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NEPAL

THE ROAD
LESS

Travelled... AND Eaten

↳ The scenic
Kali Gandaki
Valley in Upper
Mustang

Landscape

Himalayan peaks,
dirt roads and dry
riverbeds

Mustang

Former Buddhist
kingdom and salt
trade route

Thakalis

Culture, cuisine and
traditions

PALLAVI PASRICHA

travels through the little-known Mustang Valley—home to Nepal's Thakali ethnic group—on an adrenaline-packed trail past craggy mountains, ancient villages and mysterious caves



PALLAVI PASRICHA

Local at Lo Manthang



PALLAVI PASRICHA

A typical Thakali thali

I

IT IS USUALLY JUST ONCE IN A

lifetime that you embark on a journey to one of the remotest, most exotic and less traversed parts of the world. For me that happened when we bumped our way along rough tracks that snake along Mustang Valley in western Nepal to trace the Thakali trail.

When I sit in the tiny aircraft that we take at sunrise from Pokhara to Jomsom, I don't yet know how enriching and enthralling the experience of journeying to the former Buddhist kingdom lying on the Tibetan border will be.

It starts on a stunning note with the plane brushing so close by the Annapurna, Nilgiri, Tukucho and Dhaulagiri peaks that I feel I can touch the sun-kissed, snow-clad heights. Then I am staring into the depths of the Kali Gandaki gorge, one of the world's

deepest. Flights (only 18-seater Twin Otters are allowed) land in Jomsom before 10am because the wind speed really picks up after that. Stepping out of the aircraft, we shiver—it's minus four degrees.

Our encounter with the region begins at Jomsom, the official entry point to Lower Mustang valley. We divide our time between Upper and Lower Mustang and spend five nights. We stop for tea and come face to face with the power-packed vehicles that will ferry us on unpaved roads along barren slopes—one Isuzu SUV, two Isuzu pick-up trucks, two CFMoto ZForce SSVs (side-by-side vehicles). I love adventure so am tempted to get behind the wheel but the left-wheel drive plus the fact that I have never driven in such tricky terrain makes me change my mind.

We breakfast at the stunning Dhumba Lake, a pristine expanse of shimmering blue lying at 2,900 metres between towering, snow-capped peaks on one side and tall trees on the other. Lying at the base of Mount Nilgiri, it is just five kilometres from Jomsom and close to Thini village. We

quickly wash down sausages, boiled eggs and croissants with tea and coffee.

As we drive deeper into the Mustang valley, the landscape changes dramatically, reminding me of Ladakh and Spiti. In this rain-shadow region, the wind-eroded mountains are craggy and brown. The snow-capped peaks and an occasional touch of green provide the perfect contrast—almost as if an artist has patiently painted the scene at these dizzying heights.

Kagbeni

& MUKTINATH

The villages where we stop date back centuries, but with the advent of a sprinkling of visitors, the first signs of modernity have arrived. Our lunch is in a charming village called Kagbeni, at Yac Donalds, a restaurant famous for yak burgers! Although tempted, I somehow cannot muster the heart to eat it and stick to the traditional fare of dal-bhat which comes on the Thakali thali.

In any case, good food is always at hand

because the team we are travelling with runs one of the most popular restaurants in Kathmandu—Jimbu Thakali—and has brought their kitchen staff along.

After lunch, we walk down narrow, cobblestoned paths to see a deity that guards the village, a monastery (Kag Chode) that dates back to 1429 and simple mud houses. Located along the Kali Gandaki River, Kagbeni is the last village in lower Mustang and is also known as the 'Gateway to Upper Mustang.' For those who want a better understanding of its history, Yac Donalds conducts walking tours.

After lunch we visit the most famous pilgrimage site in Mustang—Muktinath—sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists. This is the only place in the region where you find tarmac roads but the final steep trek to the temple gives me a rude reality check on my fitness levels.

Located at 3,800 metres, Muktinath is one of the highest temples in the world. We spot many locals taking a dip in the water—it supposedly leads to salvation after death. Buddhists also believe

this is the place where Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) meditated.

Reaching our next stop, Lete village, where we are to spend the night, turns into an adventure. With two paths blocked, we drive over the Kali Gandaki riverbed but lose our way as it's already dark. For a while we follow the tyre marks of other vehicles but almost sink into a swamp when we finally notice a path. Little do I know that this experience is just a foretaste of the journey ahead.

After a restful night at Kalopani Guesthouse, I wake up to the stunning sight of Tukucho Peak right in front and Annapurna to the south. Dhaulagiri is partially visible as well and I have my breakfast with this majestic view.

Tukucho

VILLAGE & DISTILLERY

It is time to explore another ancient village called Tukucho, famous for its apples and a nearly four-decade-old distillery owned and run by 82-year-old Kalpana Sherchan

The Japanese Monk

It is believed that Japanese Buddhist monk Ekai Kawaguchi visited Tukucho village in 1899 and stayed there for a few months. He was on his way to Tibet and supposedly stayed in the house where Tukucho distillery is now located.

and her son Nirjhar Man Sherchan. It is also the ancestral village of Gaurav Man and Vivek Sherchan, who own the Jimbu Thakali restaurant.

Home to the Thakalis, who are primarily traders, Mustang lies along an ancient salt trade route between Tibet and India. The food of the Thakalis has become one of the most popular cuisines of Nepal and it is only appropriate that our mainstay on the Thakali trail is traditional Thakali fare.

A typical thali, which we eat almost daily, consists of dal, rice, saag, fermented vegetable, bitter melon, fried potato, a bowl of chicken, mutton or fish and accompaniments like radish pickle, papad

and sweet curd. It is wholesome and delicious. GauravMan—better known as GMan—tells me, “Even though rice is an integral part of Thakali food, it does not grow in Mustang. The environment is not conducive for crop cultivation and the rice is imported from India; that is why trade was always important.”

It takes a while to get used to the slightly sour and tangy taste of the fermented vegetables, but I love them from the word go. Vivek’s mother has passed on authentic recipes to Rishi Chaudary, the main chef at Jimbu Thakali.

Older than Buddhism, Thakali culture has deep-rooted traditions. They do not worship an idol, but have shamans, who they believe connect directly with God. There are only a handful left in the clan and we spend an evening with one of them, Bhupendra Gauchan.

Upper MUSTANG

The real drama begins in Upper Mustang, where the terrain is dry and rocky, chiselled red mountain cliffs hang over rough paths and heart-stopping, narrow bends leave you clinging to your car seat.

We travel six hours (114km from Leta) to reach Lo Manthang, the 14th-century walled city of the kingdom of Lo that lies close to the Tibet border and is considered to be one of the last strongholds of traditional Tibetan life and culture. Steeped in history, this is our home for two nights. The red palace that was made by the first king of Mustang, Ame Pal, still stands strong. Tourists were allowed to enter only in 1992 and the monarchy was abolished only in 2008, so it has remained virtually unchanged.

I go for a morning walk and learn more about the former kingdom. It has three beautiful monasteries filled with art—Dragkar-Thegchen Ling Gompa, Jampa Gompa and Thupchen Gompa—about 180 white homes with colourful windows and doors, small alleys and friendly people.

Next day we go to the legendary man-made Mustang Caves that have been carved into cliffs and remain shrouded in mystery. Archaeologists have discovered human remains, paintings, manuscripts, artefacts and Buddhist murals but have yet to unlock the puzzle of who made them. We get a ticket to enter the most famous one—Shija Jong—and it’s an incredible experience. We go up a few steps on the mountain side to clamber in, then go up make-shift wooden ladders into a warren of interlinked chambers where we could not even stand straight because of the low roof.



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➤ Capital of the former Lo kingdom

SIDDHANT MAN SHRESTHA



↗ SUVs on the way to Muktinath

↑ Bull-head pipe of the holy spring at Muktinath temple

↓ A man sunning himself in front of the city wall of Lo Manthang



We explore three levels and could have gone higher but don't have the strength. The ceiling is black as if covered with soot that comes from cooking. As I return, I wonder who lived here, when and why?

Our last stunning ascent is to the 4,612m Korala Pass and we set a record by taking the CFMoto SSVs to that height. I am elated to be amid the craggy mountains with snow-capped peaks and fluttering prayer flags. The wind speed makes it a challenge to stand straight for even a minute but the thrill of being in such a dramatic landscape is worth it. At that moment I vow to one day make a go for the Everest Base Camp, which at 5,364 metres is 700 metres higher.

Tiji Festival

Held for three days in May, this is the most popular festival in Lo Manthang. It marks the victory of good over evil and dates back to the 17th century and is celebrated with dances, prayers and chants. This year it was from 8th to 10th May.



The next day we are on our way back to Jomsom and I decide to sit in the SSV with Gaurav. He is the only one who's been to Upper Mustang before and tells me that things have improved because, when he came last, there were hardly any roads. Still,

the rough-hewn paths mean that by the time we return I am coated with dust, down to my eyelids.

We stop on the way at Dhakmar to click the tall, spectacular red cliffs which legend says were coloured with a vanquished demon's blood. They remind me of the Grand Canyon. We down a couple of beers and then steer our way to the base at Jomsom where we stay for a night.

We celebrate when we reach back because in the last few days we have made memories and friends for life. Come and explore the Thakali trail because the adventure on this road less travelled is something that you will never ever forget. At least I will not. ☺

traveller NEPAL

How to reach: Jomsom airport has regular daily flights to and from Pokhara. But these are early morning flights as the wind speed picks up after that. The duration is 20 minutes.



Where to Stay

- ☒ **Lete Kalopani Guest House** (kalopaniguesthouse.com)
 - Tariff is ₹1,200-2,500 per night
- ☒ **Jomsom Hotel Om's Home** (www.omshomejomsom.com);
 - Tariff from \$70 (₹5,000 approximately) per night
- ☒ **Lo Manthang Lotus Holiday Inn;**
 - Tariff from ₹2,000 per night
- ☒ **Royal Mustang Resort** (royalmustangresort.com);
 - Tariff from ₹8,000 per night

✱ You can't come to Mustang and not have their coffee. Just remember it's alcoholic



Where To Go

- ☒ **Muktinath:** Famous pilgrimage site for Buddhists and Hindus
- ☒ **Tukuche Distillery:** In Tukuche village to taste apple and apricot brandy
- ☒ **Marpha:** A charming village near Jomsom (13km) that's famous for apples
- ☒ **Mustang Caves:** Ancient caves that go back many centuries
- ☒ **Dhumba Lake:** A stunning lake close to Jomsom



Getting Around

You'll need a 4x4 wheel drive. There are two ways to do this:

- ☒ Hire it from Pokhara since luxury 4x4 vehicles like Land Cruisers would only be available there. The cost is ₹30,000 per day.
- ☒ In Jomsom your hotel can book the vehicle. But only Scorpio is available and the cost is ₹10,000 per day.

The cheaper way to travel is shared jeep from Jomsom to Lo Manthang. The cost per person fair is ₹1,000. The jeeps will only depart when full.

Good To Know

- ☒ To visit Upper Mustang, non-Nepalese need to apply for a permit from a registered trekking agency. A minimum of two travellers plus a guide need to be present. It costs \$500 (approx. ₹36,000) for 10 days, and \$50 (approx. ₹3,600) per day per person after 10 days.
- ☒ Travellers need to obtain certain permits from the Nepal Tourism Board office in Kathmandu or Pokhara. This includes Annapurna Conservation Area Permit (ACAP) which costs NPR 3,000 (₹1,800) per person for non-Nepalese, NPR 1,000 (₹600) per person for SAARC nationals and NPR 100 (₹62) for Nepali nationals.
- ☒ The Trekkers Information Management System (TIMS) card costs NPR 1,000 (₹622) per person for non-Nepalese and NPR 300 (₹186) for SAARC nationals. You also need to provide passport details, trip itinerary and two passport-size photos.

What to Eat

- ☒ It is advisable to have at least one meal at the hotel where you are staying.
- ☒ Try Mustang coffee that's made with raski which is Nepali rice wine.
- ☒ If you are fond of burgers then try the yak burger at Yac Donalds in Kagbeni.
- ☒ There are coffee shops and bakeries in Jomsom but as you go towards Upper Mustang the food gets more basic. Dal-bhat is something you can always get even at small dhabas and eateries.