# K2
# the mountaineer's mountain

## viewed from the southeast (Pakistan)

### Firsts

**1902: First* attempt**

Six climbers from an international expedition, including infamous Satanist Aleister Crowley (UK), made it to 6525m (21,400ft) on the Northeast Ridge.

**1909: First attempt via the Abruzzi Spur**

An Italian party led by Luigi Amedeo di Savoia (the Duke of Abruzzi) was first to try the spur – a route that was to become the line of the first ascent 45 years later and now bears the Duke's title. Twelve climbed to 6250m (20,500ft).

**July 31, 1954: First ascent**

Achille Compagnoni and Lino Lacedelli, climbing as part of a full-blown, 'siege-style' Italian expedition, were first to conquer K2. They reached the summit around 6pm in fading light after running out of oxygen just short of the top. The pair were lucky to escape unscathed as they stumbled (not helped by a few slips of cognac) in avalanche conditions during their rapid descent. Compagnoni lost fingers to frostbite as a result of filming the summit.

**September 6, 1978: First ascent without bottled oxygen**

Faulty oxygen equipment resulted in Lou Reichardt (US) becoming the first to climb K2 without supplementary gas. Reichardt and climbing partner Jim Wickwire also became the first Americans to make the summit, getting to the top after abandoning the Northeast Ridge (obscured), traversing to the Shoulder and then continuing up the original route.

**June 23, 1986: First female ascent**

Wanda Rutkiewicz (Poland), climbing without bottled oxygen, was the first woman to summit K2, reaching the top via the Abruzzi Spur. Her climbing partners Liliane and Maurice Barrard (husband and wife) disappeared in bad weather on the descent after bivouacking at about 8300m (27,230ft). It's likely they were avalanched or hit by a serac fall. A fourth team member – Michel Parmentier (France) – had a lucky escape after getting lost in whiteout conditions on the way down. He was directed by radio to the fixed ropes on the Shoulder, finding them after spotting urine stains in the snow.

* There's evidence to suggest Italian explorer Roberto Lerco climbed the Abruzzi during a reconnaissance of the Baltoro Glacier in 1890.

8616m (28,268ft)

8300m (27231ft)

Routes obscured

West Ridge

Hockey Stick Gully

7722m (25335ft)

Shoulder

The easy-going slopes of the Shoulder provide one of the only respites from K2's steep flanks. Paul Petzoldt and Charles Houston were first to reach the Shoulder, climbing as part of the 1938 US expedition. The two ploughed through waist-deep snow. Petzoldt made it to just under 8000m (26,250ft) before turning back.

Abruzzi Spur (obscured)

Polish route

Poles Jerzy Kukuczka and Tadeusz Piotrowski completed the long and avalanche-prone route leading up the central rib of the South Face on July 10, 1986. The toughest bit was a high rock step guarding access to the summit ridge at the end of the Hockey Stick Gully. It took the Poles two nights to overcome the obstacle. The pair bivouacked again (without food or water, or sleeping bags) near the summit after being caught in rotten weather on the way down. Piotrowski (presumably exhausted and dehydrated) lost his crampons on a steep ice slope while descending below the Shoulder. He fell to his death.

South-Southwest Ridge ('The Magic Line')

SSE Spur route

The South-Southeast Spur route is regarded as a lot easier than the traditional Abruzzi line, as it bypasses the difficult Black Pyramid and House's Chimney. Doug Scott (UK) led an alpine-style attempt in 1983, but gave up in deep snow just below the bottom of the Shoulder when a team member fell ill. Yugoslavian Tomo Cesen soloed the spur to the Shoulder three years later (August 4, 1986), controversially claiming a new route – controversial because there were no witnesses and Scott's team had already climbed all but the last few metres. In 1994 a Basque team, using fixed ropes, became the first to complete the route to the top.

South–Southeast Spur

Negrotto Col

Filippi Glacier

Casarotto's crevasse fall (see 'Magic Line')

Godwin Austen Glacier

K2's main base camp area is on the moraine at the bottom of the glacier. Nearby is the Gilkey Memorial – a cairn erected in 1953 for American Art Gilkey (see 'High point of US 1953 expedition'). The area now serves as a cemetery and a memorial site for other climbers who have died on the mountain.

**1 Summit (8616m, 28,268ft)**

A satellite reading in 1986 indicated that K2 was higher than Everest by some 11m (36ft), threatening a rewrite of mountaineering history. A fresh survey the following year, however, confirmed K2's status as the world's second highest mountain.

**2 Highest bivouac (approx 8550m, 28,050ft)**

Dan Mazur (US) and Jonathan Pratt (UK) shared the highest bivouac on K2 when they sheltered under an overhanging boulder on September 2, 1993. They were descending after a marathon climb through the night to make the second ascent via the West Ridge route. They had earlier abandoned the siege tactics of their international expedition to 'go for broke' on the ridge. Pratt became the first Briton to survive an ascent of K2.

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

Leader Fritz Wiessner, a rock climber who was uncomfortable on steep ice, tried to reach the summit slopes via the rocks above his high camp, instead of following the now-established route up the Bottleneck Couloir. The verglassed rock proved tough going. And late in the day his climbing partner Sherpa Pasang Dawa Lama, fearing evil spirits would come out in the dark, persuaded him to turn back only 300m (984ft) short of the summit.

**4 Hillary's high point (1995) (approx 8100m, 26,570ft)**

New Zealander Peter Hillary, son of Everest conqueror Edmund Hillary, turned back just below the Bottleneck on August 13, 1995 after the weather started to turn. It proved a wise decision – seven climbers who continued higher lost their lives in a vicious storm. Six of them, including Alison Hargreaves (UK) – credited as the first woman to solo Everest without bottled oxygen – were most likely blown off the mountain just below the summit. A Spanish party reported seeing Hargreaves's body hanging out of reach as they descended to Camp III. The seventh climber – Canadian Jeff Lakes – turned back above the Bottleneck. He made it to Camp II after a hellish descent, including being caught in an avalanche on the Shoulder, but died during the night from pulmonary oedema.

**5 Camp IV 1986 (approx 8000m, 26,250ft)**

A storm trapped seven climbers at Camp IV on the Shoulder for five days from August 5, 1986, resulting in five deaths – a tragedy that, along with eight other deaths that summer, established K2's reputation as the most dangerous of the world's highest mountains. Britons Julie Tullis and Al Rouse died at the camp – presumably from altitude sickness. Three others perished while descending from the Shoulder during a break in the storm. Austrians Alfred Imitzer and Hannes Wieser only made it a short distance below the camp before collapsing. And Pole Dobroslawa Wolf's body was found later, attached to fixed ropes near the Black Pyramid. Only Austrians Willi Bauer and Kurt Diemberger made it back to Base Camp.

**6 Bonatti's bivouac (approx 8000m, 26,250ft)**

Walter Bonatti, regarded as the best Italian climber of the day, and Hunza porter Mahdi were forced to bivouac in harsh conditions during the historic Italian ascent of 1954. Bonatti and Mahdi had intended to rejoin the summit team after climbing down to retrieve oxygen cylinders, but were caught out when their team mates pitched the final camp higher than expected. Mahdi lost most of his toes and fingers to frostbite. Bo natti was outraged by the experience, believing he had been abandoned by the summitters. He later took legal action against the Italian Alpine Club.

**7 High point of US 1953 expedition (approx 7900m, 25,920ft)**

The Charles Houston-led party pushed out a route in poor weather to near the end of the Shoulder. A storm trapped the climbers in their tents for nearly 10 days. It proved too much for Art Gilkey, who collapsed after developing a blood clot in his leg. Dragging Gilkey in a makeshift stretcher, his rescuers slipped on ice as they were lowering the stretcher into a gully. A miraculous belay by Pete Schoening saved six climbers from plummeting to certain death. Gilkey survived the fall, but he and the stretcher disappeared while the others set up a tent, leaving behind only some blood-stained rocks and a tangle of rope. Gilkey's remains were found in 1993 close to the present Base Camp area along with the bones of a small Asian – assumed to be Pasang Kitar, who perished trying to save Dudley Wolfe (US) in 1939.

**8 Boivin's launch pad**

Frenchman Jean-Marc Boivin set a world paragliding height record (using a modified glider half the normal weight) in 1979 when he launched off from Camp IV at 7600m (24,900ft) and landed at Base Camp 13 minutes later. His tear ducts froze on the way down (ouch!).

**9 Camp VII, 1939 US expedition (approx 7550m, 24,770ft)**

Rich American socialite Dudley Wolfe succumbed to exhaustion at Camp VII, leading to a rescue attempt that claimed K2's first known victims – Wolfe and three Sherpas (Pasang Kikuli, Pasang Kitar and Pintso).

**10 Line of the first ascent**

The route heads up the Abruzzi Spur (obscured) to the Shoulder from the Godwin Austen Glacier. It looks like an easy climb from a distance, but it's hard going. The first obstacle is House's Chimney – a steep crack through a buttress at around 6600m (21,650ft). It was regarded as one of the toughest pitches in the Karokoram or Himalaya when Bill House (US) knocked it off in 1938. Today, it is permanently fixed with ropes and wire ladders. The last 600m (1970ft) of the Abruzzi are the most treacherous, particularly the steep and icy rock slabs of the Black Pyramid. From the Shoulder, the route leads to the narrow and icy Bottleneck Couloir, which finishes below an overhanging ice wall at around 8200m (26,902ft). Most climbers opt for the Bottleneck and then traverse under the band of ice. A final steep section of ice leads to the summit ridge, which isn't technically difficult. Modern expeditions on the route usually employ four high camps. The pioneering Italians used nine in 1954.

**11 Japanese route**

The route follows the West Ridge, then makes a long traverse across the West Face to the top of the Southwest Pillar ('Magic Line' route). It was first conquered by Nazir Sabir (Pakistan) and Eiho Ohtani (Japan) in 1981, who bivouacked in a snow hole, warmed only by a candle, at 8470m (27,790ft). The Japanese expedition laid 5.5km (3.5 miles) of rope along the route and took 52 days to reach the top. Three years earlier, expedition leader Chris Bonington abandoned a British attempt on the route after an avalanche killed Nick Estcourt at around 6700m (22,000ft). Everest veteran Doug Scott was also caught in the slide. He was saved by his heavy pack, which anchored him in the snow, arresting his fall and snapping the rope that was dragging him to his death.

**12 'The Magic Line'**

Mountaineering great Reinhold Messner (Italy) coined the name in 1979. He ended up abandoning the route, which contains some of K2's steepest and most technical climbing, after deciding it was too dangerous for porters. Poles Przemyslaw Piasecki and Wojciech Wroz and Czech Peter Bozik made the first ascent on August 3, 1986. Wroz, descending at night, was killed in a fall near the Bottleneck Couloir. It's assumed he abseiled off the end of a fixed rope.

The route claimed three lives during the deadly summer of 1986, including well known solo climber Renato Casarotto (Italy), who had been part of Messner's original expedition and had fallen out with him over the decision to give up on the line. Casarotto fell into a crevasse coming down from the Negrotto Col. He managed to radio his wife at Base Camp for help, but collapsed and died after being hauled out. The other two fatalities were Americans Alan Pennington and John Smolich, who were caught in a slab avalanche below the Negrotto.

**Northern routes (obscured)**

There are two established routes on the northern (Chinese) side of K2 – the North Ridge and the Northwest Face. A Japanese team first climbed the North Ridge in 1982. It is one of the most alluring routes in the Himalayas – featuring a long, broad ridge leading to the summit from around 5200m (17,050ft). The route deviates from the ridge at around 7800m, traverses across the North Face and follows the Northeast Ridge to the summit. The Japanese were also first to conquer the Northwest Face in 1990. The route starts in the K2 Glacier, heading up the Northwest Ridge. There's a long traverse across the rough terrain of the Northwest Face before joining the North Ridge to the summit.

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