

On Top of Elbrus

Włodek Kierus, a member of the team of Polish mountain-climbers who conquered the highest peak of the Caucasus Mountains, the 5,642-meter Elbrus, talks to Igor Slavich.

Who were the organizers and participants of the expedition?

The Polish Alpine Club from Tychy, headed by Bogusław Magrel. The group consisted of eight people, including two women. The participants represented various professions and were aged from 27 to 50. What they had in common was their love of extreme sports and journeys to the strangest places in the world. One requirement they had to meet was a good knowledge of Russian.

What can you say about that region and the mountain itself?

There is a continuing discussion concerning Elbrus, due to its location. It lies on the border between Russia and Georgia, and between Europe and Asia. Formally, Elbrus is situated in Europe, which means it's Europe's highest mountain. Officially, though, the title belongs to Mont Blanc (4,807 m) and let it remain so. Nonetheless, as I stood on top of Elbrus, it felt like standing on the "roof" of Europe—you can see a bit of both continents from there.

Were there any incidents on your trip?

The trip was tiring, but without any unpleasant surprises. We took a train to Moscow, then a plane to the city of Mineralniye Vody, and then, via Piatigorsk and Nalchik, we used any available way to get to the town of Terskol in the area of the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic, at the foot of Elbrus. Troublesome taxi drivers, cash machines out of service, a minimal number of hotels and other accommodations, and astronomic prices for foreigners are all normal in these regions. Before I got there, I had dreamt of real Georgian wine and I became disillusioned as only Sofia wine from Bulgaria was available.

What can you say about the famous hospitality of people from the Caucasus?

The people there are indeed extremely hospitable, regardless of the widespread poverty. We never met with any signs of resentment or hostility. The only exceptions were taxi drivers and militia officers.

How about safety—after all the Caucasus is embroiled in a war?

The war, or rather martial law, is in the nearby Chechnya and its neighboring countries, thus also in Kabardino-Balkaria. It's manifested in the increased presence of the army and militia, and frequent road blocks. We didn't have any problems with the army; the soldiers on mountain roads are usually friendly, they warn you about any dangers and advise you on your choice of route. We even became friends with the staff of one of the

posts, which looked like a small fortress. We were surprised to see a 13-year-old boy, the son of one of the officers, who wore a uniform and was armed like a professional soldier, which clearly made him very proud.

In one of your photos I saw menacing looking anti-aircraft guns.

That's true, they can look threatening, but they're not used to kill people, but to protect their lives. They are aimed at huge heaps of snow lying above roads which pose the threat of avalanches. This year, the area was affected by flooding. A couple of warm days and rain in the mountains were enough to melt the snow and transform mountain creeks into wild torrents tearing down bridges, flooding houses and entire residential areas. It was a depressing sight. Nevertheless, the Caucasus is beautiful-anyone who has been there will surely want to visit it again.