



AAC Publications

K2 on Skis

The First Descent of the World's Second-Highest Peak

ON JULY 22, 2018, just before 11:30 a.m., Andrzej Bargiel from Poland reached the summit of K2 (8,611 meters). That day and the day before, more than 60 other people summited K2—a record for a single season—but unlike the large majority of them, Bargiel was not breathing supplementary oxygen. And unlike almost anyone else in history, he was carrying skis. About seven hours later he skied onto the Godwin-Austen Glacier, about 3,400 meters below the summit, having finished the first complete ski descent of the mountain.

Bargiel, age 30 at the time of the descent, had climbed three other 8,000-meter peaks from 2013 to 2015: the central summit of Xixabangma (a.k.a. Shishapangma), Manaslu, and Broad Peak. The latter was the first complete ski descent from the summit of Broad Peak (8,051 meters). In 2017, he attempted K2 without success. (He reached about 6,500 meters on his planned ski route.) Other mountaineers who had attempted to ski K2 before Bargiel included Hans Kammerlander (Italy), Dave Watson (USA), who skied through the Bottleneck in 2009, starting about 250 meters below the summit, and Luis Stitzinger (Germany), who skied from around 8,050 meters in 2011. (He downclimbed about 200 meters near Camp 3 on the Cesen Spur.) At least two mountaineers had died during their attempts to climb and ski K2.

Previous skiers had envisioned descending a line similar to the Cesen route on the south-southeast spur, left of the Abruzzi Ridge, but it was very unlikely this route would ever be covered with enough snow to allow a continuous descent. From the slopes of Broad Peak in 2015, Bargiel spotted a better way. “None of the descent lines directly from the summit was entirely viable, so I had to link them,” he said at a press conference in Poland, recorded by *Góry* magazine. “From Broad Peak, [I saw] the right combination of snowy lines to allow for an actual attempt at descending.”

Bargiel had custom-made skis, including top sheets emblazoned with the initials of his parents and ten siblings. His extremely light carbon boots, made in France by Pierre Gignoux, were comfortable enough for both climbing and skiing. “When others see me in these, they’re shocked because the boots are small and not as warm as Himalayan ones,” Bargiel said at the press conference. “But I have a few methods which ensure that the temperatures in the boots are comfortable—for example, inside I have heated insoles, and outside I have neoprene boots which protect me from wind and moisture.” His ski bindings had no brakes or leashes, and on the summit he experienced a moment of panic when the skis nearly slipped away as he worked to get his neoprene-covered boots into the bindings. During the descent, he used lightweight ski poles, sometimes wielding an ice tool in one hand.

Before the summit push on K2, Bargiel spent some time acclimatizing on Gasherbrum II and a little time on K2. On his second trip up K2, he went up the Abruzzi almost to the Shoulder, at nearly 8,000 meters, and back down again in a long day.

Bargiel had hoped to summit the peak with Janusz Gołąb, a fellow Pole, but at Camp 3, Gołąb suddenly developed severe back pain. He was unable to climb up or down. Contacted by radio at base camp, a doctor said the only way for Gołąb to recover was to lie motionless on his back for two days. Bargiel’s brother, Bartek, who was operating drones to film the climb and descent, flew anti-inflammatories to Camp 3 (at around 7,000 meters) to help. Together, the two men there decided

Bargiel should try to reach the summit alone. He had forgotten his GoPro and was worried he might make the first ski descent of K2 without any point-of-view footage to show for it. So, Bartek made two drone flights to deliver the gear, first the camera and then a battery. (Previously, he had flown the drone to 8,500 meters to scope the planned line of descent.)

On July 21, Bargiel headed for Camp 4 carrying all of his own gear (tent, sleeping bag, skis, etc.) and spent the night there. Early in the morning, heating water with the stove between his legs, he set his high-altitude suit on fire. "Luckily, I put it out quickly," he said. "There were really a lot of weird things going on." He left for the summit at 4 a.m.

On top there were light winds and intermittent clouds, but as Bargiel started down he entered thick fog. He had worried the descent from the summit to the Shoulder would be the crux, but a continuous line of deep snow made it feel quite reasonable. "Somewhere around 8,400 meters, I was all alone, far from the path. It was incredible to have the whole wall to myself." At one section, above the Bottleneck, he made use of a 50-meter length of fixed rope, but only because he worried about knocking loose snow onto climbers below. "That was the main challenge," he explained, "because the terrain wasn't difficult enough to warrant descending with a rope."

Peering through a powerful spotting scope, photographer Marek Ogień directed Bargiel over the radio. "This ended up being key, just as the drone was," Bargiel said. "There was a heavy fog in Camp 4, which was problematic because below that was a part [of the descent] that I didn't entirely know." This was the section of his route where he left the Abruzzi route, starting from a little before Point 7,722m. From here, Bargiel planned to stay to skier's right of the Cesen spur, but he had to wait about an hour for the fog to clear. "So, I'm lying on the snow and I didn't know what to do, because it's about 1,000 meters of pretty steep wall and then a bowl into which all the slopes empty—if there was an avalanche there, it would be a massacre. The descent had to be very precise. Marek told me where I could hide behind rocks, where there are fissures. For him, it was probably really stressful, because by saying what I should do, he took on some responsibility for [my life]."

At Camp 3 on the Cesen, Bargiel was thrilled to find Gołab waiting and ready to descend to base camp on his own. This "filled me with optimism," he said. Moreover, "I felt that I had the descent under control, because I felt it get colder after Camp 3. At the same time, I realized it was still going to be difficult, because I had to do the 'Messner Traverse.' I had gone down that way during my acclimatization, and I prepped by placing a screw and putting up a line. During the final push, I took a different way, but from the 200-meter serac above it was raining blocks of ice."

This descending traverse beneath the great serac barrier, beginning at around 6,800 meters, was the link-up between the Cesen spur and the Kukuczka-Piotrowski Route (1986)—it was the key to Bargiel's carefully crafted route. Afterward, this line was widely misreported as the "Messner Traverse," even though Reinhold Messner never went near it nor had any intention of doing so. (He briefly explored this area of the mountain in 1979, hoping to climb what eventually became the Magic Line, but only went to around 6,200 meters before switching to the Abruzzi Ridge.) The traverse has been ascended at least twice during attempted climbs of K2, but perhaps never to the summit.

In this area, Bargiel used a rope for only the second time during the 3,400-meter descent, securing himself for about 10 meters. Once across the traverse, Bargiel skied down the Kukuczka-Piotrowski to a point at around 6,200 meters, where that route heads off to skier's right and Bargiel skied more directly toward the glacier below.

Although the skiing appeared more straightforward here, the enormous temperature swing between early in the day on the upper mountain and the evening at below 6,000 meters now came into play, as the soft, warm snow continuously threatened to slide. "The terrain looked like it would be OK, but as it turned out, I needed to do some ski cuts to [release dangerous snow and] conquer these slopes," Bargiel said. "There was always something falling, and I thought that I would get knocked into a crevasse."

Bargiel finally reached the glacier and stopped skiing about seven hours after leaving the summit (including rests). He was about ten minutes away from base camp. "At the bottom I was totally exhausted, and I had enough of everything," he said. "I lay on the snow for an hour. I still had the skis on my feet."

After his first attempt in 2017, Bargiel hadn't been sure if he wanted to return to K2. But his desire to accomplish the feat was compounded by a sense of urgency: "An important factor is that the climate is changing rapidly," he explained. "If I waited a few years, everything would have changed, and I would have to start from scratch."

Returning to a hero's welcome in Poland, Bargiel soon visited the family farm, where his father told him, "Well, you had a nice little holiday, but now it's time to do some work."

About the Sources: Visual documentation of Andrzej Bargiel's descent is mostly in video footage captured by his GoPro or by distant telephoto or drone cameras. A five-minute video of the highlights can be seen below, and a longer film is in the works. This account was compiled by AAJ editors Dougald MacDonald and Lindsay Griffin, using published interviews with Bargiel, along with Griffin's notes from a talk that Bargiel gave at the Ladek Mountain Film Festival in Poland in September 2018. Most of the direct quotes are drawn from an article published in the *Góry Magazyn* in Poland, which in turn was developed from the press conference and interviews with Bargiel. The AAJ thanks Piotr Drożdż, editor of *Góry*, and Sonia Szczesna, translator of the *Góry* article, for their generous assistance.

Images



Traversing below the giant serac band at around 6,800 meters.



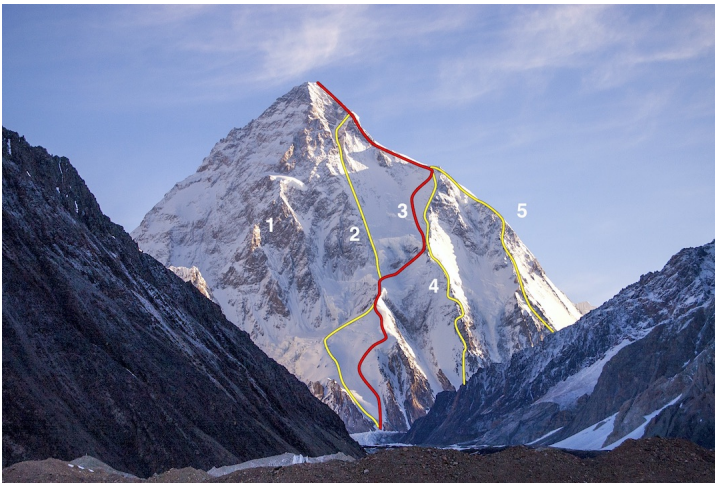
Bargiel nearing the bottom of K2.



"At the bottom I was totally exhausted.... I lay on the snow for an hour."



Photo diagram of Bargiel's route down K2.



K2 from Concordia to the south (June 2006 photo). The face is approximately 3,400 meters high. The red line (3) shows the route traced by Andrzej Bargiel to make the first complete ski descent of the mountain. (1) General area climbed by the Magic Line (1986). (2) Kukuczka-Piotrowski Route. (4) Cesen Route (south- southeast spur). (5) Abruzzi Ridge (continuing up the right skyline).



Point-of-view video capture, looking down to the Godwin-Austen Glacier.



Alongside the fixed ropes through the Bottleneck on the Abruzzi Ridge. In some spots, Bargiel skied with both poles in one hand and an ice tool in the other for security.

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