
A Tribute to Jerzy Kukuczka (1948–1989)

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Jerzy 'Jurek' Kukuczka died on 24 October 1989 when he fell near the summit of Lhotse (8516m) while attempting a first ascent of the S face. He was one of the greatest Himalayan climbers of all time and he placed the Polish flag on all fourteen 8000m peaks.

Kukuczka was born in Skoczow, Beskid Slaski, Poland, on 24 March 1948 and was educated in his local school. He became an electrical engineer and worked in the coalmining industry. In 1965 he started to climb in the Polish Tatra mountains and became a member of the Katowice High Mountain Club. He climbed the most difficult and demanding routes in the Tatra, both in summer and winter, and did some superb climbs. Then he went to the Alps, the Dolomites, the Hindu Kush, the Karakoram and Tibet. In recent years he climbed almost exclusively in the Himalaya. Kukuczka climbed all fourteen 8000m peaks, as did Reinhold Messner before him, but, unlike Messner, Kukuczka climbed all but one by new routes or in winter.

It had been Kukuczka's ambition to set up new routes on all fourteen eight-thousanders, either in summer or in winter. He climbed all but one of them without oxygen; it was only on Everest that oxygen was used for part of the way up to the South Summit. He achieved ten 8000m peaks by new routes, climbed Makalu solo, and made four first winter ascents. No other high-altitude climber has matched that record.

Kukuczka's stamina and strength at high altitudes were phenomenal. He acclimatized slowly but, once acclimatized, he was able to survive for very long periods at high altitude, if necessary without food or drink. An extremely strong climber, he reacted well to danger. He preferred to climb in 'alpine style', if possible by new routes or in winter, in a small team and without oxygen.

The most important first ascents made by Kukuczka were Everest by the South Pillar (1980); Makalu solo (1981); Gasherbrum 2 and 1 (1982) with Wojciech Kurtyka; Broad Peak – the first traverse of the massif of three peaks (1983), also with Kurtyka; Dhaulagiri and Cho Oyu (1985), first winter ascents and in the space of three weeks.

Kukuczka's ascent of Kangchenjunga in winter (1986) and then the first route on K2 via the South Wall were among his most remarkable climbs. In 1987 he finally completed all fourteen 8000m peaks. He himself once said that his favourite and most satisfying climbs were Makalu and K2. When he reached the summits of these mountains, beside leaving the Polish flag, he often left little mascots or souvenirs from his two sons.

In 1988, with Artur Hajzer, Kukuczka established yet another route on

Jerzy Kukuczka's 8000m Peaks

(This is a revised version of the list in AJ93, 258, 1988/89.)

1	Lhotse	8516m	4.10.1979	Normal route. (On 24.10.1989 Jerzy Kukuczka died in a fall near the summit of Lhotse while attempting the unclimbed South Face.)
2	Everest	8848m	19.05.1980	New route, S Pillar. (Using oxygen only to the South Summit.)
3	Makalu	8463m	15.10.81	New route - Flank from Barun glacier and NW ridge. Solo.
4	Gasherbrum 2	8035m	1.07.1983	New route, SE Flank, via virgin peak 7772m.
5	Gasherbrum 1	8068m	23.07.1983	New route, SW wall.
6	Broad Peak	8047m	17.07.1984	New route, Traverse of the Massif of 3 Peaks 7538m, 8016m, 8047m. (In 1982 Jerzy Kukuczka climbed Broad Peak via the normal route.)
7	Dhaulagiri	8167m	21.01.1985	1st Winter Ascent, normal route.
8	Cho Oyu	8201m	15.02.1985	1st Winter Ascent (as a second team), new route, SE pillar.
9	Nanga Parbat	8125m	13.07.1985	New route, SE pillar.
10	Kangchenjunga	8586m	11.01.1986	1st Winter Ascent, normal route.
11	K2	8611m	8.07.1986	New route, S wall.
12	Manaslu	8163m	10.11.1986	New route, NE wall.
13	Annapurna	8091m	3.02.1987	1st Winter Ascent, normal route. (On 14.10.1988 Jerzy Kukuczka established a new route via the E buttress of the S face.)
14	Xixabangma	8027m	18.09.1987	New route, W ridge.

Annapurna, via the almost 2000m-high right E buttress of the S face. Over the years, he made several outstanding climbs with his close friend and longest-serving partner, Wojciech Kurtyka. He also climbed with Czok, Pawlowski, Wielicki, Heinrich, Piotrowski and Hajzer.

Kukuczka received several gold medals in Poland for achieving outstanding results abroad in sport. In 1987 he was made 'Man of the Year' in Poland after completing the 8000m peaks. He also received a crystal trophy from the Polish Foreign Minister 'for making the name of Poland famous throughout the mountaineering world'. In 1988 he was awarded an honorary Olympic silver medal by the Winter Olympic Committee in Calgary.

Kukuczka was a wonderful husband and father of two sons. He was a quiet, modest and sensitive man, religious, dependable, a considerate friend and tolerant in his opinions of other climbers. His magnetic personality was an inspiration to all around him. His loss is a severe blow to his family, to Poland and to international mountaineering. His eternal bivouac is high among his beloved Himalayan peaks, and his memory will remain for ever with those who climb mountains.