

PEAK PERFORMANCE

How Polish skier Andrzej Bargiel turned the world's second-highest mountain into the world's most dangerous downhill

Text by KEITH GORDON

On May 6, 1970, Japanese ski adventurer Yuichiro Miura managed to carve down part of Mount Everest's South Col, eventually falling down the icy face and careening toward an open crevasse, and likely death, until he was miraculously stopped by a snow patch. That day, the legend of the "man who skied down Everest" was born, and it was unlikely to be outdone by any sane human anytime soon.

After all, if skiing a small part of Everest, a vicious mountain where hundreds of climbers and Sherpas have lost their lives, was insanely risky for Miura, the thought of someone attempting to ski the much more treacherous K2 was pure fantasy.

For all the notoriety and high fatality rate of Mount Everest, the tallest mountain on earth, it is K2, the second-tallest, that remains the more challenging and dangerous summit, ranking only behind the lethal Annapurna. While more climbers have died on Everest, K2's fatality rate of one death for every four successful ascents is another level of grim. Only the very best alpinists in the world even attempt K2, with its challenging mix of high-level ice, rock, and mixed climbing, unlike Everest and its long rope lines guiding climbers to the peak. As dangerous as Everest has proven to be, K2 is a different beast altogether for climbers, never mind skiers.

This only makes Andrzej Bargiel's death-defying descent on July 22, 2018, even more superhuman. For it was Bargiel, a 30-year-old alpinist and skier from Poland, who successfully ascended the steep final sections of K2's summit, only to strap on his skis and set off for the bottom from an altitude of 8,611 meters. Whereas Miura chose a specific section of Everest to descend, Bargiel skied down as much of the descent as possible, only removing his skis for areas without sufficient snow and piecing together parts of four different routes to maximize the drop he could achieve on his skis.







Bargiel has had his sights set on skiing some of the world's biggest mountains for some time, even forming a team for such challenges called *Hic Sunt Leones* (Here Come the Lions). After racking up legitimate climbing accomplishments like Manaslu (the eighth-tallest mountain) and Shishapangma (14th-tallest), each a member of the 8,000-meter club, Bargiel took time during his successful ascent and ski descent of Broad Peak (12th-tallest) to look over at one of its neighbors in the Karakoram mountain range, K2. He noticed that the face, despite its terrifying reputation, just might be possible for him and his team.

Bargiel had first attempted the seemingly impossible in 2017, but as is often the case on the world's tallest mountains, Mother Nature decides when she will allow climbers an opportunity to even try. Because of extensive rockfalls and avalanches, Bargiel and his team couldn't make inroads on the route he planned to descend on his skis. As logistically challenging and expensive as such expeditions can be, a return for Bargiel was far from certain. After his successful descent in 2018, he told Redbull.com, "I don't like to go back to the same places. But then I thought that I'd devoted so much time, research, and money to the project already that I had to give it another shot. I was worried that due to climate change, the big glacier would transform too fast, and that if I waited a few years before coming back, the line I had in mind wouldn't be viable anymore and all the work would've been wasted. This year, everything fell into place and things felt much easier."

If Bargiel was unsure of the risks he was facing prior to his climb, he was harshly reminded of the dangers when he and his team learned of a missing climber on neighboring Broad Peak. Highly regarded Scottish climber Rick Allen was presumed dead after disappearing during his descent, before Bargiel and his brother located him via their drone and directed rescuers to him, who then assisted Allen back down to safety. It was hardly an auspicious start to the expedition, but served as a stern, if unnecessary reminder of how even the world's top climbers can be helpless in the face of raw nature. But a few days later, the incident would be just a footnote on the superhuman accomplishment of the Polish adventurer.

If skiing down a narrow, 50-degree couloir named the "bottleneck" isn't scary enough, doing so at more than 8,000 meters isn't supposed to be possible. That's difficult ski terrain closer to sea level, but Bargiel had to flawlessly descend while his muscles burned for oxygen that simply wasn't available at such heights. "I was fully aware of the dangers at all times," Bargiel told Redbull.com. "I needed good visibility and excellent snow conditions. We had a large telescope that I used to observe the face all the time. It's essential to have a lot of experience so, based on your knowledge and the information you draw from observing nature, you can find the right moment to move and to act on the mountain."

Bargiel knew better than to be deceived into thinking the mountain is a stable entity. It's a constantly shifting puzzle, as snow conditions change and some sections go from relatively safe to completely impassable overnight. He had to carefully scout his path, and then make sure that conditions hadn't changed, surprising him during his descent. "There are one or two steep sections, where you have to pass at the right time to be safe so that the snow isn't too hard or soft and there's no avalanche danger," Bargiel said. "And the sun shines exactly on the spots where you need it, but it's not too warm, because otherwise you have seracs [ice blocks] falling on your head. There's a lot of data."

There's a general philosophy in big-mountain climbing that getting to the summit is only half the battle. This is true for all climbers, as the majority of accidents occur during descent, but perhaps no one has had more reason to avoid summit celebrations than Bargiel. After all, despite successfully climbing perhaps the most difficult mountain on earth, he had only completed the comparatively "easy" part of his day. "Reaching the summit, I didn't feel like a winner. I got there, put warmer clothes on, and took a photo of myself," Bargiel said in his post-descent interview with Redbull.com. "I acted a bit like a machine, because I knew the most important and most difficult part was still ahead of me. Fortunately, I work in a way that such a challenge cuts me off from everything. Nothing scares me. I might've worried before, during preparation, but when the time comes, I just do it."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MAREK OGIEN/RED BULL CONTENT POOL (3); KIN MARCIN/RED BULL CONTENT POOL