

Climbing: Is K2 the new Everest?

Mick Conefrey



K2's summit, at 8,611m, is 237m lower than Everest's

In September 1953, as he was being stretchered off an aircraft suffering from severe frostbite, the American climber George Bell was asked how he felt about the peak he had just attempted to climb — K2, the world's second-highest peak. His reply was succinct: "It's a savage mountain that tries to kill you."

For decades, it was seen as the world's toughest and most dangerous mountain, with one death for every four successful ascents. While Everest grew crowded with relative novices who paid commercial guiding companies to help them reach the top — to the extent that the Nepalese government last week announced plans to ban those without sufficient experience — it was always assumed K2 would remain the preserve of the elite.

This year, however, Himalayan Experience and Madison Mountaineering, two of the biggest companies in the climbing business, offered guided ascents,

for a fee of about \$55,000 per person. So could K2 become the next Everest?

Bell's "savage mountain" lies on Pakistan's border with China in the Karakoram mountains. It was first measured in 1856 by TG Montgomerie, a British surveyor, and given the temporary designation "K2", for Karakoram 2, until the team could find out the local name for it. But K2 was so remote that no name could be found and the abbreviation soon became official: an austere name for an austere mountain.

Though K2 is 237m shorter than Everest, it is a much harder climb. The first ascent was made by an Italian team in 1954. Both summiteers, Achille Compagnoni and Lino Lacedelli, were professional mountain guides, and their support team included Walter Bonatti, who would be acclaimed as the greatest mountaineer of the 20th century.

"It's the gold medal," says Alan Hinkes, the first British mountaineer to climb all 14 of the world's 8,000m peaks, "the first prize in mountaineering." He made it to the top in 1995 after "donating" three years of his life to the mountain, but is wary of returning to guide clients. "You wouldn't get me going there, even if a rich client offered me £150,000," he says. "I did it for me, not for money, so why go back and get killed?"

Alan Arnette, the American climber who now runs one of the most influential mountaineering blogs, agrees that K2 is in a different league from Everest. "Everest's big challenge", he says, "is its altitude. On K2 it's the altitude plus the weather plus the climbing itself. Getting to the top requires hard rock-climbing at an extremely high altitude. The constant threat of avalanche and rockfall makes it even more dangerous."

Despite this, commercial climbing has now arrived on the mountain. Garrett Madison, the Seattle-based mountain guide who runs Madison Mountaineering, took the first fully supported commercial expedition in 2014 and went again this summer. "I always wanted to climb it myself," he says, "and I thought it could be guided."

Russel Brice, founder of Himalayan Experience, says his decision to mount an expedition this year was driven by his clients. "I have many clients who have climbed many 8,000m peaks, and they were always asking me when I would go to K2," he says.

Madison's 2014 expedition went well, with two out of his three clients reaching the summit. In 2015 bad weather put paid to both companies' attempts, but things were worse on Everest. The 2014 season there came to an abrupt halt when an avalanche killed 16 Sherpas. This year, Nepal was devastated by an earthquake that killed more than 9,000 and wrought widespread havoc; unsurprisingly, there were no ascents of Everest from the Nepalese side.

Brice expects fewer expeditions on Everest next year, and a growing focus on K2 as a result. "I see that there is a big downturn of business in Nepal, so part of the reason to go again to K2

next year is also to offer more employment to my Sherpa staff,” he says. He also recognises the benefits to Pakistan: “Local porters and operators are pleading for more expeditions to come to help with the economy. I feel that my last trip helped a lot of people and so maybe it is good to continue.”

There are major hurdles, however, for the large-scale development of K2. “It is so much more challenging [for a guiding company],” says Madison, “everything from getting permits and visas to the trek in to base camp, which is twice as long as it is for Everest.” While Nepal has a well-developed climbing and trekking industry, with equipment, helicopters and support staff readily available and dozens of tea-houses lining the route to base camp, there’s nothing comparable on the way in to K2. Add to this the unpredictability and severity of the weather, and the odds of business moving wholesale from Everest to K2 look longer. In four of the past seven years there have been no ascents of K2 at all. “It doesn’t take much for conditions to become unacceptable,” says Madison, “and it’s tough for clients who have taken the time off and spent the money when I have to say to them that it is not safe to go up.”

Nevertheless, both Himalayan Experience and Madison Mountaineering will return to K2 in 2016. Even if only a small number of clients are willing to take the risks involved, it is still possible to run K2 expeditions as a niche business. The savage mountain may not have been tamed but it looks as if growing numbers of climbers will be drawn to attempt it.

Mick Conefrey is the author of ‘The Ghosts of K2’, published by Oneworld this week