

Mustang-The Almost Forgotten Kingdom

To the sounds of both twelve-foot long and short double reed horns, hand cymbals and drums, a procession of Buddhist monks in maroon and saffron emerged from the gate of the walled town of Lo Manthang, capital of the almost forgotten kingdom of Mustang. Behind them other masked monks carried bowls of evil spirits captured during three days of dancing and chanting. Jigme Palbar Bista, the Raja of Mustang, in royal golden robes strode through the gate with his entourage. A boisterous crowd of spectators, in their various tribal dress, completed the procession. The annual spring festival of Tiji was approaching climax.

Reaching the edge of town, the crowd looked on while the ornately masked head dancer ceremonially smashed the bowls upon the ground vanquishing demons that might rain fire, drought, flood, famine, and earthquakes upon the people. Ancient flintlock muskets were periodically discharged accompanied with much smoke and lusty cheering. The demons were well warned not to return. The exorcism completed the crowd slowly dispersed. I hoped that the demons were so far away they'd not find us either.

I was one of six American photographers led by Bill Chapman, a professional photographer with five years of Nepal and Tibet experience. Three of us were in the mid-50s and I am 71 years old. Having to cross three or four passes daily at altitudes around 13,000 feet was a test of our mental and physical stamina. Walking in the dry riverbed was also a challenge: the plethora of rocks was hard on ankles. We trekked north through Mustang arriving just in time to witness the festival. We were grubby and grumpy but the adrenaline flowed. I quickly forgot my assorted aches and pains.

Mustang (pronounced moo-stong) lies north of the main Himalayan massif between Tibet and Nepal. There are no roads, cars, trucks, telephones, airports, or banks. There are incredible vistas, fascinating people and miles of dirt, wind and rocky paths. It's been described as a high altitude desert of dirt and scree, a barren expanse of innumerable cliffs and gorges. Geographers once called it "the dead heart of Asia." As we neared the villages there almost always were splashes of green from fields of oats and a few willow trees. Chapman kept calling attention to incredible landscapes, some like the red rock canyons of the American Southwest but with the magnificent Himalayas in the background.

Remoteness has insulated Mustang from foreign influences. Few travelers reached Nepal before 1950 and fewer still anywhere beyond Kathmandu. Probably the first foreigner to set foot in Mustang was in 1950. There were less than a handful of others until 1960 when the country was closed entirely to outside visitors. It was not until 1990 that an American photographer and a journalist got entry permits. Mustang is still not a major tourist destination. The only foreigners we saw was a small group of Japanese trekkers. In 2000 there were only 800 permits issued and the government plans to keep entries below 1000 annually. I felt fortunate to be among the few Americans to visit this almost forgotten kingdom. Most of my friends never heard of the place.

Our group gathered in Kathmandu over a three-day period. After finally getting required permits from the Nepalese government we drove through the countryside to Pokhara. The Ministry of Interior says that this is a fabulous resort. I was unimpressed. It was a typical third world tourist trap. The next morning we were supposed to fly to Jomsom to begin our trek but the flights were cancelled due to dense cloud cover in the canyons. We spent a leisurely and interesting afternoon at a nearby Tibetan refugee camp watching the lady weavers.

The next day we were on the second flight, a twin engine Otter. Flying between the stunning peaks of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri, rising some five miles high, I knew that I didn't want to be there in bad weather. To further complicate things, each morning a blasting wind rises in the mid-morning heat of the Indian plain and is sucked northward through the awesome breach by the low pressure of the mountain deserts. Flights are scheduled from around 7:00 to 9:45, when the wind comes up. As we trekked back to Jomsom, at the end of our adventure, we were facing into this wind and at times we could barely move forward. Now I understood why the narrow window of opportunity for flying.

Jomsom, at 8,800 feet, is overshadowed by Nilgiri, the snow peak at the northwest corner of the Annapurna. Here we met Krishna Pathak and his Trekking Team (P) Ltd. crew. As we sipped cups of black tea they quickly loaded our duffel bags and other supplies onto pack animals. All goods going into or coming out of Mustang are on the backs of persons or animals. Leaving Hindu Nepal behind, a three-hour walk north up the canyon brought us to Kagbeni. at the edge of the restricted area of Mustang.

One can not proceed further north without a permit. Each trekker is charged \$700 per day by the Nepalese government. Sixty percent of this is supposed to go to Mustang. Given the existing rampant graft it is unlikely that significant funds ever reach Mustang.

Krishna had to provide a count of all our supplies and especially containers that are not biodegradable. On exiting Mustang 11 days later he had to again provide a count. which must reflect our environmental awareness. For example, all plastic containers going in must come out.

A Nepalese "liaison officer" must accompany foreigners. This may be a reward for the individual as the trekkers are responsible for feeding and housing them. Ours, a member of the government's Anti-graft Department, soon injured his foot and left our group and returned to Kathmandu. We never missed him. Bureaucracy may be why almost all foreigners entering Mustang do so as organized groups whose leaders understand the system.

Mustang is still essentially a feudal kingdom that grew rich from its position astride the Kali Gandaki River with access to the traders from Tibet and India. The raja and nobles who controlled the trade became wealthy. During the 15th and 16th centuries Mustang was renowned for its Buddhist art and scholarship. A number of monasteries in Mustang

predate even the earliest Buddhist monasteries in Tibet. Most villages still have temples and some are home to monasteries.

Mustang epitomizes the dilemma of modernization. Today only a few of the temples still house ornately bound texts and fine statutes. Most monasteries are abandoned or under the care of a handful of monks. The chortens are deteriorating. Few new prayer stones are evident. The kingdom is picturesque but in advanced decay. It is part of Nepal but a living museum of Tibetan culture.

Trekking mostly up the west side of the almost dry Kali Gandaki River our group stayed in small villages of dirt colored flat roofed houses. We'd typically walk for perhaps four hours in the morning. Krishna scheduled lunch breaks for small way stations much like our old pony express or stagecoach stops. They were typically only one to three buildings. The cook team would typically jog past us mid-morning and again mid-afternoon.

In the late afternoons after walking three or four hours we'd arrive in a larger village marked by green fields of oats or rice, chortens, and long walls of prayer wheels. The porters pitched our tents in stone corrals that before and after us would again contain four-footed animals. Thankfully the sites were almost always out of the afternoon winds. But dust was a common irritant. In the larger villages typically one of the buildings was a hotel for traveling merchants, holy men and trekkers. The buildings all seemed the same: two stories with the bottom for animals and storage and the second for living. Acrid smoke from wood cooking fires and cigarettes was ubiquitous and daily doses of antihistamines was a common practice among our group. It was chilly in the mornings but as the sun came up we soon were in shirtsleeves.

The third night of trekking we stayed in the village of Chele, on the leeward side of the Nilgiri Hotel owned by Takla Guruny. Takla invited us to tea. At age 64 he is the oldest, and probably the crustiest person in town. His lined face spoke of a hard life of labor in the high dry air. But he was quick to smile. I asked about what they did in the winter. "If you came here in the winter you would hardly find anybody here. Almost all the people of Mustang leave in the winter," he said. "There is nothing to do. Most go to India, do some trading and get a little money." I asked if he goes away in the winter. He replied "No. I stay and keep the snow from filling the hotel."

The festival activities in Lo Manthang were in the afternoons so we had the mornings to roam around the town. The first morning we visited the Sakyapa Monastic School founded in 1994. According to Pema Tering, the current principal, when the link to Tibet was severed in 1959 Mustang faced extremely critical cultural and economic conditions. Intermingling with peoples from the south impacted negatively on the local culture. Until their school there were no centers and schools to maintain and promote the culture. He said that change is happening but schools and centers are essential to revive and promote culture. The curriculum consists of monastic subjects such as scriptures, ritual dances, musical instruments and prayers, and, moral education. Non-monastic subjects include

three languages, mathematics and general science, social and environmental education, health and hygiene, drawing and painting.

The last afternoon I was watching a monk take photographs of the festival and speaking briefly to many of the onlookers. During a tea and toilet break in the proceedings he came by where I was resting against a pillar. As we chatted I learned that he was a guru for education in Lo Manthang. He worries about change but knows that it is inevitable. "Education is a mean of slowing change and equipping the people with means of coping," he said. I noted with amusement that he, as well as most of the other monks, were wearing imitation Converse tennis sneakers. "They are from China," he replied, moving on to chat with other observers.

Just before leaving Lo Manthang we had a 15-minute audience with Raja Jigne in his crumbling palace. The nearest road is a four-day trek through the deepest gorge in the world. I knew there was talk of building a road linking Lo Manthang with Tibet seven miles away. I asked Raja Jigne about this. "I have tried to reinforce our culture." He replied. "A road could shatter the peace of this tranquil valley." He is worried that the road would open the country to an influx of Chinese commerce and development, so devastatingly evident in Tibet. Jigne also is aware that a road to the outside world would be a welcome sign of progress for many of his subjects. He sees no easy solution.

After four more nights of sleeping in tents and fighting the wind in our faces as we trekked the last miles, we were back in Jomsom and hot running water, real beds and beer. Sipping a cold one, I ruminated about the trek. It was a rare chance to see well preserved Tibetan culture in its purest form. The surreal landscapes are unlike any other in the world. As Chapman "The diversity of landscapes, the stunning light and the unique architecture make this one of the earth's most grand and inspiring places to photograph." And Chapman is a great teacher.

Krishna and Bill Chapman coordinated a very unique adventure but not for casual tourists. How well were we cared for? Well, each morning there was a knock on our tents followed by a cup of black tea and a pan of warm water for washing. For breakfast there was porridge, bread, peanut butter and jam, messed up eggs, hot milk, tea or instant coffee. Lunches were typically two sandwiches, warm French fries, a vegetable salad, lemonade or tea. For dinner there was soup of some variety, different types of baked bread, vegetable salad, rice, and a different vegetable entree each night. We soon learned to look forward to mid-afternoon tea and cookies or crackers, signifying the days walk was over.

The trek was not as difficult as I had imagined it would be, but it was not a walk in the park. Mustang is not easily accessible and there are few amenities. It's different than any trip I have been on. Anyone with a sense of adventure, a positive and enthusiastic attitude, and in reasonably decent physical condition, should find it challenging, but not impossible. And there are abundant photographic possibilities.

How to get There, Who to Contact

There are no direct flights from the USA to Nepal. There are several airlines servicing Nepal. The following have the least number of connecting flights.

- Royal Nepal Airlines via London and Frankfurt. The airlines had no offices in the USA. For reservations & information call Virgin Atlantic 800-862-8621. They have ticketing agreements with Royal Nepal. Or call 011 977 1-220757
- Thai Airways International via Los Angeles, New York and Bangkok. For reservations & information: 1-800-426-5304 or Thaiair@earthlink.net
- Singapore Airlines via Los Angeles, New York & Singapore. For reservations & information: 1-800-742-333 Or 800-742-8474.
- Bill Chapman can be contacted at Bill@Himalayanlight.com or 1-800-900 –3215 or chapmanw@charter.net
- Trekking Team Ltd. can be contacted at www.trekkingteam.com or at 977-1-228163 or infor@trekkingteam.com

For international departures an airport tax of 1100 Rupees is required. There is a domestic departure tax of 165 Rs for each flight. A passport valid for six months of arrival is required. Visas may be obtained at the Kathmandu airport upon arrival.