Shrouded in mystery and unparalleled in natural and cultural beauty, it should come as no surprise to hear that through the ages, Mustang has gone by many names. “Mustang” is an English corruption of Lo Monthang, the walled capital city and the seat of the local king. The earliest reference to this ancient realm in western literature was by Kirkpatrick, the first Englishman to visit Nepal, who in 1793 wrote, in what was to be perhaps the greatest Himalayan understatement: “Moostang is a place of some note...”. Moostang was to become Mastang, and then in turn, Mustang. None of these names is as evocative as the original Tibetan though: Lo Monthang or “The Southern Plains of Aspiration”.

Nature & Climate

Mustang can be best understood as two climate and natural regions: the lower, more fertile valleys and then the upper reaches which stretch all the way to the border with Tibet. The whole district is one of extremes and superlatives. The ancient walking track and trade route takes visitors and locals alike through the world’s deepest and steepest river gorge, that of the fierce Kali Gandaki. Above tower two of the world’s highest mountains: Annapurna I (8,078m) and Dhaulagiri I (8,172m). At one point, the difference between the valley floor and the summits is over 6,000m and the ominous peaks are only 20km apart so that on a clear day, from the villages below, one can see climbers making their approach along the deadly ice falls which have claimed so many lives.

This part of southern Mustang is called Thak Khola, “The Valley of the Border Country”, and is characterised by lush fields of wheat, barley and maize. The indigenous population stem largely from the Thakali ethnic group, a famed trading people who now make a living as inn-keepers for the countless tourists and pilgrims passing through.

Places to Visit

The villages of Tukche and Marpha are some of Nepal’s most picturesque. Tukche was once the most important Thakali village being the centre of the Trans-Himalayan trade. The grand stone houses were used as stores for salt and grain. The open land in the centre of the village, now a school playground, was once a bustling market ground where local businessmen mingled with Indian and Tibetan traders to barter for goods.

The village of Marpha, a two-hour walk to the north, boasts a unique medieval drainage system which runs underneath the flagstone-paved streets. The roofs of the houses are noticeably flatter and are piled high with firewood collected in summer months. Both villages have numerous Tibetan Buddhist gompas, or monasteries, well worth the visit. Across the river from Marpha is the village of Chairo, a Tibetan refugee settlement with a small school and some authentic souvenirs for sale.

Jomsom is the administrative capital for the whole of the Mustang district. There is a domestic airport from where you can fly to Pokhara, and the town houses an army post as well as...
many official buildings, countless lodges, restaurants and shops, offering delights such as hot showers, pizza, beer and western chocolate.

A few hours to the north is the village of Kagbeni, the last settlement in the unrestricted part of lower Mustang. Being situated at the confluence of two rivers, it is spiritually auspicious and functioned as an important trade stop in the olden days. It is by far the most ethnically Tibetan of the villages of lower Mustang: sitting in a smoky lodge sipping a cup of yak butter and salt tea, you feel taken back to Tibetan life as it has existed for centuries.

To the east of Kag, up a steep trail, lies the most important pilgrimage site in the mountains of Nepal. It is known as Muktinath, literally “Salvation Lord”, for here one finds a temple complex dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu, Lord of Salvation. The many temples of Muktinath have a supernatural as well as a historical dimension. In the Jwala Mai temple, pilgrims worship a never-ending flame, fuelled by natural gases deep in the earth’s core, which appears to burn on top of a water spring. It represents Agni, the fire god, a crucial element in Hindu Vedic ritual. Whilst the temple complex is predominantly Hindu, local Buddhists and animists also worship there, attributing the natural miracles to the work of their own gods. It is locally believed, for example, that the saint Padmasambhava, responsible for bringing Buddhism to Tibet, visited Muktinath in the 8th century.

Between Kagbeni and Muktinath, as you make the ascent of around a thousand metres (from 2,800 to 3,000 m.) within a short span of a few kilometres, there are a number of picturesque settlements that come in view. The most notable one is Dzar - Jharkot that offers a spectacular views both of the Muktinath valley which lies straight across, and the Kali Gandaki down below.

Keep an eye out for the shaligrams. A beady-eyed traveller has a good chance of finding his or her own free souvenir no less than 140 million years old! These shaligrams are the fossilised remnants of prehistoric ammonites, a kind of mollusc, that once lived in the Sea of Tethys before the continental collision that created the Himalayan range. Because of their unique spiralled shape, they are worshipped as earthly manifestations of Vishnu and are therefore particularly sought after by Hindu pilgrims.

North of Kagbeni lies the restricted area of Upper Mustang. To trek here, you need to travel with an organised trekking group and to have purchased the permit in Kathmandu. More often than not, you will be accompanied by a Special Forces Police Officer since the area is still deemed to be politically sensitive. For those trekkers who do go, all these careful
preparations only serve to make the trip even more of an adventure. North of Kagbeni lies the restricted area of upper Mustang. To trek here, you need to travel with an organised trekking group and to have purchased the permit in Kathmandu. More often than not, you will be accompanied by a Special Forces Police Officer since the area is still deemed to be politically sensitive. For those trekkers who do go, all these careful preparations only serve to make the trip even more of an adventure.

The best way to travel to Lo Monthang is by horse. The local breed is hardy and well acclimatised to the altitude, and being the only form of transport other than feet in the whole region, is the subject of much admiration and pride. The royal family of Mustang own some of the best horses: the crown prince himself has a trekking agency based in Kathmandu, known as Royal Mustang Excursions, and fortunate trekkers get to ride on these choice steeds.

En route to the magnificent walled capital of Lo Monthang, there are many other wonders in store for those who venture into side valleys. One of the most breathtaking is the Luri cave temple, cut into the rock as the name implies. The approach is steep and rocky, but well worth the extra day hike. Every one of the villages along the main trail is beautiful and different. Gompas, stupas and other sacred sites abound in settlements such as Tangbe, Samar and Tsarang, but this spiritual voyage is only complete once you have seen the three temples in Lo Monthang itself. The 50ft tall image of “The Coming Buddha”, or Maitreya in Sanskrit, dominates the Jampa gompa and is one of the largest statues of its kind in Nepal.

The rulers of Mustang have always been patrons of the Buddhist faith, and in about 1425, the first great king of Lo, Annapurna, founded the city and commissioned a 108-volume of the Buddhist scriptures in gold and silver as well as the painting of the gompa’s walls. The frescoes can still be seen today whilst the only remaining gold and silver book is now in the king’s private chapel. In the great halls of Thubchen gompa, the pillars are well over 30ft high and the bright murals that still adorn the walls are currently being restored by artists and experts both from Nepal and the West.

In short, Mustang continues to be a place of deep spirituality and fascination. Beautifully illustrated coffee table books with panoramic photos abound, with such titles as Mustang - the Forbidden Kingdom; East of Lo Monthang; Mustang - A Lost Tibetan Kingdom and Himalayan Pilgrimage, each extolling the virtues of the area. If you are interested in Buddhist art and culture and want to walk through Himalayan history, Mustang remains the perfect destination. With the Tibetan plateau in your sights and the wind in your hair, it is the trek of a lifetime.

-Mark Turin