

# Lo and Behold: Riding to a Forbidden Kingdom

A riveting journey to a walled city sitting in the Nepalese Himalaya, alongside the deepest gorge in the world and dizzying sky caves, brought home a familiar realisation for a motorcyclist.



*The Kali Gandaki river trickles through a rocky bed beneath a suspension near Tatopani. Photo by: Edwina D'Souza*

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In my hotel in [Kathmandu](#), I was listening to a Royal Enfield ride brief. The following day, we would embark on a motorcycling adventure in the remote Himalayas in northern Nepal. I was in the company of 25 riders who had gathered from all corners of India, who seemed like they had gone off-roading or ridden on the Indian side of the Himalayas at least once. They had some idea of what they had signed up for, unlike me!

The last time I went on a remarkably gratifying road trip was to Kutch, three years back. Those were tarmac roads in Gujarat. Nothing had prepared me for this adventure I was about to undertake. We were going to ride to the forbidden kingdom of Lo in Upper Mustang, Nepal—a 1,040-kilometre ride, and only 480 kilometres were tarmac roads.

I was riding—and quite thankfully—the Royal Enfield Himalayan that is built to handle just this terrain. So while it was established that I was out of my comfort zone, this was surely my motorcycle's playground, where it felt at home.

## **The Ride**

Two hours out of Pokhara, I rode along the Baglung Highway, flexing my right wrist on a blemish-free road. 70 kilometres later, we left the tarmac roads for good. Here was when things got serious. After passing through a slushy patch, I stopped to tank up in a village named Beni. We were told there would be no petrol pumps beyond this point and our hopes would be pinned on locals selling loose petrol in bottles at inflated prices.

For a large part, we were riding along the [Kali Gandaki](#) River that cuts through the mighty Annapurna and Dhaulagiri mountain ranges to form the deepest gorge in the world. I threaded with caution on a route that tests your motoring skills. My worry was the gushing

streams formed by glacial melt that washed away any signs of a possible road. To protect my feet, I had covered my socks with plastic bags, as I rode through icy waters on loose stones, praying that I don't hit a blind rock that throws me off. I must have manifested my fear for that's where I had my first fall. The route approaching Kalo Pani posed further challenges as I struggled to keep momentum on the steep inclines laden with small rocks, and that is when I had my second fall. My consolation that day was the guest house in Kalo Pani with a view of the mighty Annapurna from my window.



*The bikers pave their own way to Lo Manthang. Photos by: Edwina D'Souza*

On the morning of day three, my bike had a flat tyre just when we were about to begin our journey onward to Lo Manthang. In 15

minutes, the Royal Enfield support team changed the tyre and I was back on the road, but sooner, I lost my way on a turn I wasn't supposed to take. By the time I found my way back, the convoy of riders had already covered miles. I continued on at a steady pace of 30 kmph with the Kali Gandaki River for company. Riding along the deepest gorge in the world can play with your head. The slightest loss in balance and your heart can go into an instant panic which it did multiple times on this route. I tried to ride on the opposite side and looked away from the gorge like a horse with blinders on. Trickle rain followed me till the Jomsom check post, and my riding skills were at their peak, as I manoeuvred the road and constantly tried to wipe the splatters on my visor with my gloves.

From Kalo Pani to Lo Manthang, we climbed from 8,000 feet to 13,000 feet in five hours, perpetually riding at 30-degree inclines on roads covered in a layer of loose gravel. I pulled up my visor to let the cool breeze hit my face as we entered the rain-shadow region of the Nepalese [Himalayas](#). The terrain had suddenly turned outlandish with vast patches of barren nothingness except mountains till where your vision could hold. Even a minor skid in this isolated terrain could leave me stranded for hours until help arrived in the form of local jeeps or yak herders.

Upper [Mustang](#) is dotted with sky caves dug into the sides of the valley, hinting at the oldest evidence of prehistoric settlements in the region. The afternoon rays did a play of lights in shades of amber and gold on these majestic mountains. As tempting as it was to stop every few metres and click pictures of this ethereal landscape, daylight was precious, so I continued on my journey, snaking through mountain passes.

If you look up the route to Lo Manthang on Google maps, there are none. Well, at least not yet; although work is ongoing at breakneck speed to build a highway between Nepal and China that will ease

trade, this also means that it would not be long before mass tourism makes headway here.



*The narrow cobble streets of Marpha village (left); Wild ponies of Mustang can trot to towering heights (right). Photos by: Edwina D'souza*

## **The Kingdom of Lo**

At its prime, Lo Manthang flourished as the capital of the Upper Mustang province (or the Kingdom of Lo) due to its strategic location on the trade route between Tibet, Nepal, and India. Despite its cultural links with Tibet, Lo became a part of Nepal after it was annexed in 1789. Its economy crumbled after the border to Tibet was closed due to political conflicts.

The entrance to Lo Manthang can feel straight out of a Western film, with its deserted landscape and sparse settlement—those

shots where you enter a sleepy dusty town, park your horse outside a saloon, and heads turn, except that there is no horse here but your motorcycle. This is a town of contrasts. On one side, it has been cut off from mainland civilisation, which has resulted in preserving its unique [Tibetan culture](#), and yet modern conveniences like sunscreens and lotions, pizzas, and espressos are readily available. The pizzas were a welcome break from the staple *dal bhaat* that I had become accustomed to eating for five days straight. Many consumer goods come here from the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, with the Kora la border 20 kilometres away.

Fortunately, I was feeling none of the dreaded AMS symptoms, but the 1-degree chilly nights got to me. I come from Mumbai where winters are considered 20 degrees, and I was way off my bandwidth to withstand low temperatures. The accommodation in Lo was basic, with no attached bathroom or hot shower which also led me to forgo my bathing routine for three days.

Most of my time in Lo Manthang was spent wandering around the walled city, which, with its mud-brick homes, shops and monasteries, is home to around 900 residents. The town's biggest draw is the annual Tiji festival that is celebrated every May to pray for World Peace. Lo Manthang comes to life during these three-day festivities that entail local revelry, music, and ceremonial dances performed by monks in the main town square.

During mornings, I found locals socialising in the town square over butter tea while basking in the sun. At dusk, evening prayers took place in Lo's centuries-old monasteries; the prettiest among them is the Thupchen Gompa with its ancient Sakya wall paintings in gold and turquoise depicting the life of Buddha. The 14th-century royal palace of Lo Manthang was closed for restoration after it was severely damaged by the 2015 earthquake.



*Inhabitants of Lo Manthang are locally called Lo-pa. Photo by: Edwina D'souza*

## **The road back home**

On day six, we bid goodbye to Lo Manthang and started our descent, making multiple small-town halts over the next three days. In the Dhaulagiri zone, at Samar, our [motorcycles](#) braved steep declines of sand whirls that found their way into our eyes, mouth, and nostrils. In Chusang, crosswinds posed threats to our attempts at keeping our motorcycles in line. In Kagbeni, we made a pit-stop by a stunning gorge to capture our convoy of 26 motorcycles, and later visited Yac Donalds for a Yak Burger happy meal with sea buckthorn juice. In Marpha, the apple capital of Nepal, we rode through the narrow stone-lined village and drank apple brandy and cider. And in Tatopani, we rode across an old bridge swinging over the roaring waters of Kali Gandaki.



As we inched closer to the city on the ninth and final day, tarmac roads resurfaced. Apprehensive as I was at the beginning of this adventure, my excitement knew no bounds now—I had completed a challenging, yet spectacularly rewarding ride to an isolated region in the Nepalese Himalayas that is so off-limits to visitors. The beauty of this remote region had filled me with awe and a sense of realisation that I was a speck in its grandeur. I surrendered to its glory and came back captivated.

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