

## Upper Mustang in early winter

The Lonely Planet notes for Mustang are pretty good although they lack track times, some of which we provide below. We thought it might be useful for people to have some extra notes that apply particularly to early winter. At this time about 80% of Mustangis leave their homes for warmer Pokhara, Kathmandu and even the USA, goats and other stock are moved lower or sold down, and homes are winterised ahead of night-time temperatures that can go as low as -25°C (-13°F).

After 30 November organised tour groups stop, so independent trekkers will find the kingdom empty, the weather fine and the remaining people welcoming, although there may be trouble finding accommodation in some villages, the days are short (8.30am-4.30pm for comfortable walking) and it is cold once the sun leaves. Of course you will still need the expensive permit and a guide, but 60% of the permit fee now flows to development in Mustang. A Tibetan-speaking guide is more likely to be welcome in Upper Mustang.

Despite many treks in Nepal, the 10 days we spent in Upper Mustang in this season were the most spectacular and extraordinary in terms of scenery: the huge, quiet, empty scale impresses itself upon you and on the rare occasions you meet people the meetings are memorable. You will be haunted by the colours and beauty and will know your time has been well-spent.

One very special opportunity is that, because the Kali Gandaki is so low in winter, trucks can drive from Tsarang and Dhi right down to Jomoson. This must be one of the most exciting drives in the world, often in the middle of the river, through spectacular narrow gorges that horsemen don't venture into, and even through a tunnel. Presumably trucks can also now be taken into Upper Mustang, enquire in Jomoson. Some brief details to add to the Lonely Planet notes appear below.

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	Hrs.mins	Day	Some hotels
<b>1 Kagbeni</b> - Tangbe	3.00		
Tangbe - Chhuksang	1.00		New Bragha
Chhuksang - <b>Chele</b>	1.00	1 - 5.0 hrs	Mustang Gate
<b>2 Chele</b> – Samar	2.30		
Samar – Bhena La	1.10		
Bhena La – Yamdo La	1.45		
Yamdo La – Shyangmochen	0.45		
Shyangmochen – <b>Geling</b>	1.15	2 – 7.5 hrs	Hotel Darjeeling
<b>3 Geling</b> – Nyi La	1.30		
Nyi La – Ghemi	1.10		Hotel Royal Mustang (Raju)
Ghemi – Tsarang La	1.30		
Tsarang La – <b>Tsarang</b>	1.30	3 – 5.5 hrs	Hotel Maya
<b>4 Tsarang</b> – Ghar Gumpa	2.15		
Ghar Gumpa – Marang La	2.10		
Marang La – ruined village	0.30		
ruined village – <b>Lo Manthang</b>	1.30	4 – 6.5 hrs	Hotel Mystique
<b>5 Lo Manthang</b> – Garphu	2.00		(day trip to caves on pony)
Garphu – <b>Lo Manthang</b>	2.00	5 – 4.0 hrs	
<b>6 Lo Manthang rest day</b>		6 – 0.0 hrs	
<b>7 Lo Manthang</b> – Dhi	3.30	7 – 3.5 hrs	Hira Hotel
<b>8 Dhi</b> – Yara	1.30		
Yara – Luri Gumpa by riverbed	1.30		
Luri Gumpa – Ghara	0.30		
Ghara – <b>Yara</b>	1.00	8 – 4.5 hrs	Hotel Saribung
<b>9 Yara</b> – Surkhang	1.00		
Surkhang – under Tsarang	2.00		(several river crossings)
under Tsarang – <b>Tsarang</b>	1.00	9 – 4.0 hrs	Hotel Maya
<b>10 Tsarang</b> – Kagbeni	3.00	10 – 3.0 hrs	By truck down river bed

## 1. Kagbeni to Chele (3050m) 5hrs

The high road route is easier on the feet and drier despite low-level bridges on much of the route in the Kali Gandaki riverbed, and the views up and downriver are superb. There is a large walled irrigation development being undertaken just before **Tangbe** (3060m), apples and potatoes using Chinese money. After Tangbe, if trekking in mid-November, you may see winter barley being sown before the villagers leave downriver, the fields full of singing people. The trail beyond has some scary slips and detours but also spectacular red eroded cliffs and warm reflected light in all directions to **Chhuksang** (2980m), where you can get a good lunch.

Continue on the road up and down, then drop to the riverbed and head for the right of the two obvious bridges, with no distinct trail. After 12.30am there will be a lot of up-valley wind here. Cross the bridges and climb steeply to **Chele** (Tsele, 3100m), surrounded by wild cliffs. The Kali Gandaki, besides passing under a huge fallen slab, becomes a very narrow and dangerous canyon above here. Take a good look because if you are lucky you may come out down this gorge.



One hour above Kagbeni, Mt Nilgiri above, Kagbeni downriver

## 2. Chele to Geling (3570m) 5.5hrs

From here to Lo Manthang the route is a high traverse over gentle passes far above the Kali Gandaki, with extensive views over wildly eroded mountains. At this time of year there may be big herds of goats on the very dusty trail, heading for sale in Jomoson, and some blue sheep may even be sighted. There's a new *gompa* above **Samar** (3620m) and lunch at the Hotel Himali. A lot of up and down into deeply incised and sometimes icy gullies as the track climbs over two distinct flag-draped passes (Bhena La 3860m and Yamdo La 4010m) before dropping to **Shyangmochen** (Syangboche, 3800m). The jeepable road from Lo Manthang now reaches halfway up to Yamdo La. The alternative route from Samar to Shyangmochen via Chungsi caves looked to have long stretches of bare ice in the canyon and may not be passable in this season.



Over another gentle pass and a long dusty descent, probably in beautiful evening light, brings you to **Geling** (Ghiling, 3570m) dominated by a colourful *gompa*. There are several hotels of varying quality here and you may need to ask for quilts.



Climbing above Chele, the bridge crosses to Ghyakar with only eight families



View east from Yamdo La (4010m), the Kali Gandaki out of sight below

### 3. Geling to Tsarang (3575m) 7.5hrs

Very open dry country up to the **Nyi La** (4020m) then drop steeply to **Ghemi** (3510m), a large prosperous village in a sea of firewood and yellow fodder, a good spot for lunch. The hotels were already closed in Drakmar ('red cliffs') to the north but its huge cliffs and erosion pipes provide a stunning match for the *chortens* dwarfed beneath them as the rocky gully climbs to Choya La (Tsarang La, 3870m) to the north-west. The very friendly Maya hotel in **Tsarang** (Charang, 3560m) was hard to locate as it had already taken down its sign for winter and went into caretaker mode a week later. The five-storey *dzong* (fort) is collapsing and there appeared to be no key-holder for the red 14<sup>th</sup> century *gompa* at this time of year.



Goats being taken out for sale in Jomsom at onset of winter





Only the old and herdspeople are left in Geling at this time of year



First view of the Drakmar cliffs from above Ghemi, with the route to Tsarang to the right



The colours of the cliffs of Drakmar echoed in *chortens*

#### 4. Tsarang to Lo Manthang (3950m) 6.5hrs

We chose to go via Ghar *gompa* since Drakmar hotels were closed and we wanted to visit Luri caves on the return journey. The direct road route is also rather boring.

The road to the south of the Charang Khola would have been the best route but we had adventures among frozen rivers trying to follow an irrigation canal. Aim for the river below Marang, where there is a small village beneath cliffs with caves, then the route up to **Ghar Gompa** ('house temple', 3950m) becomes obvious. This is Nyingma rather than Sakya sect and repays close inspection of the many rooms – see Lonely Planet Day 7. Three old monks were still in residence doing *puja*. No food, but tea may be obtained.

Cross the Charang Khola and climb steadily to **Marang La** (Chogo La, 4230m), the highest point on the trek and a place of extraordinary light-swept emptiness. Himalayan partridge, grazing yaks and russet flycatchers may be seen at this time of year but the marmots are all hibernating. The route onwards to Lo Manthang lies past a ruined village, not on the ridge trail that looks more likely, and can be indistinct on the slopes outside the town. In **Lo Manthang** (3840m) only the Lo Manthang Guest House (just inside the walls) and the Mystique Himalayan Resort (outside the walls, Rs300, not \$US99 as in Lonely Planet) were open but in caretaker mode. This means your guide may have to cook!





Ancient Nyingma sect Ghar Gompa above Tsarang\



Arriving in Lo Manthang from the south

### **5. Lo Manthang to Garphu (3897m) 4hrs return**

Either valley above Lo Manthang can be visited, with horses (Rs1000 each in winter) allowing you to cover more ground and feel part of the legion of long-ago salt-traders or Tibetan raiders. Chosar

(3987m) towards the Tibetan border has the Garphu cave *gompa* and also nearby five-level cave dwellings that you can visit for a fee, taking two hours each way which is quite long enough if you are not used to riding a short-legged pony. The views of ruined forts, ochre *chortens* and eroded pastel hills in the actinic high altitude light makes this a day not to miss.



Arriving in Chosar near the Tibetan border with the red Garphu cave *gompa* in sight



Five storey cave dwellings near Chosar



## 6. Rest day in Lo Manthang

In winter, nearly all tourist and souvenir shops are shut and the city is deserted except for animals, herdspeople and old people, which lends an unusual atmosphere. Even if you are feeling gompas out, the three old *gompas* within the walled city of Lo Manthang (Chode, Jampa and Thupchen) are each very distinctive and worth visiting. One \$US10 ticket, available from the monastic school but watch the dogs, gives entrance to all three and then it is certainly worth the trouble of chasing down the keys, which can take time in winter. Take torches but no photos. You can also choose to visit the western valley above Lo Manthang - details in Lonely Planet. Internet facilities are available at the friendly ACAP office opposite the King's Palace.

If you are considering exiting Mustang via truck down the bed of the Kali Gandaki (see Tsarang – Kagbeni below), start to enquire here about what days the truck might leave and book a space.



The palace of the founder king of Mustang, from Lo Manthang

## 7. Lo Manthang to Dhi (3300m) 3.5hrs

Take the road to Tsarang climbing to Lo La, then branch left (south-east) onto a narrow track (shown on most maps) on a long climbing traverse on bare hills, empty and full of light, with views of the Tsarang road below. After about three hours, a sign points left to Dhi and onwards to Tsarang, although the track is not shown on most maps. The very inventive and dusty track drops through steep erosion gullies to **Dhi** (3300m), hidden by the steepness of the slope. Only spring barley can be grown here, although fields are prepared in early winter. From Dhi, you can ring ahead to Yara to check that the Luri Gumpa has a caretaker in residence.

If you are considering exiting Mustang via truck down the bed of the Kali Gandaki (see Tsarang – Kagbeni below), enquire also in Dhi about what days the truck might leave and book a space since one of the trucks is owned by a man in Dhi.



The old salt route road between Lo Manthang and Tsarang, viewed from the track to Dhi



Typical courtyard lighting on first floor of Hira Hotel in Dhi

## **8. Dhi to Yara (3600m) and Luri Caves (4000m) 4.5hrs**

Cross the Kali Gandaki below Dhi and head up the bed of the Fuyung Khola which is full of ammonite fossils and probably ice. After about 1 hr, watch for a small sign on the left (true right) up



a zig-zag track to **Yara** (3600m). Leave your equipment here and grab a meal since there is nothing available further on. Climb above Yara past a large red *chorten* and take the middle of three paths which will drop you back into the Fuyung Khola eventually. Continue gently up the streambed, passing huge erosion flutings and squared caves within them. After about 1 hr you will see the climb right towards the Hindu pilgrimage site called Darmodar Kund but continue up the streambed for another 30 mins. There is a goat camp on a spur that you can cross, or stay in the streambed, and shortly thereafter climb left (true right) for **Luri Gompa** (4000m), visible just above the stream. In winter there may not be a caretaker, but we found a nun teaching Tibetan to Ghara children who had the necessary key for the magnificent old red cave gompa is perched on the cliffs above. The frescoes date from 12<sup>th</sup> century, show Persian miniature influences and happy enlightened teachers, unlike the terrors of modern gompas, a real highlight of Mustang. There photos at <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/BuddhistTempleArt/LuriGompa.html>

Find the marked westward trail below the old *gompa* and walk through Ghara. Below Ghara turn right off the road onto a track that descends into an increasingly claustrophobic canyon. Fear not, eventually you will arrive in the middle of downtown Yara for the night.



The 12th century Luri Cave gompa perched above its cave complex



From the old Luri Cave gompa, looking down at the 'new' gompa and the streambed approach

## 9. Yara to Tsarang (3575m) 4hrs

In winter the days are not long enough for the 30km day through Tangge, nor are there any facilities, so we chose to return to Tsarang and take the truck from there.

From Yara, return down the Fuyung Khola and climb briefly through **Surkhang** (3400m), staying high on the true left bank of the Kali Gandaki until forced to drop onto the riverbed. It is possible to sidle beside the river for some distance, but eventually you will be forced to wade. Take care to choose a safe crossing, undo waist belts and link arms as the current can be fierce. Opposite the first major stream coming from the east (the Dhechyang Khola) cross to the west bank (true right) downstream of the Charang Khola, climb up the motor road to Ghemi for 200m and take the track climbing north to **Tsarang** (3575m).

## 10. Tsarang to Kagbeni (2810) 3hrs

Several times in early winter, two high clearance 4WD trucks from Lo Manthang and Dhi travel in convoy downriver after meeting in the Kali Gandaki riverbed. This drive is extremely interesting, rough and exciting and highly recommended if your schedule allows. We were happy to pay Rs1000 each and the hotel will organise details for you. The trucks spend much of the time in the rushing water, with the walls narrowing at times to only 20m apart. At one point the whole Kali Gandaki passes through a narrow tunnel with water bank to bank. We saw three lots of blue sheep and one lonely shepherd and were very glad to arrive at the bridge below Chele in one piece. Everyone stops for tea in Chhuksang, then trucks continue to Kagbeni and Jomoson. A most amazing journey!

Finally, just a few tips for trekking in upper Mustang at this time of year: expect simple food like tsampa porridge and dal bhat. Many hotels have no menus and toilets can be a long way away. There is a shortage of water for washing due to freezing. And a buff (head covering) can be very



useful for dust and wind. But it is an intense experience to visit at this time, ambiguous, beautiful and empty. We hope you enjoy it as much as we did.



Trucks from Lo Manthang and Dhi join up for the trip down the Kali Gandaki Gorge



Typical Kali Gandaki Gorge, only accessible in winter.



The Kali Gandaki passes through a narrow tunnel in the upper gorge.



Nearing Kagbeni from the Kali Gandaki riverbed

Sue and Howard Dengage (2-11 December 2010) Note that since these track notes were prepared the road down from Lo Manthang has been much extended and there is now significant traffic.

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