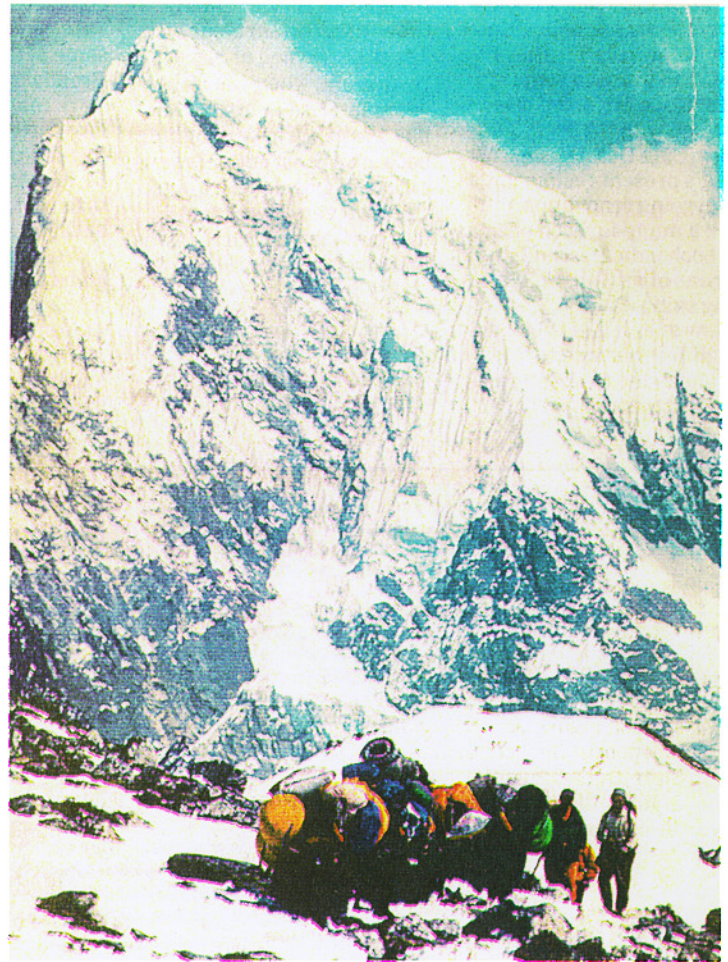
"Thanks to the new Everest boom, the Sherpas are very much in vogue," said Dr. Vincanne Adams, a Princeton University anthropology professor who has been studying them since 1982. "After all the books and movies, there is kind of a celebrity aspect to being a Sherpa."

This has provoked no little astonishment and a measure of delight among the nearly 500 Sherpas living in New York City, the largest settlement in the United States. Until now, the city's newest microcommunity had grown so quietly that it was off the scope of most demographers.

But in recent weeks, Sherpas have loomed large in the glow of *The Movie*, as they call it: the Imax film "Everest," which chronicles an expedition to the 29,028-foot summit of the world's tallest mountain. The film has racked up the highest per-screen attendance gross — \$54,099, according to *Variety* — of any film playing in the country. Thus far, "Everest" has taken in a record \$662,000 at the Imax theater at Sony Lincoln Square in Manhattan as of April 1.

The film is just the latest manifestation of Everest-mania. There is also the book "Into Thin Air," by Jon Krakauer, which chronicles the May 1996 blizzard that claimed the lives of eight climbers. It has been on the best-seller list of *The New York Times* for 47 weeks and became an ABC Sunday Night Movie. And the National Geographic Society's \$35 coffee-table book on the Imax expedition, "Everest: Mountain Without Mercy," has sold 150,000 copies since October.

"The Imax film is a very big event for us," said Dhamey Norgay, a Sherpa who works in Manhattan as a program coordinator at Philip Morris. "It was very



MacGillivray Freeman Films

Sherpa climbers with a yak on the 1996 Everest expedition, which was featured in the Imax movie "Everest."

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moving for so many of us to see our mountains again, and our culture portrayed on the big screen."

The 28-year-old Mr. Norgay is the youngest son of the most illustrious

Sherpa, the late Tenzing Norgay, who made the first ascent of Everest with Edmund Hillary on May 29, 1953. The younger Norgay remembers the cold and the wind of Everest more than 20 years later, when he hiked there at age 9 with his father up to the 13,000-foot level. "We've

lost a lot of family members on that mountain," he said. All told, 53 Sherpas have died on Everest.

"People have been coming to the store and talking about the movie," said Gelmu Sherpa, the owner of Tibet, a tiny, artifact-rich Himalayan gift shop on West 80th Street in Manhattan. "I think there is much curiosity about Sherpas now. I'm thinking of opening a second store."