

*Bardia – 10 April 2018*

The moment you cross the border between India and Nepal, you step into a different world. Nepal is quiet and peaceful, and the people are friendly and quite introverted. This was a welcome change, as after India's chaos (no matter how much I loved it) I could really use a break to catch my breath. After crossing the border, I traveled straight to Pokhara: the second biggest city in Nepal and the jumping-off point for hikes in the Annapurna mountain range. Because that's what I was planning to do in Nepal: hiking. I spent a few days in Pokhara preparing for my trip, and then left the city behind and took off... into the Himalayas!

The hike I chose to do is the Annapurna Circuit: a relatively long hike of 2 to 3 weeks, that leads through the Thorang La Pass – one of the highest passes in the world, at an elevation of 5416 meters. As you know, I'm not extremely sporty and I didn't do any training, so I was hesitant at first, but finally decided to go for it based on experiences of other travelers... and I wouldn't regret that decision! I found the first days to be the hardest. The hike has a gradual build-up, but my body wasn't used to walking entire days with a backpack on my back. Around the fourth day though, I got into a rhythm and my confidence grew. From then on it only got easier, even though the hike actually got tougher. Of course, it was hard work, because there are some long and steep climbs, temperatures up in the mountains are very low (think minus 20 at night), and at high altitude, the air contains less oxygen, which influences your body and causes you to run out of breath more quickly. But, taking everything into consideration, it wasn't too bad, and I managed to complete the trek without any major difficulties. When you think about it, it's really special how much a human body can take, and the fact that I was able to complete this trek makes me realize we are capable of much more than we think. If you have the right mindset and believe in yourself, there's so much you can accomplish!

The Annapurna Circuit is known as one of the most beautiful hikes in the world, partly due to its great diversity. The trail passes through a variety of stunning landscapes and villages, influenced by Tibetan Buddhism. The trek is not just a physical challenge, but also a great adventure for anybody interested in nature, culture, and spirituality. Along the way you get to see different types of landscapes, which gradually change as you gain altitude. Initially, the landscape is characterized by lots of green leafy trees, that slowly make way for pine trees. A rocky and barren landscape emerges, that eventually turns into a white wonderland covered in snow. Making your way down, at first you cross a dry and rocky area, followed by pine forests. As you continue to descend, subtropical vegetation takes over and greenery, flowers and banana plants abound. Because it was spring, many trees were blossoming, and the last part of the trail leads through rhododendron forests in full bloom, with an abundance of delicate pink flowers (the national symbol of Nepal). All along the trek you encounter beautiful, crystal clear rivers and lakes, and spectacular, breathtaking mountain views. At times it almost seemed like a surreal experience and I felt like I had walked straight into a fairy tale. When it comes to natural beauty,

this is for sure the most amazing place I've ever been. Walking the mountain roads, I realized more than ever how strong nature is and how small and dependent human beings actually are.

The beautiful mountain villages you encounter are another special feature of this trek. The Manang and Lower Mustang regions, high up in the mountains, are home to several small villages reminiscent of medieval times. Tilted houses made of stone and wood, with tiny windows, doors and stairways, are built one on top of the other. The streets are a labyrinth of small alleys and gateways, and stables for yaks and other animals, attached to the houses, are scattered throughout the villages. In the morning you wake up to the sound of bells, when shepherds take their cows and goats out to graze. You walk along impressive prayer walls with engraved prayer stones and prayer wheels, and pass by local people carrying prayer beads or muttering mantras while sitting beside or walking down the street. The living conditions around here aren't easy. It's often extremely cold, and people live in simple houses without isolation, and just a wood-burning stove to stay warm. In most places, electricity is available but scarce, and the network unreliable. Because of their remote location, villages largely rely on agriculture and livestock to sustain themselves. I was amazed by the ability of people to adjust themselves to these circumstances and survive in rough places like this. When you have been walking through barren landscapes for hours, and all of sudden a village emerges, full of life and surrounded by green fields, it fulfills you with a sense of awe. To make life around here possible, smart basic infrastructure has been developed everywhere. Even the most remote villages have water pumps and there's an elaborate system of canals to irrigate fields. Small walking trails cross the fields and mountains, and are populated by Nepali carrying enormous loads. They walk long distances with huge baskets on their backs and strapped to their foreheads. Nepali are typically small, but surprisingly tough, and I have a deep respect for their strength.

In and around the villages, and scattered throughout the mountains, you find many ancient Buddhist monasteries, often located high up on a mountain peak or tucked away in a mountain wall. In one of those monasteries near Manang, I was lucky enough to have an old Buddhist monk bless my journey through the pass. The first town you encounter after having crossed the pass is Muktinath: a sacred place for Hindus as well as Buddhists. This is a place of pilgrimage, and many 'sadhus' from India make the pilgrimage on foot, walking from India all the way up here. It's a unique place, and a beautiful experience to witness devotees from two religions worshipping the same site, without fighting each other and showing mutual respect. All along the trek, religious objects such as prayer flags, prayer walls, prayer stones, and prayer wheels are present, which gives the trek a special spiritual dimension. The walking is also quite meditative of itself: after some time you get into a state of 'flow', it's easy to clear your mind and you feel very free mentally. The energy in the Himalayas is very peaceful and pure, and it's a perfect place for finding peace of mind and spirituality if that's what you're looking for. The silence, the exercise, being outside, the fresh mountain air, and the special Himalayan energy... It all made me feel very healthy, light and clear-minded. Once I got back to civilization, I was obviously tired, but at the same time I felt like I had fresh, new energy. Yes, this place is magical, and I feel

privileged to have been able to experience this. I hope future generations will get to do this as well, but it seems like modern life has made its entrance, threatening the existence of nature and traditional ways of life. Parts of the trek are now paved with roads, used by cars and busses. I completed the whole trek on foot, and it's possible to avoid most of the road by taking side trails. Many hikers travel part of the trek by bus or jeep though, and I imagine this number will only grow in the future. I guess I should be thankful I got to finish the hike on foot because this might not be possible later on.

After the hike, I spent a few days in Pokhara: a pretty touristy town that doesn't seem very Nepali but has convenient facilities and everything you need for a few days of relaxing after a long hike. After I had gotten myself together again, I went to visit Phil and Jill, two friends from New-Zealand that I met on Tioman Island in Malaysia. They turned out to be in Pokhara at the same time I was there and were renting a house across the lake, on a quiet and secluded spot inhabited mainly by locals. It was a beautiful place and it was great catching up, so I stayed over for a few nights. By now a month had passed and I hadn't seen anything of Nepal other than the Himalayas and the (touristy) Pokhara. In order to see more of the country, I extended my visa and decided to travel westwards. The western part of the country is not very touristy, so I was hoping to see more of the original culture, and it would enable me to cross back over to India using the western Nepali border. This does mean I skipped the eastern part of the country, including Kathmandu, but then again, that's a good reason to come back – it's a good thing to have some places left on your wish list 😊. I made a stop in Tansen, a friendly and atmospheric village, with beautiful old houses and typical Mewari architecture. It's a nice place to wander around, try local food and chat with local people. After this, I went to Bardia National Park, in the southeast corner of the country, where I am writing this story from. The climate and natural environment are completely different from the mountains: the temperature and humidity are higher, and the landscape is made up of forests, rivers, grasslands, and savannahs – another example of Nepal's amazing biodiversity. The park is home to many wild animals, and during my safaris, I saw a tiger, a rhino, wild elephants, crocodiles and many kinds of deer. I'm staying at a cozy homestay, in a village close to the park – a wonderfully peaceful spot – and it's great to explore the countryside and surrounding villages by bike or foot. Around here you see many traditional houses made from bamboo, straw and clay. It's the perfect place to spend my last few days enjoying peace and silence, and mentally preparing for my return to India. I won't be getting much peace there, so I'll have to switch my mindset, but I'm definitely looking forward to it!