

On the peaks of the world. Part 2.

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka talks with **Anna Borecka**, a lonely climber, hitchhiking across continents, implementing the project „200 Peaks of the World”.



Ice climbing in the Slovak Paradise, photo by Stanisław Proszak.

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

Which countries you have so far visited, you remember the most?

Anna Borecka:

The countries where I had the biggest problems, i.e. Iran and China. On the first day in Tehran, I was robbed by a taxi driver. Then I witnessed street demonstrations.

I had to get through the chanting crowd and armed police cordon to reach the dormitory where I lived. It was even more difficult for me to cross the multi-million capital every day to get three visas to the post-Soviet countries. At one point, I was in a stalemate because I was stuck for good. So I started with the permission from Tajikistan, which was the last on my list. After having received a visa to neighboring Turkmenistan, I had to travel five hundred kilometers, changing the earlier planned route. In the meantime, I reached **Demawand** (5,610 m), the highest peak in Iran, so my efforts were rewarded.

There was martial law in West China, lots of armed police and soldiers in the streets, and purges in the Uyghur homes. One can not get along easily with officials in China. There was also a blockade of communication with the world, so I used to withdraw small amounts of money from an ATM to let my daughter know that I was alive.



On Demavand (5,610 m a.s.l.) with a group of Iranians, photo from the collection of Anna Borecka.

Have you ever been in really dangerous situations?

It often happened. In Tajikistan, for example, I got lost in the mountains of Pamir. I entered the military base and officers intended to arrest me and lock me up in prison for half a year. I quickly took out the map and showed them where I came from by hitchhiking and I explained that I came to climb alone in the mountains. I had never before spoke Russian so well. (Laugh) Surprised, they even fed me and drove me to the nearest village.

On the Karakorum Highway, Chinese police stopped me and forbade me to continue hitchhiking. When I opposed them, one of them jerked and pushed me and the other one raised the rifle up at me. I calmed down. I showed them my passport with visa and ... I continued hitchhiking.

Hitchhiking across the Kazakh steppe, I escaped being raped only by miracle, but now I will not speak about it. Whoever wishes, will read about it in the second volume of "Alpinistka na autostopie" (Hitchhiker and climber). In Kosovo, I was alone in the mountains, when I heard quite close the Kalashnikov shots. I heard the voices of a few men, but I did not see them, because fortunately there was fog. Suddenly, one of them screamed so terribly that I crouched down and quietly, running along ruts, I left the dangerous area.

In the Alps, Pamir and Karakorum, I jumped alone through glacial crevasses at 4,000-6,000 meters and fell into them a few times, but fortunately not too deep. I put the ice ax in front of me, I stretched out on it and crawled out to finally stand up. In different mountains, I had several accidents and injuries including serious knee injuries, torn muscles and ligaments in both legs. And in the Balkans, when I sprained my right hand and it immediately swelled up like a bubble, I was worried about how I would hitch. I first had to come back from the mountains during the storm, hand wash my clothing, because everything was muddy, and pack a backpack. It was a torment, every move caused me pain, but after all I chose a lonely style of traveling. However, I never interrupted the trip, and I treated my injuries after returning home, even for half a year.

The previous summer, at Cape Verde, I climbed the rock and I tore a huge stone out of it. It hit my leg, but fortunately I did not fall off the wall. However, to this day I have a dimple in my thigh. Also, a taxi driver hit me, because he did not notice me when he tried to drive back. My spine ached a lot, but I had to put on a rucksack and go on, because I could not fight with a few angry Africans. However, I was so nervous that I hit the driver a few times on his head. These are just a few drastic situations that I experienced, but I definitely prefer to remember those positive ones.



Hitchhiking on Karakorum Highway, photo by Anna Borecka.

When you went alone to the mountains, did you happen to have some surprising encounters, unpredictable situations that you had to face?

I have already mentioned some of them, so now I will describe a funny episode for a change. In Andorra I came down from the mountains in the evening, although it would be wiser to camp somewhere in the forest. I could not catch a car for a long

time. Finally, a bearded man stopped, but he spoke only Spanish. I tried to explain to him that I reach different peaks in Europe, and he smiled and invited me to the car. This way I traveled to Asturias, in the north of Spain where I discovered the mountains of the Picos de Europa, whose existence I did not know before. What could I do? I went to those mountains as well. It turned out that this bearded man, looking like Santa Claus, was a pensioner and lived in a motorhome. For four years he lived on the road, he visited the countries of Western Europe, although he did not know foreign languages. He would come home every three months for medical treatment, because for years he was seriously ill. And then he moved into the world again, saying that the trips were the best medicine for him, and the views from the window of a car were like the most beautiful television. He did not want to reveal his identity, so I called him Incognito.

Hm, when it comes to a surprising meeting, it reminded me of a story. In Iceland, I went alone to the highest peak **Hvannadalshnúkur** (2,110 m). The mountain is small, but it is located on the treacherous, large Vatnajökull glacier. There, the weather changes every now and then, Arctic conditions often prevail. The crevasses are covered with snow and it is easy to get lost in the blizzard. No one goes there alone, without a rope and GPS ... except me.

In my second approach towards the summit, the crystals of snow hit my face, I suddenly felt the blow of icy air, and then came thick fog. The visibility fell to zero and the sky turned black. I thought I had a problem with my sight, and I was scared, but the feeling of darkness quickly recurred during the day. At that moment, I did not see anything, not even the traces of shoes on the snow that previously led me. Suddenly, I heard a strange male voice, muffled and dull, like coming from under the glacier: „Turn back!“. I stopped, listening. I took two steps and again I heard: „Turn back!“. I stopped, took off my glasses, no one was around. However, I did not have to look around because I felt that this voice did not come from outside or from inside me. It was the voice from beyond the grave. With my seventh sense which had previously warned me several times I saw a man in his forties. He had gray, curly, short hair. He was a short, of medium-sized body, and was wearing a thick, gray wool sweater with long, bright bristles. I still remember that figure and the voice I have never heard before. That made me wonder, so I started to walk in circles, looking for footprints on the snow in order

to go back. However, the wind blew them away. Luckily, after a few minutes, it cleared a little, and I saw a crevasse covered with snow in place where I wanted to go. My path should go straight up, but I listened to the voice of intuition and turned back.



Jökulsárlón – tourist attraction on hitchhiking in Iceland, photo by Anna Borecka. I hitchhiked the whole of Iceland, visiting some beautiful places. After a week, I returned to Hvannadalshnúkur. I only got to the top approaching it third time, but even then I had a strange experience. It was quite warm a day, so the conditions were much better. I stopped at the glacier, took a sip of thermos tea and heard a clear, resounding voice behind me: „Don’t go there!”. I looked surprised, but I did not see anybody. After a moment, the same voice repeated the warning from a distance in front of me, and again there was no one there. I recognized the voice as the voice of my guide from Ararat whom I met in 2008. It clearly was the Kurda’s voice speaking broken English and with a foreign accent in the rhythm of „ta ta ta”. „Don’t go there!”. It surprised me a little and even made me laugh. This time I did not listen, I went further, jumped through a few crevasses, and right before the top

dome I dropped my right leg into the ice crack, all the way to the thigh. I quickly pulled it out using the ice ax and breathed a sigh of relief. As a reward for bravery I made a few photos from the top of the mountain when fog broke for a moment.

In short, the first warning voice could have come from the so-called collective memory. That's what my friend said in Poland, giving me the goose bumps. However, I do not know how the Kurdish guide could speak to me. He probably does not even know where Iceland is. The boy had only several classes of elementary school. First, he grazed sheep on the slopes of Ararat, and when he was twenty years old, he started as the guide for tourists and alpinists. (Laugh) Yes, a person is never alone, even when convinced he/she is. Sometimes in the mountains we experience the third or even fourth degree encounters. (Smile)

You wrote, among others, the book entitled “Alpinistka na autostopie” (Hitchhiker and climber). Is hitchhiking a better chance to meet people, witness their daily lives, customs and dreams?

Yes, of course, often strangers invite me to their homes. We talk about their worldviews, everyday worries, but they rarely talk about their great dreams. They usually live here and now. I have the opportunity to get to know their everyday life. I know they enjoy the visits of an unexpected guest. I write about it in both volumes of “Alpinistka na autostopie”, describing people from Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Because of numerous meetings I gained knowledge about various countries and their inhabitants. I also have the opportunity to reach places that tourists do not know, e.g. I spent the night in a Kyrgyz yurt and got to know everyday life in the mountains of a big Muslim family.



Return to Pamir Highway after the overnight stay with hospitable Kyrgyz family, photo by Anna Borecka.

When it comes to hitchhiking, I have the opportunity to see different drivers' behavior towards a female hitchhiker. Poles, Czechs and Slovaks like to complain about their fate, but countrymen will treat me with stuffed cabbage or *bigos* from a jar. Swiss only need information where I am from. The Icelanders will take me out of the way into the worst of turmoil. Finns have a gesture - with a golf coach as driver, I rode a sporty BMW worth 200,000 euros. With a nice Finnish couple, I traveled for two days to their home, where they invited me for an exquisite dinner and overnight stay. Inhabitants of the Balkans see comrades in Poles, so with every driver you have to drink at least one cup of coffee in a bar. Austrian men treat me like air, but Austrian women will always take me to the shopping center, although it is not on my way. Italians and Spaniards do not take hitchhikers, but if one of them stops the car, he already offers a long road. Traveling with Frenchman, Turk or Chinese, I can sometimes sit behind the wheel as a driver of a car or a pick-

up. On the Pamir Highway, I drove a truck which belonged to a Kyrgyz. I drove it to Ak Baital (4,655 m), the highest pass on the road. With the inhabitants of the Azores I visited the island of Pico, and on Cape Verde I hitchhiked to the inhabited caldera, although noone rides there for free.

You say that all over the world there are people like us. In what respect are they the same?

So far I visited 63 countries on five continents and met people from many other countries. So I dare to say that people everywhere are similar because they have similar problems and dreams, and they only differ because of their place of birth. The place very much determines their lives, but in fact they are the same as us. Man is good by nature, because he comes into the world pure, innocent and trusting. Unfortunately, he later socializes. However, each of us strives to do the same: to ensure well being and safe life for oneself and the family. We need to cope with problems, set goals and realize our dreams as much as possible. I found out about it on hitchhiking, in mountain villages, in urban areas. Initially, some people were distrustful of me and others tried to play tricks on me. However, when I started talking to them and they found out that I was a normal person, they would become kind and helpful or they would leave me alone. It gives me faith in people. Each of us has some advantages and disadvantages, and creates different relationships with people, but in the majority, we are all normal, positive persons. And someone who emanates negative energy, he usually has problems that he cannot cope with by himself. Therefore, we should either help him if we feel strong enough, or we should steer clear of him. During the journey, I program myself positively, so usually I meet people with whom I can connect, even engage in normal, hearty conversation.



Dinner in a Tajik village, but in the house of Kirgiz, photo from the collection of Anna Borecka.

Have you ever said that jumping through the ice crevasses in Pamir you met your family in Canada? How do you mean by that?

This is obviously a figure of speech, but I like the vision of a big jump over two continents and an ocean. The story is extraordinary. In 2009, I wanted to climb the Avicenna Peak (7,134 m a.s.l.) in the Pamirs. On the glacier, about 5,000 meters above sea level, I found such ice crevasses that I could not jump over. However, risking a lot, I overcame these gaping abysses and reached the next camp, followed the Russian mountaineer. Unfortunately, due to a three-day hurricane and very low temperature, around -50 degrees Celsius, I decided not to attack the peak. In fact, a few Russian daredevils did not manage to get a seven-thousander, and one of them suffered amputation of several toes. When I was withdrawing from **Razdielnaya Peak** (6,148 m), I helped a Polish climber who had frostbitten

fingers, to pack the backpack. Then he invited me to the “Rally of Tatra climbers in the seventies”, (Tatra climbers – łojanci, in the Polish mountain jargon it means climbers who explored the Tatra Mountains). In the mountain refuge of „Morskie Oko”, I got to know the living legends of Polish climbers, as they said about themselves. I noticed with surprise that these are wary people with a sense of humor, wiggling on the dance floor in a dance rhythm. There, I met another climber who invited me to Canada in 2014. Then I was seriously ill, so I accepted this invitation as a salvation. To get out of the disease, I had to find a specific goal, and in Canada I have never been before. So I wrote a message on Facebook to my three cousins, born in the country of the maple leaf, that I will be in their area, so I could visit them for a cup of coffee. Joe wrote to me first, that he would invite me to his son’s wedding. At that time, Adam was going to marry Amanda, a beautiful Indian-girl. Then I had the opportunity to meet the whole family. Well, I flew to Canada! I also arranged for a meeting with my friends from Ottawa, whom I met on my way to **Aconcagua** (6,960 m) in 2003. Summing up, standing in front of a big crevasse in the Pamirs, I did not retreat, but I overcame my own fear and jumped to the other side. Thanks to this, I met Polish climbers who led me to my family in Canada.



On the glacier in Pamir, about 4,500 m a.s.l., photo by Anna Borecka.

What did you learn from the mountains and travels?

I learnt how to be humble in the mountains, small and big, and how to behave in different situations. I also learnt respect for people who are culturally different, the ability to talk with almost every human being, overcome my own barriers, and discover the beauty of the world in small things. I call it the simplicity of bread. Sometimes a smile or greeting by an unknown person in a foreign country means more than meeting a large group of friends. I've learnt that the world is beautiful and people are good and very similar to us. For me, it does not matter what someone owns, but what a person is as a human being. During my expeditions, I meet poor but beautiful people who reveal joy and peace. I try to learn from them, although with varying results.

What do you expect from life?

Health and happiness for a close family and friends. Also, I would like to make everybody live better and more interesting lives. For myself, I want to implement the project „200 Peaks of the World” and to have „m & m’s”. It’s not about colorful chocolate balls, but about „man & money”. I need kind people all over the world helping me to achieve the mountain goals. In exchange I will write about them in my books and talk about presentations. I would also like to earn my living from my passions, not to hitch around the world and not to stay in a claustrophobic tent, somewhere in a remote area – but to sleep in a bed, in a hostel or even better in a jeep or a motorhome. Then I will continue the project faster and will take interested people on the trip. My mountain project is no longer a passion, but an imperative in life! This is a professional goal for the next ten years or until the stocks of countries and mountains are exhausted. And then I will write only bestsellers. (Laugh)

The first part of the interview:

<https://www.cultureave.com/on-the-peaks-of-the-world-part-1/>

Books by Anna Borecka:

„Alpinizm – życie na haju”, (Mountaineering – life on high), the book published by the author, Wrocław, Poland 2006;

„Alpinistka na autostopie. Tom 1. Przez Karpaty na Ararat”, (Hitchhiker and climber. Volume 1. Through the Carpathians to Ararat), Publisher: Bernardinum, Pelplin, Poland 2015;

„Alpinistka na autostopie. Tom 2. Z Polski do Chin”, (Hitchhiker and climber. Volume 2. From Poland to China), Publisher: Bernardinum, Pelplin, Poland 2016.

„Śpiew lodowca” (Glacier song), book in progress, planned edition in Polish and English, in 2019.

Translated by: Anna Borecka, Ryszard Sawicki.