



A RIDE TO MUSTANG

The challenges and thrill of riding from Pokhara to Lo Manthang, once the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lo

Rishad Saam Mehta

I am on a six-lane highway from Pokhara in Nepal and the Royal Enfield Himalayan I am riding is at peace with the smooth tarmac. My fellow riders and I are clipping along at 70 kpmh and I even have time to take in the cottony clouds in the blue sky. "This is simple and stress-free," I think. "At this rate, I will be in Kalopani—125km away and the night halt—in less than three hours."

Little did I know that we would not stay on the fast Pokhara-Baglung highway all the way. About 68km in, at Maldhunga, there's a fork. I look longingly to the left, where the same satiny ribbon of black continues. My route takes me right, along the Maldhunga-Beni "road", with a surface that looks more like the jute string used to truss bamboo scaffolding.

It's late May and I am in Nepal, on a ride to Upper Mustang, where Tibetan Buddhist culture and tradition are still practised. The region was isolated for decades and getting there is still not for the faint of heart.

By the time I have ridden 5km, I am well out of my comfort zone. The road is a mud track strewn with rocks and the past week's rain has left puddles that soak my shoes. The town of Beni is just 16km from the fork in the road but it takes me close to two hours to get there. This excuse of a road runs along the Kali Gandaki river. At Beni, I cross a bridge and hit a spot of slush. It grabs the front wheel and the next thing I know I am lying prone in the porridge. I haul my motorcycle from the sludge and start riding again. For the next few kilometres, globs of mud fly off the handlebars on to my helmet.

The road climbs high above the river and snakes along the mountainsides. The scenery is spectacular but I have my work



cut out, keeping the motorcycle upright because there is gravel, clay-ey mud, water crossings, and, at times, the threat of landslides. I find the Himalayan is at its best balance when I am standing on the foot pegs and gunning it over irregularities. My entire world right now is the motorcycle and the road ahead. In a strangely pleasant way, it's meditative.

By the time I reach the Kalopani guesthouse, my fellow riders say I look wiped out. But I am actually feeling calm and relaxed. It has taken me six hours to get there, each hour challenging my skills and mind. The views at Kalopani are supposed to be spectacular, with the Annapurna peak dominating the skyline, but the dark clouds block the view.

It's raining the next morning and I brace myself for a tougher ride because the wet gravel is slippery with slush. We stop at Marpha, where the locals sell petrol in drums. The price is Nepali ₹200 per litre.

This translates to ₹125; the measure of a litre is an empty water bottle. After five bottles are emptied into my tank, I carry on.

Kagbeni, 20km from Marpha and past Jomsom, is the end of the road, according to Google Maps. In less than 48 hours, I have ridden from Pokhara, which sits at 2,697ft, to Jomsom at 9,000ft. But Google Maps has got it wrong—there is a track heading towards Lo Manthang in the Upper Mustang region.

It is a barely motorable track that climbs high over the Kali Gandaki river, beside the world's highest gorge. I stay as close to the mountain as possible. Yet sometimes the corners are so tricky and the mud so treacherous that the motorcycle inevitably slides towards the edge.

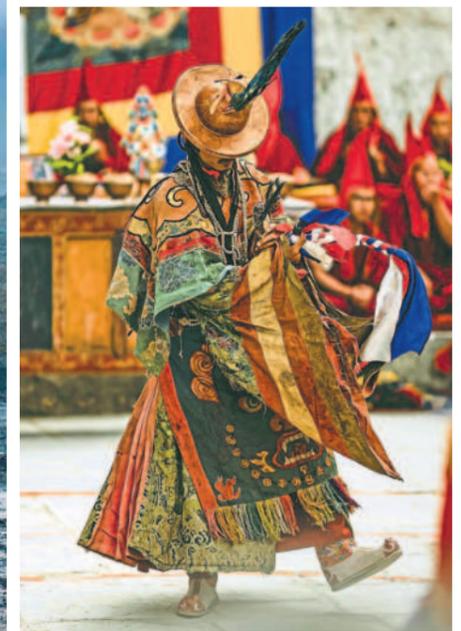
Kagbeni is the entrance to the Upper Mustang region and the landscape changes abruptly. By the time I ride into Chhusang, 10km from Kagbeni, and stop at a *dhaba* for lunch, I realise the rain has

disappeared. So has the vegetation. We are now in a rain-shadow area. The landscape is rocky and stark, shaped in the Ice Age, and still continues to be minutely sculpted by wind erosion. It's reminiscent of Zaskar in Ladakh.

We are still about 30km from Lo Manthang, once the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lo. The ride becomes more challenging because I am riding through what is commonly called *fesh fesh*, very fine sand. I cannot take my eyes off the road even for a moment. But the landscape is so stunning that I often park the motorcycle to admire it and take a few photographs before starting off again.

Coming to grips with *fesh fesh* takes some time, and by the time I see the walled city of Lo Manthang in the distance, I have figured out the technique. You need to keep the throttle constant and ride with a loose grip on the handlebars, letting the motorcycle weave through the fine sand.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA



(clockwise, from left) A rainy morning start from Kalopani; the Tiji Festival is a three-day celebration; and on the way to Lo Manthang.

ating a water scarcity—the most prized resource in this parched land. Dorje Jono ultimately succeeds.

This re-enactment involves an assortment of theatrics, colourful costumes, music and dance, and has attracted travellers. We spend time in the centre of town, which has a clutch of cafés that hiss out cappuccinos and Americanos, and restaurants serving steamed or fried momos and chilli beef with fiery red chutney.

There are souvenir and artefact shops; for me, the most fascinating are the fossil rocks stores. The region around Kagbeni was a sea before the continental drift-and-clash, millions of years ago, crumpled it into a mountain range, so there are rocks with ammonites to be found. Ammonites are shelled cephalopods that died out about 66 million years ago.

When we start the ride back, after spending three nights in Lo, I am refreshed and more self-assured on the motorcycle. The return trip is broken into small sections, so what I did in two days, I will do in four. The first night halt is at Samar, a little village with charming home-stays just 40km from Lo. Samar remains the prettiest place we stayed in on the entire trip. It is there that I get my first view of the majestic Annapurna.

The next night halt is Marpha, 55km from Samar. In between Samar and Marpha, we ride through Kagbeni again and this time it is stress-free because there is no rain and we have plenty of time. We stop at Yakdonalds—not a typo—named for its yak meat burgers. They are delicious and the happy meal comes with healthy sea-buckthorn juice.

Two days later, we enter Pokhara, having done about 650km. There is a sense of gratitude for a great ride and anticipation because Pokhara, the city where all and sundry return after tough treks or scaling snowy summits, really knows how to throw a party. Now that the riding is done, I am looking forward to local talent performing live, soul-satisfying food and fine Nepali whisky.

Rishad Saam Mehta is a travel writer and photographer.

HOW TO GET THERE

There have always been foot tracks for Upper Mustang and Lo Manthang. Once, the only way to get there was to trek from Pokhara. Then came the motorable roads to Jomsom; now there are flights from Pokhara to Jomsom. From there, it is still a five-day trek to Lo Manthang, should you choose to walk.

Road construction is on and the tarmac is slowly and steadily creeping closer to Lo Manthang. Right now, the road beyond Jomsom is barely motorable, suitable only for 4x4 vehicles.

HOW TO GO

Wild Adventures Nepal (wildadventurenepal.com) organises guided tours. Royal Enfield organises rides to Mustang, including motorcycle and logistics, for a fee.

COST

Upper Mustang, beyond Kagbeni, costs \$500 (around ₹40,000) for 10 days and \$50 per day thereafter.

We spend three days in Lo Manthang. The three-day spring Tiji festival, usually held in May-June depending on the Buddhist calendar, is on. Also known as "the ridding of the Demons", it marks the tale of a deity, Dorje Jono, who wages war on his father (a demon) to protect the kingdom of Mustang from annihilation. The father inflicts mayhem on Mustang by cre-