

# GREAT HIMALAYA TRAILS

An ECS NEPAL'S SUPPLEMENT



Mustang - Getting Lost in  
the Hidden Kingdom of Lo

## IN THE MIDST OF MOUNTAINS

Stories from the Mountains

Although, down the ages, Nepal's rugged mountains have attracted adventurers from all over the world, there's still plenty of mystery left. The Great Himalaya Trails trek is the best way for new discovery and adventure.

TEXT: MADELEINE DOLLING

PHOTOS: NEHA SHRESTHA (@Z.NEHAZ)

(GREAT HIMALAYA TRAILS TEAM)

# Mustang - Getting Lost in the Hidden Kingdom of Lo



**T**he beauty of the scenery as we approached Jomsom airport was rivalled only by the incredulity that a plane could possibly land there. Flying into the deepest gorge in the world requires a complex U-turn manoeuvre, potentially disconcerting for a nervous flyer, but fortunately a routine procedure for our experienced

Tara Air pilot. In any case, it was well worth it to have arrived in Mustang, one of the most stunning and intriguing sections of the Great Himalaya Trails.

Our party, a group of photographers and Instagram influencers, was headed for Lo Manthang, the heart of the rugged and spiritually rich world of Upper Mustang. Hidden behind the soaring peaks of the Annapurnas and Dhaulagiri,

this remote and isolated part of the Himalayas remains very much the forbidden kingdom of its past.

Mustang, or the Kingdom of Lo, as it was known back then, was once an independent fiefdom closely tied by geography, language, and culture to Tibet. Its strategic location on an ancient trade route enabled the kingdom to control the

commerce between Tibet, Nepal, and India, amassing substantial wealth from taxes levied on the traded goods. Foreign visitors to the region were few and far between, and the Upper Mustang region remained a restricted area till as late as 1992. Its relative geographical and political isolation from the outside world has contributed to a highly preserved Tibetan culture and unspoiled nature, adding much to its allure as a travel destination today.

Ancient monasteries, royal palaces, and ruins of fortresses surrounded by a 6-meter white-washed wall reveal a history of prosperity and grandeur.

backdrop of impressive 8,000 meter peaks.

At every resting point we were greeted by friendly locals offering delicious daal bhaat, chia, and Tibetan fried bread. Not keen on attempting the precarious jeep track in the dark, we settled down

for the night in one of two guest houses in Samar. Rising with the sun, we admired the stunning views of the snowy peaks of Annapurna Himal in the distance, and the canyon landscapes inbetween.

The drive from Samar to Lo Manthang was one of ever-changing beauty. After kilometers of arid high-altitude desert lands, the village of Tsarang magically appears as an oasis with colorful buckwheat fields and waterfalls overhead drawing water from the Dolpo glaciers. We stopped to admire the longest mani in the world, and marveled at the grey, red, and yellow cliffs towering above us.

The final pass before descending into Lo Manthang offered a spectacular bird's-eye view of the walled capital and the Tibetan plateau 50 kilometers yonder. Ancient monasteries, royal palaces, and ruins of fortresses surrounded by a 6-meter white-washed wall reveal a history of prosperity and grandeur. The walls protect some 200 earthen households, built close together, creating a labyrinth of stone-walled tunnels and passages. The city seems almost frozen in amber, untouched by time and modern development. Street life within the gates grows more active in the late afternoons, with children and young monks playing games of cricket in the courtyards, and farm animals causing occasional traffic jams in the narrow streets upon returning from a day of grazing in the fields.

We were also sharing the confinements of the city with a few hundred Mustang ponies and their riders. Unaware of our luck, we had perfectly timed our visit to Lo Manthang with the yearly Yartung Festival. The festival takes place every August

to celebrate the end of the summer season. The highlight of the three-day celebrations are the horse races that bring in locals from all around the region. Riders and their spirited steeds gallop back and forth down the main pathways of the city, trying to impress the judges with speed and daring stunts, often coming perilously close to the spectators. The event was a special and rare insight into the local culture.

While there are not that many frontiers left to discover in this world, trekking along the Great Himalaya Trails gives adventurous travelers a rare opportunity to encounter hidden gems like Mustang. Before it is unlocked to the rest of the world, be one of few travelers fortunate enough to experience this remote and seldom-visited corner of the Himalayas.

## Sharing your Great Himalaya Trails experience with #MyGHT

Great Himalaya Trails (GHT) is a network of extraordinary journeys in the Nepali Himalayas. The GHT acts as a destination, and therefore the goal is to inspire travelers to explore the trails at their own pace and in their own way. In August, this year, the GHT team traveled around the country with six photographers and social media influencers to create awareness for the tourism potential of Nepal. They explored renowned destinations, like Mustang, and shared the experience with millions of their followers, hoping to inspire passionate and adventurous travelers to follow in their footsteps.

By publicizing real-time images of today's Nepal, tourists and social media influencers can help change the narrative, and hopefully restore consumer confidence in the safety and security of Nepal as a tourism destination. You can contribute to the tourism marketing of the country as well by sharing your trekking experience on social media platforms. The GHT invites everyone to share their GHT experience using #MyGHT.

To see more photos from this journey to Mustang, search for #MyGHT on Instagram, or follow Great Himalaya Trails on Instagram or Facebook. For more stories on amazing trekking destinations in Nepal, head over to [www.greathimalayatrails.com](http://www.greathimalayatrails.com)

While the region has been open to foreign tourists for over two decades now, tourism remains limited and regulated. Trekking permits are expensive (\$500 for the 10-day permit) and limited to a certain number each year. Until recently, the area was only accessible by foot or mule, making it one of Nepal's most exclusive trekking areas, with only a few thousand tourists passing through each year.

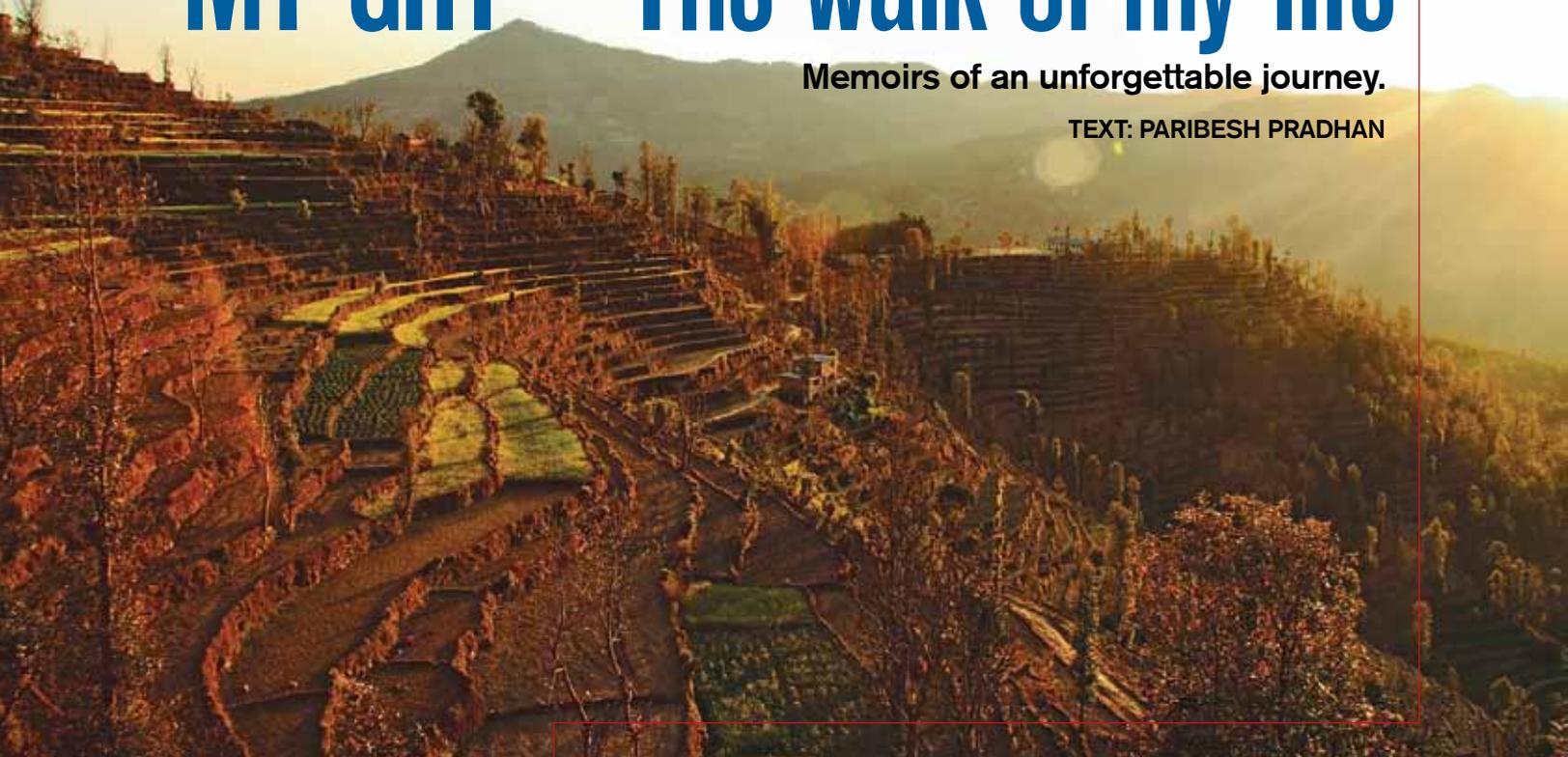
Today, the main tourist entry point to Mustang is by air through Jomsom. Most visitors start the trek from the airport, and travel the 80 or so kilometers to Lo Manthang by foot, along the same route that has been used for centuries. In April every year, it's also possible to run the circuit with Trail Running Nepal: a highly recommended trip for those who like sightseeing at a faster pace.

Fortunately for us, a well-trodden goat trail was recently widened to accommodate 4x4 vehicles which, since we were on a tight schedule, became our transportation of choice. The 7-hour journey took us on a very bumpy, sometimes alarmingly narrow, dirt track from the bottom of the Kali Gandaki gorge to the top of 4,000-meter mountain passes, through sparsely scattered Buddhist villages, along the rim of steep canyon walls carved out by the rushing waters of the river below, past hidden caves, red-walled monasteries, colourful chortens festooned with prayer flags, all the while with the dramatic

# MY GHT – The walk of my life

Memoirs of an unforgettable journey.

TEXT: PARIBESH PRADHAN



**T**

he Great Himalaya Trails is a journey of life time that takes you from the highest mountain ridges in the world to some of

the deepest gorges in a single sketch on a map. While you cross many rugged mountains and rigid cliffs disguised in the wilderness of rhododendron and juniper forests, you will never fail to be amused and awed by the snow laden outcrops, folds and faults of these mountains that tells their own geological tale of the formation of this spellbinding landscape. You will be accompanied by the whistling winds of prayers and roaring rivers that meander through the mountains to guide you through this path towards your destiny.

Every now and then, you will also witness the rich biodiversity of flora and fauna that these ecosystems host, as you trail from one mountain corridor to another. If you are a people's person, this trail will also take you through the hearts of many rural villages, climbing innumerable contours of terrace farms and riparian fields - giving you a glimpse of Nepal's diverse agrarian society that reside in harmony with nature and

among themselves in these majestic mountains. However, amidst such cultural diversity, you can be assured that you will always be welcomed in these villages, huts and hamlets with an uncompromising friendly smile and warm hospitality. It is perhaps for this reason that in spite of our insurgent past, Nepal is still one of the safest tourist destinations in the world where travelers are still received with almost godly cordiality and 'Namaste'.

It will perhaps be a truism to say that this odyssey is an epic route for avid trekkers par excellence. It demands a lot of physical fitness and mental stamina, for much of the journey is internal, inside yourself. You will be travelling within your thoughts and emotions most of the time as you walk forward in the physical world wandering from one mountain to the another,

I walked this trail back in 2012 - walking about 20 km on average every day for 78 days, from altitude ranging from 320 m to 4800 m.

sleeping in new and unfamiliar places every night and dining with different company every time. It will also test your leadership skills, challenge your organizational skills and assess your negotiation skills along with your decision making and problem solving abilities.

Furthermore, it will also bring you close towards understanding the developmental issues and environmental challenges of Nepal.

I walked this trail back in 2012 - walking about 20 km on average every day for 78 days, from altitude ranging from 320 m to 4800 m. It left me exhausted and emancipated at the same time, and while I cannot guarantee your emancipation, if you decide to embark on this journey, I can say this that it will surely leave you elated and change your life forever, for the better. It will most certainly be the walk of your life which you will not regret. I know I didn't.

Trekking to the mountains is always as challenging as it is beautiful. Whether that switched between idyllic sunshine, relentless rain, or a whiteout snowfall, every grueling step in our trek to the Himalayas was worth it. Trepidations of embarking to high altitudes was thrown into thin air as the night sky glittered with stars, and snow-capped mountains that surrounded us in every direction burst into a majestic sunrise at the Annapurna Base Camp.

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TEXT/ PHOTOS/ ILLUSTRATION: ANUJ D. ADHIKARY

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# In the Midst of Mountains



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Adrift on the calm waters of Phewa Lake, I massaged my hamstrings in vain attempts to relieve a throbbing sore. Five hours of manspreading from Kathmandu to Pokhara in a bus that claimed to have extra legroom (and WiFi) had taken its toll. Yet the discomfort paled before Annapurnas' grandeur, albeit partially hidden behind scattered clouds. We rejoiced in the morning mist on our last boat ride.

We drove off on jeep from Halan Chowk, and after a couple of hours, reached Phedi, the starting point of our 8-day trek to Annapurna Base Camp at 4,130 meters. Amidst rice and millet terraces, we slowly made our way up the steps, and as the sun scorched down on us, made our way through the mid-hills. With a backpack weighing over 20 kg strapped on my back, the climb would get quite exhausting at times. Layers of clothes got shed by the time we got used to the steps that seemed to know no end. The occasional chautaras, as well as Gurung settlements, along the wide trail did wonders to help us catch our breath and appreciate the greenery. The gradual uphill climb on stony steps to Dhampus was mere prelude of what awaited.

Crossing dodgy suspension bridges, we reached thick woods, and could feel a sense of remoteness of our adventure. Bulls possessive of their female companions were certainly a threat, especially if you had to walk past them while they were mating, which we encountered on more than a few occasions. A brief stop at a shop that sold 'nak' cheese made us smirk at the typo, only to realize that it was not yaks, but their female counterparts, naks, that make cheese. As we zeroed in on our first destination, Landruk, mountains popped up prominently in the distance, just in time to quell complaints about painful legs from the uphill walk.

Annapurna's massifs, from the restive Pothana village, seemed like from another world altogether. Macchaphuchhare, in its photogenic glory, was indeed a treat to the eyes over lunch so delicious that the most insatiable of food critics would be silenced and left salivating for more. After hogging

down more servings of daal bhaat than we're proud of, we trailed on, bloated and happy. By this time, the clouds were moving in, which was quite a respite after the dog day afternoon. Weather was, in fact, perfect as we reached our destination in Landruk. We were settled in our rooms and served raksi, a hot homemade millet brew, affectionately called tharra or local. The sleep was deep and restful, and the first sight of the mountains next morning was something to behold.

The jeep tracks from Landruk would dwindle to trails through a forest, followed by a gorgeous waterfall. Making our way down towards the fresh white waters of Modi River, we reached a tiny settlement called New Bridge. Distant rolling hills would merge with haze below skies filled with cotton balls of picturesque clouds. It was interesting to note the influx of Nepali tourists, especially youngsters, as we moved up the trails, a few of whom almost tipped us over the cliff by accident when their inebriated selves couldn't handle the rocky and slippery steps in Jhinu. It then bears pointing out that the prices of beverages (and food) can be pretty steep as it gets more remote. That's mainly because it has to be carried by porters. We wondered where they got all that booze from. It would take about half an hour's walk to find that out, when we made a pit stop at a small hotel.

A lovely Tamang lady and her differently-abled son had championed hospitality to unwitting and exhausted tourists on that climb. Tasty omelets, coupled with fresh pickles from her farm, had me licking my fingers. And the liquor she crafted was true to her words: the best and strongest in the Annapurnas. Well, probably. As the only openly drunk raksi-appreciator, I took a couple of pegs with the lady. She went on to explain how her last bunch of patrons—half a dozen Nepali boys—finished a jerry can just a while earlier. No wonder! I would gladly have spent a few hours here, blown away by the jolly hosts, amazing refreshments, and equally remarkable views. But we were due for Chhomrong, a ginormous town up a ginormous hill, by dark.

The backbreaking ascent to Chhomrong came without warning. The higher we climbed, the more exhausted we got, and better the vantage point. Quite un-

fortunately, the skies were overcast, and mountains up north were shrouded behind gloomy clouds. We conquered the long climb towards dusk, and upon arrival at Chhomrong, were greeted with a chilly drizzle. As everybody prepared to put extra layers of fleece and down, mine went mysteriously missing. Must've left it at the omelet place, I thought. So much for merrymaking. The chill in Chhomrong would be nothing compared to the freezing cold in ABC, or so I was told. In panic-stricken hysteria, I went around early next morning to a million shops trying to find a jacket for rent. To no avail. The closest one was one with furry yak wool that made me look like a Siberian hillbilly.

I'd almost given up until I decided to have some coffee in a bakery, where croissants looked like swollen boomerangs and the owner's pretty daughter basked in the morning sun. I decided to steer clear from the interesting delights, fearing for my tummy. Instead, I settled for some spicy noodles the young lady was having. In fact, after hearing my wardrobe predicament, she invited me into her room with a smile. She slowly reached down and pulled out a rusty chest from under her bed. It was filled with medieval-looking clothes, including down jackets left behind by trekkers for her baker father almost two decades ago. God-awful smell and stains from the jackets corroborated her story. A good pair to buy would cost upwards of USD200, and renting would cost USD10 a day. Instead, she offered it for 50 cents a day. Bingo! I was off with an oversized blue down jacket looking like a clown, and smelling like fungus. And with a phone number, might I add.

We really began to feel the altitude Chhomrong onwards, as we reached the last few settlements before entering Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP). We arrived at a place aptly called Himalaya, whence the mountains towered right above. Soldiering on along Modi River raging below, we were surrounded by rhododendron forests, and giant snow-covered peaks followed us. Our ascent seemed endless, and just as our legs warmed up and got acquainted



to the steps, in rolled ominous black clouds, and drenched us in a matter of seconds.

Icetails and waterfalls were common sights, and walking over snow deposits became a breeze, as we reached closer to Macchapuchare Base Camp, a station before ABC. The last leg to ABC had our hearts thudding with each heavy step. And, as if that wasn't enough, it started snowing hard, and the mercury dropped further along with strong headwinds. Never mind the mountains ahead, even our steps were far from visible in the inclement weather. Nevertheless, the eerie feeling of walking on sludge into white Himalayan oblivion was quite thrilling. We were lucky that despite such physical strain in high altitude our breathing was normal, and we avoided high altitude sickness as we had taken it slow and steady since day one.

Just as we edged towards ABC on the final path, clouds started dispersing. Almost like the weather gods wanted to save the best for the last, unveiled before our eyes were phenomenal mountains,

Wherever we looked, absolutely stunning sights of elaborate ridges readily took our breath away, and at night when stars lit the peaks, we would stand in awe.

some of the highest points on this planet, right ahead, surrounding us in every single direction. Wherever we looked, absolutely stunning sights of elaborate ridges readily took our breath away, and at night when stars lit the peaks, we would stand in awe, sighing at the mountains, ready with a wish, waiting for another meteorite to whiz past millions of stars.

In bouts of ogling magical landscapes, we forgot that we were soaked wet in the sleet. The heated dining hall came as warm solace, but not without the price of a singed toe. In burning realization, the heater turned out to be nothing more than a small propane stove under the table, along with smelly boots and socks left to dry. A surprisingly delicious order of pizza was enough to make us ditch the warm room for shivering hours outside, watching the Himalayas in its glory. A peaceful night of sleep was well deserved.

Waking up at dawn was no less enchanting. Braving cold chills just before sunrise, we huddled together on the hotel's tiny patio to watch a royal purple

glow on the Annapurna that gradually turned orange. As the first rays of the sun touched the mountain's eastern flank, a burst of yellow illuminated the summits in a magnificent show of lights and dazzling hues. Annapurna's furious facade came to life. It was most prominently seen from a short distance away by prayer flags, memorial stones of vanished climbers, and spectators in hundreds, but dwarfed and humbled by the mountains' inexplicable might. It is quite fascinating to imagine the monumental feat of conquering mountains, and in that, yourself. Though a daring few have accomplished and lived to tell the tale, memorial stones by the gumba where I stood painted a grim picture. A reminder that mountains are billions of years old, and unlike our transient lives, will be there for eternity. I stood there motionless, numbed, staring at the timeless mountains. Miniscule, as I was and felt, a mere vanishing dot in the shadows of imposing rocks. It was a transcendental experience: moving, awe-inspiring, and humbling, to say the very least.

My thoughts were cut short when faint sounds coming from far off in the mountains drew my attention. I had lost track of time, and the sun, now brighter, had started melting the previous day's snow on peaks, causing avalanches

higher up. They looked tiny as they swept their way down, but we knew that if one even half as big got triggered at our spot, a wrath of nature's hell would be unleashed. The dire prophecy, too much to bear, led me to seek refuge in a breakfast of pancakes and eggs, which, meanwhile, had gone unregrettably cold. We were thoroughly intrigued, and could stay here a whole lot longer, but had a long way to walk back. Snow, foot-deep, got shoveled out at the hotel gate, while we packed our bags and prepared to bid the mountains a hesitant goodbye.

Looking back every so often to catch what was now a passing glimpse of the Annapurnas, we retraced our steps. Descents were as deceptively laborious as ascents on the now slippery trail, and especially with the heavy rucksacks we were carrying, our knees took an ugly beating. But, there was no stopping until we walked down to Sinuwa, and then Jhunu, the next day. Walking back, we couldn't help but feel proud to have climbed up steps that appeared impossibly steep.

Jhunu was quite an experience in itself. The hot spring at a hiking distance from the village wasn't obvious. There are no shops by the pool, so our little picnic included snacks and a bottle of local brew. A week of trekking later, a relaxing dip in the hot pool served our

muscles well. When the heat would become unbearable, it only made sense to take a plunge into the freezing cold waters of Modi River near by. It would take sheer luck to avoid sandal attacks and harassment lawsuits after nearly barging into the ladies' changing room, thanks to unlabelled doors. The pool was unsurprisingly abuzz with dozens of people. A group of Nepali doctors were on a weekend getaway to the hot spring, as were locals from Ghandruk and Chhomrong on a quick trip to pamper themselves. But, mostly, it was trekkers like us, trying to unwind and kick back.

Back in our hotel, the owners—a middle aged down-to-earth couple—took part in an intense and prolonged dohori face-off between our guide and a French-speaking guide. Shortly before midnight, as others went to bed, the troupe in the dining room (myself, a gawky vocal sidekick), was just getting started. After countless rounds of friendly, yet intimidating exchanges, (and a flurry of noise complaints from sleepy, lackluster patrons), the party slowly crawled its way to bed well past midnight.

I woke up with a terrible hangover the next morning to sensational news that would also explain the toilet filled with holy yuck. Apparently, the French guide, in a bid to ease his untimely intoxication (he was with VIP clients),

and an unprecedented defeat in dohori (our guide had prevailed), thought it was a good idea to venture to the hot spring—alone, and in pre-dawn pitch darkness. Almost an hour later, an ad hoc SAR team would discover the hapless monsieur a few hundred meters away, passed out in cattle cesspool. Embarrassment and dung on his face evident, and a foul smell, made for the most grotesquely amusing story of this trip. Bad as we felt for him, we got a few good laughs out of his drunken escapade while walking back to Ghandruk and then Pokhara.

It is no surprise why Annapurna Base Camp is one of the most renowned trekking destinations in the world, one that thousands of trekkers check off from their bucket list every year. For our bunch, it was a dreamy treat to the senses, immersion in a variety of rich cultures, and bonding with the wilderness. It was an emotional experience, where mystical gompas dotted the snowy abode of mythical yetis, where every exhilarating stride was equal parts tough and rejuvenating, and where showers were a luxury, and in that cold, barely a priority. Moments spent in the midst of mountains have been etched in our hearts, and they've left us with enlivened spirits, tightened glutes and daydreaming in the office cubicle, a longing to return.

