



## CHAPTER ONE — NEPAL

## A Failed Attempt at Entering A Forbidden Kingdom



*"The scenes I witnessed were so extraordinary and so unexpected that I dared not believe my eyes and even today I have some trouble in believing the reality of what I saw that day."*

(Michel Peissel, one of the first foreigners allowed into Lo.)



I nearly crashed the Enfield motorcycle into the side of the old hotel, throwing a handful of rupees to the confused hotel owner whose parking lot I'd just skidded into, and then ran back up to that bend in the cobblestoned road, the one I'd briefly seen while first trying to navigate myself and the bike down that steep path. I knew as soon as I saw that skyline—adobe homes with firewood fastened to the roof, seemingly to batten the proverbial hatches from that violent wind that was passing through; along with the earth red colors of two huge religious-looking buildings, they themselves dwarfed by the Himalayas in the background—I knew that this was not only something I wanted to remember clearly, but to also meticulously document, as a place like this hadn't been seen by many, putting it on a very small list of treasures yet to be spoiled by Instagram (he says).



Mustang—a large 1400 square-miled district in Northern Nepal, separated into Lower and Upper regions—first appeared on my radar while hiking to Everest Base Camp, in the form of its namesake coffee; this oily, potent and imposing concoction of whiskey, butter, fennel, sugar and espresso, invented to keep sherpas warm from the winter winds. Mustang, though. I knew the word, of course — horses, cars and Sally—but other than that, I'd never given it a whole lot of thought.

A few weeks later, having returned from Base Camp, I arrived in the peaceful Pokhara to recover, catch up on reading and plan the next adventure. While walking down New Road, a necessary gaudy stretch of commerce synonymous with any Nepalese trekking town; shops upon shops of fake North Face and real momos, when a travel agent's window caught my eye. On it, a nicely stenciled list of destinations offered, one of them being "Lower and Upper Mustang". This reminded me of the coffee that had sparked a tiny interest and I made a point of returning, but first wanted to see if the next door bookshop had any material on it. They did. It was scarce, but they did: One Lower Mustang map, one Upper Mustang map, and one book, written in the 1950's, *Mustang; A Lost Tibetan Kingdom*, by Michel Peissel. I bought them all and headed to the nearest cafe, where I devoured the first three chapters of that book nearly as fast as I did my lunch, forcing myself to stop, as I didn't want to get too far ahead... the reason being that within those first few pages sat everything one could ever hope for in a real adventure:



*"Everything I saw was in such perfect harmony with the landscape, and the people fitted in so well with their surroundings and lived a life in such perfect accord with their needs and beliefs - that the whole structure formed a solid entity with never a crack, and at times I began to wonder whether any other way of life really existed. Was I living in a dream, an illusion (or at times a nightmare)? No false note broke the spell and brought me back to myself."*

... which tells you the power of a well-written paragraph, as that simple 86 word entry made the decision for me. I, myself, would journey, sans travel agency, to this unknown, highly protected, old kingdom.

Mustang—also known locally as The Land of Lo—seemingly intentionally keeps itself off of the radar. The subtext in nearly every search for its background immediately tells you that it's the second least populated place in Nepal. But calling it "Nepal" even seems strange, as anyone who's set foot in this might-as-well-be-Tibet can testify. And seeing how it's located 20 miles south (although, don't let that fool you into thinking it'd be possible with a long day's hike; as I'd soon find out that the distances in Mustang are measured by days, not miles), it might as well be Tibet. In fact, it wasn't until 2008—following the death of its king and subsequently the dissolution of the Shah Dynasty (est. 1559)—that it finally joined the Nepalese Federation. Prior to that, though, it had truly been a forbidden kingdom, only officially opening its doors to foreign adventurers in 1992.

But its allure goes back further than its pseudo grand opening, specifically with a story dealing with its then-nickname. Explorers tracing the Silk Road, when inquiring as to where traders had passed through to arrive in the West, began hearing rumors of a mysterious and holy place located between Tibet and Nepal referred to as some as "Shambhala" — AKA, the spiritual kingdom to Tibetans, AKA paradise, AKA Lo Manthang. The Westerners themselves would then pass on this story to others, except that they would mess up the pronunciation, calling it, instead, "Shangri-La." Meaning that the forbidden kingdom of Lo was possibly the catalyst for the largest rumor of paradise to ever exist.





To say it's piqued many a traveler's curiosity would be a falsity in two parts:

1. It's still too unknown to pique "many" a traveler.
2. "Curiosity" doesn't seem to sum up the many fervent attempts at finding ways (in)to it.

The subtext was true, it was indeed a Lost Kingdom... even still.

And it was one I was excited to get to.



*He meant rupees*, I told myself. 500 rupees for a visa, not \$500 dollars. 500 rupees. Cheap, but then again, it didn't seem like a whole lot of people were lining up at the gate. But this only led to more of my excitement. A hidden spot, unruined by tourists, for less than \$5? Perfect. Seemed even humorous at the time. This was turning out to be a bit too easy.

Of course, if I was looking for obstacles, the next literal speed bump was just around the corner:

Renting a motorcycle.



As irony (or timing, or perfection) would have it, 15 years ago, while on the semi-run from Chinese authorities after my online series [The Shanghai Diaries](#)—a 10-episode underground exposé on China’s human rights violations (and more) leading up to the Olympics, aired on Al Gore’s pet project Current TV—had gotten me on the Chinese blacklist, the first time I had ever attempted to ride a motorcycle had been in Kathmandu. In fact, I remember even one of my first crowd-funding’s being “Hey, who can tell me how this thing works?” on Facebook. Maybe Nepal brings it out in me. But, once again, here I was I was Googling “How to shift a motorcycle” a few hours before walking into the bike shop to rent

something that’d take me from Pokhara, through the Kali Gandaki Gorge (bigger than the Grand Canyon, they say), to the outpost of Kagbeni, into Lower and Upper Mustang, and finally ending in the lost kingdom of Lo Manthang.

Thanks to it still being low tourist season, the motorcycle shop owner fortunately didn’t ask for a license, down payment or even proof of ability (thank you, grey beard + tattoos), and we quickly agreed on a heavy old Enfield 250 for 10 days @ \$15 a day. We were now at \$150 + \$4.25 (permit) in total. I’d be eating a lot of dal bhat to afford it, but that’s alright - small price to pay for a forbidden kingdom.



The next few days were spent studying the map I had bought for the route (it wasn't hard, there was only one road) and re-reading those first few chapters of that book, packed with passages on every page that did nothing for my patience.

*"The scenes I witnessed were so extraordinary and so unexpected that I dared not believe my eyes and even today I have some trouble believing the reality of what I saw that day. Before me spread a yellow and ochre desert, the most horrifying I could have imagined, a succession of barren, wind-eroded crags overlooking deep gorges and canyons which cut across an inferno of parched soil, like deep scars in a vast sand pile... A terrible wind whistled in my ears, in my eyes, spitting sand as it whipped across this parched landscape, howling in the canyons and buffeting the hills... I found myself exclaiming 'This is Mustang! I must be mad! I will find nothing here but desolation.'"*



I probably should have been less of a colonial overlord at the bike shop the morning of my departure, but pieces of the bike were falling off and so I allowed my tall, white disapproval to be voiced. Fortunately, an hour later, everything had been either tightened or replaced, and I was ready to head off. The problem now was that, following my scene, I had attracted quite a few curious onlookers to ride off in front of. Now, you'll remember I don't know how to operate a motorcycle



and one jerk, sputter, stall or screech of the tyres (probably not mine, but whoever I was bound to pull out in front of) and I'd probably have been asked to leave a downpayment.

The world's most meticulous motorcycle start, sure, but I managed to coast down the shop driveway, put it into first, sloooowwwly let out the clutch, same with the throttle and off I went. Phone holders in Nepal were illegal, so this meant I had to pull off to the side of the road every few minutes to see where I was going, but that was alright because I needed practice in turning it on and off. Once I was out of Pokhara it was, as mentioned, one road, but that didn't appear for a good hour (or 17 minutes if you were a local or weren't Aric), but whatever! I remembered how to ride a motorcycle! I was out of Pokhara! I had no security deposit to worry about! And I was on my way to the Forbidden Kingdom! What a real adventure! Yeah!



The Kingdom of Lo (Upper Mustang) was founded in 1380 by an ex-communicated warrior named Ame Pal, who was said to have fallen in love with a local princess in the region, and had killed a demon that had been terrorizing her village. His bravery won the princess' heart, as well as the villagers, who, in turn, named him as their king. He quickly established Lo as a middleman between traders from Nepal and Tibet (dealing mainly in rock salt), and the Kingdom of Lo prospered both greatly and quickly. The money being made was immediately sunk into Buddhist art and artifacts, and due to Mustang's remote and (still) highly protected geographical position, said

artifacts—namely *gompas* (monasteries), sky caves (holes dug into the sides of cliffs for meditation) and *mandalas* (Buddhist diagrams)—have remained both unmoved and intact, so much so that even mummies are still being discovered in the elevated tombs overlooking Lo.

But back to Lo and how and why this tiny Kingdom was, and then wasn't. From the early 15th century to the late 18th, Lo continued its quiet wealth—more salt, more artifacts, more allure—but in 1795 (for reasons that even I still don't entirely understand) it was officially made part of Nepal—although as a separate principality. It would peacefully hold this title for 150 years until, in the 1950s, when China invaded Tibet. What was once a fortunate spot between the two trading countries of Nepal and Tibet quickly became the beginning of Lo's end, with the kingdom [being used a base](#) for the CIA and, more uncomfortably, the dreaded Khampas (still secretly in charge of protecting the Dalai Lama), of whom everyone—including Tibetans and Nepalese—were (are) terrified of. This unfortunate geographical location being used would continue for 20 years, ending only when Nixon traveled to China in the 1970s, ending the United State's support for the Khampas. It was then when the King of Lo finally closed off Upper Mustang to outsiders, and—aside from the occasional anthropologist or our author in question—wasn't seen for more than 20 years. In 1992, the doors to tourism were finally opened, but only slightly, with the kingdom still holding onto its history, tradition and religion of the Loba culture, of which states, amongst other things, that the world is flat.



Half a day into my motorcycle journey and I could tell you that even if Upper Mustang was completely open to tourists, few would go. The paved road from Pokhara quickly not only turned to dirt, but an early monsoon season arrived in the form of a muddy, rocky, slippery and elevated mess. At one point, after the bike had fallen over—in traffic, mind you—I asked the inquisitive Spanish rider who stopped to see if I was okay, if I should continue on. “I mean... you’ve come this far” he laughed. And he was right. Who gives up after a few wrecks, huh? This was a forbidden kingdom! All good stories need a Joseph Campbell treatment and this was to be mine.



Three hours later, my ears and mouth filled with dust, I briefly took my eyes off of the road and saw a sign for Kagbeni. I passed the main entrance and rode further up the mountain so I could stop, turn around and get a good look at it. It was tinier than I imagined, but it was stunning. Green farmlands cascading down into a tiny village of a hundred or so mud homes all topped with, as mentioned, piles of branches on the roofs ("We say that a house without firewood on top is like a head without hair."), the aforementioned two large red buildings, hugged on two sides by the Kali Gandaki River, all in the shadow of the snow capped Himalayas.



My Enfield reluctantly jerked down the mountain path into Kagbeni. A sharp right turn and that's when I realized that this was a place I needed to get to know—which was weird, I have to admit, seeing how it was only a place for me to get my permit into Upper Mustang. Nonetheless, I found the first parking lot I could to park the bike and walk around freely.

It didn't take long for me to realize that all of my life, I had assumed that the term "medieval" referred to the West. Doesn't it you? I mean, if you saw the phrase "medieval times" written, you'd think of, well, Americans will first think of the themed restaurant ("The saddest part is that the horses think it's all real" goes the joke), but most imagine France. England. Jousting. Pots of shit being thrown out threw the window. Etc. But as soon as I began walking, around the giant dirt stupa, then taking a right past the Immigration Office (they were out to lunch or I'd have gone ahead and secured my permit), I realized that "medieval" means anywhere, and while it's



usually/commonly/maybe *supposed* to be associated with the West, it actually just means the Middle Ages, aka 500-1500, making it universal. And Kagbeni was medieval... I think. I obviously don't know much about the phrase myself, but it had all of the attributes of what I would assume could make something medieval:



Previously protected.

Windy mazes of lanes.

Common squares for the public.

Livestock living at the bottom of homes,  
people at the top.

Sat high on a hill.

All under the eyes and protection of a fortress.

I mean... that's medieval, right?

And walking it was mesmerizing. Even the author I keep mentioning was enchanted:

*"... dark lanes, small interior courtyards and tunnels that wound their way into this town, whose massive plan spoke of war and testified to its border position. The houses were three stories high, forming ... one great mass closed to the outside world."*

I think when you've seen as much as I've seen, you kind of give up being shocked by a place. With the internet being what it is these days, we already have an idea of what it's going to be like. Look like. But not here. Not Kagbeni. And as I shuffled, ducked and got lost in those old streets, I was hit with this enormous awesome realization that I was standing somewhere very special. Untouched by nearly every outside influence. Happy in its simplicity.

I stopped into a place called YacDonald's for one of their Happier Meals (so much for being untouched by outside influence) and made my way across the river—a hand-drawn nearly hilarious

map showing the uninitiated where was what—and walked to that earth red windowless building that I had first seen from above.



It was huge. Made so more by being completely solid, save for two tiny windows on the second floor, a gorgeous door and pock-marked throughout where structural beams were placed. It looked like it was part of a monastery, but what part? The second, newer and much more ornate building to its left told me that *that* was the monastery, so what could this be?

I walked up to the door and was stopped in my tracks by a young monk coming out, so I snapped a few photos. He stopped and looked my way. Shit, I thought, he saw me. It's one thing to take a cheeky photo of the general public, but stealing shots from a monk? Great job, Aric. I bit my teeth in a silent apology. He smiled. So I walked up to him. "Sorry!" I said, blaming my accidental photo of him on the door, "but it's so beautiful." "Do you want to see inside?" he asked. I did, and so he—Tashi Paljor, 19 years old, here since he was 11—led me in.





No photos were allowed and as I creaked my way up the stairs, I quickly saw why. A large prayer wheel sat in the far corner. Next to it, a painting of the Tibetan Wheel of Life that had to have been a hundred years old (“200, actually” said Tashi, reading my mind; meaning he was in the right profession), but neither wheel nor painting of wheel could compare what was beyond the staircase—an entrance into the old temple, its sagging wooden frame, high ceilings, old carpet and colorful fabrics telling you of its importance. We walked in and my eyes quickly went to the frightening masks hanging on the pillars. “These are the masks we wear for evil spirits”, explained Tashi, “and every year we have a festival called *Tiji* to drive them away.”

I stood there—half voluntary and half not. Frozen by a powerful unexplained. I had had this feeling before. Twice actually. Once, while watching an exorcism be performed in India and the second at [High Priestess Miriam](#)’s private room in New Orleans—just this paralyzing-yet-comfortable feeling of



being cloaked by something else unseen, much more powerful and important than whatever it is we have happening down here. I shivered and forced my legs to move.

We walked out and around the red brick. Tashi told me it was the old monastery, of its age (600 years) and how it was only used for special occasions. I had thanked him and was walking away when he beckoned me back. "You know we pray there (motioning to the newer building next to it) every morning at 6am" he said, proudly smiling, "and visitors can come watch." I told him I'd see him there tomorrow, but he told me it was his week to clean out the older temple we had just been in. I nearly asked if I could join him—a week doing nothing but cleaning a 600 year-old monastery while in Nepal seemed not only the epitome of zen, but also a serious one-up chip should I ever have a dinner party with people who just returned from some wellness retreat in Santa Fe—but I knew I had to be getting to my real adventure in Upper Mustang the next afternoon, so I made my way back to the town center.



The sympathetic yet unmoving look on the Immigration Official's face told me he had to do this often—telling would-be explorers to Upper Mustang that the place they were currently standing would be the end of their journey. My original thought that the \$500 was actually 500 rupees was wrong, and that \$500 (plus \$50 more a day afterwards) per person (solo riders were not allowed, although a "ghost permit" was rumored to be floating around, meaning my misanthropy would run me now \$1000), but coupled with the new rule of no trekking (hiking, biking or otherwise) without a guide that had just gone into effect on April 01, meaning I'd also have to find a guide, pay for his motorcycle, food and lodging. All in I was looking at

\$2000 before even setting foot into Upper Mustang, which was now both a heartbreaking and annoying stone's throw from where I was standing.

It's easier and more succinct to write now, a month after this all went down, but my initial response was more that of disbelief. Of *oh-this-is-how-it-starts* usually reserved for haggling over produce in the market. As soon as he told me the bad news, I quietly asked if this was something I could, you know, handle in-person with him (cough, wink). It was not. I then asked how rigorously the police checked. Often, he said, nearly rehearsed. So there's no way at all for me to get in? None sir, I'm sorry.

I walked back to YacDonald's dejected, depressed, angry and, admittedly entitled. Funny how you love a country until they tell you "No" and then you suddenly remember its litter problem and bland cuisine. But I was a tourist with money. In one of the world's poorest places. In one of the poorest places within the poorest place! Here is a stack of cash, take it! But they wouldn't. That was it. This is the end. And I suddenly realized I could add one more adjective to how I was feeling: Deflated. Deflated for obvious reasons, sure, but also because this pattern of big announcements + failure continues to be a speciality of mine.

Anyone remember me buying a boat and sailing around the world to sell lemonade?  
How about the Defender I bought and drove all around Africa?  
I mean, c'mon, I couldn't even make it all the way up Everest.

YacDonald's fortunately had rooms next to their restaurant, so I holed up there for the evening. Licking my wounds and cups of local raski, I did have a bright spot, though, in realizing that I honestly had wanted to journey to Upper Mustang purely out of adventure reasons. Not clout or bragging rights or anything (see: Base Camp) but truly for the hungry 12 year-old in me that I and you continue to feed.

And what the hell was I supposed to do now?

My answer would come the next morning. Keeping my promise to join the monks at their prayers—what I thought would be a calm start to the morning, but turned into a carnival of horns, bells, drums, cymbals and loud chants, thus becoming one of the more [moving experiences](#) I had in Nepal. I passed Tashi on the way out and he smiled, asking if I enjoyed the prayers and I told him I did. Oh sure, it might have been projecting at that point, but I enjoyed it nonetheless.



And it was that — a simple exchange with a 19 year-old monk — that (easily) convinced me to stay in Kagbeni for the next four days. Doing nothing but walking the winding lanes until I met either a dead end or someone's living room. Climbing the neighboring mountain for a look down into the valley where it sat. Trying to remember the importance of the ghost eater god "Kheni" at the gates of the city vs. looking at his shockingly detailed wooden penis. Banging my head against more than one of the less-than-4-foot entrances ("Zombies can't bend," claims a villager in a recent interview. "They hit their head on the door and they die again.") Watching the groups of pilgrims and their offerings down at the Kali Gandaki River, while entrepreneurial types swam and looked for perfectly smooth black fossilized stones—rumored to only exist in this river, at this exact spot—to leave either in their homes, local temples, underneath gods, or to sell to tourists.





You'd think there'd be more to this story, but there's not. And therein lies what I believe to be the beauty. Even now as I sit here in Kathmandu, I have a list of things to see and film, this snack or that temple or this living goddess or that museum; each of them needing some sort of prologue, an explanation or introduction, a lesson or pretty ending. But not Kagbeni. In the days I spent there, I never once found myself thinking about an angle. Or even how to tell its story. I walked around like I was in the midst of something incredible, and didn't want to take my eyes off of it—those lanes and stacked homes, on the mountains above or down in that holy river, its waters going further than I myself would be allowed...

For now, at least.





Maybe you read this already, but I threw it all in (or away, depending) to write these little stories, take photos the way they were supposed to, and make little documentaries—all in exchange for tips.

In this, though, are two truths:

- I'm doing all of this for small donations
- This doesn't work if that is a cause of any worry on your part

Meaning, if you have a few bucks and if you like what you read, saw or heard, then I'll absolutely take them. If you liked it, though, but don't have anything to spare, then I beg of you to not send a dime. Trust me—I know how it can be. And if I thought for one second that someone was putting themselves out, that takes away from the whole spirit of this, you know? So please... don't. If things get dire, I have a collection of standalone stories I can release and I'll just say "Look, I'm down to my last \$20" or something. Ok? Alright.

If I'm being honest (and I hope you'll let me do throughout this new chapter), these were stories and photos you'd probably already seen (Nepal). I'm also not 100% happy with the final product(s), but—as stated in the email—I had to let it go to concentrate on the present. They'll get better and soon, this will all be content only seen here, as I'll be leaving Social Media (happily, if you'll allow me a continued honesty), meaning I don't think this month's was worth a whole lot. So don't send a whole lot. I still have my part-time job until end of July. By then, these will be worth something.

Have I said "Thanks for coming along!"? Then let me once more. Thanks for coming along! I am painfully aware that this now takes much more effort on your part—opening, reading, clicking through, etc., but you're also the only people I want to create for: folks who are genuinely interested in the world, seen through this side of things. I've always been an effort and I'm (mostly) okay with that these days.

This is just me saying that I hope it's worth it.

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