K2
the mountaineer’s mountain
viewed from the southeast (Pakistan)

Firsts

June 23, 1986: First female ascent

July 31, 1954: First ascent

1909: First attempt via the Abruzzi Spur

Original Expedition

The original expedition and had fallen out with him over the decision to give up on leading to the summit from around 5200m.

The route claimed three lives during the deadly summer of 1986, including well equipped bivouacked in a snow hole, warmed only by a candle, at 8470m (27,790ft). The story goes that the Italian alpinist Roberto Cherubini had gone on a solo climbing expedition to K2 when he was wounded in a crevasse fall on the South-Southwest Ridge. Unable to find a way back to the main camp, he decided to bivouac in a snow hole at an altitude of 8470m (27,790ft). The next day, he was found dead in the snow, with no trace of a body or equipment, and still wearing his crampons.

The route usually employs four high camps. The pioneering Italians used nine in 1954.

K2 – the North Ridge and the South-Southwest Ridge

The North Ridge is the main route of ascent to K2, starting at Base Camp approximately 5200m (17,000ft) above sea level. The route leads up the North Ridge to the Bottleneck Couloir, which marks the beginning of the South-Southwest Ridge. The ridge is characterized by steep rock sections, ice falls, and crevasses, making it one of the most challenging parts of the ascent. The South-Southwest Ridge is a continuation of the South Ridge, bypassing the Black Pyramid and ending at Camp VI, which is located at an altitude of 7550m (24,770ft).

Polish Route

Poles Jerzy Kukuczka and Tadeusz Piotrowski completed the long and arduous climb on July 10, 1986. The toughest bit was a high rock step guarding the entrance to the Bottleneck Couloir. The pair bivouacked again (without food or water, or sleeping bags) near Camp V. They then traversed to the Shoulder and continued upward. The temperature was minus 25°C and visibility was zero. At a height of 8250m (27,000ft), an icefall blocked the path. They bivouacked for two days, waiting for the icefall to melt. Finally, they descended to Camp IV, where they spent two days fixing ropes and restating the icefall. After two days, they continued up the ridge.

South-Southwest Ridge

(The Mazot Llaw)

François Casarotto's crevasse fall

François Casarotto, a French alpinist, fell into a crevasse on the South-Southwest Ridge, in 1986. He was bivouacked in the crevasse for several days, but managed to survive. He later described the experience as one of the most intense moments of his life.

South–Southwest Ridge

The South–Southwest Ridge is a prominent spur extending from the South Ridge of K2. It is characterized by steep cliffs and challenging rock sections. The ridge is climbed by the Polish route and the South Ridge route, both of which lead to the summit. The South–Southwest Ridge is often used as a contingency route in case of bad weather or other difficulties on the main routes.

North Ridge

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Bottleneck Couloir

The Bottleneck Couloir is a narrow and steep section of the South-Southwest Ridge, located at an altitude of 7222m (23,670ft). It is characterized by steep cliffs and challenging rock sections. The couloir is often used as a contingency route in case of bad weather or other difficulties on the main routes.

Leader Fritz Wiessner, a rock climber who was uncomfortable on the 1939 US expedition. The two ploughed the route to the top.

Frenchman Jean-Marc Boivin set a world paragliding height record (using a 150m rope) of 8500m (27,870ft), leading to a rescue attempt that claimed K2's first known victims – Wolfe and Heinrich on July 22, 1986. The three climbers were descending when they were caught in an avalanche. Casper Wolfe died instantly, while Heinrich was injured. The bodies of the climbers were never found.

Wolfe and Heinrich's death was the first fatality on K2 since the expedition in 1933. The accident highlighted the dangers of climbing on K2 and raised questions about the safety of the routes.

Wolfe and Heinrich's bodies were found by a rescue team in 1987, but their remains were never identified. The bodies were later transferred to the University of Victoria for identification, but they were never positively identified.

High point of US 1953 expedition (approx 8350m, 27,400ft)

A fresh survey the following year, confirmed the story of the Squall Ridge, which led to the summit. A cairn erected in 1953 for American Art Gilkey (see 'High point of US 1953 expedition').

High point of 1939 US expedition (approx 8350m, 27,400ft)

The area now serves as a cemetery and a memorial site for other climbers who have lost their lives while attempting to conquer K2.