

Everest Chomolungma

viewed from the west

Firsts

- 1953: Tenzing Norgay (Nepal) and Edmund Hillary (NZ) complete the first ascent of Everest (via the South Col route) at 11:30am on May 29. The question of who reached the summit first became embroiled in politics, especially after Tenzing was duped into signing a document saying he beat Hillary. The two agreed to a compromise story – they reached the summit together. Hillary later claimed he reached the top a rope length ahead of Tenzing. Hillary also has the dubious honour of being the first to urinate from the summit, unable to contain a full bladder of hot lemon drink.
- 1960: Chinese claim the first successful ascent of the classical Mallory line, leaving a bust of Mao at the summit. Initially treated with scepticism by the West, especially claims that the climbers summited at night and that the leader scaled the steep Second Step by standing barefoot on the shoulders of a team mate. The ascent claim is now generally accepted.
- 1973: Japanese climbers Yasuo Kato and Hiachi Ishiguro make the first post-monsoon ascent on October 26, surviving an emergency bivouac on the way down. It was also the first time the summit had been reached from the South Col without an intermediate camp.
- 1975: First female ascent – Junko Tabei (Japan) from the south.
- Chinese make first undisputed ascent from the north in the pre-monsoon season. British Southwest Face expedition finds proof in the form of a survey pole at the summit.
- 1978: Reinhold Messner (Italy) and Peter Habeler (Austria) make the first ascent without bottled oxygen. Attached to an Austrian expedition, they climbed from the South Col unaided and unroped, reaching the summit in 9.5 hours. Habeler, worried about brain damage from oxygen starvation, raced back to the col in an hour, part-glissading and part-falling. The ascent astounded the climbing world, especially the Sherpas, many of whom didn't believe Westerners were capable of such a feat. Notable Sherpas like Tenzing Norgay even signed a petition demanding an inquiry.
- 1980: Messner solos (from the north) without oxygen during a weather window in the monsoon. An astonishing effort, regarded as the high point of classic mountaineering.
- 1980: Poles Leszka Cichy and Krzysztof Wielicki complete the first winter ascent (from the south).
- 1985: First commercial climb of Everest. David Breashears (US), despite struggling with pneumonia, guides 55-year-old Dick Bass to the summit via the South Col.
- 1988: Lydia Bradey (NZ) becomes the first female to climb Everest without supplementary oxygen. Bradey's ascent, however, is disputed. She climbed alone on the Southeast Ridge route (without a permit), was unable to verify her times and took no pictures (her camera was frozen). The first fully recognised ascent by a female without oxygen was Alison Hargreaves (UK) via the Mallory route in 1995.
- 1999: The summit becomes the site of the highest camp ever when Sherpa Babu Chhime stays for 21.5 hours on May 6, 1999. Chhime's mattress was still on the summit when Cathy O'Dowd (South Africa) became the first woman to reach the top separately from both the north and south three weeks later. Chhime died after falling into a crevasse near Camp II in the Western Cwm in April, 2001. He was the record holder for the fastest ascent (16 hours, 56 minutes) at the time.

Summit

8,850m (29,035ft). Modern surveys have revised the height up 10 metres on earlier calculations.

Northeast Ridge

A long, serrated ridge, rising steeply to the summit. It's notoriously hard to find the gullies leading down from the ridge through the limestone Yellow Band toward Camp VI, especially in the dark. Expeditions regularly turn tragic on the trickier sections.

South Summit

1 Summit Ridge

A slender, heavily corniced fin of rock and wind-scoured snow between the South Summit and the main summit. Apart from the Hillary Step, there are no technical hurdles. But the route is very exposed with steep flanks on either side – Tibet to the east, Nepal to the west. In the late season there are often enormous monsoon cornices overhanging the Kangshung (Eastern) Face.

2 Hillary Step – 8810m (28,900ft)

The 12m rock climb is the only technical obstacle on the Southeast Ridge. Hillary climbed a crack where an ice cornice overhanging the Kangshung Face had broken away from the rock. The step can act as a bottleneck when the route is busy.

3 South Summit – 8749m (28,700ft)

First ascent by Britons Charles Evans and Tom Bourdillon on May 26, 1953. The two made the first summit attempt of the 1953 expedition, but turned back at the South Summit, though Bourdillon took some convincing.

- Britons Dougal Haston and Doug Scott established a new bivouac record in a snow cave just above here after completing the first ascent of the Southwest Face in 1973. They had no bivouac stoves or sleeping bags, but only suffered frost-nipped toes and fingers, despite temperatures of -30°C.
- IMAX Filming Expedition discovered Kiwi expedition leader Rob Hall's body half buried in a snow drift in the notch above the South Summit 12 days after the killer storm of May 1995. Eight climbers died in the storm. Hall had earlier survived a night alone at the summit at temperatures of around -40°C, but was too weak to make it back to the South Col. A rescue attempt had floundered some 210m (690ft) below the South Summit, pushed back by cold and wind.

Lhotse

(8516m, 27,940ft)

Southwest Face

South Col

The Balcony – 8400m (27,560ft)

A ledge just below the Southeast Ridge (hidden from view). Climbers on the classical South Col route emerge here after following a steep, narrow couloir.

Geneva Spur

A rib of rock that guards the entrance to the South Col. Last major hurdle before the col. Named by Swiss in 1952.

Yellow Band

A 150m layer of yellowish limestone. Cuts horizontally across the upper reaches of the whole Everest massif.

Camp III: approx. 7315m (24,000ft)

Camp II: approx. 6462m (21,200ft)

Western Shoulder

A gently rising slope of snow and ice. The Swiss expedition of 1952 called it The Valley of Silence.

Camp I: approx. 5944m (19,500ft)

West Ridge

Western Shoulder

US West Ridge route
Pioneered by the 1963 US expedition, Willi Unsoeld and Tom Hornbein reached the summit at 6:30pm on May 24. They intended to meet with the party's South Col team on the summit and descend to the col, but missed them. They decided to go down the Southeast Ridge anyway, as the West Ridge was too dangerous to descend, especially the crumbly rock on the Yellow Band. Luckily, they were able to follow the footprints of the col climbers down the unfamiliar terrain and eventually found them in an exhausted state below the South Summit. The forced bivouac was the highest ever at the time. Hornbein and Unsoeld's traverse was one of the great mountaineering feats – the first traverse not only of Everest, but of any Himalayan peak.

Death Zone

Above 7500m (24,500ft) Swiss physician Edouard Wyss-Dunant first coined the term in 1952 to describe the altitude where human life cannot be sustained over time, even with supplementary oxygen.

Direct line up the north face and Hornbein Couloir to summit

First climbed by Japanese in 1980.

Messner's solo route

From Rongphu Glacier up the North Face and Great Couloir. First climbed by Australians Tim McCartney-Shaps and Greg Mortimer (without oxygen) in 1984. McCartney-Shaps climbed in cross-country ski boots after losing his climbing boots in an avalanche.

Mallory route

Via the North and North East Ridges

North Ridge

North Face

From Rongphu Glacier up the North Face and Great Couloir. First climbed by Australians Tim McCartney-Shaps and Greg Mortimer (without oxygen) in 1984. McCartney-Shaps climbed in cross-country ski boots after losing his climbing boots in an avalanche.

West Ridge from Lho La

First climbed in 1979 by a Yugoslavian team. Sherpa Ang Phu killed on the descent.

Route up northern spur of West Shoulder

Pioneered by Canadians Dwayne Congdon and Sharon Wood in 1986, making Wood the first woman to establish a new route.

Rongphu Glacier

Lho La

5981m (19,600ft)

George Mallory climbed Lho La pass during the 1921 British reconnaissance expedition. It was from here he named the Western Cwm (pronounced 'koom'), dismissing it as a potential route. Jean Bourgeois (Belgium) went missing near here in 1983 while descending from the West Ridge. Given up for dead by his colleagues, he remarkably showed up in Kathmandu two weeks later. It turned out he had been detained and interrogated by Chinese authorities in Tibet.

Tibet

Nepal

Border line

Khumbu Icefall

A virtual river of broken ice. Moves about a metre a day. The noise of shifting ice can be heard at Base Camp every night. Regarded as the most dangerous part of the South Col route. Climbers are exposed to 'objective dangers' – perils that no amount of knowledge or skill can control. Jake Brettenbeck (US) was icefall's first victim, crushed by an ice avalanche in 1963. Edmund Hillary was almost killed in 1953 when he fell into a crevasse. An ice-axe belay by Tenzing saved his life.

1 High point of 1952 Swiss expedition – 8600m (28,200ft)

Raymond Lambert and Tenzing Norgay turned back here. They had spent previous night camped at 8400m (27,560ft) without sleeping bags.

2 Unsoeld and Hornbein bivouac – 8530m (28,000ft)

US West Ridge pioneers Willi Unsoeld and Tom Hornbein spent a night in the open with exhausted and hypoxic colleagues Lute Jersted and Barry Bishop below a knife-edged section of the summit ridge on May 24, 1963. Unsoeld allowed Hornbein to warm his stockinged feet against his bare stomach, but refused reciprocity. Everyone except Hornbein lost all or most of their toes to frostbite.

3 Venables bivouac site

Briton Stephen Venables became one of the first climbers to survive a night alone in bivouac above 8000m after an ascent via a new route on the treacherous Kangshung Face in 1988. He was lucky with the conditions. The temperature didn't get lower than -20°C. It was cold enough, though, for him to lose four toes to frostbite. Venables' efforts made him the first Briton to reach the summit without supplementary oxygen.

4 South Col – 7906m (26,000ft)

Last camp before summit attempt for modern expeditions. A broad plateau of windswept ice and boulders. "As dreary and desolate a place as I ever expect to see," according to British expedition leader John Hunt. Blasted by the Everest jet stream, the wind is often stronger than at the summit. The col has also been called the world's highest junkyard. Discarded oxygen canisters and other rubbish have been accumulating since the 1950s. Sherpas are now paid a cash bonus for each oxygen bottle they bring down from the col.

5 Question position for Camp III (about halfway up the face)

Also the approximate position for the 1953 British expedition's Camp VII. The 1953 assault almost faltered when exhausted porters refused to go higher than Camp VII. It took cajoling by Hillary and Tenzing to get them moving. Party leader John Hunt described Hillary and Tenzing's efforts as a major turning point of the expedition. Nowadays, Sherpas don't favour Camp III, often climbing all the way to the South Col in one go from Camp II.

6 Lhotse Face

A sheer precipice coated with glacial blue ice. It is the most perilous section of South Col route. The entire route is fixed with ropes. George Lowe (NZ) pioneered the route to the head of the glacier for the British in 1953. The British initially considered making directly for the Geneva Spur, but decided the line was too steep and icy, and not suitable for a camp. Yachiyo Miura (Japan) became the first to ski the face in 1970. A parachute brake opened when he reached 160km/h (100mph), but didn't stop him crashing. Knocked unconscious, he skidded to a halt just short of a huge crevasse.

7 Bonington Route

Dougal Haston and Doug Scott reached the summit via the difficult and steep Southwest Face on September 24, 1975 after a traditional 'siege-style' expedition led by Chris Bonington (UK). The climbers used 'Macdines boxes', complete with 'bullet-proof' tarpaulins, to provide protection from avalanches, high winds and rock falls. Mick Burke, a camera man, disappeared in white-out conditions above the South Summit during the second summit attempt two days later, presumably walking off the Southeast Ridge below the Hillary Step. Four Czech climbers died on the descent to the South Col after making the first alpine-style assault on the Southwest Face in 1988.

8 1963 US Advance Camp – 6500m (21,300ft)

The point where the West Ridge and South Col teams branched off on their separate routes.

9 Highest mountain helicopter rescue – 6050m (19,860ft)

A Nepalese army B2 Squirrel airlifted Beck Weathers (US) and 'Makalu' Gau (Taiwan) from the Cwm on May 12, 1996. The thin air made flying very dangerous. It was only the second time helicopters had landed on the Cwm. The first was in 1973 when an Italian expedition, organised by millionaire Guido Monzino, used them to ferry gear up the icefall. The exercise was a flop as, at altitude, the choppers couldn't carry enough to avoid the use of Sherpas. In the end, one crashed, ending the experiment.

10 South Col route

Discovered by Eric Shipton's British expedition in 1951 soon after Nepal first opened its borders to climbers. Regarded as the easiest route, especially since the start of guided ascents in 1985. Sometimes disparagingly called the 'yak route'. The successful 1953 British expedition used nine camps to get to the summit. Modern expeditions tend to use only four. Approximate positions marked on route.

1 Third Step – 8700m (28,550ft)

Broken battion of rock at base of the summit pyramid. Involves more of a scramble than a climb.

2 Second Step – 8600m (28,200ft)

Steepest part of the Northeast Ridge route. Roughly 30m high. Chinese expedition of 1975 installed a rickety ladder, which is still in place, to scale the near-vertical top section. Absence of the ladder would have made it tough for Mallory and Irvine and the 1960 Chinese team. But Conrad Anker (US) proved ascent was possible without aids in 1999.

3 Highpoint of 1924 British expedition – 8573m (28,126ft)

Highpoint of 1924 British expedition. Edward Norton and Howard Somervell, climbing without oxygen, angled across the North Face to a height of 8534m (28,000ft). From there Norton, suffering from exhaustion and snow blindness, struggled on alone to reach the far side of the Great Couloir – just 275m below the summit. Norton set a height record that wasn't surpassed for 29 years (unless Mallory and Irvine made it). He also set an altitude record for oxygen-less climbing that was not broken until Messner and Habeler's ascent from the south 56 years later. A blocked throat almost suffocated Somervell on the descent. He was seconds away from death before coughing up the frostbitten lining of his lungs.

4 Yellow Band

The limestone band runs from 8200m (26,902ft) to 8600m (28,215ft), just beneath the summit ridge on the northern side.

5 First Step – 8450m (27,700ft)

A rock buttress about 30m high. It was here that the Japanese-Fukuoka expedition came across a badly frostbitten climber from the Indo-Tibetan Border Police expedition on May 11, 1996. The Japanese didn't offer any assistance, despite being equipped with oxygen, fluid and food. They later passed two other stricken Indian climbers at the Second Step. Their failure to help prompted a storm of protest in the climbing world.

6 Irvine's Ice-axe – 8,466m (27,760ft)

1933 British expedition discovered the axe 20m down the crest of the Northeast Ridge, near the First Step. It's questionable whether it marked the spot of a fatal fall, or whether it had just been dropped or deliberately placed there.

7 High point of 1922 British expedition – 8320m (27,300ft)

In what was the first use of bottled oxygen, Australian George Finch made it up the Northeast Ridge as far as the North Face after exploring the traverse towards the Great Couloir.

8 Northeast Shoulder – 8403m (27,560ft)

End point for the notorious 'Pinnacle Ridge'. A Japanese expedition finally summited via the ridge in 1995. Harry Taylor (UK) and Russell Brice (NZ) climbed as far as the shoulder in 1988. Bad weather prevented them from going to the top. Not a really steep route, but very long and exhausting. Two jagged pinnacles bar access to the shoulder. British climbers Pete Boardman and Joe Tasker were last seen alive just before the Second Pinnacle on the Chris Bonington-led expedition of 1992.

9 Camp VI (1924) – 8140m (26,700ft)

Mallory and Irvine's final camp. Noel Odell placed two sleeping bags in the snow here in the shape of a 'T' to signal that Mallory and Irvine were almost certainly dead. Modern expeditions on the route usually veer off the ridge to base their final camp on the North Face about 450m (1460ft) higher than the 1924 site, taking nearly an hour off the summit climb. The 1975 Chinese expedition established a seventh camp around 8600m (28,215ft), but the site hasn't been used since 1990. Some veterans believe it forces climbers to spend too much time at high altitude.

10 'English Dead' (Irvine's body) – 8150m (26,740ft)

Wang Hong Bao (China) told Ryuzo Hasegawa (Japan) during the joint Sino-Japanese expedition of 1979 that the Chinese had found 'two deads' during their 1975 ascent. The first was at 8558m (21,500ft) and was probably Maurice Wilson – an eccentric Yorkshireman whose body (rumoured to have been wearing women's clothing) was found and buried by the British in 1935. The latter, lying on its side with a hole in its cheek (presumably pecked by birds), was thought to be Mallory's climbing partner Andrew Irvine. An avalanche killed Wang the next day, so the story was never confirmed. If it were Irvine, he made it to within half an hour of the 1924 Camp VI before succumbing to exposure or injury. The Chinese were rumoured to have found a camera on the body, which could have contained photos from the summit. They denied the story, but doubts persist.

11 Odell sights Mallory and Irvine – 7925m (26,000ft)

Noel Odell (UK) was searching for fossils close to here when he spotted George Mallory and Andrew Irvine during a break in the cloud on June 8, 1924. They were heading straight up the ridge, rather than retracing Norton's traverse across the North Face. Odell thought they were about three hours from the top, and climbing strongly. He calculated they were 250m from the summit at 12:50pm, probably on or just above the Second Step. He later became less certain whether he had seen them on the Second Step or on the much lower First Step, or even the higher Third Step.

12 Mallory's body – 8170m (26,800ft)

Conrad Anker (US) found Mallory's remains on May 1, 1999 below the Yellow Band, north of the First Step. The body was lying face down, frozen into a self-arrest position. There was no sign of Mallory's Kodak Vestpocket camera, which could have proved a successful summit. Broken rope suggested he was attached to Irvine when he fell. Goggles in his pockets fuelled speculation he was climbing at night, probably making a descent.

13 Messner's final camp on his 1980 solo ascent – 8200m (26,900ft)

Deep snow and avalanche danger saw Messner abandon the classic Northeast Ridge route and traverse across the North Face. The next day he climbed to the summit via the Great Couloir, finally completing the route that had evaded Norton in 1924.

14 North Ridge

A three-kilometre buttress that climbs from the North Col to the shoulder of the Northeast Ridge. Extremely windy.



Mount Everest photograph: Chris Curry, Hedgehog House, New Zealand