In 1953, the New Zealander Edmund Hillary and the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay became the first people to reach the 29,035-foot peak of Mount Everest. Since that time, nearly 4,000 other people have successfully scaled the world’s highest mountain. The youngest is an American boy who made the climb when he was 13 years old; the oldest is a Japanese woman who was 73 years old when she made her second successful climb.

Not everyone manages to complete the climb, and some of these people pay with their lives. There have been over 230 deaths on the mountain.

Alan Arnette is a mountaineer who reached the summits of the tallest mountains on each of the seven continents in a single year. He has climbed Everest four times and thinks that perhaps 200 dead bodies remain on the mountain. The body of one climber who died in 1996 still lies next to the trail on the north side and is used as a landmark identified by the green boots he is still wearing.

It has been 50 years since Hillary and Norgay made their historic climb, and the ascent is not as treacherous as it was. Sherpa guides know where they should put ropes and the paths the climbers should take. So why do so many people die in their attempts?

One thing to bear in mind is that climbers not only have to reach the summit safely, they also have to make their way back down. By that time, they are tired and may have run low on oxygen. They may have faced bad weather, and they have struggled up the icy slopes of the “death zone.” This is the part of the climb above 26,247 feet, where the final camp before the summit is located. A person cannot survive in this zone for more than two days because of the lack of oxygen and the extreme temperatures.

In recent years, this problem has been made worse by the large number of climbers who want to conquer Everest. The climbing season only lasts for about two months, if that, when the winds on the mountain are not as powerful as during the rest of the year. Climbers need to leave the final camp by late morning. Then, there can be so many of them in the death zone that there are traffic jams. Some days, up to 200 people set off. Climbers are delayed and can suffer exposure and use their precious supplies of oxygen.

There is also another problem facing some climbers: they may not be skilled enough. Nobody doubts their strength and fitness, but they may not know enough about mountaineering and the hazards that high altitudes present. The paths have been prepared by hundreds of Sherpas and the hardships seem less than they would have been years ago. So people can get lulled into thinking that it isn’t such an ordeal.

Given these difficulties, the months of preparation, and the thousands of dollars paid for a permit, why do more and more people want to challenge the world’s highest mountain? Well, it seems that the question includes the answer. It’s because it is the world’s highest mountain. It’s the biggest feather in a mountaineer’s cap. Rhys Jones, an English climber who completed the ascent of Everest on his twentieth birthday, explained to the BBC: “Everyone is aware of the risks. . . . But actually, risk is part of the attraction—it makes it more of a test, it gives you more to aim for.”

Rhys Jones probably has it right, but it’s been said in fewer words. George Mallory, before his fatal attempt to scale Everest in 1924, explained why he wanted to climb the mountain: “Because it’s there.”
1Sherpa: a member of an ethnic group from the most mountainous region of Nepal