

Mustang – The Forbidden Kingdom

22 DAYS
13 Days MODERATE Trekking
Maximum Altitude 4250 Metres

A Fascinating Journey Through Nepal's Ancient & Forbidden Kingdom

- ◆ FOLLOW AN ANCIENT TRADING ROUTE TOWARDS THE TIBETAN PLATEAU
- ◆ TREK THROUGH THE KALI GANDAKI VALLEY, THE DEEPEST GORGE IN THE WORLD
- ◆ TRADITIONAL TIBETAN CULTURE & THE WALLED CITY OF LO MANTHANG

Introduction

Mustang is a remote semi-independent Tibetan Kingdom north of the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri Mountains and is one of the last bastions of undisturbed Tibetan culture in the world. Only opened to westerners in 1992, our trek takes us to the capital Lo Manthang and the fascinating Upper Mustang. Well-known, intrepid explorers such as Professor David Snellgrove and the Italian scholar Guiseppe Tucci visited Mustang in the 1950's and it has largely been their tales of a Tibetan-like arid region that has fuelled interest in the area.

Mustang has an average height of 4000 metres and is located to the north of the mountain giants of Dhaulagiri and Annapurna, being north of the main Himalayan range and is geographically part of the highlands of Tibet. It is a vast high valley, arid and dry, characterised by eroded canyons, colourful stratified rock formations and has a barren, desert like appearance.

Lo was once part of Tibet and was an important means of crossing the Himalaya from Tibet to Nepal, and many of the old salt caravans passed through Mustang. It became an independent kingdom in its own right, under the rule of Ame Pal, the founder king of Lo in 1380. The present royal family can trace its history 25 generations back to Ame Pal, and the city of Lo Manthang, which we will visit, was the centre of their power. In more recent time in the 1960's Mustang became the centre for Tibetan guerrilla fighters who carried out small operations against the occupying Chinese. The CIA assisted them and the Tibetan Khampas were secretly trained in America. With Nixon's visit to China in the 1970's, the CIA's support was withdrawn and the Nepalese managed to disband these resistance fighters.

We begin our trek with a spectacular drive up the Kala Gandaki Valley, first to Tatopani and then on to Kagbeni, the gateway to Upper Mustang. The Kala Gandaki is the deepest valley in the world with the towering giants of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri rising on each side. From here we head north, following an ancient trading route, crossing windswept passes up to 4000 metres to the walled capital city of Lo Manthang. Most of the trek keeps to arid, high deserts inhabited mostly by people of Tibetan origin. The men are either traders or farmers while the women mostly tend the fields. We have several days at Lo Manthang and have time to explore the city and visit villages north of Lo Manthang. We trek through a landscape of indescribable beauty, surrounded by snow-capped peaks and bathed in hues of orange and red rocks. We pass eroded cliffs, red-walled monasteries and remote villages little changed by the twentieth century to enter a land inhabited by the infamous snow leopard, the endangered Bharal (blue sheep), and the mythical Yeti (abominable snowman).

"Mustang is one of the few places in the Himalayan region that has been able to retain its traditional Tibetan culture unmolested... authentic Tibetan culture now survives only in exile and a few places like Mustang, which have had long historical and cultural ties with Tibet."

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

The price includes the special Mustang Permit Fee.

Recognising the special nature of the old, tiny kingdom, the Nepalese have imposed a surcharge for anyone wishing to trek past Kagbeni, the border of Upper Mustang. We also have to be accompanied by a government representative (liaison officer) on every trip. This special entry permit and government liaison officer's fees and expenses increase the cost of this special trek. With legal trekking groups only being allowed in for the first time in March 1992, and on average only 700 people each year visiting Mustang, this cost is outweighed by the fact that you would be part of a small privileged minority to visit this remote outpost of Nepal.

Itinerary

Day 1 – Depart UK

Depart UK on flight to Kathmandu.

Day 2 - Kathmandu (1527 metres)

Arrive Kathmandu. Flying into Kathmandu along the northern border of Nepal on a clear day is in itself an unforgettable experience, with the entire Nepalese Himalaya sprawling out below you. After customs, you will pass out of the restricted area and into the passenger pick-up area outside the building. You will see a Classic Journeys signboard and our staff will be waiting to welcome you to Nepal. After transferring to your hotel, you will be given a chance to catch your breath and then be given a briefing. We complete the

application for your Mustang trekking permit and your passport and air ticket will be collected and used by us to obtain this permit. Overnight hotel.

Day 3 - Kathmandu (1527 metres)

A day in Kathmandu. Morning guided sightseeing to the Buddhist and Hindu sights in Kathmandu, probably to Kathmandu's Durbar Square, Swayambunath - the Buddhist monkey temple and Pashupatinath – a sacred Hindu temple complex on the banks of the Bagmati River. Three major towns are located in the valley, Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, each having a great artistic and architectural tradition. Kathmandu is the capital and the largest city in the country. Patan, the second largest is separated from Kathmandu by a river. Bhaktapur, the third largest, is towards the eastern end of the valley and its relative isolation is reflected in its slower pace and more distinctly mediaeval atmosphere. In the Valley the landscape is dramatically sculpted by the contours of the paddy fields. The towns and villages are alive with the colours of farm produce, ranging from pyramids of golden grain to the vivid reds of chilli peppers laid out on mats to dry in the sun. In the streets and towns there is a constant bustle of activity, especially in the bazaars and markets where the farmers sell their vegetables and fruit. The afternoon is free for you to explore the city further and pack bags ready for the start of the trek the following morning. You can leave a bag at the hotel with items you will not need on the trek. Overnight hotel. (B)

Day 4 - Pokhara (885 metres)

Drive to Pokhara, the rural capital of western Nepal. (5 – 6 hours) On arrival we will check in to the hotel, situated near Phewa Tal Lake. The rest of the day is free to explore this small town. Pokhara is an area of great natural beauty with the Himalayan Mountains looming over the horizon. The Pokhara Valley has three large lakes, the largest being Phewa Tal. Bicycles are available for hire and boats are available on Phewa Tal Lake. There are many trails that will take you out of the town and into the quiet hillsides, returning to lakeside to discover the best cafes and restaurants. The wonderful Annapurna mountain panorama forms a wonderful backdrop for photography, particularly splendid at sunset. Overnight Hotel. (B)

Day 5 – Drive to Tatopani (1100metres)

5 – 6 hours adventurous drive. Leaving the Pokhara Valley we enter the Kala Gandaki Valley. We begin our journey up the World's deepest river gorge with the Himalayan giants Nilgiri (7061m) and Dhaulagiri (8167m) to either side. Eventually we reach the village of Tatopani. Tatopnai means 'hot water'. There may be an opportunity to wash the journey's dust off our bodies with a dip in the hot springs of Tatopani. Overnight in a local lodge (BLD)

Day 6 – Drive to Marpha (2600m) 5 – 6 hours drive. Continuing our journey up the Kala Gandaki Valley to Marpha, an interesting and old mountain village inhabited by Thakali people. Overnight in a local lodge

Day 7 – Trek to Kagbeni (2900 metres)

4 – 5 hours walk. En route we pass through the large village of Jomsom with its airport on our right. This is a very easy, enjoyable start to our trek and is, at the same time picturesque, with views of big peaks all around such as Dhaulagiri (8180m), Tukuiche (6930m) and in the west the awesome mountain of Nilgiri (6950m). Over to the south and southwest can be seen the entire Annapurna Massif. Upon reaching Kagbeni there is a taste of scenes to come in Upper Mustang, what with its narrow alleyways and tunnels, irrigation canals, green fields of wheat and barley and a large red Gumpa. There are about 80 families living at Kagbeni, most of them traders who are the link in the chain between modern Nepal and the Tibetan-type people of Mustang.

We will follow the gentle trail that follows the left bank of the Kali Gandaki River. Views are stunning and we will also explore the major highlights of Kagbeni village. It is a fortified village inhabited by people who belong to Tibetan heritage.

We will cross a wooden bridge and enter the old part of Kagbeni, with its winding streets, Gumpa, and town entrance gate. Legend says that one should think good thoughts when going through the gate, leaving all bad will outside the town. The Gumpa (monastery) has a new wing that was added on quite recently, however the older section is open for viewing if you can locate the keeper of the key (often not an easy task). This is well worth the visit as it has many fresco style wall paintings depicting the life and teachings of the Buddha and is quite similar to many of the older Gompas we will see further north in upper Mustang.

There will be plenty of time to climb up into the barley fields above the town to get a glimpse into Mustang or perhaps of the snow-capped peaks of the Annapurna range. At the police check post, north end of the village, there is a sign saying *'Restricted area, tourists please do not go beyond this point'*. Here we will

complete our paperwork formalities for us to enter this forbidden region of Nepal. Overnight lodge in Kagbeni. (BLD)

Day 8 – Chele (3050 metres)

Having shown our passes at the police check-post, we continue into Mustang proper. It is possible to trek right up the river valley, but the best way is to use a combination of the high trail and the riverbank pathways. The trail then widens significantly revealing an endless stretch of sand, however, the path is kept interesting by the passing of several mule trains bearing goods from Mustang and probably Tibet as well. On the west bank of the river you can see Gumpa Kang and some caves. Unlike most monasteries in Upper Mustang, Gumpa Kang is of the Nyingmapa sect. We stop for lunch at the village of Tangbe (after 4 hours of walking), which is situated alongside the east bank trail above the river. Here are the first black, white and red chortens that typify Upper Mustang. The little town is a labyrinth of narrow alleys among whitewashed houses, fields of buckwheat barley, wheat and apple orchards. Nilgiri Peak continues to dominate the southern skyline.

From Tangbe the trail climbs to a high point around 3100 metres. From here the route ahead unfolds, a stunning view towards great red canyon walls where the river enters a narrow defile. The village of Chele, can be seen perched high above the river on the west bank. The trail descends gradually out of to near river level. The rest of the walk is relatively mild into Chuksang. Chuksang is actually two halves separated by Narsing Khola coming out of the mountains to the east. About 45min walk up Narsing is the town of Tetang that is visible as a walled town on a hill of terraces. Chuksang is a truly beautiful place set deep in the Kali Gandaki canyon with red, orange and silver/grey cliffs all around. Notice the now inaccessible cliff dwellings in the large red rock face opposite Chuksang. These are also quite common throughout Mustang. They were carved out and lived in by Buddhist hermits, often much or most of their lives were spent in meditation and prayer in these cliff side dwellings. The trail heads out of Chuksang along the Kali Gandaki River but quickly divides to either down in the riverbed (low water route) or hugs the east bank (high water route). We will usually take the lower route off across the now very wide Kali Gandaki riverbed (this is a fabulous chance to look for "shaligrams", ammonite fossils considered holy by locals).

The trail passes below another fort and village with red and white striped buildings on the east side. On the west side are great towering cliffs of amazing eroded pipes, chimneys and gullies in glowing yellow, gold, orange and red colours. After a short walk along the riverbed, there is a solid bridge across the Kali Gandaki at the point where it tunnels its way under a vast block of red sandstone. From here it is a short sharp climb to Chele. (6 hours walking) Overnight camp. (BLD)

Day 9 - Syangmochen (3600 metres)

There is a distinct change here, not only in the topography, but there is a world of difference also in the culture, lifestyle and people. Settlements are more scattered, smaller and more basic. The people of Lo or Mustang do practice agriculture, but because of lack of rain and fertile soil, cultivation is in sheltered plots of land making the landscape a pattern of brown, with scattered patterns of shaded greens. Immediately on leaving Chele, the path climbs steeply up to a plateau region through a small tunnel-like gully. Climbing more gradually, the village of Ghyakar appears to the west as the path rounds a corner. A tremendous canyon opens out between the trail and the village, surrounded by patchwork fields of rich red buckwheat and brilliant green. The trail winds upward hugging the north wall of the canyon and in places is literally carved into the cliff-side.

As we continue upward, the village of Ghyakar comes into view across the canyon. Ghyakar is a small village with numerous terraced fields that spread down the canyon; abruptly stopping at the edge of a large cliff-face, which drops off into the canyon. We approach the end of our climb and our first mountain pass at 3320 metres. From the pass it is a short descent to Samar, a pleasant settlement in a grove of willows with good running water in irrigation channels. This is a major stopping place for horse and mule caravans. The village has a commanding view of the valley below it.

Leaving Samar we descend steeply into a small canyon before climbing back up the other side to the Bag La pass (3745m). In Mustang and other Buddhist regions of the Himalaya, a large pile of stones, topped by numerous prayer flags, marks most passes. Buddhist believe that the act of carrying stones up to these passes and building a pile by the path will be rewarded with spiritual merit. Centuries of this practice have left significant piles of stones. From the pass we descend and ascend again before arriving in the very small town of Yemdo (3800m). We continue from Yemdo gently down and on up to Yemdo La (4000m) where we are rewarded with another even better view over all of Mustang.

We descend down a relatively steep trail to Syangmochen (3600m) with its two-three houses. The section of trail between Samar and Syangmochen is surprisingly wet and forested. Juniper trees (woefully missing most of their branches, which have been removed for firewood), dot the lower slopes while the higher slopes are virtually fully forested, as they are inaccessible to local woodcutters.

We will pass through numerous small canyons that are home to an amazingly diverse number of plant species, usually found much farther to the south. Look for the Himalayan pine, fir, small elm bushes (hackberry), and numerous types of roses. If we have time we can take a short but rigorous side trail just before Syangmochen to visit Rangbyung, a cave with numerous Buddha statues. Overnight camp. (BLD)

Day 10 - Dakmar (3786 metres)

The trail climbs gently from Syangmochen to a pass at 3700 metres and enters another huge east-west valley. There is a trail junction here. The left trail is the direct route to the Nyi La bypassing Gheling. We take the right fork and descend to Gheling with its extensive fields of barley at 3600 metres. As in all the settlements of Mustang, most houses are constructed out of mud and stones with roofs cast out of twigs, straw and a mixture of mud and pebbles, usually painted in bright white or ochre colours. On the north side of town are the active Monastery and Gumpa, as well as the remains of one of the oldest Gumpas in Mustang. Although its age is unknown, this Gumpa houses some very old Tibetan artefacts as well as numerous oddities. These include a 500+ year old prayer book, a 1000+ year old suite of armour from an ancient king of Tibet, numerous weapons from the Khampa resistance, and the centuries old mummified hand of a local thief who stole from the Gumpa. Overnight camp. (BLD)

Day 11 – Charang (3820 metres)

From Gheling the trail climbs gently through fields, up the centre of the valley, passing below the settlement of Tama Gun and an imposing Chorten. There is an awesome view southward of the ruins of the Gheling nunnery with a backdrop of the snowy steep faces Nilgiri and Tilicho towering above. We rejoin the direct trail and start an unrelenting climb across the head of the valley to the Nyi La Pass (3950m). This pass marks the official entrance into Upper Mustang.

From here are spectacular views of the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri ranges to the south as well as the impressive Tibetan plateau to the north. The descent from the Nyi La is nice and gentle and takes us down to Ghami. Ghami is the first town under the rule of the King of Mustang and is a small village sheltered by overhanging cliffs and next to a clear stream. As with all of the significant towns in Upper Mustang, there is a royal house from where a relative of the King watches over the town. During the day you will pass many chortens along the way. Always keep to the left, as it is bad 'Karma' to go the wrong way round. The trail climbs onto a gently sloping plateau and passes beside a very long Mani wall about half an hour from Ghami. From the end of the wall the trail heads north to cross the ridgeline and begins a one-hour traverse to Charang. Overnight camp. (BLD)

Day 12 - Lo Manthang (3820 metres)

After crossing a small Khola we head north and start ascending, eventually reaching the top of the cliffs after 1 hour. From here we continue to head north over rolling hills edged with 6096 metre mountains to the west, arriving at Lo Ghekar. Lo Ghekar is a small town with lovely grassy meadows usually inhabited by local yaks. It is also home to the oldest Gumpa in Nepal.

The trail continues out of Lo Ghekar to the north with a short descent to a wooden bridge and then a steep ascent up the other side. The entire Mustang Valley is visible from here and we will be rewarded with numerous fabulous views across Mustang as the day progresses. After around 2 hours we begin our last long uphill before Lo Manthang. At 4200 metres this is the highest point on our trek! From here the trail winds its way slowly down to a pass at 4095 metres where we get our first views of Lo Manthang far off across the 'Plain of Aspiration' below us. The trail descends moderately steeply to the base of the hills and then sets out across the plain towards Lo Manthang. We will camp not far from the main entrance gate outside the walls of the city. Overnight camp. (BLD)

Day 13 – Explore Lo Manthang

Lo Manthang is the capital city of the kingdom of Mustang. The town sits in a broad valley filled with fields, horses, and yaks and contains about 150 houses, plus many cells for lamas. There are four major temples within the city and there is a caretaker and key, which are available at certain times. These really are very impressive, with huge clay statues of various Buddhas. The king's palace is an imposing 4 storey building in the centre of the city and is presently occupied by the current king and queen.

The city is an absolutely fascinating place, with narrow streets and houses built adjoining the city wall.

The town has four of the largest and oldest Gompas in Nepal, dating back to the 14-15th centuries. These are spectacular structures featuring traditional Buddhist paintings, woodcarvings, and massive Buddha sculptures. Despite the apparent squalor of Lo Manthang, the city is prosperous and maintains a strong sense of community. Though the people call themselves Lobas, people from Lo, they are very much Tibetan and practice a sophisticated culture and economy. Before trade with Tibet was disrupted, all of the salt and wool trade on the Kali Gandaki passed through Lo Manthang, and this brought a sizable amount of money to the city. Wealth is now primarily measured in land, horses and social standing. Overnight camp. (BLD)

Day 14 – Ghami (3520 metres)

Beginning our return trek out of Mustang we retrace our route crossing the Marang La (4230m) and Mui La (4170m) to Dakmar, a split town, with 4-5 houses set in a stand of poplar trees in the lower village and 8-10 houses in the upper village about 20 min further along the trail. The Dakmar area is beautiful with large tracts of terraced fields set against blood red cliffs with numerous ancient cave dwellings. These once housed monks who wished to devote their lives to prayer. Overnight camp (BLD)

Day 15 – Samar (3660 metres)

Crossing the Nyi La (4010m) we trek out to Samar. En route, we have good views southwards to the Annapurna Massif. Overnight camp. (BLD)

Day 16 – Chuksang (2980 metres)

Trekking steeply down to Chele, we cross the upper Kali Gandaki on a metal bridge, then meander through Chukksang. We will see stunning views of the Nilgiris and Tilicho Peak. The walk is very pleasant and downhill. Overnight camp. (BLD)

Day 17 – Kagbeni (2800m) Trek back to the entry point for Upper Mustang. Overnight in local lodge. (BLD)

Day 18 – Trek to Muktinath (3800m), the holiest place in lower Mustang. From Kagbeni the trail climbs to Jharkot, which dominates a ridge on the eastern side of the valley and continues to Muktinath. Muktinath, located in a poplar grove, is a sacred shrine and pilgrimage site for Hindus and Buddhists. The Mahabharata, the ancient Hindu epic written about 300 BC, mentions Muktinath as Shaligrama because of its ammonite fossils called shaligrams. Brahma, the creator, made an offering here by lighting a fire on water. You can see this miracle (burning natural gas) in a small Buddhist shrine below the main Hindu temple. Springs are piped into 108 waterspouts in the shape of boars' heads near the temple dedicated to Vishnu, the focal point for Hindus. Overnight in local lodge. (BLD)

Day 19 – Drive to Kalopani 4 – 5 hours drive. Heading down the valley through the village of Kagbeni the route is now part of the more frequented Annapurna Circuit trek, following the rock strewn valley floor to Jomsom and on to Kalopani Overnight lodge. (BLD)

Day 20 – Drive to Pokhara 7 – 8 hours drive. Overnight Hotel. (BL)

Day 21 – Kathmandu - Drive or fly to Kathmandu. Overnight Hotel. (B)

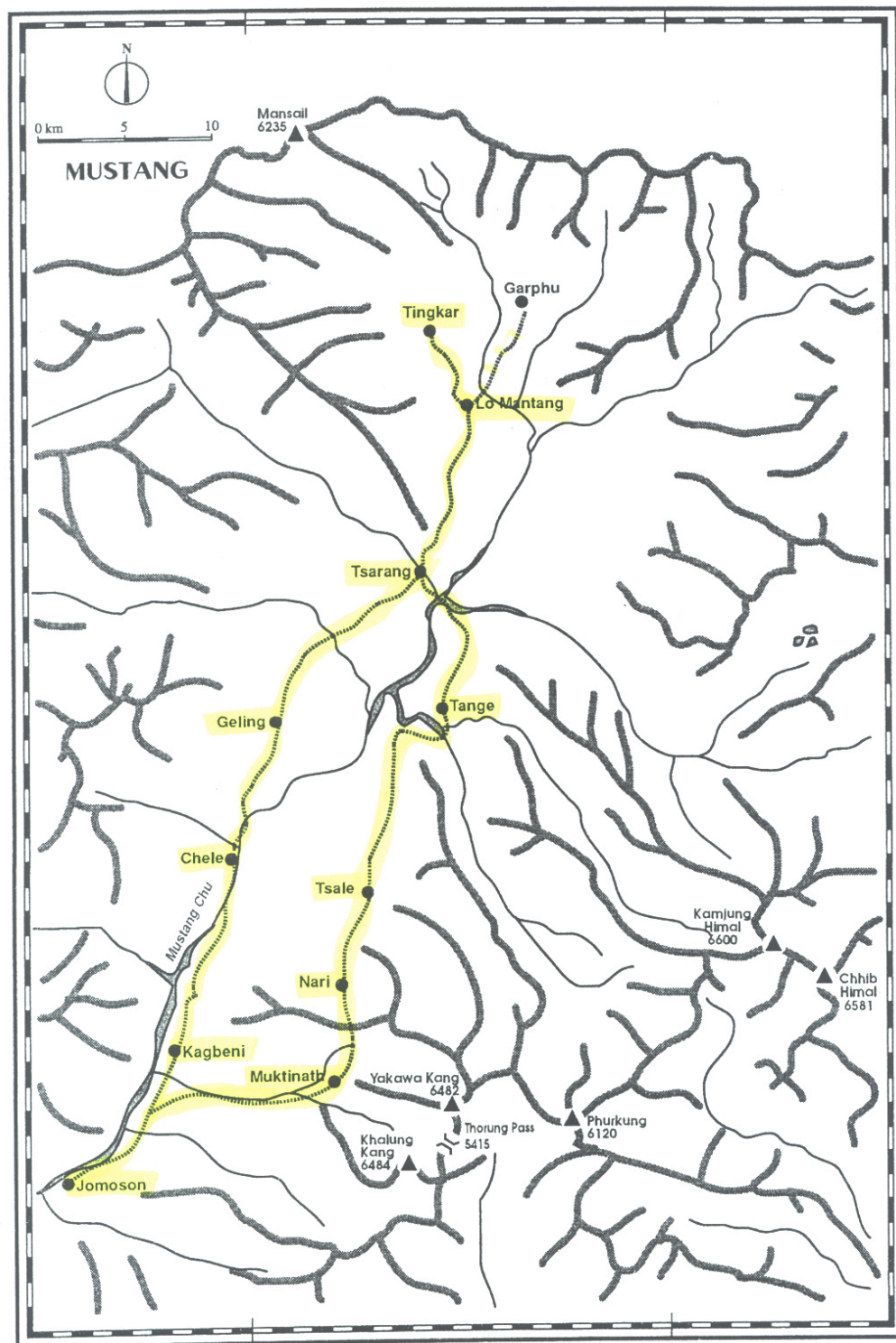
Days 22 & 23 – Kathmandu – An opportunity to involve ourselves in a community project in either a school or an orphanage supported by KSW Nepal Trust. It is very likely that we will take part in an international volley ball tournament against Saptagandaki School in Kathmandu. We last challenged them in 2004 and we were well beaten, despite the fact that the King's players each had at least a foot advantage in height!
Overnight hotel (B)

Day 24 – Depart Kathmandu

Transfer to the airport for your flight departure. (B)

B = breakfast, L = lunch, D = dinner

The day-to-day schedule should be taken only as a general guide. A variety of factors, including adverse weather conditions, difficulty with transportation and politics can lead to enforced changes. Because of this it is not possible to guarantee that any of our holidays will run exactly according to the planned itinerary. The trip leader will make any changes, which are necessary.



Not quite our route but covers all the areas visited during the trek.

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