

# **Mountain Climbing**

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**Mountain climbing, also known as mountaineering or alpinism, is the sport of climbing mountains. Although many climbers compete to reach the summit the fastest, mountain climbing requires extensive teamwork because it entails many hazards. The highest mountains—those in the Himalayas and Alps, for instance—are snowy and contain glaciers, or slowly flowing masses of ice. Deep chasms or crevasses form within a glacier as it passes over an uneven bed. These are frequently hidden by snow, forming what are called snow bridges. To cross glaciers, climbers should be roped to other climbers. When a climber falls into a crevasse, his partners must move into “self-arrest” positions to prevent the climber from falling any deeper into the crevasse. Self-arrest is a maneuver whereby one uses an ice axe or one’s own limbs to stop sliding toward the crevasse. Moreover, to scale mountain peaks in the Himalayas of Asia, mountain climbers usually hire Sherpas—mountaineering natives of Nepal—to guide them.**

**Apart from the competition and teamwork, mountain climbing is also regarded as a form of exercise. It can take several weeks to reach the top of the highest mountains. A successful climber must have strong heart muscles to pump blood and deliver oxygen, as well as sturdy lungs to inhale the smaller amount of oxygen available at high altitudes. If the climber ascends too rapidly, he can suffer from altitude sickness (nausea, headache, insomnia, and loss of appetite). This sickness can progress to cerebral or pulmonary edema**

and be fatal within twenty-four hours. Most mountaineers venturing above about twenty-five thousand feet (eight thousand meters) bring bottled oxygen. Other hazards include falling rocks, avalanches, lightning, and high ozone concentrations. To prevent slipping, experienced mountaineers wear iron-spiked boots or attach spikes called crampons to their boots.

Mountain climbing has an ancient history and originally had spiritual motives. Bards and scribes across epochs have drawn close connections between mountains and the human search for something transcendent and immortal. The Bible abounds in mountain imagery; the Gospels frequently speak of Jesus going up on a mountain by himself to pray. In China as far back as the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. to 221 C.E.), people climbed mountain peaks for poetic inspiration and to evade evil spirits. The Chinese customarily climb mountains to celebrate the Double Ninth or Double Yang Festival on the ninth day of the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar. The ninth month and its ninth day symbolize “yang,” a principle in Chinese philosophy associated with all things bright, positive, and masculine. In Chile, Inca sun worshippers erected shrines and entombed mummies on the windy summits of the Andes Mountains. Indian yogis and monks seek refuge in the foothills of the Himalayas.

People also scaled mountains for scientific reasons. The artist and scientist Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) reportedly climbed a snowfield near Val Sesia, Italy, to observe the flora and fauna. In fact, the first mountaineers who set historical records were not professional climbers but instead were topographers, geologists, physicists, botanists, photographers, doctors, artists, and even priests. Much attention was initially devoted to the Alps, hence the term “alpinism.” In 1760 the Genevese physicist and geologist Horace-

**Bénédict de Saussure visited Chamonix, Switzerland, and offered prize money to the first mountaineer to scale Mont Blanc, the tallest peak in the Alps. In 1786 a doctor, Michel-Gabriel Paccard, and his porter Jacques Balmat received the prize. Saussure himself repeated the feat a year later. A number of other peaks in the Alps were then climbed in quick succession: the Jungfrau (1811), the Finsteraarhorn (1812), and the Breithorn (1813). With the landmark ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865 by British artist Edward Whymper, the main period of Alpine conquest in Europe ended.**

**Exploration of the Jotunheimen range in Norway and the Pyrenees in Spain occurred at roughly the same time as that of the Alps. In 1798 the Norwegian Jens Esmark was the first to ascend Snøhetta, and in 1810 he ascended Mount Gaustatoppen. The Russian army officer Platon de Chikhachev climbed the highest peak in the Pyrenees, Aneto, in 1842.**

**European mountain climbers then shifted their focus to mountain ranges outside Europe. Douglas William Freshfield, a British mountaineer and the editor of the *Alpine Journal*, initiated exploration of the Caucasus Mountains (spanning Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan). By 1888 most of the range's great peaks—including the highest, Mount Elbrus in Russia—had been climbed. In 1882 the Reverend W. S. Green of Ireland led the first expedition to New Zealand's Southern Alps, and in 1888 he led the first expedition to the Selkirk Mountains of North America (Idaho, Washington, and British Columbia). Mount Saint Elias in Alaska was scaled by Luigi Amedeo di Savoy, Duke of Abruzzi, in 1897. As early as 1820 the American botanist Dr. Edwin S. James climbed Pikes Peak in Colorado; Lieutenant Zebulon Montgomery Pike had discovered it in 1806. In 1879–1880, Edward Whymper explored the Andes Mountains in South America,**

successfully climbing Chimborazo, Ecuador's highest peak. In Africa in 1889, the German geologist Dr. Hans Meyer climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, and in 1899 the British geographer Sir Halford John Mackinder climbed Mount Kenya. Another Englishman, Sir William Martin Conway, explored mountains of the Arctic, including those on the Norwegian island of Spitsbergen, in 1896–1897.

The highest mountains, which were the last to be conquered, are the so-called eight-thousanders—that is, mountains more than eight thousand meters (about twenty-six thousand feet) above sea level—located in the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges in Asia. These are Kanchenjunga, climbed in 1905 by Aleister Crowley; Annapurna, climbed in 1950 by Maurice Herzog and Louis Lachenal; Everest, climbed in 1953 by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay; Nanga Parbat, climbed in 1953 by Hermann Buhl; K2, climbed in 1954 by Achille Compagnoni and Lino Lacedelli; and Shishapangma, climbed in 1964 by Xu Jing.

It is no coincidence that so many pioneers were British. After 1850 they ventured most actively into the Alps and elsewhere, not only for sport but also as an outgrowth of British imperialism. Ideas of “survival of the fittest” proliferated after the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Conquering the highest peaks helped climbers demonstrate virility and mastery of nature when England was becoming increasingly urbanized. In a similar fashion, the women's suffrage movement and the California gold rush in the mid-nineteenth century inspired American women to climb mountains. In 1858, Julia Holmes became the first woman to climb Pikes Peak. In 1975, Junko Tabei of Japan became the first woman to climb the world's highest mountain, Everest.

The British established the first Alpine Club in 1857, followed quickly by Austrian, Swiss, and Italian clubs. In 1932 the Union Internationale des Associations d'Alpinisme was founded. Alpine associations now exist in nearly every country, playing vital social and cultural roles in training guides and popularizing the sport. In the twenty-first century, in a culture obsessed with safety, mountaineering holidays attract millions of tourists seeking to test their courage, despite annual death statistics. "It is not the mountain we conquer but ourselves," Edmund Hillary wrote.

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