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K2 (Mount Godwin-Austen)

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K2 (Mount Godwin-Austen)

K2 is the second-highest mountain on Earth, at **8,611 m**. It is also the only 8,000 m giant still known by a survey code. This article explains where it stands, how it got its names and why climbers fear it.

On Indian maps, K2 lies in Gilgit-Baltistan. India regards this region as part of Ladakh, under Pakistan’s illegal occupation.



K2, seen from Broad Peak Base Camp in the Karakoram range. Photo: Zacharie Grossen, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Where is K2, and how high does it stand?

Height and rank

K2 is **8,611 m** (28,251 ft) high.

Only Everest, at 8,848.9 m, is taller.

K2 is one of the **14 eight-thousanders**.

It rises in the **Karakoram** range.

It sits on the border between Pakistan and China.

The Chinese side lies in Xinjiang.

The Pakistani side lies in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Sources: climbing.com

> **Quick check 1.** K2 is the second-highest mountain in the world. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 2.** K2 stands on the India-China border. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Why is it called K2?

A survey code

K2 is a survey code, not a local name.

In **1856**, **Thomas Montgomerie** mapped the peaks from about 200 km away.

He labelled them with the letter **K**, for Karakoram.

Masherbrum became **K1**.

The mountain we now call **K2** got the next number.

The code stuck.

Sources: cknp.org; lex.dk

The K-peaks

The British Great Trigonometrical Survey numbered five peaks.

K2 is the one that kept its code.

See the table for their modern names.

Sources: climbing.com; cknp.org

Survey code	Modern name	Height
K1	Masherbrum	7,821 m
K2	K2 (Chogori)	8,611 m
K3	Gasherbrum IV	7,925 m
K4	Gasherbrum II	8,035 m
K5	Gasherbrum I	8,080 m

Mount Godwin-Austen

In **1861**, Henry Godwin-Austen led the first expedition near the mountain.

The peak was later named **Mount Godwin-Austen** after him.

The name is rarely used today.

Sources: ebsco.com; cknp.org

Quick check 3. The code “K2” was given by a British survey in 1856. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Why no local name?

The mountain is remote, so nearby people had no everyday name for it.

Balti speakers use **Chogori**, meaning big mountain, but it has little local use.

The Chinese call it **Qogir**.

Another local name, **Dapsang**, is also recorded.

Sources: climbing.com; ebsco.com

Think it through
Why did a survey code outlive the local names?

Show the explanation

The peak is remote and hidden behind other ranges. Few people lived close enough to name it. The survey code reached maps first, and it stuck.

Why is K2 called the Savage Mountain?

The nickname

The nickname dates from **1953**.

It came from a remark by climber **George Bell**.

It is not about one technical feature.

It reflects how often the mountain has beaten climbers.

The Danish national encyclopedia notes its death rate is second only to Nanga Parbat.

Sources: climbing.com; lex.dk

How deadly is it?

K2's historic fatality rate is above **20 percent**.

One account counts about 800 summits and 96 deaths.

Another counts **964 summits and 92 deaths**, a rate of 9.54 percent through 2025.

The figures differ by who counts and when.

Sources: climbing.com; globalsummitguide.com

> **Quick check 4.** The nickname "Savage Mountain" dates from 1953. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Who first climbed K2, and by what route?

Early attempts

An attempt in **1902** by Oscar Eckenstein and Aleister Crowley reached about 6,500 m.

In **1909**, the Duke of the Abruzzi led another expedition.

In 1938, an American party led by Charles Houston tried too.

The **Abruzzi Spur** is now used by about 95 percent of expeditions.

Sources: cknp.org; climbing.com; ebsco.com

The first summit

Two Italians reached the top on **31 July 1954**.

They were Achille Compagnoni and Lino Lacedelli.

They climbed by the Abruzzi Spur.

The expedition was led by **Ardito Desio**.

The East Face has never been climbed.

Sources: climbing.com; ebsco.com; lex.dk

> **Quick check 5.** The first ascent of K2 was on 31 July 1954. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Common traps

- Saying K2 is on the India-China border. It is on the Pakistan-China border.
- Saying K2 is India’s highest peak. No source here supports that.

- Saying “Savage Mountain” is about technical difficulty alone. It came from a 1953 remark.
- Treating “K2” as a local name. It is a survey code.

Sources: climbing.com; ebsco.com; globalsummitguide.com

Explain it back
Say what K2 means. Then say why the mountain has a reputation for danger.

Show a model answer

K2 is a survey code from 1856, with K for Karakoram. The peak earned the Savage Mountain name from a 1953 remark. Its historic death rate is above 20 percent.

Quick check 6. “Chogori” and “Dapsang” are among the local names recorded for K2. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick recap

- Height: **8,611 m**, second only to Everest.
- Place: Karakoram, on the Pakistan-China border.
- Name: a **1856** survey code, K for Karakoram.
- Nickname: Savage Mountain, from **1953**.
- First summit: **31 July 1954**, by an Italian team.

Sources: climbing.com; cknp.org; globalsummitguide.com

Practice MCQs

1. What is the height of K2?

A. 8,848 m

B. 8,126 m

C. 8,611 m

D. 7,821 m

See answer ↓

2. On which two countries' border does K2 stand?

A. Pakistan and China

B. Pakistan and Afghanistan

C. India and Nepal

D. India and China

See answer ↓

3. Who gave K2 its survey code in 1856?

A. Henry Godwin-Austen

B. Ardito Desio

C. George Bell

D. Thomas Montgomerie

See answer ↓

4. When did the nickname “Savage Mountain” arise?

A. 1856

B. 1954

C. 1909

D. 1953

See answer ↓

5. Who led the 1954 expedition that made the first ascent of K2?

A. Oscar Eckenstein

B. Ardito Desio

C. Charles Houston

D. Duke of the Abruzzi

See answer ↓

6. Which route did the 1954 summit climbers use?

A. Cesen Route

B. East Face

C. North Ridge

D. Abruzzi Spur

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.**
   K2 is 8,611 m high. Only Everest is taller.
   ↑ Q1
2. **A.**
   K2 sits on the Pakistan-China border, in the Karakoram. The Pakistani side is Gilgit-Baltistan.
   ↑ Q2
3. **D.**
   Montgomerie labelled peaks with K for Karakoram. K2 is one of them.
   ↑ Q3
4. **D.**
   The nickname came from a 1953 remark by George Bell.
   ↑ Q4
5. **B.**
   Desio led the Italian expedition. Compagnoni and Lacedelli reached the summit on 31 July 1954.
   ↑ Q5
6. **D.**
   They used the Abruzzi Spur, which most expeditions still follow.
   ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** At 8,611 m, only Everest is taller. ↑ 1
2. **False.** It stands on the border of Pakistan (Gilgit-Baltistan) and China (Xinjiang).
   ↑ 2
3. **True.** Thomas Montgomerie used the K for Karakoram in 1856. ↑ 3
4. **True.** It came from a remark by George Bell in 1953. ↑ 4
5. **True.** Compagnoni and Lacedelli reached the summit that day. ↑ 5
6. **True.** Both are recorded, though Chogori has little local use. ↑ 6

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