

K2 Base Camp

IN THE SHADOW OF
GIANTS

Peter Elia joins a once-in-a-lifetime trek to K2 Base Camp and finds splendour, strength and comradeship in the heart of Pakistan's Karakoram range

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I FELT UTTERLY INSIGNIFICANT as I watched the sunrise at Concordia, gateway to some of the world's highest peaks. Ahead, K2's snow-draped pyramid pierced the sky, its sharp top glowing in the first light of dawn. Broad Peak and Gasherbrum I and II – also members of the elite 8000er club – rose like invincible titans on either side. I suddenly understood why this amphitheatre of rock and ice is often called the 'throne room of the mountain gods' – where nature's supremacy is absolute, and human ambition feels fragile.

The silence was immense, broken only by the distant thunder of avalanches. A few trekkers from our expedition joined me, huddling together on the moraine. Encircled by giants, every demanding step and sleepless night felt worthwhile. Concordia wasn't just a destination — it was a revelation.

SAVAGE SUMMIT

At 8611 metres, K2 is the planet's second-highest peak and the pinnacle of mountaineering ambition. A combination of vertical climbs, volatile conditions and technical demands makes 'the Savage Mountain' a daunting and elusive prize. With fewer than 400 successful ascents and a staggering fatality rate, this formidable giant has secured its status as the ultimate test of skill, resilience, and bravery.

The mountain has claimed the lives of many esteemed climbers. In 1995, British mountaineer Alison Hargreaves perished in a storm while descending from the summit. More recently, in July 2024, 



[previous page] The heat often proved a greater challenge than the cold
[top] The journey begins [above] The scale of the landscape is enormous
[right] Amid the rocky wilds, a heart-shaped emerald pool stands out





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renowned Japanese climbers Kazuya Hiraide and Kenro Nakajima were presumed dead after a fall on the west face. These tragedies underscore the risks facing even most skilled mountaineers.

For trekkers, the journey to K2 Base Camp is a raw and uncompromising experience – a far cry from the commercialised trails of Everest. While the world's highest mountain sees up to 40,000 hikers yearly, only around 1000 venture to K2. There are no tea houses, lodges or comforts along these challenging paths. This is 'wilderness' in its purest form – a world of extremes, where rock spires claw at the sky and glaciers twist through valleys.

THE LAST OUTPOST

The journey began at Skardu Airport. Here I met Alun

Richardson, our Welsh guide from the UK-based expedition company Jagged Globe. A professional photographer with a calming presence, Alun exuded quiet confidence. Alongside him was lead local guide Javid, a seasoned trekker with a deep reverence for the Karakoram; and 19-year-old Zakir, an assistant guide whose maturity far exceeded his years.

Our support team included head cook Nasir, whose booming laughter and boundless energy lifted our spirits, and a group of porters. Each of our 11-strong trekking party had been drawn to the Karakoram for different reasons. Among us was Lachlan, a retired oil rig worker from Aberdeen, whose decades in harsh environments matched his dry humour and no-nonsense attitude. We would share a tent for the next two weeks, forging an unspoken



[left] At times, the path faded into the landscape [below] The uneven trail tested everyone's endurance [middle] With no pollution, the mountains are mirrored perfectly [bottom] Porters enjoying a deserved rest



camaraderie through times of discomfort and awe.

Skardu, a rugged town straddling the Indus River, is the last true outpost before the wilderness. Its weathered shopfronts and *chai* stalls offered a final taste of civilisation before we climbed into 4x4s for a seven-hour journey deep into the mountains. The route wound through the Shigar Valley, where apricot orchards and terraced fields clung to the otherwise stark landscape. Small villages with their stone houses blended seamlessly into the terrain. The Balti people – descendants of Tibetan settlers – greeted us with quiet warmth.

The drive itself was an adventure – bumpy, unpredictable and occasionally unnerving. A collapsed bridge forced us to ford the river. Thankfully, our sturdy Jeep handled the crossing without

issue. By the time we reached the village of Askole, which marked the start of our trek, the world we had left behind felt impossibly distant. Ahead lay ten days of hiking to K2 Base Camp, followed by four very long days retracing our steps through the same unforgiving terrain.

TRIALS AND WONDERS

The route to K2 Base Camp traverses the Baltoro Glacier, a vast expanse of ice and debris stretching endlessly beneath towering peaks. Navigating it required patience and unwavering focus – the surface of the glacier was fractured by seracs and moraine, and the path was often indistinct as it wound unpredictably across unstable terrain. ■

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[below] The horses were the unsung heroes [bottom] Peter celebrates reaching K2 Base Camp [right] The scenery made every step worth it [below right] Making a jump for it, with encouragement from Zakir



At over 4000 metres, altitude slowed our movements. Each breath became thinner than the last. But it wasn't the thin air that caught me off guard – it was the heat. By midday, the glacier reflected the sun's glare with punishing intensity, turning the trek into something closer to a desert crossing than a high-altitude climb. The heat drained our energy, leaving us desperate for shade. Evenings, by contrast, were crisp but manageable.

Landmarks slowly emerged from the monotony of ice and stone. Uli Biaho, an imposing granite spire, rose from the glacier's edge, its sheer walls slicing into the sky. Further on, the smooth rock faces of the Trango Towers shifted in colour as the light changed.

The hardships of the trail had a way of bringing people together. One afternoon as we rested, assistant guide Zakir shared his ambitions. "I want to become an eye doctor," he said. "In my village, many people struggle with vision problems, but there's no one to treat them. If I can study and return, I can make a real difference." His determination was as striking as the surroundings.

Amid the challenges, our group became a source of strength.

Nasir lifted spirits with his quick humour and even quicker hands in the kitchen. Fragrant vegetable curries, hearty stews, and even a pizza night transformed mealtimes into an event.

CONCORDIA TO K2

Arriving at Concordia felt like reaching the heart of the Karakoram. Poised at the junction of the Baltoro, Godwin-Austen and Vigne Glaciers, this vast campsite offers incredible views of four of the world's 14 8000-metre-plus peaks. It was a natural resting spot for trekkers, and we took a day to acclimatise and soak in the surroundings.

From here, we set off for Broad Peak across slippery glacial terrain. K2 loomed ahead, pyramid-like in its grandeur but on a scale beyond comprehension. "No matter how often I see it, K2 leaves me speechless," Javid said, his voice filled with awe.

We camped at over 4900 metres and endured the coldest night of the trek – so cold that the horses were moved to lower altitudes. A blizzard greeted us the following morning, the howling winds



Photo credit: Alun Richardson

and swirling snow threatening to derail our journey.

After breakfast, Alun suggested a vote to see who wanted to continue in the harsh conditions. All but one chose to push on. After a brief deliberation, Alun and Javid decided we would venture out for 30 minutes to assess the situation. The weather improved as we walked, but the path remained challenging. Treacherous ice and hidden crevasses kept us on edge at every step. The scale of K2 became increasingly overwhelming.

A few of us detoured to visit the Gilkey Memorial, a tribute to climbers who had perished on K2. The plaques and mementoes were deeply moving. Some of these climbers were so young, and there were too many to name. Surrounded by their silent stories, we were reminded of the mountain's unforgiving nature and the courage it demands.

Finally, we arrived at K2 Base Camp. It felt like we had entered a small village, with tents housing climbers and trekkers from around the world. The air buzzed with activity – porters carrying supplies, climbers preparing gear, everyone chattering in



different languages. But what struck me most was the view of K2 itself. From Base Camp, you could see the mountain from top to bottom. Its scale was incomprehensible, and I was content to go no further.

SHARED CHALLENGES

The descent felt different. A quieter, more reflective pace replaced the urgency that had driven us forward. As we retraced our steps over four long days, the same landscapes – glaciers, rivers, vast rock faces – now held a familiarity. The excitement of the outward journey was replaced by a singular focus: getting back.

It was during one of these weary moments that disaster struck. I heard Lachlan's screams ahead of me, sharp and urgent, but I couldn't see him until I turned a corner. I found him sprawled on the rocky trail, one leg trapped between two boulders. The sight sent a jolt of adrenaline through me. Alun reacted instantly, his years of experience evident as he assessed the injury and stabilised Lachlan with practised efficiency.

"Stay still, mate," Alun said calmly. "Let's make sure nothing's broken before you try to move."

[top] Day 11, and the long return begins as the group retrace their steps back to Askole [above right] A final photo as the group prepares to leave K2 behind [below right] K2 rises over its bustling base camp





and again, his determination and maturity shining through at every challenge. And Nasir had been the heart of our group. His infectious laughter and endless supply of *chai* had turned even the toughest days into moments of warmth and connection. We had faced the Karakoram's challenges; and together, we had emerged stronger, united by that extraordinary shared experience. 🏔️



Map courtesy of Jagged Globe / Google Maps

TREK TO K2 BASE CAMP

Total distance: Approximately 130km from Askole to K2 Base Camp and back.

Duration: The trek typically takes 12-14 days, including acclimatisation days.

Difficulty: Strenuous, requiring high levels of both fitness and acclimatisation.

Terrain: A mix of glacial moraine, rocky trails and high-altitude passes. Expect long daily hikes on uneven ground with river crossings and potential snowfall.

Highlights: This trek through the heart of the Karakoram crosses glaciers and high-altitude passes with breathtaking views of the Trango Towers, Broad Peak, and the world's second-highest mountain: K2.

When to go: The best trekking season is from mid-June to late August, when conditions are stable. Outside this window, extreme cold and heavy snowfall make the route inaccessible.

Getting there: British Airways offers direct flights from the UK to Islamabad. From there, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) operates flights to Skardu (included in the Jagged Globe package). Alternatively, a two-day drive along the Karakoram Highway is possible. It's a 8-10-hour 4x4 journey from Skardu to Askole, the last village before the trek begins.

Accommodation: Camping throughout the trek, with basic facilities in designated campsites. Porters and horses carry gear.

Food & drink: Cooked meals – usually a mix of local and simple Western dishes – are provided by trekking crews.

Tour operator: Peter travelled with Jagged Globe (jagged-globe.co.uk), a UK-based expedition company with extensive experience in the Karakoram.

See more: Find further photos and stories from the K2 Base Camp Trek on Peter Elia's Instagram ([@themanwhohikedtheworld](https://www.instagram.com/themanwhohikedtheworld)) and at alunrichardson.co.uk

Lachlan managed a smile. "I've had better landings," he observed wryly.

With Alun's support, we carefully freed the trapped leg; and, though Lachlan was clearly in pain, he insisted on continuing.

By the final day, my spirits had lifted. The end was in sight and a sense of relief and accomplishment came with it. Fatigue still lingered, but it was tempered by the knowledge that the trek was nearly over.

The journey had left its mark. The simplicity of trekking – the focus on each step – had stripped away distractions, leaving only the essentials: movement, survival and moments of wonder. There had been struggles, but also clarity. The mountains had shown us how small we were, yet how much we could endure. They taught us patience, resilience and humility in the light of nature's power.

As we stepped back into civilisation, part of us remained in the high places where time moved differently; where the world felt vast and untamed. The silence of the Baltoro Glacier, the stark beauty of the Trango Towers and the warmth of Balti hospitality lingered in our memories.

Javid, our quiet leader, walked beside me on the final stretch. His calm presence was a reminder of the strength we'd found in each other. "The mountains test us," he said, "but they also show us who we are." Zakir, though young, had proven himself time