



Annapurna Circuit Trek
12 April – 7 May 2021
(a richly illustrated diary)



The route:

Jeep: Kathmandu — Bhulbhule, 190 km; 3,100 m 3,500 m;

Bhulbhule — Jomsom, 150 km; 12,370 m ascent, 10,470 m descent;

Bus: Jomsom — Tatopani, 50 km; 2,000 m ascent, 3,500 m descent;

Tatopani — Nayapul, 34 km; 2,200 m 2,400 m;

Taxi: Nayapul — Pokhara, 46 km; 1,000 m 1,300 m;

Taxi Pokhara — Kathmandu 206 km; 3,150 m 2,700 m

In total, on foot: Bhulbhule — Nayapul 184 km; 14,570 m ascent, 12,870 m descent.



12 April. A Qatar Airways Dreamliner has completed taxiing onto the runway at Okęcie Airport. It turned sharply towards the start of the runway and stopped. A moment later the turbines revved at full throttle. I am pressed deep into my seat. We are taking off. I am flying. I am flying! I am flying!! I am flyyyyyyying! At last. A success. Twenty four months of preparation and twelve months of postponing the trip due to the Covid 19 pandemic in anticipation of more suitable times. And when the opportunity to depart finally arose, it turned out to be burdened with such a complicated system of obstacles that preparations for the trip resembled freeing oneself from prison by digging a hole in the rock under the cell using a teaspoon. I have travelled a lot. I have always taken care to be well prepared for a trip. This often made preparations laborious and lengthy. However, they have never been marked by such uncertainty and have not involved such a long wait with no clear deadline. Two film and literary analogies come to my mind in this respect, the film titled *The Shawshank Redemption* and the and Dumas' *Count of Monte Cristo*. When Tim Robbins sits in his prison cell in the *Shawshank*. He has a poster on a wall. There's a lot going on there but for the majority of the film this poster seems like just an

irrelevant piece of a stage setting. Nobody knows what is hidden behind. Only the prisoner does. He is constantly worried that he would be moved to a different cell, or that they would carry out some renovation and take down his poster, and this goes on all the time, every day, every hour, every moment. It's a mental nightmare no less tormenting than the arduous effort of digging out the tunnel hidden behind the poster with the aid of a piece of a shell. Of course, this comparison is a bit exaggerated. But a good comparison is meant to be overdone, so that it brings out the essence of the matter. In this case, the essence of the matter is uncertainty.

It was supposed to be completely different. No uncertainty. No complicated formalities. Just pack a bag, buy dollars and a ticket, get a visa online and hit the road. In pre-Covid that is how it would have played out. If it hadn't gone wrong.

I started thinking realistically about trekking in the Himalayas about a year and a half ago. Perhaps nearly two years ago. I remember thinking that if I had made up my mind straight away, I could have gone to the Himalayas in October 2019. The reasons I didn't go were quite trivial. That I had more work in the autumn, that I had been lecturing at NCU for years in the winter semester. And that there was no point, that spring would be better. Take it easy, no pressure. This extremely sound idea has turned out to be a mistake. Just as almost every concept of picking numbers in the lottery turns out to be completely wrong. My primary school friend, Janusz Janiaczyk, used to say: "You know how it is, you don't know how it will be". For we all tend to assume that things will be as they are, as usual, that nothing extraordinary will happen. Instead, it just happened as it did.

As early as in December, there were first reports of a Coronavirus outbreak. Distant and, at first, rather unrealistic. Somewhere in China, in some town called Wuhan. More realistic, even worrying, was the coverage of the construction of the Covid field hospital in Wuhan. Dozens of diggers and other machinery and hundreds of people were erecting some sort of a giant arena. Even then, though, I thought more of how strange these Chinese people were rather than considering it a real emergency. I had long since bought my ticket. The first three weeks of April to be spent trekking around Annapurna. There was no way I was going to give it up because of some Chinese virus. So I have not given up on Nepal. It was Nepal that gave up on me. Sometime around the 20th of March, Nepal cancelled all climbing and trekking, and closed its borders. We had no choice. We postponed it until October. Everything would be over by then, certainly. At the time I was convinced, and I wasn't the only one, that it would take a few weeks, that for two or perhaps three weeks it would increase, and in May it would be all over. It seemed to be the case for a while. It increased, then decreased, but it was not going to go away, nothing of the sort. There was little Covid in the summer. It was not possible to travel everywhere, but nevertheless we could go somewhere. I rediscovered the Bieszczady Mountains. Over there, in the summer and even at the beginning of October, there was no news about Covid. I even managed to fly to Greece, to Meteora, and to climb Olympus. It was quite clear that it would pass soon, and in October we would fly and go on a trek. Well, it didn't come to an end and Covid is as it was. Just as a year ago it seemed to be over soon, now after a year it seems the same. So, the trekking in October did not happen. And so I continued digging through the tunnel, because it turned out that the

prison wall was even further away. Everything was clear then. Nepal was closed. There was nothing we could have done. Uncertainty passed in mid-December with the first news of the vaccine. Nepal wants to open up. Nepal is opening its borders. Only the terms are not known. And I'm unlikely to go if I haven't been vaccinated. Krysia will not let me go, and even if she did, it would be foolish to expose myself like that. Only if they vaccinated me, but how could I make it happen? The vaccination campaign was supposed to start at the end of December. And it apparently started, but there was a shortage of vaccines, nothing was clear and the uncertainty only increased. I struggled in many ways to have them vaccinate me, but nothing seemed to work. Even when the campaign to vaccinate university teaching staff finally began, the struggle only increased at the outset. At the NCU, the first round of enrolment for vaccination took place on 15–17 February, and was based on the Polon system, which, among other things, involves a register of lecturers working at the university. If I had a permanent position there, as I used to, it wouldn't have been a problem, but I had a contract for only one semester, usually winter, and this time, because of Covid, I postponed my lectures to the summer. Therefore, my contract started on the 20th of February, which meant that at the time of enrolling for vaccinations I was not a lecturer at the University. That is what nice lady from the Rector's Office, who coordinated the enrolment at the University, informed me about. It's not that she didn't want to help, she simply couldn't do anything about it because it all went through the central online system; and if you're not on it, you don't exist. I explained my situation to her, Ania Taica helped me, and maybe also the Dean, because Mrs Mikulska wrote to me immediately that the rector knows the case and they would look into it. And they did, a fortnight later they made a second round of enrolment, as if for those who were only doing the summer semester. So I enrolled, and they even vaccinated me quite quickly, even ahead of schedule, so I had to travel from Pabianice to Toruń earlier as there was a surplus of vaccines.

A wise person might ask why I am writing all this stuff when I am supposed to report on my trek around Annapurna. There is nothing I can do about it. One has to write about what is important, what is fundamental to the journey. It was boring as hell when the Count of Monte Cristo was forging his way through the prison stone, but no less important than was the way he exacted his revenge upon his enemies.

This vaccination was very important, as Nepal actually had been opened since January. Although a compulsory quarantine was introduced, at first for 14 days but later for only seven, and afterwards people were sometimes released just after two days. I did not hesitate, with or without the quarantine, I was going to fly. It was better to spend a few more days in Kathmandu than to stay at home in Toruń. At the time, I thought that once I bought the ticket, it was a done deal. People would get vaccinated, the pandemic would be over and I would fly.

Of the three assumptions, only the latter occurred. Vaccinations proceeded slowly, and the pandemic loomed. However, I'm actually going to fly! And it's as cool as it gets. On the train it is quiet, and at the airport too. I've been flying for three hours already, I think we're somewhere over Turkey, and even though I'm still writing, I'm still far from the real-time. This Dreamliner is pretty cool, Qatar airlines also not bad. Dinner was delicious, which is a rare occurrence on a plane. About one third of the

seats are occupied. Three out of nine seats in my row are taken. In the row behind me one, and in front of me six. It's nice to fly this way.

Nepal needed to open up. They live almost entirely off tourism. However, this re-opening was not simply a return to the way things were before the pandemic. Nepal not only opened its borders, it also lifted the quarantine. Except, they've introduced a bunch of restrictions and security measures. First of all, one must have a recent PCR test to even get on the plane. A second test at Kathmandu airport. Two bizarre Covid documents, which apparently are supposed to be done online, but there's something wrong with the service, so I lost a couple of hours before I got it right. The visa used to be issued online, and only paid for on arrival. Now you have to have a visa promise, which is arranged by the training company, who sort of take responsibility for you. So I have completed this obstacle course. Every step of the way I was worried that something was going to mess up. I was probably most afraid that my PCR test would come back positive. I'm supposed to be immune after the vaccination, I am well, but what if the test comes back false-positive. Then it's kaput. Luckily, it came out negative.

At the airport, as in the Wolf's Lair, there's five lines of checkpoints. The first, preliminary one, right at the entrance, just for the temperature check. It's done by a machine, they've upgraded. Then the main checkpoint, before a line of striped meandering abatis. A check of all permits: passport, promise visa, visa form, Covid form, Covid barcode, (that's the name of the thing you can't get on a plane without), and most importantly, a Covid PCR test. They are taking photos of it all. This is the first and most important airport security check, followed by a second, similar one. Only once you have passed these can you go between the meandering lanes to a check-in point. The previous checks are to determine whether you can fly out. The check-in is by Qatar Airlines, it checks whether you are allowed on the plane. And again, one by one, the same set of documents. The fifth line of checkpoints is the traditional passport control. Luckily, they only check your passport. And there's actually a sixth line as they allow you onto the plane. It's a shambles. It's worth writing about.

I wonder how it was with me and the Himalayas. It's not about why I wanted to go there, because that's pretty obvious. I have always loved the mountains. I've always had the best time there, and it's only professional matters, especially travels, that for many years kept me from having as much time for the mountains as I would like to. The point is why was I so late in planning such a trip. I will have to come back to it, but I think it has something to do with the Claudia Schiffer syndrome. Something about those Himalayas was like that of my Claudia Schiffer. When asked if you would like to have such a girl, you will say yes, but you will not go looking for her straight away. Unattainable as it once seemed, and then this unattainability became so firmly established that it did not fade away even when a trip to the Himalayas was already within reach. I will definitely come back to this idea when I have thought it through more. In about two hours we land in Doha. This is the capital of Qatar. There, I have two hours to change planes to Kathmandu. I might stop at that for now and get some sleep.



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13 April I didn't sleep much. It turns out that we will soon be landing in Doha. The time-zone has changed. It is after midnight, so it's the 13th. It means that the next day begins. Doha airport is just like any other airport. There is nothing to admire here. To my surprise, it turned out that the plane to Kathmandu is full to the brim. And it's a huge Dreamliner, after all. It carries workers. Nepalese work in Qatar on construction sites. For example, they are building a stadium and other facilities for the World Cup to be held there next year. Not many tourists on the plane. But a crowd of workers and women with bags. And I got a seat in the middle. It is tough. But I fell asleep at once. I don't even remember the plane taking off. Well, it took off at two in the morning. I slept all the way to Kathmandu. I didn't even get up to go to the loo. I was anxious about how it would go with the controls at the airport. Such a crowd of

people and there are tests and other controls here. I thought it would take hours. I was wrong. The Asians are exceptionally good at dealing with crowds. Perhaps because there are so many of them. The Covid matters only took a few minutes. Then it turned out that all this crowd of Nepalese had a separate passport control and I ended up being the first on the plane to pay for my visa. It all went so swiftly that the people from Sujan did not have time to get through the traffic jam to the airport. And everyone wanted to help me. One guy told me to give him the number of the person who was supposed to pick me up. My phone wasn't in service yet. So he called and talked to him and said he would take me to my hotel and to Sujan. I got worried that it was a conspiracy, that he wasn't talking to Sujan but to another villain and that they wanted to abduct me to steal from me. Later, it became clear. A driver from my hotel and from my trekking company ExploringNepal came to pick me up. I had a coffee with some of them, gave two dollars to one and three dollars to yet another person, and that was it. We went to the hotel. Morning traffic. Left-hand traffic and, as it is in Asia, a tight squeeze. There was not much to see. Finally, we arrived at my hotel in Thamel district. It is the Kathmandu city centre. Markham Bistro is a sign on the hotel building. Why Bistro? Only much later I've noticed another sign: Potala Guest House. The building is not much to admire but the rooms are nice, big and clean. Sujan was waiting for me here. I had seen him before in a photograph but he seemed much bigger there. He is a nice guy, very smart. He is the head of the company. He rarely goes to the mountains as a guide. He rather takes care of the arrangements. We agreed on everything. Above all, what to do with the extra days that we have gained since there is no quarantine. And there were eight of them. I thought a bit to extend the trek to the Mustang valley. It is a very special area just by the Tibet border. It has been inaccessible for centuries. Only a few years ago it had been opened to exploration, but the entrance fee is \$500. Well, I would give that much, but it simply cannot be added to my itinerary. And Sujan extended my route here and there, and added various attractions. This extended the trek to 20 days and increased the cost by \$440 added to the previous \$1,795. This includes a guide, porter, accommodation and food for the entire stay, plus sightseeing in Pokhara, Kathmandu, and the Kathmandu valley transfers to and from the airport, and a flight from Pokhara to Kathmandu. In addition, if they deserve it, the guide and porter are given a 50 dollar tip each. It seems like a lot, but after all it is for 20 days of taking care of me. Sujan checked my equipment and approved it in full. He referred to my sleeping bag differently than Magda. It is a shelter sleeping bag with a comfort level of +5 degrees, but in fact it should have a comfort level of -10 degrees. Magda said the sleeping bag needed to be warmer. And Sujan repeated what I have read many times in the descriptions of this route. There are blankets provided in all the hotels along the route, and on those few nights when it is really cold, you can add blankets for yourself. You do not sleep under them because you sleep in your sleeping bag, so there is no disgust. In fact, I wouldn't be disgusted to sleep under such blankets alone.

I exchanged an extra \$400 with Sujan — for petty expenses. And finally, the last obstacle to overcome: the second, this time Nepalese, PCR test for Covid. What if it comes out positive? I am starting to get anxious again.

Sujan has invited me for a Nepali dinner. Afterwards, I will have a stroll around Kathmandu. I will pack and get some sleep. Tomorrow we set off by Jeep to Bhulbhule, a seven-hour drive.

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And that was a proper Nepali dinner. Dal Bhat meat, fish, rice and lots of veggies on a silver tray, and the waiter served up the extras. The vegetables were the best, especially the spinach, and this kind of spiced courgette, and some turnips, and something else, very spicy. This dinner was, so far, definitely the best of the whole of Kathmandu. We also discussed the trek, how it would be, and all. I also learned that Sujan had spent the entire pandemic in Poland. He had just arrived in Kathmandu the day before me. And so they live with Magda in Chelm, the Lublin one. Exploring Nepal was recommended to me by Ewa Zygierewicz. She went with them on a trek to the Annapurna base camp in 2018. I have previously checked different trekking companies. They are all quite similar. It is difficult to distinguish them. They seem to differ in pricing, but what is included in the price also varies. I decided not to focus on price and to go with reliability. Only much later it turned out that reliability was the key and that I had made a very good choice. Exploring Nepal is a company run by a Polish-Nepalese couple: Magda Pietruszka–Pandey and Sujan Pandey. Of course, there are many others working there. I met three of them: Niraj, my guide, excellent, I would say without hesitation: a super-guide; Aashis my porter, and Nabin, who took care of me in Kathmandu. I don't know how I would have made it through the Covid test queue without him. Contact details for the company are posted above.

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Then, I went sightseeing in Kathmandu. I did not enjoy it very much. Essentially, it is similar to Giza or Marrakesh. Only that here there is Buddhist exotics, not Muslim. And Morocco is obviously richer. Everything there is beautifully restored. In Kathmandu, historic temples are scaffolded so that it is difficult to pass through. What is similar, is the stench and the noise. Mopeds, motorbikes, one on the top of the other, squeeze past in such a way that it's hard to believe it is really happening. Kathmandu as well as Marrakesh is necessary to visit because these are wonders of the world; but the first day is great, the second, fine; but do not stay for the third day. There are plenty of shops. Just like in Marrakesh. Everyone wants to sell you something. But do I really need another pair of slippers or a purse? I saw only one shop with travelling equipment. I was not impressed. I don't think I will be buying anything here. Unless, of course, I see some wonders. That is the end for today.



Sujan Pandey and our Dal Bhat at a welcome dinner in Kathmandu on the 13th of April 2021. Dal Bhat is the most popular dish in Nepal. Niraj told me that they eat it twice a day and without cutlery, just with

their fingers. Dal Bhat was on the menu in every hostel we slept in, but the higher up the mountain you went, the fewer ingredients were included. The poorest option was probably in Ghermu: rice, lentil soup and curry with potatoes. In Kathmandu, there was a rich option: meat, fish, spinach, turnips and a whole host of spices and additions, generally spicy ones that I won't name. For many days I enjoyed eating it. Only at the very end did I have enough.

14 April I slept like a log, for almost 10 hours in one go, without getting up. Good news in the morning, I test negative. It is the hotel here that orders the tests and is responsible for them. Good system. I paid 2,000 rupees that is 60 zloty, in Poland it was 500 zloty. So, it looks like it worked, we are on our way. It is nice here, quiet and friendly. Along with the hotel, there is a bistro here, they offer just three dishes but yesterday I had a tasty broth with ravioli stuffed with meat with those green leaves and a tasty salad for dinner and then I fell asleep. Now, I am already packed. Soon I will have breakfast and we will set off.

I have just met my guide. He is extremely friendly. His name is Niraj. The porter is also already here. His name is Aashis. He will carry my things. I have packed them to the backpack that Sujana had lent me. We have a big Jeep and we are on our way, 200 kilometres of winding mountain road with poor asphalt. It's warm, not hot, but not too chilly either. It's foggy, Niraj says it's a smog from Kathmandu and from burning grass. But this fog is also slowly thinning out and it's getting more like in the mountains. Today by car our quaternity, the driver, guide Niraj, porter Aashis and me. Tomorrow on foot, just our trinity. It's a long drive, seemingly first on a motorway, as that's how the road is referred to in Nepal, although it's a narrow cracked tarmac with cows and goats. Then an even worse bumpy mountain dirt road. Nothing noteworthy along the way. We have lunch on the way. Niraj asked what I wanted. I decided on Dal Bhat with fish. It turned out to be the same dish I had yesterday with Sujana. It doesn't matter because it's good and looks nice. Next time I'll take the vegetarian option as the vegetables are the best there. Actually, the first interesting site on the way is our Guest House Holiday Trekker's Lodge and Restaurant. Cottages set in a beautiful garden. Mostly roses. It's beautiful, warm, the birds are singing, you can hardly see the mountains. This seems more like our allotments than the proud Himalayas. The altitude here is 800 m MSL, less than in Kathmandu. It will start rising tomorrow.

I'll go for a walk and listen to the birds. In two hours, at 7pm, we are having a dinner as normal, only breakfast Niraj suggested we have earlier, at 8am. He is right. One has to combine the local all-inclusiveness with the mountains. Maybe I will write something more later. For now I have nothing to add.

I have cleaned up, taken a shower, gotten ready for tomorrow and am waiting for the dinner, so I can write a bit more. Here it is like on a plot run by a poor but hard-working allotment holder. Neatly tended plants, weeded patches, trimmed lawns, watered nicely. DIY shower. There is a large barrel on top of a hollow block shed, with water coming from it. It is gas heated. It is small but clean and works well. Only

the river flowing in the ravine next to me associates this place with the mountains. The air here is also allotment-like. A kind of a greenhouse combined with a kitchen. The smells of Indian and Nepalese food linger all around. In the mountains you always feel such a sharp fresh breeze. It's not here. It will probably be present tomorrow in Ghermu and certainly the day after tomorrow in Tal, where we are headed.

As early as on the plane, I had begun to wonder why I had not come to the Himalayas earlier. It is very strange. At the time I started climbing, and was on a rock climbing and mountaineering course, the expedition of the Łódź Mountaineering Club to Annapurna had just finished. Fijał, with whom I used to hang out back then, didn't like Himalayan grandpas and it might have been his fault that instead of taking the right path of going to high mountains, I started rock climbing, which wasn't really my intention before. Wojtek Jedliński was my instructor both at the rock climbing course and the mountaineering one. He is a well-known and accomplished climber. He had just returned from an expedition to Annapurna. They didn't manage to climb, they had to retreat just before reaching the top. Fijał and his comrades were terribly hard on these expeditioners. Perhaps because they saw them as doing nothing significant but shopping in Kathmandu while the club pays them a lot for it. I was part of that gang too. Didn't the ceiling fall on my head then? Now I completely fail to understand what Fijał had in mind. The fact that I adopted his attitude certainly distanced me from trips to high mountains. Another reason could have been financial inaccessibility, which later became embedded in my mind.

I spent a lot of time with Wojtek then, and he talked about that trip. It was fresh, he had just come back. I memorised quite a lot and even more of it is coming back to me now. I will describe here everything that comes to mind from Wojtek's story. Later, because now a lady is preparing dinner for me. There are to be potatoes and eggs. Something is frying. Sort of like scrambled eggs with potatoes. I think it's fried together? I wonder what will come out of it.

And the result was fried potatoes with eggs and various vegetables. Will do.

From Wojtek's story, two things were memorable to me: he spoke of a multi-day trek through rhododendron thickets and that nowhere else was as beautiful as on this trek. He also said that nowhere else had he eaten such good food as in Nepal. But the fact is that then, in 1981, going to Nepal was something completely unattainable. In addition to the various obstacles invented by the Polish People's Republic, a lot of money was needed. At the time, I planned to earn enough to go to the Dolomites. And that was already a lot. I will return to these memories. It's now completely dark, but there's no sign of the cold air. I'm sitting in the garden on two armchairs, short sleeves and shorts. This may be where I end today.



This is how we arrived in Bhulbhule: Aashis, Land Cruiser driver



Holiday Trekker's Lodge & Restaurant, our first night on the trek, already a bit past Bhulbhule, in Ngadi. Nice garden, warm. When I was there, I didn't realise that the next place where you can go outside with a short sleeve will be 10 days later in Tatopani.

15 April Again, I slept soundly through the night, without getting up. I wonder why. Niraj rushed to have an early breakfast. He ordered it for us at 8 o'clock and we ended up eating even earlier. At 8 o'clock we set off. The first day of hiking.

There is a charming route from Buk to Ług in the Bieszczady Mountains. It goes along a rocky road alongside a canyon where the river Wetlina flows, and then it runs into Solinka. Today we followed a similar route from Bhulbhule to Ghermu along the deep canyon of the Marsyangdi River. It's prettier in the Bieszczady Mountains, but it is one of the most charming places there; and here, it is just an introduction to the actual mountains. The route is easy and short. It can be walked even faster on the main road that leads all the way to Manang, but we followed the trail and paths through the surrounding villages. There are no orchids or rhododendrons yet. There are small mountain villages with goats and cows, and on cut-up plots located on steep slopes they grow maize in spring, which is now, and rice in summer, during the monsoon season. But it's fun without the orchids, too. A beautiful exotic adventure. On the way up the steep climb to the village of Bahundanda we caught up with a boy carrying a schoolbag, just like our Jacuś. When he saw us catching up with him, he remembered he was in a hurry to get to school and ran a bit, then slowed down again, we caught up with him again and so on a couple of times. Further on a friend was waiting for him and then they walked together. They had a very uphill struggle. Later, I visited this school, exotic, but on the whole quite decent, and the children were lovely. The route didn't take us long. A few steep short climbs, the terrain was very undulating. Around noon we were there. Now we are waiting for lunch. We will have Mo Mo dumplings, I ordered vegetable ones. Then we will walk around the area.

Very tasty small dumplings made of thin dough, dipped in some kind of brown and red Nepalese sauce, but we moved because there was no internet connection in that Fish House and then even the electricity went out. We are now at the Hotel Rainbow Restaurant and Lodge. The names here bring to mind great luxuries. And there is luxury here, one luxury to be exact: the Himalayas. Other than that, these are quite ordinary cottages with quite spartan conditions: a bed, a toilet, and a shower. This time I have a room with a kind of a bathroom. I have not checked whether there is hot water. There may not be. Our Hotel Rainbow is beautifully situated in front of a waterfall several hundred metres high. I'll take a picture, although it will probably be low quality as we are still in the cloud.

What is striking here is the emptiness. Of course there are locals, lots of them, as this is a populated area. But everything here is tourist-focused, and I have seen only one tourist since leaving Kathmandu, this morning, in the mirror, when I was shaving. Niraj told me that his expedition with me was his first trip in a year and a half. Niraj

and I then went to the viewpoint above our village of Ghermu, afterwards we will have dinner as on any all-inclusive.

The route we are taking today and will be taking tomorrow and part of the day after tomorrow, follows the valley that is shared by Annapurna and Manaslu. I take the Bhulbhule — Ghermu — Tal — Dharapani route uphill. Then I turn west to Manang. During her trek around Manaslu, Agnieszka descended from Dharapani to Bhulbhule or drove down in a Jeep. Anyway, these first three days of trekking I somehow have in common with Agnieszka.

10 km. 3h20; 380 m ascent, 120 m descent, plus a visit to Ghermu.



Aashis and Niraj



School in Bahundanda



A classroom in this school



The Hotel Rainbow in Ghermu, our second accommodation. You can see here how empty it was there. For the first few days we hardly met any tourists and were usually alone in the Guest Houses. It was already cold in Ghermu, and a big storm had passed through during the night.



The waterfall and the gate to a further part of the road through Jagat to Tal

16 April A storm passed through during the night. It was pouring so hard that the sound of the rain was heard through the noise of the waterfall. Again, I slept through the night without getting up. The Himalayas as a remedy for prostate problems? It's a wonderful morning. Finally I can smell the freshness of the mountains. Not a trace of mist or clouds. You can see the mountains, even the snow-capped five thousand metre peaks. For the first time on this trip, I can see the mountains and for the first time I feel that I am in the mountains. We set off briskly at eight o'clock. It's fresh, the beautiful sun is shining strongly. In about an hour and a half we reach Jagat. The village is quite nice, even somewhat touristic, located on the slope of a canyon about a hundred metres above the turbulent mountain river Marsyangdi. It's the second day of us walking along either bank of the river, and it will accompany us until Manang, that is for three more days. The river gathers water flowing from the northern slopes of Annapurna and Manaslu. In Jagat, Niraj talks about hot springs. I recall that I have already read about them somewhere. To reach them, one has to go down to the bottom of the canyon. A stretch of a steep path. Above the bank there are some pipes, as if baths of concrete, or small pools. Nothing to get excited about, but the Nepali host directed a pipe into the bathtub, it began to fill and after a while the three of us were laying, or maybe rather we were lying in the hot water united in trinity. It is nice, especially that in the Hotel Rainbow there was neither hot water nor a mirror or even a washbasin. I didn't shave in the morning. It is not easy to shave in a cold shower.

We keep walking, today almost all the time along a dirt road. It's empty, something passes by sporadically. Aashis carries almost all my things, I have a light, nearly empty backpack. The heaviest in it is a one-litre bottle of water. Niraj thinks for me, I just keep walking. It has never been like this for me before.

After an hour we stop in Chamje (pronounced: Cham-Chay) for lunch. And again, I don't have to do anything. Niraj will take care of everything. Niraj has done the route around Annapurna 10 times. Half of the times as a porter, and half as a guide. After lunch we walk for another hour and a half, then a steep climb brings us to the edge of a wide valley, where, on the bank of the wide Marsyangdi River, a village of Tal is located. It is different from all the previous ones. It is situated on a flat ground. This is not common here. There's a match on at the moment. The local football league. I don't care much about football, but I went to watch. There is in fact a pitch with goals, there's no grass, just some gravel. They're playing, but that is of little importance. In other villages in the area, you could find flat ground at best to fit your feet, a pitch is out of the question.

We are staying in Tilicho Hotel. It is better than the previous one, because the Hotel Rainbow in Ghermu was quite a mess. Here I do indeed have a room with a bathroom and there is a hot shower. However, for the second time I have a problem with shaving. There is neither a washbasin nor a mirror. It seems that this shower takes care of everything, that you can wash your pants and shave in the shower. Perhaps they know how to do such things here. I don't. I found a bucket and did my laundry in it. The mirror is riveted down outside. Tomorrow I will take some water in a bucket and I will go to this mirror to shave. Just as I write this, four goats enter our

so-called hotel courtyard, followed by a farmer, with a huge machete-axe stuck behind his belt, they go further into the depths of their rear farm courtyard.

Here, I choose my meals, that is breakfast, lunch and dinner, from a menu. Even a drink with a meal is “included in the price”. Niraj pays for that and for accommodation. If I want something more I pay for it myself. I usually buy water and other drinks, as there is hardly anything to buy here. The rule is that you eat in the same place where you sleep. It even may be that if you eat in a Guest House, you do not pay for accommodation. Each such pseudo hotel is in fact an ordinary house with rooms. The owner cooks whatever she can. There is always a menu with just a few dishes on it. I choose at random. And it works out that way. Today for dinner I chose a potato curry with rice. It turned out that potato curry is a tasty spicy and thick potato soup, and the rice came separately shaped in a half sphere. Why the rice? Niraj says they eat rice with everything. Maybe that’s the point.

Tomorrow we go to Chame. The route is long and there is a lot of ascent.

In the photos:

Me on the crest of the Tal valley;

Tilicho Hotel — our accommodation in Tal;

Today’s route is also short, but there is more ascent than yesterday;

12 km, 730 m ascent, 300 m descent; Tal is located at 1,700 m MSL.



Hot springs in Jagat. From the trail it is necessary to descend very low to the Marsyangdi River itself. When we arrived it looked bad, a concrete channel, and it was empty, but then the guys moved the pipes, and at once we had a pool of hot water.



It is unbelievable that there is a fairly normal road there. View from the trail from Ghermu about half an hour from Tal.



Surprisingly flat for this area, the valley in which the village of Tal lies.



The gate to the Tal valley.



Our Tilicho Hotel in Tal.



*The unusual village of Tal. Quite flat, there is even a football field.
There are no flat areas in the neighbouring villages.*

17 April: Tal — Chame

It turned out that this football match at the Tal was an important event. Not just any match but a whole tournament. There were 20 teams from the surrounding area. The winning team was to be awarded \$5,000. The 20 teams meant a lot of people, so our hotel and all the others were full of footballers. But they didn't make any noise, either way I didn't hear them, I slept like a log.

We set off early because the route ahead was long. No more pre-runs, but real mountains. Just after Tal, the ascent begins, but I am doing well, and after an hour and a half we reach Dharapani. Here, the trails around Manaslu and Annapurna branch out. Back in Tal is the first check point; here in Dharapani, the second; and there will be another one today just before Chame. The police have to look at me, my passport, my trekking permit, probably Niraj's guide permit too, and maybe even

Aashis has some porter's permit. Niraj keeps all the permits, but at the end of the trip, he will give me mine as a souvenir.

From Dharapani, we walk for about four kilometres along the dusty road that leads to Manang. It is a steep path, I find it hard to walk. The weather starts to break, the wind picks up, Niraj says it will rain in the afternoon. Then, we leave the road and take a trail sharply uphill. A long sharp climb, not yet killing but already exhausting. This is the high brink of the northern Annapurna valley. Finally, we arrive in the famous Rainforest. Rhododendrons appear. They are not very impressive. Tall trees with small flowers on the top, nothing to photograph. But I find orchids. Niraj does not know what an orchid is, but the one I show him he calls a cobra flower. Then he finds another one, black. It's a beautiful forest, at last something other than villages. At last, the ascent ends, we reach two and a half thousand metres above sea level. It will be flat further on, although there is still about 8 km to go. Tamang village, it starts to rain, as we stop for lunch it breaks up for good. It gets cold, for the first time here I put on my mountain clothes, Gore-Tex, a backpack protector, the rain has eased, we can go. It's a little easier now, it's nice after the rain; earlier, it was probably the weather that made it so difficult for me to walk. At first the rain stopped, but then it came back. I am moving with speed, as if I were walking my everyday route. The guys are trying to keep up but they are lagging behind. At the checkpoint, I have to wait for them, without a guide they will not let me in. Finally, we reach Chame. It's not just any town, it is the county town, the capital of Manang county. Manang is also a small village in Manang county but Chame is the capital. It's something, there's a hairdresser, Aashis went to get a haircut and a shave straight away, and Niraj and I went to bask in the hot springs. A changing room made of plywood, a pool made of concrete, maybe 5 by 6 metres in size; two local girls, or women, are sitting in the pool in the hot springs. Next to it, the same Marsyangdi River flows with a loud noise. We are lying in the hot water, the rain is pouring down on our heads, it doesn't bother us, it even makes it nice.

We are staying in the Hotel Marsyangdi Mandala. Definitely the best place of the ones we've been to. I get a bungalow, two big beds, a socket to charge my phone, this is important because in Tal it was a problem; there is also a mirror, in Tal I had to ask for it, and I got a pocket mirror; I somehow managed to shave there. There is no washbasin, the toilet and shower are separate, but who needs that in their room, I took a bath in a hot spring and, for some unknown reason, I don't pee at night. On top of that, we ended up at a family party, a birthday party, a boy turns 5, he gets a tablet, he can't keep his hands off it. I sit with them because the room is shared by the owners and guests. Unlike in Tal, we are the only guests here. This is definitely the coolest place I've been to so far. Never mind the rain. Here there are already great mountains, from Chame we could see almost all of Manaslu. Annapurna will be visible from tomorrow or the day after. I am glad to have my strength back. Today was almost the most difficult day. The next few will be easy. Only the crossing of the Thorong La Pass will be more difficult.

Tal — Chame route (2,650 m MSL), 24 km, 720 m ascent, 490 m descent.



Cobra Lily — is what Niraj calls this flower. It is an orchid. The only place with orchids I found was in a part of the rainforest on the approach to the upper floor of the valley between Dharapani and Timang.



And this is a black cobra orchid.



One of the countless suspension bridges on the way. The one near Timang.



Goats and donkeys are a common sight on the rocky paths and even on the steel suspension bridges.

18 April: Chame — Upper Pisang

At night cold, crispy. Fortunately, I was given a warm blanket. It was enough. In the morning the sun rose. Everything is drying and warming up beautifully. Only now do I see where I am. Behind our Marsyangdi Mandala, the Annapurna ridge rises on one side, that's where we're about to go via the valley. On the other side, a snowy seven-thousander above the hotel. Today's route is short. After six kilometres, in an hour and a half, we reach Bratang. Three houses and orchards. They grow apples here. We take a break, the sun is shining and we warm ourselves in the sun. Complete relaxation. Small ascents through a fragrant pine forest. Saturday stroll in beautiful weather. In Dhikur Pokhari we take a lunch break. Although it is early, only half past twelve, there is not much left to the end of the route and it is so beautiful here. I am sitting on the roof terrace. The guys always eat separately, they are the staff and I am the customer. Niraj always brings me the menu, he tells me what's on it, and since there isn't much, I settle for the same food every day. In the morning I had a sort of omelette and on top of that some white wheat pancakes, which is the local bread, with honey or jam. Today at breakfast in Chame it was made on the spot, fresh; earlier it was worse, probably frozen. For lunch, I have pasta with vegetables and other non-meat ingredients; either fried noodles or boiled pasta. For dinner I have settled on eating potato curry, which turned out to be a tasty potato soup. Once I had them with rice, I mean rice separately, a whole strained half ball of rice. Quite pointless, because how can you eat it? Put the rice in the soup? So I ended up taking the curry with their pancake bread. And I'm warming up on the terrace, Niraj promised that it would take a long time to prepare dinner, so maybe I'll get hungry in time.

And we made it. Mandala Hotel in Upper Pisang. So far, the best of all. I have a room with a sitting toilet and a power socket. Even shaving is somehow possible. This is a set like none of the previous hotels offered. The room and the dining room have a beautiful view of Annapurna, with the Marsyangdi running underneath and Lower Pisang behind it. Idyll. The wind has picked up, it may rain in the afternoon, but that's no big deal. It has gotten cold again. I had to put on many layers, even though it had just been a warm summer. Niraj and I went to see Pisang. It is hard to walk here as the village literally hangs on a steep slope. We've visited a Buddhist monastery and we are heading back because it is cold. The rest of the day I will spend comfortably in my sleeping bag and under a warm blanket. Niraj has decided to leave even earlier tomorrow. He's right, as the mornings here are nice and the afternoons have been cold so far. Tomorrow 20 km to Manang.

Chame — Upper Pisang 14 km; 800 m ascent, 400 m descent.



I had a bungalow like this in Chame. It looks quite misleading, like a bungalow on an allotment plot and brings to mind summer, lazy laying on a deckchair in front of the cottage and singing birds. It is a bit like that but only for a few hours when the sun is high. When the sun goes down, it gets very cold.



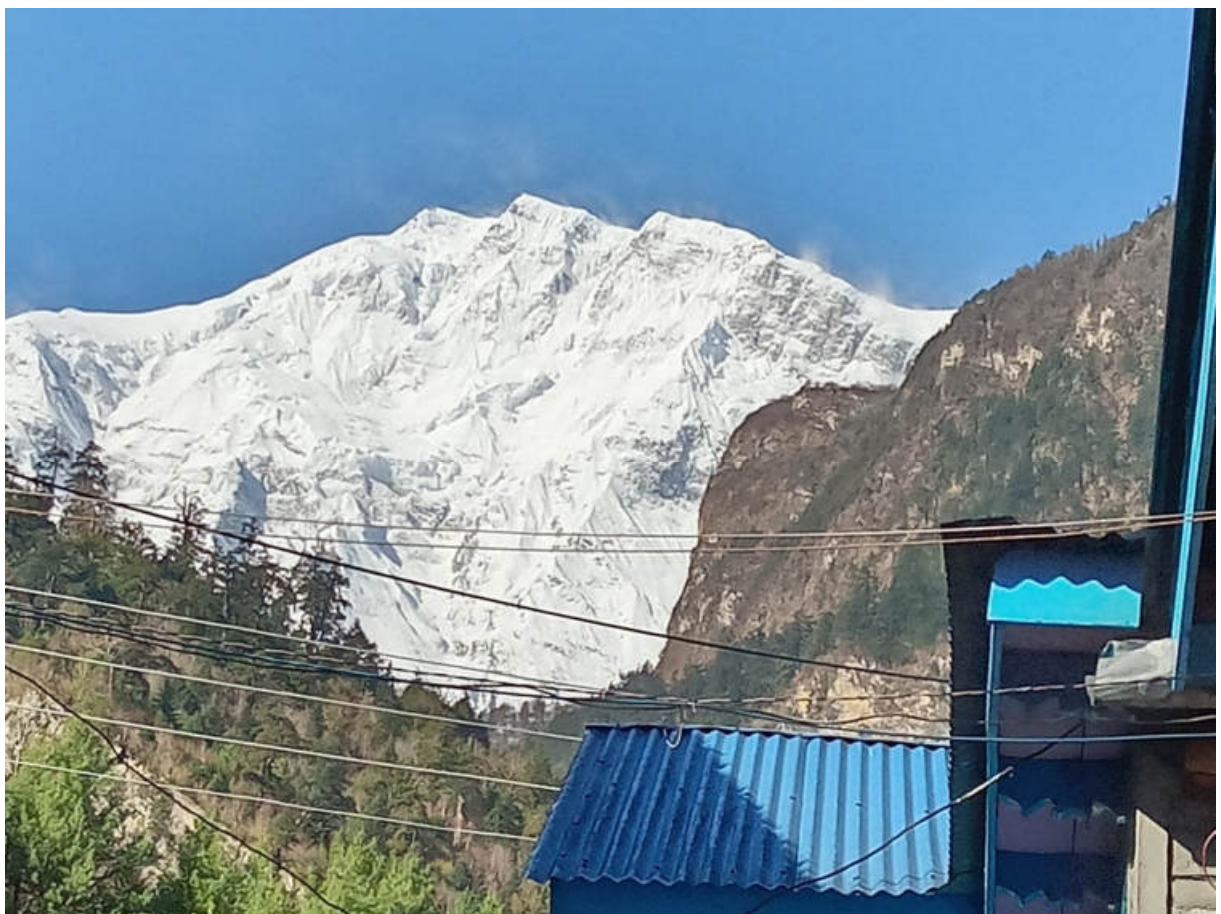
This is the son of the owners of the Hotel Marsyangdi Mandala. He has just been given a tablet. There is no TV there. The only contact with the world is through Wi-Fi.

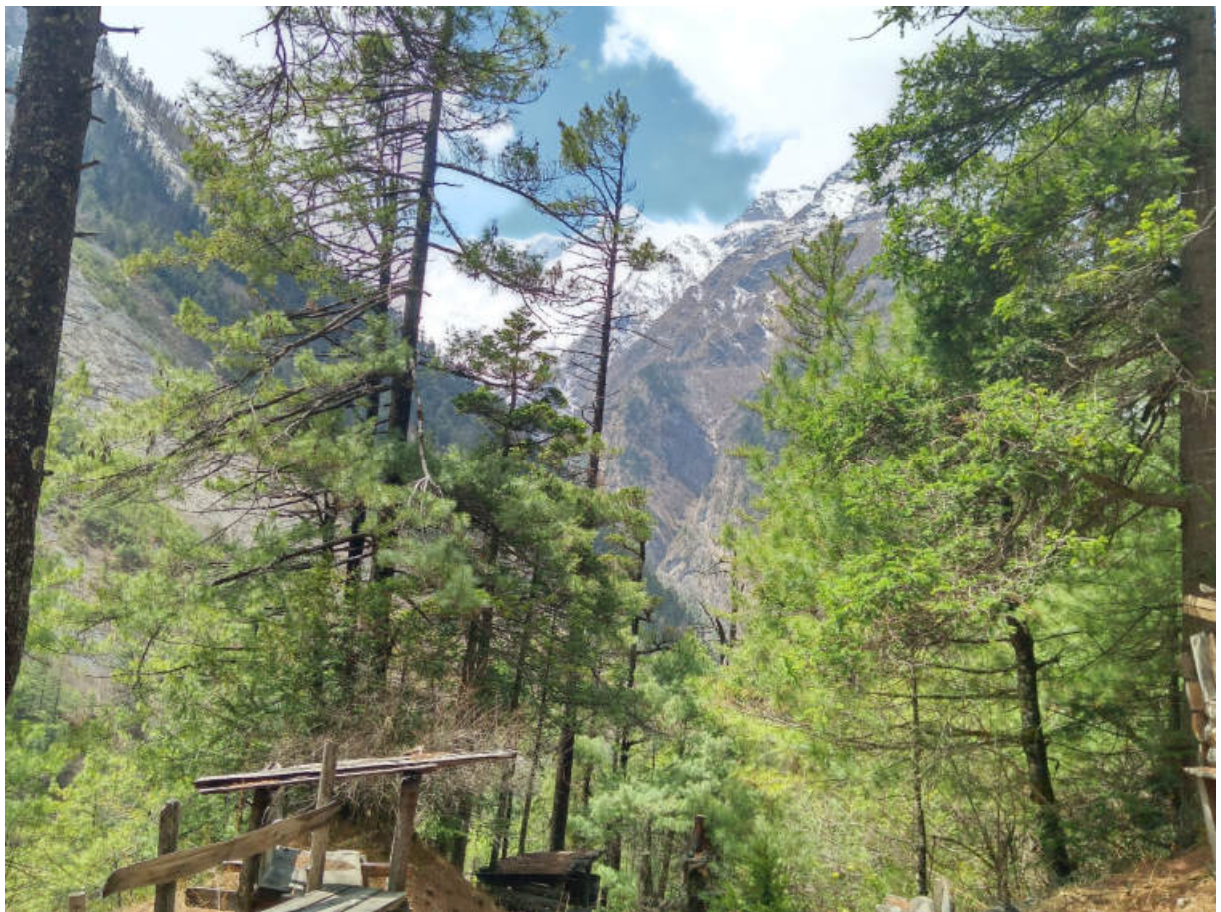


White mountains above the green Chame.



The view of the valley from Chame towards Pisang.





In the previous four photos, the Annapurna massif from Chame. In the following three photos, the view from Dikur Pokhari.







My tea in the dining room of the Mandala Hotel in Upper Pisang.



Above: the Stupa at the Buddhist temple in Upper Pisang. Below: the temple in its entirety.





View from Upper Pisang to Lower Pisang. In the next pictures, the iron cooker in the dining room of the Mandala Hotel in Pisang, the only source of heat in the evening. Next photo: My little room in Pisang. It looks warm, mistakenly.









In the above photos: the majestic Annapurna II in various shots. The next two photos: the Himalayan patisserie at Bench above Upper Pisang. I had coffee and hot apple cones there, which I ate at a table overlooking the Annapurna massif.





Above: the spinning prayer mills at the Buddhist temple in Bench. Such mills are not only found in temples. There are many of them on various roads. One should always pass them on the left and turn each one prayerfully. On the following seven photos of Bench: temple, views, us.











19 April: Upper Pisang — Manang.

Second very cold night. Well below zero degrees. As long as the sun is shining, it's full summer, at around six it turns to winter. We warmed ourselves in the dining room by the steel wood burner. Right after dinner, before half past eight, I went to bed. It took me a long time to warm up, in leggings, a long sleeve and a fleece, and in a sleeping bag, and under a warm blanket. Then, I got warmer and could undress, just down to my underwear. This cold is a bit of a nuisance, one has to adapt to it somehow. It is also strange that it does not get colder overnight, on the contrary, when I woke up around four o'clock, and it was still dark, it seemed to me that it was warmer. And in the morning, it's quite nice. Especially since the sun is bright, it's cloudless and you can see the details of the face of Annapurna II through the window. Many obstacles. The simplest things require much thought. First of all a shower, there is one, with gas, really hot, but it is in a small shed, so you have to walk there in rain and cold wind, and when you take a shower it gets hot in there like in a steam room, because it is just a metre square, including a toilet. No tiles whatsoever, just a concrete floor with a hole made with a chisel, for drainage. And now, get yourself dry and dressed to go out in the cold. Brushing teeth and shaving does not get any easier. Here, in Pisang, it was unusually possible for me to brush my teeth and shave in warm water. But it was not easy. Forget about a washbasin. Hot water only in the shower. I found a plastic bucket in the yard, and filled it with water from the shower. There was a mirror in the dining room, for decoration, fortunately not fixed, I've snatched it up, and took a cup from the kitchen. I've carried it all to my room. I put the mirror on the window and, kneeling, brushed my teeth and shaved.

Yet, all these obstacles are a pittance for what you can see and smell here. This is a real paradise. A dream, quintessence, spectacle and prominence. Since, for the second day, it was nice in the morning and quite unpleasant in the afternoon, Niraj decided that we should change the time and start as early as possible, so that we could walk the whole route in nice weather. That is why I finally got up as I normally do at home, before six o'clock, and before seven we set off. It is not daytime yet, but we can already feel the sun and nice weather. We follow the Marsyangdi River as before, but now, on its other side, there are the mighty ridges and faces of the second Annapurna, Gangapurna and the neighbouring peaks. The usual road to Manang, that is the one for Jeeps, runs on the other side of the river; we set off sharply uphill, along the ascent towards the edge of the valley. The steep incline prevents us from feeling the chill of the morning air. Our first destination is a stupa visible from a distance at the top of a steep wall. It is a Buddhist monastery in Gyaru. We take a break there. The sign of a patisserie on a shed that you wouldn't give a tin shilling for if it weren't for its location. I order a coffee, and an old Nepalese woman offers me some dumplings. I take one, it is delicious, crispy hot filled with chopped apples. Naturally, I sit at the table overlooking Annapurna. (See photo) The route to Manang is long and perhaps would have been so tiring if not for the beautiful weather and amazing views. As a result of leaving so early, we arrive in Manang around midday, only then does the wind pick up. Manang is different. Tal was different

before, because it was flat, but here it is about something else. All of the villages we've seen so far, have been made of plywood and wood. Manang is built of stone. Not that this makes it particularly presentable. On the contrary, many of the houses are falling apart and probably abandoned, and the rest is rather shabby. But it is a big city, even the shops are real, more or less.

We are staying at the Gangapurna Hotel.

A stone, extensive, ugly building. The room as big as in some castle. A squat toilet, and the threshold to it is half a metre. But it is still better than in Pisang. The shower is in the building, no need for tricks. I even managed to do my laundry right away.

This is the end of the first part of the trek. Tomorrow is a day off. We are not going anywhere far, just a short trip to a Buddhist temple, I think. After the day off, we were supposed to go straight to the Thorong La Pass, which, with its altitude of over 5,400 metres, is the main trekking point. However, because of the Covid situation, or more precisely because of the extra days I had planned for the quarantine, which was not the case, Sujan extended my route by two additions. The first is Tilicho Lake and the second is Tatopani. I will write about the latter when its time comes. Tilicho Lake trek will take place the day after tomorrow, it is a lake located at almost 5,000 metres. This addition will take us five or four days.

It is getting cold again. I am waiting for dinner and going to bed.

Upper Pisang — Manang (3530 m MSL), 20 km, 500 m ascent, 300 m descent



Above: our Gangapurna Hotel in Manang. Below: the stupa in Mamang, then the archery competition in Manang, the dining room and my room with the barrel on the roof.







Taken at dawn from the roof of my hotel, just before the snowstorm. The next day it was all covered in snow. The white mountain on the left is Tilicho Peak. At its foot lies Tilicho Lake. We were supposed to go there but the weather kept us away. At the base of the grey mountain face in front, lies Tilicho Base Camp. We went there via Khangsar. The next day we traversed the slope to the right and entered the area depicted in the next photo.

Next photo: Here, you can see the route of a few days, from Tilicho Base Camp up to Thorong La Pass, which is to the left of the first snow pyramid on the left.



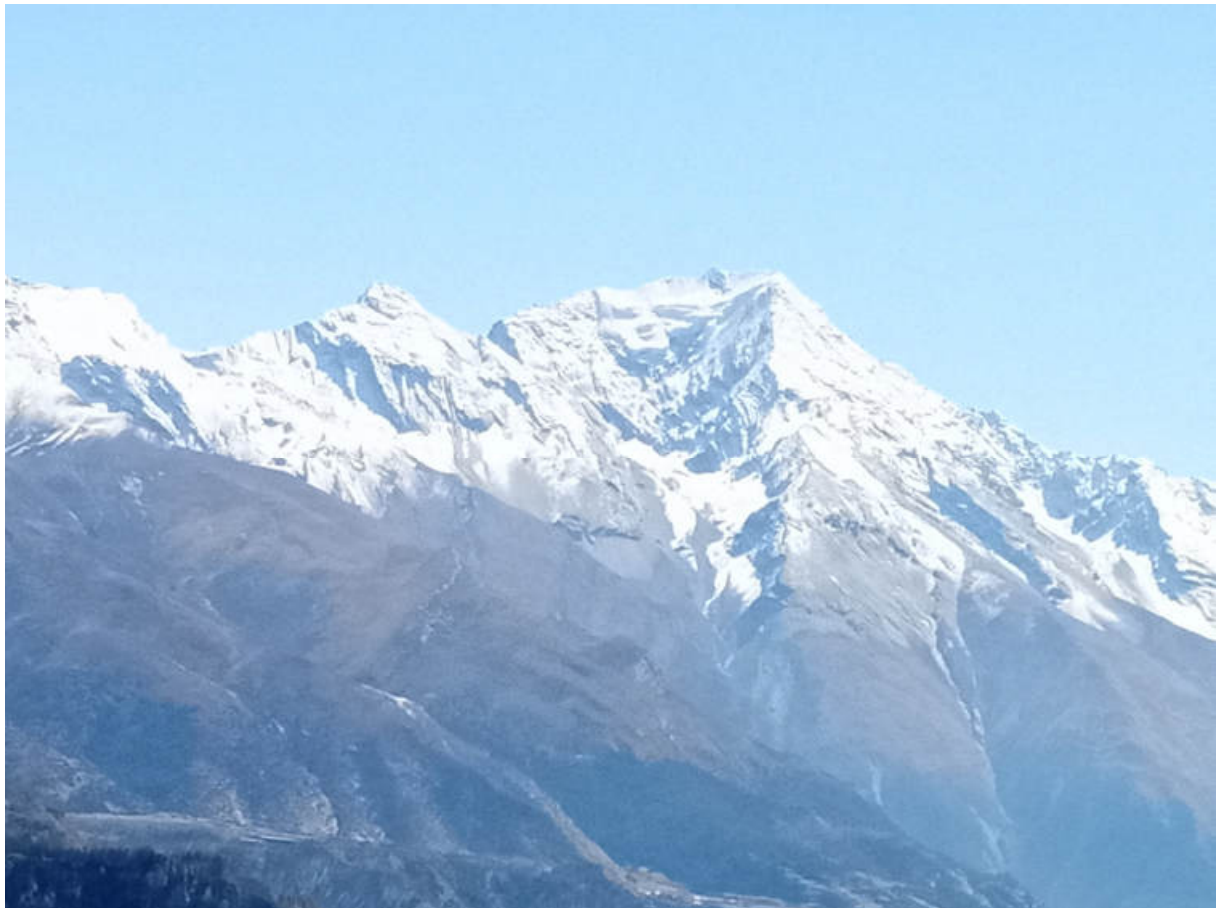
20 April Today is a day off. A day off, meaning that we stay in Manang for a second night. In the itinerary, it's called acclimatisation day in Manang. Niraj and I went on a small acclimatisation tour. It was short, including lying on the mountain for about three hours, but it was a steep climb, 450 metres of elevation gain, up to 4,000 m MSL. I did Nordic walking, Niraj told me to practise. From Thorong La Pass, there is a very long, steep, fine-stone descent. The poles, Niraj told me, should help you. And so I practise. On the ascent, in my opinion, the poles only get in the way, but on the descent they actually improve balance and, even more importantly, relieve pressure on the knees.

Now we're back; I've taken advantage of the warmth, done a second laundry, shaved, bathed and now I'm sitting on the roof terrace, in the warm sunshine, writing my report and looking at Tilicho Peak and Thorong Peak, the two mountains that will accompany me for the next six days. Tomorrow the key part of the trek will begin, with two of its most important objectives. The highest situated lake here is Tilicho (4650 m) and the highest situated pass is Thorong La Pass (5400 m), which is the highest point of the trek, then you descend into a completely different world, the Mustang Valley.

The weather here is constant. The harsh cold retreats before dawn; and it is worth getting up before dawn in order not to miss the best part of the day. The sky is cloudless, the sun is warming up, and it stays that way until the early afternoon.

Around noon the wind starts to blow. At first, it's mild and warm and doesn't bother me, but around three in the afternoon it starts to blow cold.

I have just had my meal, it is approaching three o'clock, I am wonderfully bored, still in the warmth. I bought myself a variety of biscuits and a whole thermos of tea, and I'm sitting on the terrace in the sunshine, contemplating. It's a bit windy from the side, but warm, not like yesterday.



Gangapurna from Manang.



Me, against the background of the massif from Tilicho Peak (left) to Thorong Peak (snowy pyramid on the right).



Above: Manang before the snow storm; below: two days later, after the snow storm; and still further, my colleague from Manang, who doesn't mind the snow storm.





Yeti in Manang.

21 kwietnia: Manang — Khangsar

At some point in time in the pale dawn, I opened my eyes and saw the mountains, but then in my sleep I heard pouring rain, and then later it stopped tapping on the roof. My joy was premature. In the morning I saw that the rain had turned into snow. And it was snowing, such a wet melting snow, and no wind. I am having my breakfast, and then we will wait for the weather to improve. For now, it looks depressing. Luckily, I have Niraj, without a guide, if I were here alone I would probably give up and go back.

By lunchtime it hadn't improved, at first it was snowing with rain, then wet snow, and for the last two hours it has been snowing regularly, in thick Christmas patches. The optimistic weather forecast is that it will improve tomorrow after lunch, according to the pessimistic one, this crap will last until Sunday. The good news is that the hosts have fired up the metal stove in the dining room, apart from that, there is no heating. In my room, I have a huge bed, two by two, and two equally large duvets, each five centimetres thick. For the time being, I am using one duvet and my sleeping bag; if it gets worse, I will use the other duvet too. Dinner has also warmed me up. Niraj comforts me that we will make it. He is a nice guy. The other thing is that I have

already managed to survive similar weather breakdowns in my climbing days. Therefore, I have put on hold all actions, expectations, hopes and emotions, and entered the cyborg avatar on standby.

22 April Manang — Khangsar (3,750 m)

It stopped raining last night. There was hope. In the morning, it was gone. It is snowing as if it would never stop. It is cold, but there is no frost, water drips from the melting snow. I sleep perfectly well in these conditions; after breakfast in a sleeping bag and under a warm duvet, it is pretty good. The internet stopped working; it is a miracle that it worked earlier. There is still electricity, and perhaps it will continue as they have two independent lines here: a grid powered by a local hydroelectric plant, which sometimes breaks down, and another of their own powered by photogalvanic cells. When I look through the window or go out on the terrace, and see the winter landscape, I find it hard to believe that I walked here, to Manang, for 6 days in the warm bright sunshine, and it was here that Niraj and I went for a steep hike and we lay and basked in the sun. So I thought, I would relax until lunchtime, but I couldn't lie down much. Some time after 10 o'clock the snow eased a little, but I did not pay much attention to it. Once it eases, once it increases, I thought.

And then, suddenly... Niraj knocks on my door. "Jacek, we need to have a walk" he says. I jump out of my sleeping bag and from under the duvet, get dressed as warmly as possible and off we go. And there's a surprise. It's not snowing any more, there's plenty of snow but it's melting away underfoot, the clouds are clearing, there's blue sky on the Chinese side, the sun is already heating it up and it's getting too warm at once. There is no time to waste, we are going, Niraj decides. The route planned for this day is short, 7 km, two hours of walking. In half an hour we are packed, we set off at 11:30.

There's snow everywhere. Niraj says he's only seen something like this here in winter. Yes, there were times when it snowed for an hour or two, but this time it snowed almost continuously for two days. In spite of the snow, the walk is not bad, the wet spring snow melts quickly. The sun is shining, it's hot, I have to take off my T-shirt, hard to believe I was just lying in bed covered with everything I could, and dressed in everything I had, and it was not too warm at all. The route is beautiful, even not too difficult. Despite the snow, we quickly reach Khangsar. We stay at the Maya Hotel. There is food, a room with a squat toilet, a bed, warm blankets — all the essentials. There is no electricity because of the snow. Since there is no electricity, there is also no internet connection. The hot shower doesn't work either. I try to send a text message that I'm alive, but there's also trouble with the reception. Maybe later.

We only lost one day due to the snow, and were able to get to Khangsar today. The weather seems pretty good. If it doesn't break, we're off to Tilicho Lake tomorrow. That will be a proper full day of trekking, not two hours, and a real manly adventure. Today, there was no electricity, no internet nor mobile phone reception. They've only just fixed it in Khangsar. There may be no contact with me for the next few days.



In the photographs below: We came to Manang in summer and two days later we continue on in winter. Road to Khangsar and our hotel there.











23 April: Khangsar — Tilicho base camp

We got up very early, washing is not an option and won't be for a few days. Unless we use snow. I only applied sun cream because it burns a lot, especially in the snow. Lips with Sudocream, because they also get kind of chapped. We set off at seven. The weather is beautiful. It is wonderful to walk in the warmth, even the snow did not bother us at the beginning. Since there was not much snow at the beginning. Then it became very difficult and rather dangerous. The route to the Tilicho base camp traverses a very steep slope. When there is no snow or heavy rain, it is an easy route with beautiful views, but when there is snow it becomes dangerous. The sun is out since morning, the snow melts, gets heavy, and avalanches come down. And there was a lot of snow in the upper part of our route. At the lowest part, the snow was, let's say, up to the ankles, maybe half a calf, and up there on those steep slopes it was up to the waist. When we reached the beginning of this difficult part, we met three Europeans and they said that it was wet, the snow was melting and it was getting dangerous. Such routes have to be completed early in the morning, when the snow is frozen after the night. Niraj had planned it that way, that's why we set off so early, but he hadn't predicted that there would be so much snow. And this route turned out to be very difficult, probably the most difficult of all trails I have walked in the mountains. At the beginning it was a matter of psychological difficulty. You walk along a narrow path in the middle of a steep, almost vertical wall with a chasm of maybe five hundred metres below you. If you fall, no one will even find any pieces of you. Above, an equally steep slope, covered with a thick layer of snow, and from time to time snowballs roll down on us; and in places it is black, as the avalanche has

already gone down here. I am a little worried, but not too much. I walk with poles, it helps, improves balance, especially on descents, because this path does not go quite evenly. I hold the poles tightly out of fear, so, afterwards, my hands hurt. In the second part, though it was less dangerous, there was much more snow and it subsided under my feet at almost every step. On top of that, it was impossible to rest on the way, because there were chances of an avalanche all the way. I was tired as never before, but this tiredness was brief, and after half an hour I did not feel anything anymore. The fatigue after a really long route, such as 10 hours of walking, is completely different; when I return from such a route, I do not feel any pain, it comes after several hours, usually at night. Today's route was very difficult and very beautiful. In fact, it was the most difficult and the most beautiful. At the end of the trail, there is the most beautiful place I have seen so far here in the Himalayas. The valley flattens out here. Seven-thousander peaks all around. I know Tilicho Peak and Khangsar Kang by name. Our hotel the News Tilicho Base Camp is, as Niraj calls it, basic. The internet service was on, but it stopped; the hot shower doesn't work. Maybe I could charge my phone, but I suppose it is a paid service. So, apparently, everywhere before was better, but here it is definitely the most beautiful. The dining room has huge windows facing east, west and south — all sides of the broad Annapurna massif. Besides, everywhere so far in the afternoon it blew cold from the east, and here it does not, it is somehow sheltered. And the rooms, although really basic, are somehow nicer.

Because of the snow we had to change our plans a bit. From the base camp we were supposed to go to the beautiful Tilicho lake, but it is a serious jaunce, and there is even more snow than we have today. Two locals went there in the morning, eight hours passed, and they are not back yet. Marching in such deep snow, especially on an unpaved trail, is a huge effort. We will head up there tomorrow, just for a bit of reconnaissance, at dawn; then breakfast and we will descend back to Kangsar as early as possible, so that the snow is still frozen. That's where the internet will be up and running, I won't send this report before then.

Located at 4,144 m MSL. Tilicho Base Camp surrounded by vertical white walls. Despite the cold and harsh conditions, this is one of our most enjoyable accommodations. The dining room with a fire burner is spectacular: panoramic, full view on three of the four sides of the world.









24 April: Tilicho base camp — Yak Kharka. 29 km

Last night we warmed ourselves by a wonderful fireplace. There was a couple of Belgians who, like me, are doing the full version of the route around Annapurna. Such full version can be over 170 km and may take some twenty days. The shortest solution is to drive a Jeep to Manang, from there take three days to Muktinath, and return by bus. It doesn't make much sense, because it leaves out what is most important — being in the mountains, unhurried. The Belgian couple also wanted to go to Tilicho Lake. It turned out that this lake is very popular with Nepalese tourists. After the last heavy snowfall, the trail was closed at first, but then a local guide, such a tiny Nepalese boy, went there. He came back, and said that the snow was up to his waist, it was difficult, but possible to walk. I don't know if the Belgians went. Niraj and I decided that we would just do just some recce, because, once there, you can't see anything, the lake is covered by snow and clouds, and it's a full day's expedition. We set off at 5 am and returned for breakfast at half past seven. After breakfast we set off back along the same route that had caused me so much difficulty the day before. This time there was no difficulty, some of the snow had melted and the rest was quite easy. It was going so smoothly that we have changed our plans. We were supposed to go back to Khangsar where we had slept the night before. The main reason was that there was internet connection there. But if we had gone there, we would have finished the whole day's trip at ten in the morning, and we would have lost about three hundred metres of hard-won altitude. So we extended our route, and today we went through what we had planned for tomorrow. After 29 km we reached Yak Kharka, meaning yak enclosure, 4,000 m above sea level. The weather was amazing. The snow was melting fast but there was still plenty left. So we stayed here, at the Thorong Peak Hotel. Electricity here comes only from solar panels, there is no internet connection, and you have to pay 100 rupees to charge your phone. Unsurprisingly, there is no hot water. But I have a room with an en-suite bathroom, a distinction only given to foreign tourists guided by guides. This quasi-bathroom consists, in fact, of an adjoining room, where, although there is no running water, there is a bucket with water and a flushing device, namely a one-litre cup with a very convenient handle. In addition, there is a squat toilet, which is basically a hole. I am not writing this to complain, nor to pick on the very nice and helpful Nepalese people. If you want comfort, you go to an all-inclusive five-star hotel holidays, not trekking in Nepal. It's already cold, it's almost five o'clock, the guys have started a fire in the wood burner in the dining room, it's already warm, almost all the smoke goes out through the chimney, only a small part goes to the dining room. Niraj, Aashis and the two hosts are sitting by the fire, mumbling something in Nepali. I was sitting there too, but I moved on as it was too hot.

Yak Kharka is actually the most spectacular part of the trek. Tomorrow we are going to Thorong base camp at 4,950 m; and the day after, we will cross the Thorong La Pass to Muktinath. Then, hot showers, internet, laundry and other luxuries.



*Above, our Hotel Thorong Peak at Yak Kharka (yak enclosure).
Further on, amazing views from the road up the valley to Thorong
Phedi. The last two photos are of the Thorong Phedi Base Camp
Lodge at 4,500 m MSL.*







25 April: Yak Kharka — Thorong High Camp (4,900 m MSL).

Today and tomorrow all covered. Neither in the evenings, nor at nights, not even in the mornings, is there anything to admire here. Especially in the evenings it is bloody cold. But if you can see the peaks of the mountains at dawn, and you can see them almost every day, then the weather is going to be beautiful at least until four o'clock. And so it was today. We set off slowly at half past eight, well, there is no hurry today. The sun is already visible on the higher rocks, but we still walk in the shade for a half an hour. We have to speed up so as not to feel the cold. We have more than 900 m of ascent ahead of us today, but more than half of it is not steep; first on the right and, after crossing a bridge, on the left bank of the Thorong River, which flows down from under Thorong Peak, through the Thorong Valley, and tomorrow, we go to Thorong Pass. The gentle part ends at the Thorong Phedi Base Camp Lodge (4,550 m MSL). The word *Phedi* often appears on maps here. It is probably best translated as 'near', it can also be a 'base' or a 'starting point'. So, *Thorong Phedi* means: close to the peak and pass of Thorong. We only stop here for a while. From here we head to Thorong High Camp (4,900 m MSL), the last place before the pass, the highest spot where we can spend the night. The approach from Thorong Phedi is very steep and all the more difficult with lots of snow. I'm panting a lot, but I'm going, quite efficiently, I think. From Yak Kharka we arrive at Thorong Base Camp in just under four hours, before eleven. There's no one there, everything is closed. Niraj says not to worry, so I don't. I am sitting in the sun, on the stone steps to the toilet, writing my report, and in this sun I clearly smell that I stink, the last time I had a hot shower was on 21 of April, in Manang, since then, I've only washed my teeth and hands in ice-cold water.

Soon the hosts arrived. A lot of trekkers have already gathered, more than 10 people. Probably many more will join. Tomorrow, everyone sets off even before dawn, while the snow is frozen. We have 500 m of ascent, and then almost 2,000 m of descent ahead of us; by lunchtime we should already be in the civilised world of Muktinath.

Thorong Base Camp lies on a spacious plateau beyond the pass. If someone who came here unexpectedly looked at it, they might think it was some kind of a holiday resort. The buildings are made of local granite, a large main building with a dining room and probably also bedrooms, and three long single-storey terraced houses, like bungalows, rooms with private entrances. If it wasn't so cold, if it was hot here, such a construction would make sense. Watching unprepared, you might think that the rooms have central heating, each bungalow has a bathroom, with hot water, maybe a bathtub, but no, there is none of that. It is cold, and these rooms are like the cells of self-mortifying hermits. Well, actually, there is something about that self-mortification here. I am sitting in the dining room. I'm waiting for my meal, as I eat as I normally do at two o'clock. It's still warm outside. About 15 people are sitting here with me. A few pretty girls, they don't mind the cold, and neither do I.

Below: Thorong High Camp in winter scenery.





26 April: Thorong High Camp — Mukinath.

A success. I have crossed the Thorong La Pass, 5,400 metres above sea level. It was tough. I didn't expect it. Neither did Niraj. All because of that snowstorm a few days ago. It had covered Annapurna like in winter. There is always some snow on the pass, but Niraj told me that this much snow he had seen here in February. Which means, I crossed the pass in winter conditions.

I couldn't sleep. Not from altitude, rather from fear. I woke up every now and then, I even dreamt that I got stuck, just like back then, in Zanzibar. I even thought it was for real, but then I woke up. I got up before four, so that we could walk in the hard frozen snow. For breakfast, we had thick sweetened oatmeal. It was awful. I ate it out of reason. We set off before five, with headlamps, as it was still dark. We entered the deep snow right away. Yesterday, we also walked continuously in deep snow from an altitude of about 4,500 m. Today, we had two more delights: it was very cold and the icy wind was blowing straight into our faces. I walked with my poles, otherwise I would not have been able to manage through the snow, but because of that, I couldn't move my fingers and they started to freeze and I stopped feeling them. Niraj himself did not expect it to be that bad, and only then did he give me his spare gloves. It was cloudless and full sun all the time, and that icy headwind was an extra challenge to cope with. I'm very pleased that I managed it. When I started planning a trip to the Himalayas, I considered the easiest trek to the Annapurna base camp. Only then Magda convinced me that the variant around Annapurna is better. However, it is important to remember that in the mountains the weather rules, and even a very simple trek, let alone a Himalayan one, can become a challenge.

There were about twenty of us gathered in Thorong High Camp. If you deduct the guides and porters, there are about 10 tourists and they didn't give up. Right behind us, for example, two elegant, elderly, athletic ladies, in the style of Agnieszka Gibas, were trekking with a porter and a guide. They could handle the wind in their eyes. The others did too. Niraj and I have just walked around Muktinath and met almost all of them. They were all far behind us as we set off and reached the pass and Muktinath first.

Today, for the first time since Kathmandu, so for the first time in almost two weeks, we stayed in a nearly real hotel, it's called Town House Hotel. In a puzzle of spotting 10 differences, I would probably find more. My room has smooth walls - instead of clay splashes, a door with a handle and a lock - instead of a padlock and a bolt, a bathroom with a toilet instead of a hole in the floor, a water tap, and a washbasin with a mirror. For the first time in a long while I have washed myself. I washed my smelly clothes. From tomorrow, we will continue hiking in the mountains, but lower, closer to civilisation. It should be warmer, the internet should be available, and there should also be orchids and rhododendrons.



*Above: The final metres through Thorong High Camp. Below:
Thorong La Pass (5411).*





The last metres before Thorong La Pass. Icy wind blowing straight into our faces. In the following photographs, the view of the Dhaulagiri and Mustang massif from the summit of Dhangladanda and from our hotel in Muktinath.



27 April: Muktinath — Jomsom through the Libra Valley; 22 km; 2,000 m descent, 900 m ascent.

The hotel in Muktinath is seemingly shabby, but after the harshness of the accommodations high in the mountains, even trivial facilities provide great pleasure; I didn't have to look for a mirror and stuff, I just shaved. I cherished this and the application of creams and lotions with pleasure. Muktinath is situated at an altitude of over 3,700 metres, it is still a little cold. However, no more chattering your teeth with your clothes on, in your sleeping bag and under a thick duvet. It is simply nice and fresh. We have had our breakfast and are about to set off for Jomsom. It will be even warmer there.

We descend. This is our second day of descent. Yesterday, we went down from the pass — 5,400 m MSL to Muktinath — 3,700 m MSL; and today, to Jomsom — 2,700 m MSL. Two days of descent and we're still higher than the Polish Tatra Mountains. First we have a short ascent over the ridge of the river valley and the village of Libra. On the ridge, a beautiful view unfolds of the white pyramid of the eight-thousander Dhaulagiri and the connected mountain range leading down the Mustang valley to Tibet. Then, the descent, just as long and just as steep as yesterday. I no longer feel the tension I had felt on the way to Thorong La. Now, it's just a nice route with beautiful views. The last stretch of perhaps five kilometres leads to Jomsom along a roadway. In my country, it would be some kind of non-qualified country road. Here, the category of such a road is right after the motorway, because the motorways here are made of asphalt. It is cracked, broken and uneven. The road to Jomsom is rough, curved and covered with dusty gravel and stones. Niraj rightly says that on trek such roads should be avoided. This particular road is highly frequented by tourists. For it leads into the Mustang Valley. For centuries, this valley was a separate kingdom unavailable to tourists. Only recently it has been allowed to visit, but the permit costs 50 dollars a day and has to be purchased for at least 10 days, and this is the price of the permit itself, not including a guide or porters. Niraj does not recommend the Mustang Valley. There is just this one dusty road from village to village and you walk it for days until you reach Lo Manthang, which is the seat of the king of Mustang. Niraj particularly recommends me a trek around Kanchenjunga and Makalu. I am already scheduled with him. I will take my whole family, Krysia, Agata, Michał, Wojtek, Jacuś, and next year we will go. As usual, the route lasts until noon. At noon we reach Jomsom. Just as Chame is the capital of Manang district, Jomsom is the capital of Mustang district. It is the largest settlement on the trekking route. It is very long, perhaps two kilometres. We walk all of it because only at the end, by the airport, our hotel Himalaya Inn is located. Again, I am happy like a fool that there is electricity and hot water.

I went for a stroll around Jomsom. Here, a wave of Covid can be seen. In Nepal, there is a big increase in cases in recent weeks. There is talk of some lock downs, but it is not clear what this means. Anyway, people walk around wearing masks. Here I am, coming back from the mountains, so empty here, and masks? Everyone here just stares at me and every now and then some police stops me, until I finally go to the hotel to get a mask, because they've annoyed me. There is nothing to see here. I

only bought myself biscuits and the local apple juice, pasteurised. Niraj says Jomsom is famous for its apple production.

Tomorrow we will take a bus to Tatopani. There are hot springs there.



*We move on to Jomsom via the Lupra valley. The beautiful
Dhaulagiri and the ugly buildings of Muktinath.*



Dhaulagiri.



Photographs from the summit of Dhangladanda - the path from Muktinath to Lupra. Above: us. Below: us, pointing to Dhaulagiri.



28 April: Jomsom — Tatopani

In the original version of my trek, Jomsom was to be the end point. From Jomsom by bus to Pokhara, then the Kathmandu valley and home. By adding 7 days for quarantine, which then didn't happen, the plan expanded. Trekking around Annapurna basically should form a circle. In fact, it is usually only a fragment of a circle. The first version was roughly three quarters of a circle. It surrounded Annapurna from the west, north and east. The south part was missing. So, the extended version of the trek just added, among other things, the southern section of the circle, between Jomsom and Pokhara. Apart from this addition there was also a beautiful stretch from Manang to Tilicho Lake.

Today, we are about to start this southern quarter. These areas are the most densely populated. Plus, the trail here follows the same, only busier road than the dusty rocky gravel road we walked yesterday. That is why we take a bus. Local, colourful, filled with natives but not overcrowded, lots of empty seats. Niraj said the road was decent. I wonder what he meant. It seems to me that there is no road here. We are going either along the stone bed of a wide river, or through some local construction site, or finally through some nothingness suspended over a precipice.

We drive past Syang, Marpha, Tukuche, Lamjung; an hour and a half passes; a tea break at a roadside bar. Then Lete, Jhipra Deurali, Ghansa, Rupse, Chhahara, Ligma, Tallo, Ryang. I sit comfortably by the window and enjoy the view of the Annapurna massif. Finally, less than five hours into the drive we reach Tatopani. We travelled 52 kilometres, which gave about 12 kilometres per hour. Had I not seen the thing we were driving on, I would have said it was very slow but I did see it, so I think our bus moved efficiently. It was a good idea with the bus. It would have taken us two long days to walk this route.

Tatopani is a whole different world. Very warm, 1,250 m MSL. This is about 4,200 m below the pass. It was so warm only in Bhulbhule on our first accommodation. There are some similarities with the accommodation in Thorong High Camp, because my room is also a terraced bungalow; but it is situated in the garden: grass, flowers and an armchair. By the pass it was terribly cold, unless you were standing in the sun. And here, one can relax. Well, unless Niraj pushes forward. Very nice. Usually, I was the one to hurry others.

There are hot springs in Tatopani. We had long planned to visit there. So we went, but it didn't quite work out, because of the Covid. They are having a third wave here, and they have gone into lockdown and closed the hot springs. To be precise, officially they are closed, but they let us in, only that there was no gentleman from the service who regulates the temperature by adding cold water. And it was very hot. It was impossible to stand in it. From this heat and from a hearty dinner I felt like sleeping. And I even slept a little, but I think another bus from Jomsom came and brought some friends from High Camp and Tilicho. Everyone somehow made it over the pass.

I am a vegetarian, I have not eaten meat since I started the trek. In general, I do not eat much.

Now it will be pure relaxation and laziness till the end. The route to the finish of the trek could be done in two days. We will do it in four.

Below: a view from the bus from Jomsom to Tatopani. Next, my garden house from Tatopani and another Dal Bhat.





29 April: Tatopani — Shikha Chitra

I woke up around five in the morning in my garden house in Tatopani in the Himalayas in Nepal. It was dawn. The birds were already singing in every direction. There was a Belgian couple sleeping next to my bungalow, a Japanese couple further away, a Nepalese couple further away, and a lone elderly French woman on the other side. We have all followed a similar route. It's a wonderful place, it's a shame to leave. But we are getting out of here. Niraj had planned a short day but it didn't quite work out. I don't complain, because it is all because of Covid, and I have benefited in the Himalayas from the pandemic much more than I have lost. For one, I enjoyed the Himalayas more because of the year-long wait. Two, that due to this would-be quarantine, I have a week longer trek. And three, it is quite empty out here. However, it is precisely because it is empty that we had a bit of a problem. All the guest houses on the way were closed. In Shikha, where we were planning to stay, all the places we have tried, have turned us away. Since there are no tourists, it is difficult for them to keep the business going. Because here, every guest house must provide food. Otherwise it's not possible. So it's hard to store products and keep them waiting for weeks. My legs were completely shot, because it was supposed to be short walk, but it is a long and steep climb, in total over a thousand metres. All this left very little for tomorrow to reach Ghorepani.

Finally, at the end of Chitre village we came across our place. It is called New Annapurna Lodge. Although once again there is no mirror or washbasin, it has everything else and is beautifully situated, and I have a room with a panoramic view. I'll take a picture later as a small storm is passing through now, it is cloudy and raining so I am just lying in my cot waiting for it to be nice.

Below: our New Annapurna Lodge in Chitre. A lovely place but I fell quite ill there. Panoramic room with curved (falling) floor.





30 April: Chitre — Ghorepani.

Beautiful views but the floor was uneven both in the room and in the bathroom. At first I didn't notice, until the morning when I went to the toilet and found it difficult to keep my balance. It got even worse when I listened to an audiobook through my headphones while shaving. I simply felt as dizzy as if I had stepped off a carousel. Fortunately, I did not have any nausea. I was a little worried that it might be something more serious, but apparently not. Just a sensitive labyrinthus. I've always had it. To put it briefly: vertigo from the Himalayas.

Today is a lazy day. A short route. We do everything later than usual, but still earlier than regular people. The route should take an hour and a half. We set off before nine, and after less than an hour of walking we lay down on the grass in a nice clearing. Rhododendrons abound but there is nothing attractive about them. Some leaves green others yellow, the flowers are few and small. Our pine tree is more attractive than the rhododendrons.

The route is a short but steep ascent. Just before Ghorepani, panting loudly, I pass an old Nepalese woman as she stands at the sharp approach on stone slabs arranged in a steep staircase. She looks at me then at Niraj and says to him: "He is panting terribly. Is he not going to die on you?" "He won't die. He's been panting like that for over two weeks now and nothing, he's still alive."

We reach Ghorepani. It is a beautifully situated village, quite large, even by the standards of the area. We stay in Hotel Hilltop, the tallest building in Ghorepani, and of course I get a room on the highest, second floor. We are alone in the hotel. On the previous day, a group of about ten people stayed here, we passed them on the way, they were going to Muktinath. The hotel offers all the comforts of home apart from an internet connection. Oh, well.

The internet got fixed, so I'll be able to send it after all. I spent two hours in bed and figured out that the dizziness is probably not the curved floor but my hypertension, or rather lack of it. I am still taking Polpril for hypertension and Doxar, which is for the prostate but it also lowers my blood pressure. I have been burning off a lot of energy, eating very little and no meat for over two weeks. I have certainly lost a lot of weight and my blood pressure has surely gone down. I got dizzy today about an hour after I took the tablets. Of course I won't take any more. I will just spend the day in bed, order a coffee. It is raining, it has turned cold, I have no desire to do any more sightseeing. Besides, Niraj already cares enough for me to explore everything.



Rhododendrons



1 May: Ghorepani — Hile

My hypothesis regarding too low blood pressure turned out to be incorrect. Not taking the hypertension pills did not help. During the night I got even more dizzy. Before dawn, we were supposed to go with Niraj to Poon Hill. This is the mountain above Ghorepani, which offers a beautiful view of Annapurna. We didn't go, I couldn't make it. In the morning, Niraj called for a Nepali village doctor for me. A nice and friendly young girl. She came herself, I didn't have to go anywhere and the visit cost us the equivalent of 20 zloty. She checked my blood pressure, it was a bit too high, so I took some medication and when she checked it again, it was OK. She gave me some medicine for the dizziness, so I took it.

It turned out that the dizziness was stomach related. And I think it was. The coffee I was drinking was an instant coffee with powdered milk. It harmed me rather than helped. And their other dishes too. If I had some ham and cottage cheese, I would be OK. We wondered what to do. The road from Ghorepani is very bad and nightmarishly long, even if you arrange a vehicle, you would have to endure bumps for hours along with the dizziness. That's not what I wanted at all, as nothing hurt me, I wasn't weak at all, just the dizziness. Niraj brought me some ginger honey tee, a kind of hot water with honey and herbs. It warmed me up. Then I decided that we should do a test. I got dressed, took my poles and went for a stroll with Niraj. The beginning was difficult but then it got better with every step. When I came back, I

threw up that ginger honey and felt relieved. Let's go further, I decided. The road for today was neither short nor easy, 1,700 m of sharp descent, from 3,000 m at Ghorepani to less than 1,500 m at Hile. At first we didn't plan to cover the entire length of it, but to act accordingly depending on how I was feeling. If I was going to feel very bad, there was a much shorter and better road to Pokhara starting at just an hour's walk from Ghorepani.

We set off slowly but I was getting better with every step. I was walking well, but only as long as I looked at the shoes of Niraj walking in front of me. Every time I glanced somewhere else, I had trouble with my balance. After a few hours of walking, this improved a lot. At the beginning, however, the problem was my empty stomach. Yesterday, for dinner, I did not manage to swallow anything. Today, it was the same for breakfast. We thought for a long time about what I could manage to stomach. We decided on chicken broth. Perhaps with rice. Such a broth was made by a lady in Banthanti, well past the halfway point to Hile. And this broth did me good. It was delicate. I only managed to eat a little rice. The fact that I got better was proved by the fact that despite a storm and pouring rain, and that the descent down the slippery stone stairs was very sharp, I was walking quite well. Well done Niraj for forcing me to move my ass out of bed in Ghorepani. And I had really wanted to stay in that bed.

...

We walked for five hours, actually considerably less, as this includes a long lunch break at Banthanti. And we got there. Through a storm and heavy rain. Fortunately, it was warm and without wind. We stayed at a very cosy guest house. The owner, a lovely village woman, made me a tasty vegetable soup for dinner, such a delicate stock. She served it to me in her hen kitchen in a country hut.

It was very nice, but I couldn't eat there, half of the smoke from the stove was getting into the room. I had to move to the dining room. More than an hour has passed since that soup, so it means that it took. The dizziness practically disappeared. I have eaten. I think I'll be fine now. I am just a little afraid that it might come back at night.

Today was actually the last day in the mountains. Tomorrow there are still 7 or 8 kilometres left along the country road to Nayapul, and there a hotel car will pick us up and take us to the hotel in Pokhara. Pokhara is Nepal's second city. The conditions there are already the same as in my country.

The end of the trek Closed check point in Birethani.



2 May: Hile — Nayapul on foot, Nayapul — Pokhara by car.

I woke up hungry. It's a good sign. I am still dizzy but slightly. I had two soft-boiled eggs, and one and a half toast with jam for breakfast. It took. It's not far to Nayapul, about three hours' drive, but we make it in two, and by nine, way too early, we are by the main road in Nayapul. The last two days have been a long and steep descent down the disjointed slopes of the Annapurna base camp. Plenty of small villages hanging on steep slopes. Lots of people. Almost no tourists.

Actually, this is the end of the expedition, the end of the mountains. It was certainly the most beautiful and the most difficult mountaineering adventure in my life. Such experiences are worth great sacrifices and all the money.

We sit and wait for the hotel car. It will take us back to civilization. I have had enough. I am tired and fulfilled. I would like to wash in warm water and eat properly. I think that this dizziness may be caused by hunger, or rather not so much by hunger itself, but by lack of food which my body requires. Had I eaten a ham sandwich and some cottage cheese for breakfast, the dizziness would have disappeared completely.

I am already in a hotel, in Pokhara. It is a proper one. A real hotel, not like the ones on the trekking route. Beautifully located, balcony over the garden. A real bathroom with really hot water. I got out of the car that brought us here and while walking to the hotel I staggered like a drunk. After all, it was almost 200 km of walking over 20 days, and the weather conditions were particularly difficult this year. Niraj commented that I could safely say I had crossed Thorong in winter conditions. I think I am well, because my appetite is back. Maybe not necessarily for what you can get here, but I can choose something nevertheless. I went for dinner, I paid this time, together with Niraj and Aashid, as usual I ate and they didn't, they eat separately. I guess it's a rule not to socialise with the customer. So be it, I don't care. The hotel is situated by Lake Phewa, well, not exactly by the lake, but close. It is a tourist district. Usually, crowds of trekkers and other tourists pass through here at this time of the year. Everyone who goes trekking in the mountains of western Nepal for a longer or shorter time visits Pokhara. This time, however, the streets are empty, too empty, as if there was some kind of war or state of emergency. Well, actually, it is a state of emergency. The Nepalese government has become very concerned about the Covid wave in India and has declared a lockdown. Niraj explained to me what the lockdown was all about, but at the same time pointed out that he did not really know either. He said that hotels, shops and restaurants were closed. But not all. Back in the mountains, on the route from Tatopani to Chitre, we were supposed to stop for the night before but the hotels were closed, probably because of Covid, but then we found a hotel in Chitre. Same here in Pokhara. Not sure on what basis some places are open and others closed. There are streets near our hotel Snow Hill Lodge that are clearly tourist-oriented. Just souvenir shops, hotels and restaurants. We went there to look for something for me to eat. But it was difficult, because almost everything was closed. And when it was open, there was nothing non-Asian. And I wanted something similar to the food from Poland. I needed some kind of salad and some kind of meat. Wherever we sat down there was only Dal Bhat and Momo. Finally, Niraj found something, but I think it was somehow through connections, because the place was

closed, and the waiter opened the restaurant from the inside especially for us. I managed to have some salad. Nothing extraordinary, sliced, evenly arranged and not seasoned: cucumber, carrot, turnip, tomato and onion, but for me it was delicious. Christian meat I couldn't get, instead I got something Indian: chicken pieces with bone in curry sauce. The waiter said the sauce was not spicy, not sure what he meant. It wasn't bad but not any sort of fancy food either. I'm supposed to go there for dinner too. I might go and order all the salads they have on the menu.

I washed my clothes, some of them really stank. I washed myself in water that was far too hot. Now, I am lying on my bed, and while writing, I am watching an Indian programme on TV. The gentlemen and lady are saying something, and the others are clapping and laughing.

I have already said goodbye to Aashis today. I gave him a \$60 tip. Sujan said that was the amount to give. Tomorrow I will say goodbye to Niraj. I will give him a hundred. It is more than due but I will give this much because I feel so. I have arranged with him to visit Pokhara tomorrow morning. Then we say goodbye. If it wasn't for Niraj and Aashis, I wouldn't have been able to complete this route. Not in this weather. Probably, as early as in Manang, I would have been scared and returned in disgrace. And then, when I was ill, Niraj helped me a lot, he found me a doctor, comforted me a little, motivated me. I would not have come up with anything on my own.

I have no strength left at all, but I am already a little agitated, although I would probably fall asleep on this bed and continue until morning. I will lie down a bit more, and then go for a stroll, and then at six o'clock for dinner and to bed.

So I went into town. The beginning was difficult. Then it got better. It's not quite vertigo. It's a bit similar to walking around with a huge hangover. Only then, there are extra sensations, your head hurts and you get a nasty feeling in your gullet. And here you are a bit like floating above the ground, kind of fuzzy; while the pavement rises on the right it will carry you off to the left. I've explored the surrounding streets, nothing to see, houses, shops and lots of construction sites. Finally, as planned, I went to the restaurant where I ate that day. It is upstairs, the boss was waiting on the ground floor; he recognised me from a distance. The restaurant must be closed, because for one thing, it was empty and for another, our table from earlier was still not cleaned up. Anyway, I passed many restaurants on the way and saw "takeaway only" signs. I have ordered Russian salad and mixed spicy salad. Russian salad is the internationally accepted name for what we always prepare on a name-day. I wonder if the name applies here too. Mixed spicy may be too spicy, but at most I will not eat the spicy bits. And I also ordered buff soul, which is a bull soup. You can't eat cow meat here because cow is a sacred animal, but you can eat bull meat. I will probably get some beef broth.

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The soup turned out to be the best. Beef broth, but not liquid, just a kind of thick and glossy, something like Chinese sauces. Perfect in taste and genuine. The best of the food I've had here in Nepal. Russian salads completely different, basic vegetables, mostly cauliflower, topped with a sort of diluted mayonnaise. Not so good. On the

other hand, the mixed spicy salad was excellent. Spicy but not too much. It had pickled cucumbers in it. It was good. I'm going back to sleep.

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I can't help but add some more.

These Nepalese pickles in mixed spice salads allowed my body to make an astral connection with home, through my pickles.

When I returned to the hotel, it was a five-minute walk, I was accosted in the garden by a Nepalese man with the appearance of a chef. He was carrying a plastic bag which contained toasted bread, bananas and some other fruits. In poor but communicative English, he began by apologising to me that they had to close the restaurant because of the coronavirus, that they only had a small cooker left, that he was very sorry for the poor choice, and that he could offer me soft-boiled eggs, toast, jam, fruit, coffee and juice. And also that he would bring it to me at eight o'clock, because I had requested breakfast at eight, to be served on my personal balcony. Wonderful.



My regular table at a restaurant in Pokhara. It was closed due to the lockdown; to eat there I entered through the owners' flat.

3 May: Pokhara

I thought it would be fine now, that I would lie down for two days in Pokhara and then another two, in Kathmandu. I thought I would rest and recover. I was wrong. Before six in the morning I've received a message from Niraj on WhatsApp: "there are changes, we have to meet." At six in the morning they arrive with Aashis in my room. I am still not well awake. "Today is the last day of domestic flights, and the day after tomorrow is the last day of foreign flights", says Niraj. Nepal is closing its borders. And the peace of mind is gone. I will not fly to Kathmandu tomorrow, but today, and I have to rebook my flight home for tomorrow. This is difficult to arrange through the Kompas travel agency in Toruń, as it is still the middle of the night in Poland. Niraj promises to arrange it, but he apologises that there will be no Pokhara sightseeing today. "Hang the trip" I think to myself. Niraj says "the most important thing is that you get home safely." He is right. Shortly afterwards, he sent me a ticket to Kathmandu. We take the 12:55 flight. At 10 they open the Qatar airlines office in Kathmandu. Niraj will call them then. Changes, changes, changes. The situation is dynamic. I will probably write a few times today too.

The situation is dynamic. At 11 o'clock we were supposed to leave for the airport. An hour earlier we met to call Qatar airlines. The line was busy, impossible to get through. Niraj called his friend from the travel agency who knows more, and learned that, although domestic flights will certainly be cancelled from tomorrow, foreign flights can still operate for a day or two, because cancelling foreign flights is not such a simple matter. In my Qatar airlines booking application, my flight to Doha has the status of confirmed, which means that it is scheduled to fly. Meanwhile, Niraj received news that our flight to Kathmandu has been cancelled. We're not flying, we're taking a rental car, and for now we wait. Somehow I am strangely not afraid. I wrote to Krysia to call Kompas to rebook my ticket for earlier. But that makes little sense, because today is May 3, a holiday in Poland, so there's probably no one in Kompas. Although, I remember that their airline ticket department is, or rather was, on duty on holidays. If all else falls, Krysia can go there tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock, then here it will be about 3 o'clock and that would be enough. On the other hand, there is a high chance that there will be no need for any rebooking. I think I will go for lunch. Because it will be about five hours by car to Canada.

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Niraj spent quite a long time looking for a car to take us to Kathmandu. I went to have my meal. It feels like some kind of emergency and a general shutdown. My restaurant keeper, when he saw me, was quite pleased, and he let me into the restaurant from behind, through his flat. I have eaten. Niraj found a car and we are going. All the time the guys are figuring out what to do and how to do it, the danger is growing. Police checkpoints controlled us perhaps 5 times on the 200 km route. Some under cover, some not. The danger is growing. The rain got even heavier, the danger increases. We travelled for six hours, a whole day; in Kathmandu, near his house, Aashis got off. Niraj took me to the hotel, handed me over to Nabin and also said goodbye.

I met Nabin when I arrived, he picked me up from the airport. He knows a few words in Polish. And then, Nabin started to tell me what we were going to do about my return flight. He entered a number into my mobile phone and said, call them, it's the

Polish consulate. I was a little offended as I thought they would arrange the flight for me, but Nabin said: “we will arrange whatever is necessary, but first call, at the consulate they know more.” So I called, and a gentleman immediately answered and told me that the final arrangements are that international flights will continue until midnight on 6 May, and not until midnight on 5 May, as was previously said. I asked him about three times whether he was sure. He said he was certain. So, it is okay. He also said, I had to have a test at most 48 hours before departure, and the test is only done by selected hospitals, the hotel knows which ones. When I arrived in Kathmandu, I also had a test but it was easier then. There was no need to go to the hospital. A pre-arranged team came to the hotel, did the test for me and sent the results to the hotel. I depart on the 6th at 8pm, so I have to take the test on the 5th. This pretty much rules out rebooking a ticket for the 5th? And so Nabim arranged everything for me. Even dinner. The same meal I had the day before I left for the trekking. Then, when eating in various hotels, the higher we went, the worse the food got, I often thought of this salad with chicken and crispy croutons and a delicious broth with a Chinese name and dumplings stuffed with some greens. The room is nice. I will enjoy staying here. I hope there will be no more changes.

I hope not to jinx it, but so far it looks like the first day of peace since I arrived here. As usual here, I sleep like a log, and if I wake up, I do not know where I am at first. In Pokhara, the hotel was a bit better, with a balcony and garden, but there is not much to complain about; here the room is also good, and the food is definitely better here and on site, in the hotel. In addition, in such an emergency situation it is always better to be where the airport is. In the morning when I get out of bed I still feel a little dizzy. Just like when you get out of bed weakened after an illness. Then it passes, and the later the better. In the morning it starts all over again. I hope this is not some unusual mild form of Covid. Well, I guess not every symptom means Covid.

Breakfast is finally normal. Eggs and toasts with jam. It's a pity the eggs were hard boiled. Maybe they could make scrambled eggs. Once I have had breakfast, the symptoms stop. At last, I can lie down in peace. The last time I could lie down peacefully, was when there was a snowstorm in Manang. However, the meaning of “could” and “peacefully” is quite loose here. “Could” as it was bloody cold. What is a “could”, when you lie in your clothes and sleeping bag, under a thick duvet, and when you take your hand out, it freezes. And what is “peacefully”, as I was back then worried about what would happen, about the snow, whether I would get over the pass, whether anything bad would happen. It has been an exceptionally cold year. And now I can finally lie down in peace. The flight on May 6th seems certain. The only uncertainty is the Covid test they will give me. I don't know what would happen if it came back positive. Will they keep me here? Too bad. Uncertainty is a feature of all voyages, and especially of great journeys in extreme circumstances, and mine seems to be like that. After all this, I will just sit in front of the TV, in complete confidence, watching one of the Polish scripted docuseries “Dlaczego ja?” (*Why me?*), or something similar.

There is a group called Poles in Nepal on WhatsApp. It was created by Radosław Araszkiewicz, who cooperates with the Polish consulate here. Sujan gave him my phone number yesterday, and he added me to the group. There are a lot of Poles

who need to get away from here. He is the one I asked yesterday to confirm the information that my flight on May 6th will take place. And he confirmed it. In my Qatar app, my flight is on time and confirmed. The online check-in should start tomorrow morning.

Kathmandu looks like it was under martial law. Luckily, there are exceptions. Our street is packed with souvenir shops and assorted goods for tourists. When I was leaving, everything was open, although there were few tourists. When I arrived yesterday, and today when I looked out after breakfast, all these shops were closed with corrugated metal sheet shutters. It looks sad. I have no desire to go there for the time being. I am going to lie down until lunch, then eat it, and then lie down until dinner. That is my plan. I wonder if it will work.

It feels good to be in bed, but as the weather forecast suggests that it will rain from midday until evening, I got out and went for a stroll. It's deserted, closed, shop windows covered with bars or tin blinds. This lack of people makes the rubbish, dirt and shabbiness very noticeable. The local colour of Asian cities is probably best seen on television. Well, there is no noise and less stench today. My stroll was short, not even an hour. It is hard to look for excitements, when you have mountains in mind. I return to the hotel and devote myself passionately to waiting for dinner.

And after lunch, I wait for dinner, and at dinner I am already looking forward to being in bed. Interestingly, in the evening, even after lying in bed for a long time, the dizziness decreases, it is hardly noticeable. Apart from that, boredom. There's nothing going on. Super cool, this is my first quiet day in Nepal.

At lunch, I've met a couple of Poles who were at Everest; they are also returning on the 6th, only they are flying to Doha even earlier than me. And then, over dinner, I met two Dutch women. They were in Langshiang, they were supposed to come back on the 12th, but they had to cut their trek short and are coming back by an extra plane tomorrow.

Below: my dinner at my hotel. Of all the places I've eaten in Nepal, this was the best. Although it wasn't bad in Pokhara either. We ate there on the hotel patio, quite different from the rest of Kathmandu — green and quiet. The best was the wonton soup, a broth with dumplings, and a very green Caesar salad with chicken. After the Dal Bhats served in mountain hostels, this was a real relief.





Kathmandu University Hospital. It doesn't look great but the PCR test they did there served me well (as it came back negative).

5 May: Kathmandu

I woke up feeling somewhat healthier. I walk even straighter. When, after a shower, I looked at my silhouette in the mirror, it seemed to me that there was much less of me. Maybe it was just an illusion. I still feel best in bed. They're about to bring me breakfast. After I eat, Nabin is taking me for a test. I intend to spend the rest of the day in bed.

Well, here I am after the test. I'm a survivor. We went there by taxi. Not too far, three and a half kilometres altogether. Despite TV appearances, from an aesthetic point of view, Kathmandu is horrible. Morocco's Fez or Marrakesh are also overcrowded, noisy and smelly, but there are plenty of beautiful places to balance it out; in the opinion of many, they balance it out handsomely. Here, there are some temples, but they can't cut through the filth that surrounds them. Everything is in disrepair, under construction, not a single piece of even pavement or road. The Manmohan Hospital we came to is a university hospital. The full name is Manmohan Memorial Medical College & Teaching Hospital. So it's a good hospital, a model hospital. It looks shabby, the surroundings dirty and uneven. The collection of material for testing is done in the car park under the hospital building. Apart from the nightmarish aesthetic,

it is a good place, because it is massive and, although covered, somehow also outdoors. Nabin was originally supposed to go there with me at eleven but unexpectedly this morning he changed his mind and we went at half past nine. "Yesterday, there were lots of people, I was there with other clients and it took us four hours." That's why we went early. And, indeed, there was a queue, about 80 people. And it was a good thing we came so early, because when we came back two and a half hours later, after we'd done our business, the queue was more than twice as long. On top of that, the system is complicated, first you go to a queue to pay, and then with the receipt to the right queue for specimen collection. So I queued for collection, Nabin went to pay 2,000 rupees, with my money of course, when he returned after less than an hour I had already moved on nicely. Had I been there by myself, I wouldn't have made it in six hours. All in all, apart from the nightmarish aesthetic, it was not so bad there, the guards were keeping order, everyone was wearing masks and there was plenty of hand sanitiser in the air. They even kept the distance, only at the very end, at the window it became too crowded. The lady who was taking samples was standing in a booth behind the glass, and only her hands in rubber gloves were sticking out. I handed her the packet I had received earlier at the window, she took out the wires and the test tube, stuck a wire in my nose and another in my mouth; then she put it in the test tube, and I placed it together in the prepared box. Tomorrow, I must go there again to collect my result; there were less people in that spot. Now I am slowly recovering in my bed.

Not every Pole in Nepal is as well off as I am. On WhatsApp, on the Poles in Nepal group, I've received a message that the weather in the Makalu area is unpredictable, and that the helicopter can't fly there to pick up a group of Poles who got stuck there.

6 May: Kathmandu

I've got it. I have got it. I've got it! The test result. It's negative. I was so worried. Of all the multitude of anxieties about this expedition, the worst was the one related to the tests. How to do it, when to do it so that it is not too old, where to do it, and most of all, what the result will be. I seem to feel fine, but the result could have been false positive, I have heard about such things; besides, a lot of people supposedly pass Covid without visible symptoms. Perhaps I would too? I am vaccinated so I should not get the disease, but Iwonka, although vaccinated, did develop it. I have had the test three times. Before I left, I checked if it had arrived a hundred times. Then I went to sleep. I checked in the morning at five o'clock, to my relief, negative. I was a little less scared of the test in Kathmandu, but still. The one yesterday was by far the worst. Had the first test come back positive, I wouldn't have gone, very sad but I would have stayed at home. With the second one, they would have made me take it again, and I would have been put on the road. But if yesterday's test came back positive, that would be a real disaster. I wouldn't be flying on the 6th. There are no flights after that. I would have to stay in Kathmandu. Where? Paid by with what? I am running out of money, apparently I have some sickness insurance, but I doubt it would cover my stay in Kathmandu. Plus the plane ticket. Would it be lost? Even if it wasn't, I would lose a lot of money and it would be impossible to rebook since Nepal

is closed and I'm in it. Plus the dizziness. I thought maybe it was something I ate, maybe it was weakness, but of course I read that at the beginning of the pandemic in China, dizziness was considered one of the main symptoms. Today I couldn't sleep because of this, just like at Thorong base camp before the pass.

Now, as for the dizziness, I'm pretty sure it's due to emaciation and attenuation. Just like following an illness. Today, as I sucked my stomach in the bathroom, I noticed I had a fist-sized hole there. So how do you walk straight with something like that?

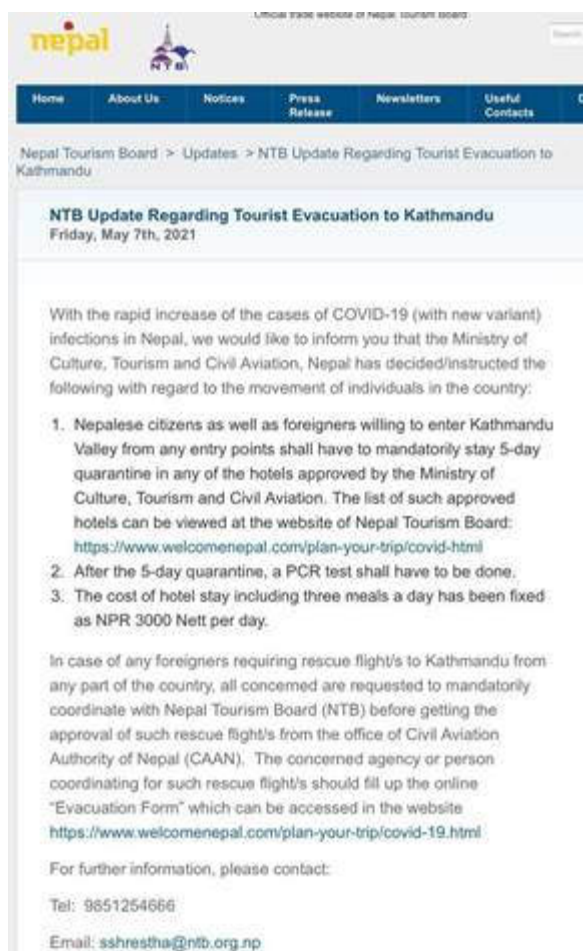
Nabin sent me the link to the test results before six this morning. A link like that is not enough to get on a plane. Qatar airlines is taking this very seriously. Maybe through various reports that someone somewhere tampered with the test, the sick person got on the plane and infected others. The test result is a document with a photo and a seal. It must be collected in person. They open at seven o'clock. I set off before half past six. It's over 3 km, I arrived at 7 o'clock sharp, I was 11th in the queue to collect. It went very smoothly, not one by one, but the man collected the receipts from all of us at once, printed out the certificates, pasted and stamped them and that was it. It's a beautiful document. Like some kind of a diploma. Later, on my way back to the hotel, I noticed that the route led through a very attractive area, with temples, both Buddhist and Hindu, shops and streets, and everything was much nicer than when I was not yet PCR negative. I even bought some pancakes on the way, small, crunchy ones. In a house, on the ground floor, a man was frying them in a huge cauldron, there were various kinds of balls, pancakes, pretzels and such, lying around. A lady was standing next to him and selling them. I asked for five. She said, 50 rupees, and I paid. She placed about ten pancakes in a tube of newspaper and handed them to me. I have to think about these numbers and the meaning of this incident in general. When you are a happy owner of a negative PCR result, everything seems better, breakfast at the hotel has never been so tasty, the weather so nice. I am enjoying it now. At five o'clock Nabin is coming and taking me to the airport.

Epilogue

Nothing else stopped me from getting home. At the airport in Kathmandu, lots of queues, I can't count how many, they probably arrange it that way on purpose. Flights on time and very pleasant. Qatar airlines has a very nice crew. Such things have not been anywhere in recent years. I remember there used to be such services about twenty years ago, but then the airlines cut costs and saved on everything, from meals to drinks. Meanwhile, the ladies of Qatar airlines were giving out refills. The stewardess gave me some orange juice, which I ordered, and then she offered me another one, mango juice, "It's really good, please try it", and then she brought me an extra one. And the food is tasty like nowhere else. Even a 10-hour break in Doha was not difficult, I slept on a couch and even had dreams. The plane to Doha was full like it had been before, while the one to Poland was less than half-full. At Okęcie airport,

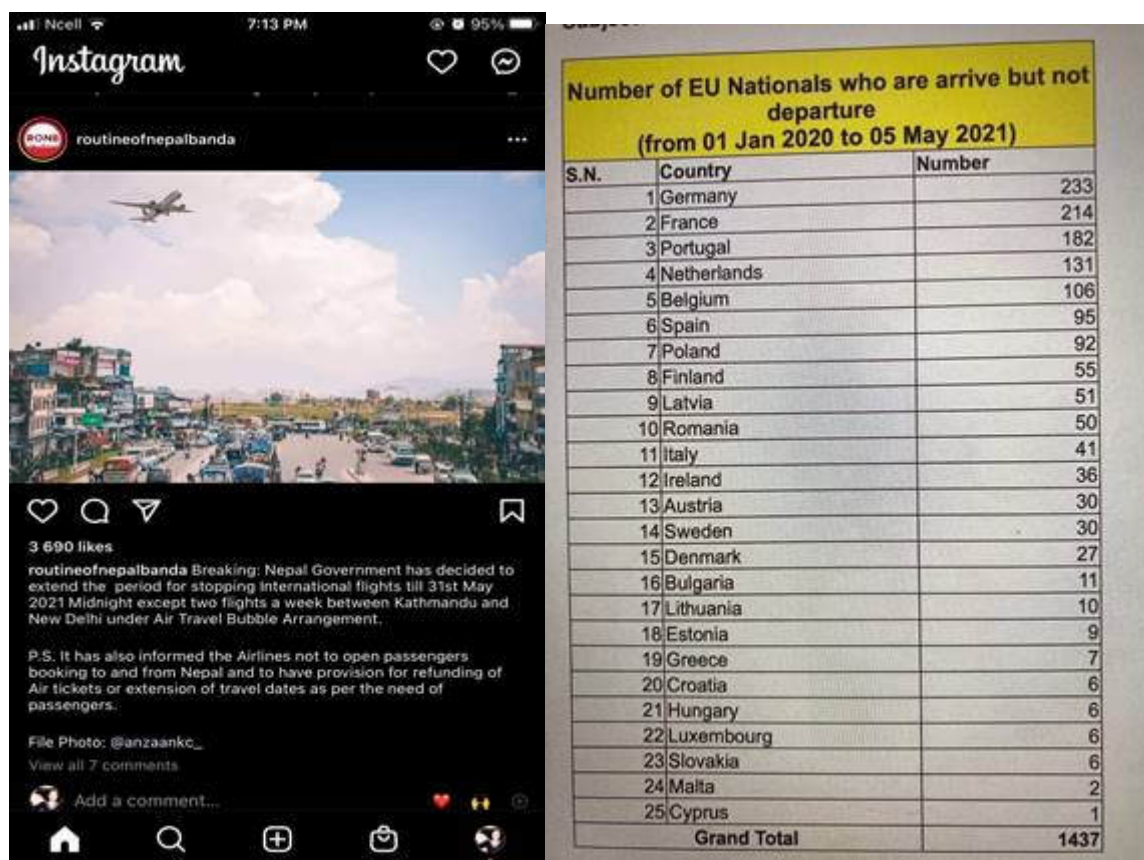
the lady from the border control sent me to the quarantine, but she immediately said that at the baggage claim they do tests and if I am negative, the quarantine will be lifted automatically. And so it happened. In addition, Michał was in Warsaw and we met, so after a 30-hour journey I arrived home.

I didn't know yet that my happy and timely return home was an exception and not a rule among Nepalese spring trekkers. When the lock down was announced on 3 May and flights were stopped in Nepal, there were admittedly far fewer tourists than there used to be in pre-Covid times. Still, there must have been thousands of them. Many of them, like me, came back by May 6th, but a lot of others did not make it.



Back home, I continued to follow the Poles in Nepal group on WhatsApp. Things got better for me, but for many the situation became dramatic. The lockdown was deepening. The Kathmandu Basin was closed by the authorities on May 7th. Kathmandu Basin is the capital region. It is the only way to fly out of Nepal. Anyone returning home from the mountains has to get to Kathmandu first, and there is a new rule that says you have to be in quarantine for seven days when you enter. Because not everyone has managed to get back before May 7th, if only to Kathmandu. Adding to the lockdown was the collapse of the weather in many areas of the mountains.

Attempts were made to get tourists down by helicopter but in many areas, for example Makalu and Kangchenjunga, the weather restricted flights for few days.



On the WhattsApp group you can see that people are trying to do something, look for flights, organise charters. Unfortunately, without results, and the chances of success do not seem high. Meanwhile, the government has extended the flight ban until the end of May. There are 1,437 tourists left in Nepal, including 93 Poles. I nearly got stranded there with them. I keep my fingers crossed for their quick and happy return.

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