

EVEREST: THE UNCUT STORY

Adventurer and filmmaker **Elia Saikaly** talks to **Rob Slade** about his experiences on Mount Everest and gives an up-close-and-personal look at the issues facing the mountain.

PHOTOS: Elia Saikaly

Mountains have fascinated men, women and children for centuries, and none more so than the highest of them all, Mount Everest. This intrigue reached fever pitch this spring, with photos of this Himalayan giant plastered across newspaper and television reports documenting the remarkable queues above 8,000m. They were sensational images, but did they tell the real story? What is the state of play on the world's highest mountain, and how has it changed over the years?

To find out, Rob Slade has been speaking to Canadian adventurer and filmmaker Elia Saikaly. Having summited Everest three times (most recently, earlier this year) and failed on several other attempts, Elia has experienced much of what the planet's highest mountain throws at you. Here, he sheds light on the events of this spring and reveals what's really been happening on this towering peak.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO MOUNTAINEERING?

I was in the film industry for five to seven years before I got into documentary adventure filmmaking, and I was on a serendipitous assignment with a friend of mine who had asked me to go to Everest. I had never slept in a tent, didn't know where Everest was, and I just figured I'd say yes. So I said yes, headed out to Nepal – I was 26 at the time – and was shooting the climb of a friend of mine who wanted to be the oldest Canadian to summit Everest.

His name was Dr Sean Egan, a University of Ottawa professor, and he tragically died during production. He died of heart failure, and I had gone as far as I could go; I just went to base camp with him. Then, not really knowing what to do, and having this film on my hands that was incomplete and this promise that I made to him to help him tell the story, I went back as a first-time climber. I climbed in his honour, ashes in one hand, video camera in the other, and that was my introduction to mountaineering.

SO THAT'S WHY YOU WENT BACK?

Yeah, in memory of Sean, to get to the summit. We didn't make it the first time. We made it to the South Summit, we were 150m from the top and turned around because of bad weather. That was quite devastating at the time. I did the whole thing with no financial support, so I took an enormous risk to make that happen. Then, over the course of a couple of years I actually tried again. I was up on the north side, on another filming project with a friend of mine. We didn't make it the second time, and then, finally, in 2010 I went back and we did summit.

I ran the expedition with a team of Sherpa friends of mine and what was interesting about that first successful ascent was that we had 20,000 Canadian school children who were following the expedition day-to-day, in real time, in their classrooms. We were shooting, cutting, broadcasting, connecting it back home to the curriculum and their classrooms, and they were supporting kids in Nepal in honour of Sean. That gave birth to a whole set of new dreams and new ideas, using technology in high places to do good things. So that was the entry point.

HOW DID IT FEEL TO STAND ON THE SUMMIT FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME?

It was an incredible feeling. It was very meaningful, because it was just my Sherpa climbing partner and I on the summit. It was a mixed bag of emotions. It was overwhelming, it was emotional and it was sad in some ways, because my friend had lost his life trying to stand where my two feet were planted.

At the same time, because we had those 130 schools that were following along, I was actually able to radio them from the summit, and there were live summit celebrations all across the region here in Canada. So, you stack all that together and it's a pretty incredible feeling.



ARE YOU ABLE TO ENJOY THE MOMENT WHILE ON EVEREST, OR ARE YOU ENTIRELY FOCUSED ON FILMING?

I definitely enjoy the moment. The way I look at it, I combine my passions. It's a passion before it's an employment, and then I stack meaningful storytelling on top of that. It's an amazing experience, hopefully a story that's making an impact, and when you put these things together you're living the dream. So yeah, it's extraordinary...

It's become this amazing combination of pushing your body to its limit, making sure that you're safe and doing it in a responsible way, performing at a high level and then operating technology in places where batteries die in minutes and most people are struggling to survive. So that's become my passion, that's kind of my thing and I thrive on it. I love it. Nothing immerses you more in the present moment than being on a high mountain above 8,000m; you have no other choice.

YOU HAD A ROUGH TIME OF IT IN 2014, COULD YOU TELL US A BIT ABOUT THAT?

So 2014 and 2015 were the hardest years of my life. I was in Nepal working for Google in 2014 and 16 Sherpas were killed due to an avalanche. I was on the mountain when that happened. I was supposed to be shooting on the icefall on that same day, on 17 April, and shortly after that experience I broke my back.

I was paragliding in the Himalayas and I lost control, fell 50m from the sky, crash-landed through a roof and miraculously survived. I was paralysed, but somehow, for some reason, my feeling in my legs came back. My L2 was split in two, my foot was broken, my liver was lacerated, and I essentially dragged myself out of that roof with the help of 20 Nepali women. I got myself back to the capital, they told me I needed surgery, but I refused and got on the plane that night with all my gear, flew home to Canada and didn't walk for eight months. They told me my career was over.

I got a call from Under Armour during that period, offering me a job to shoot six 8,000m peaks in a year. Not even able to walk, I said yes, which was bonkers. So I got myself back in shape, recovered from that accident and was back on Everest in 2015. And then we got hit by another avalanche that was triggered by the earthquake, where over 18 people died. I was at ground zero during that and got hit dead-on by the avalanche. My friend from Google died, it was a disaster.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE OF THAT DAY?

There was a 120-150m tidal wave of snow that hit us right in the face. We were very lucky to survive. We didn't have as much notice as we normally would have because there were low-hanging clouds that morning, which is uncommon at base camp. The ground started to shake and rumble. It's a very odd feeling, especially being on a glacier, and we probably had 10 seconds or so by the time we first saw it.

The thing with base camp is that there are avalanches constantly, in the night, during the day, in the afternoon. You see them, you feel them, you get dusted by the snow, and you never get touched, you're always safe; that's the belief. And so I think a lot of people didn't react that morning because that was their feeling as well, and it was just bigger than anything any of us had ever seen before. So we didn't run immediately, we didn't take cover, and it wasn't until the last minute we realised, shit, this thing is going to hit us.

AND WHAT HAPPENED THEN?

I mean, we had nowhere to run. I was with Himalayan Experience that year, with Russell Brice, and he had his camp tucked away a little bit lower than most people. Our tent happened to be tucked right under this rock pile. We dove into the tent and the avalanche essentially bounced over the top of us. There were about five of us in there. We were very lucky. ▶



At the very start people didn't realise it was as severe as it was, and within 15–20 minutes at our camp we started to receive the news that there were deceased climbers spread throughout base camp, it was very serious. Step by step it gradually got worse and worse, and we started to see people being carried in. The worst of it for me... I think it's a whole other level when you have a personal friend who's impacted by the tragedy. I found my friend from Google, Dan Fredinburg, and it was just absolutely devastating. He was a good friend of mine and I was up on Everest with him the year before.

In the moment, you're just doing what you need to do as a coping mechanism and you compartmentalise your emotions. It really isn't until you return home, when the surge of adrenaline decreases, that you start to realise that this has impacted you far deeper than you can imagine. So I was hit with post-traumatic stress for months, trying to deal with what I saw out there. It was very difficult.

IT DIDN'T PUT YOU OFF GOING BACK?

It did, actually. I had had enough. I had seen too much. Any loss of life is devastating, the loss of 16 Sherpas was really tough to deal with; they have it hard enough up there. And then the following year, losing a friend of mine and so many more deceased... I called it quits, at least for a couple of years.

It wasn't until 2018 that I got wind of this group of Arabic women that were all climbing Everest separately, and I got the idea to put them together and assemble this team from across the region. That felt like the right reason to go back, it felt like it was an amazing story to tell, an important story. It just felt like the right time to go back and do something really meaningful, especially given my father was Lebanese, and you know, I love Lebanon.

YOU'VE BEEN GOING BACK FOR OVER A DECADE NOW. HOW HAS THE MOUNTAIN CHANGED?

The mountain itself pretty much stays the same, you know, there's a larger human footprint now, with more and more

climbers climbing year after year. As far as receding glaciers go, you can definitely see it at base camp, that the pinnacles at the base of Everest are melting. They're not what they were back in 2005. From that standpoint, things look different.

There have been an increasing number of inexperienced climbers, there have been new companies that have popped up since 2005. The queues really blew my mind this year. During those couple of years off I had seen images online that showed these queues, but I had never experienced them firsthand. It wasn't until this year, in particular when I was climbing from camp three to camp four, it was alarming how many people were heading up toward the South Col and toward the summit. That was the biggest change that I saw, in addition to the severe lack of experience, preparation and fitness on the part of some climbers. Not everyone, some.

But yeah, there was an incredible amount of people, and just a few key individuals that just really had no business being up there whatsoever. Prepared climbers, strong climbers, experienced climbers, we have the ability to deal with that, we can simply pass, we can get around them, we have the confidence to unclip from the line, but those that don't end up in long queues. So that was the biggest change for me.

The other thing that I saw this year, which was incredibly disheartening, was the human waste and the trash up at camp four, and there was less snow this year, so it was more apparent. It was just a complete mess up there, and an avoidable mess. I was with Garrett Madison from Madison Mountaineering this year and we carried all of our human waste out; we organised a bit of a cleanup expedition from camp two and flew out two tonnes of garbage.

It's not that difficult to 'carry your shit out'. It really isn't, it's just people are lazy and people just don't care. It's something that could be avoidable if everybody just did their little part, but people don't, and I understand the rationale behind that. Most people are just trying to survive; 8,000m is a debilitating environment, you're slowly dying, but, still, it's just a little bit of extra effort to carry your waste out. I think if everybody did that there would be a massive change on that mountain.



DO YOU FEEL LIKE A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE EASILY BLINDED BY SUMMIT FEVER?

Contrary to the headlines, I think there are a lot of responsible people up there. You have a lot of people that respect the mountain. You certainly have Western companies and other foreign companies that really love that mountain, care for that mountain, care for their Sherpas, compensate them well, take care of their clients and have no inability to turn around. I think the problem lies in the hands of a few. I think, definitely, we see people going to the summit that have no will whatsoever to turn back who are definitely blinded by summit fever and are pushing themselves well beyond their limits. And that's when you really get yourself into trouble, when you are not humble enough to listen to what the mountain is saying, to what the body is saying, and are not humble enough to turn around.

On my way to the summit - and again, not everybody, it's just a handful or two - I saw people that were barely able to put one foot in front of the other and they're just relentlessly digging as deep as they can, giving it everything that they have, not considering their own safety or the safety of those around them. They're willing to keep going at all costs. The problem is that once you get up there, you're only halfway there.

HOW WAS THE CONGESTION THIS YEAR?

There were just long queues, there were a lot of people going up the mountain and there were unnecessary deaths that could have been avoided. We managed the queues very well, we spoke about them long in advance. Our team of women were very well prepared and they knew that it would be a no go situation if we got caught in queues and they didn't have the ability to overtake climbers. So, the question I often ask rhetorically is, if the queues were the main problem, then how come the four women from the three Middle Eastern countries had no issues on summit night? Why were they able to reach the top and get down safely with no issue whatsoever?

I put that down to experience, and yes, there were definitely a lot of people up there, but we overtook 40-50 climbers that night

and we were well aware of who was climbing and when they were moving. We actually held back 24 hours and stayed in the death zone on oxygen to allow some of the traffic to make its way up so that it would be safer. It was when we were coming down that I saw a line-up of climbers heading up to the summit around 9am, just below the South Summit, which is a difficult area to overtake. It's very narrow coming over the top and then down toward the Hillary Step. There were 100+ people jammed back to back and, at that point, unless you're willing to completely get off the line, no one is letting you past. People were so tightly crammed in together that you'd have to be a really confident climber and completely get off that line to overtake there. So that was a very difficult spot. I've got to say, thank god we had good weather that day.

IS THE NUMBER OF PERMITS AVAILABLE THE ISSUE?

We can all hope that the Nepal government may follow in the footsteps of China and limit the number of permits. Knowing the government of Nepal and the way that the country works, and how positive of a thing it is for the economy to have that many people in the region and on the mountain... I mean, you're looking at the support of families, right from the wives and children of the Sherpas that climb, to the families that own tea houses along the way, the support staff at base camp... So it's a huge boost for the economy. We often get this media blitz up there, this year was larger than usual, and a lot of attention is focused on whatever the problem may be. New regulations are proposed and they're never enforced, so in an ideal world that would happen. I don't think that's going to happen.

I think the finger should be pointed at the companies that are responsible for the climbers taken on as clients. It would be amazing to see those companies regulated. I think it really comes down to the climber, to the individual making the responsible choice of who to hire, to be responsible for their lives and also to be responsible for themselves, to educate themselves, to know who they're hiring and when they're cutting corners.

NEPAL TAKES ACTION

As we go to print, news is coming out that a panel advising Nepal's government has recommended changes to the way the country grants permits to climb Everest. It suggests that climbers must have climbed a 6,500m peak in Nepal, provide a certificate of physical fitness and only employ experienced guides. In addition, the permit would cost \$35,000 (£29,000) as opposed to the current fee of \$11,000 (£9,000). Watch this space.

They're jeopardising their own lives and they're putting the lives of the Sherpas at risk, because when you underpay a company, that trickles down the line and you end up underpaying Sherpas. Climbers need to make better decisions on who they hire, how they carry themselves above 8,000m and have the humility to accept defeat should the mountain say no.

I think in addition to the regulations, I think it would be wonderful to see a pre-requisite be put in place of having climbed an 8,000m peak before. I think that would really prepare people and it would also weed out the inexperienced, which are contributing to the problem.

WHEN YOU TALK ABOUT INEXPERIENCED PEOPLE, WHAT DID YOU SEE?

You can always tell by looking at how a person walks in their crampons, handles a fixed line, uses their ice axe, navigates the terrain... You can tell immediately who has experience and who doesn't. There are some people who wouldn't know how to use their ice axe, or carry it, if you handed it to them. There are some people who are just learning to put their crampons on and are very slow in doing so and there are people who are too terrified to clip and unclip from a safety line in order to overtake a climber.

Climbers who don't have experience of recognising the signs that their body is breaking down, that they're going too far beyond their limit because they haven't experienced extreme altitude, and also people who end up paralysed with fear, they don't know what to do... My greatest fear is that one day, when we've got 100 climbers in a line, if the safety line snaps or bad weather comes in and one of those lines snap, say above the Hillary Step, how are people going to get down? It could be one of the worst disasters we've ever seen and it's very possible.

DID THE NUMBER OF SUMMIT DAYS PLAY A PART TOO?

Definitely, that was part of the problem this year. If you compare this year to last year, you had a nine or 10-day weather window in 2018. This year it was much more narrow, so the majority of climbers headed up on 21st, 22nd and 23rd.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT EVEREST IS STILL WORTH IT?

Who are we to judge people's ambitions? You've got hundreds of people up there that are all climbing for different reasons. Everest is not going to change; it's a commercial mountain. It will always be that pinnacle of the ultimate achievement, just symbolically. So I don't see that slowing down at all. I think it's great, personally, that the average person can access a mountain like Everest and they can have a decent shot at the summit. I mean, you see a 13-year-old boy summiting Everest, you see a blind person, you see double amputees, you see firsts from countries from the desert, where there are no high mountains. I think this is all amazing, because it impacts society in a positive way, it fuels infinite dreams and possibility.

I think that we're just feeling and seeing the worst of it at the moment. But you have to remember that, again, it's not everybody. We don't hear about all of the positive achievements in the mainstream media. We don't hear about the Western companies that are leading and guiding trips very successfully and very responsibly, where the Sherpas couldn't be happier to be employed, to be paid what they're paid and to be a part of the experience. We hear all about the bad news.

YOUR TEAM STILL ENJOYED IT DESPITE THE QUEUES?

Yeah. I guess the easiest way to say it is that the loss of life up there was avoidable this year. The people that died could have made different decisions; their leadership could have enforced different decisions to avoid death. This is what's most tragic about it. I mean, people died because they ignored the signs that their bodies were displaying, because they were at extreme altitude and decided that the summit was more important than their own safety. So, had they have quit long before they got themselves into that situation, it could have been avoidable..

*Due out in late 2019, The Dream of Everest documents the story of four women from the Middle East as they attempt to climb Mount Everest. Keep an eye on Elia's website (eliasaikaly.com) and social media (@eliasaikaly) for more updates. **AI***