



120 &
4x4

Shivank 'crawls' to the Kingdom of Lo Manthang in the Mustang Valley for an overland off-road expedition of a lifetime.

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'What? Who the hell goes to Nepal for a drive?' This was my reaction to a friend a couple of years ago, when he proposed the idea of a road-trip to the Mustang Valley. Frankly, Nepal never really caught my fancy.

Perhaps the fact that it's so close to us North Indians that it doesn't seem like a 'foreign' land. Also, there's nothing there but Mt. Everest – isn't it?

So, why would anyone like me – who even dreads the thought of walking to the nearest grocery store – ever go there? There was absolutely no incentive for me, or so I thought. So, just like our present government, I made the mistake of taking Nepal for granted!

But, in October an invite for the Mahindra Adventure Authentic Mustang 2019 expedition arrived. I'd be lying if I said that I was dying to go on this expedition, but since it promised 12 days of 'extreme terrain driving' and, more importantly, an opportunity to escape Delhi's toxic air, I quickly reserved my seat for this drive. Shortly afterwards, I found myself on a flight to Nepal.

Upon landing in Kathmandu, I was greeted by the sight of an overcrowded airport, thanks to trekkers and backpackers from all over the world, who come here because of – drumroll – Mt. Everest. However, beating every single one of them, I exited the airport swiftly since we Indians get preferential treatment there – there's a separate immigration queue for us.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Kathmandu is at a height of 1,400m or 4,600ft, and located in the foothills of the mighty Himalayas – just like the country itself. At first, it feels like a typical hill-station – hordes of tourists, narrow roads, a beautiful view of the surrounding mountains, and courteous people. However, since it's the capital of Nepal and the largest city in the country, the general upkeep, infrastructure, and traffic management is five times better than any hill-station in India.

That said, people tend to be quite reckless and unpredictable on the road – be it pedestrians, drivers, or motorcyclists – something that they share in common with us. Peak hour traffic can be maddening, but there are traffic cops everywhere. What really surprised, or rather impressed, me was that almost everyone on the road follows lane discipline. They, at least, understand that those markers on the road are there for a reason.

As soon as I reached the hotel, I met Nidhi Salgame – the 'lead' of this extreme overland expedition. And she has quite a CV. In fact, you



Lomanthang is the former capital of the 'Kingdom of Lo'. At over 12,000ft above sea level, it's a cold and barren desert highland. The good, or bad, thing about the Upper Mustang Valley is that it's a restricted area and you require a special permit, which costs upwards of 500 US dollars, to enter the region.



could say that she's a bit overqualified for this job. Nidhi is an extreme terrain driver, outdoor educator, and overland adventurer, with a specialisation in extreme overlanding. She runs an off-road self-drive firm called Wander Beyond Boundaries (WBB) – not to mention the fact that she's the first Indian to drive to the Pole of Cold and Road of Bones in Siberia, amongst other extreme expeditions. In short, she's a total badass!

Last year, Nidhi came up with the idea of Mustang Overland, and she and a team of women drivers became the first group of women to drive to Lo Manthang in Upper Mustang. Mahindra Adventure supported the activity with its vehicles, but given how amazing and challenging this trail is, Mahindra opened it up to its customers and added it to its already expansive list of expeditions.

And, so, there were 20 odd-customers, including an 8-year-old kid, in 8 Mahindra Thars and 2 Scorpios in this first edition of this extreme overlanding experience.

Before we began the journey, we were clearly told that this drive is *really* extreme

and requires one to be extra alert – it's in the top 3 treacherous roads in the Himalayas for a reason! This meant that there were certain protocols to be followed – like taking care of our vehicles, a health check-up, and checking the vehicle's fluid levels and air-pressure every morning before the start.

Now, you may think that you could have easily escaped this drill, but then you couldn't have escaped Nidhi's fury if you got caught. At times, she reminded me of my favourite teachers from school – fun to be around, but, at the same time, never ones to shy away from rapping your knuckles if you failed to follow orders!

On day 1, we hit the road to Pokhara – the second largest city of Nepal. The 200-kilometre drive was pretty uneventful, not unlike the Chandigarh-Manali drive, as the views were similar and the roads, although wide, were congested with commercial vehicles and other cars. I was also surprised to see a vast number of private cars on roads here. Why? Well, if you thought the duty structure on cars in India is unreasonable, it's borderline

bonkers in Nepal, as people have to shell out nearly 300% duties on cars and bikes here! To give you a reference, an XUV500 costs 90 lakh NPR (Nepali Rupee) – which is approximately ₹56 lakhs, after conversion!

Pokhara is also known as the 'tourism capital' of the country. That's because the city serves as a base for trekkers heading to the Annapurna range of mountains, which has three of the ten highest peaks in the world – and they are all within a 25 to 50-kilometre radius from here. This makes Pokhara quite a happening place. The main market is upbeat, with numerous bars and cafés, and you'll find scores of tourists everywhere. It's super clean too, and gives you a mini-Thailand-like vibe.

4X4 LOW COUNTRY

From Pokhara, it was quite an early start, which, at first, seemed surprising because our night halt was only 120 kilometres away. However, soon the reason became clear. The condition of the road deteriorated after about 80 kilometres, which we covered in 4 hours. We stopped for lunch in a town called Beni, and

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continued with the journey.

After 10-odd kilometres, Nidhi relayed a message over the radio, 'please, engage 4x4 Low.' Now I'm not an avid off-roader, but I know for a fact that low-ratio is something that's only needed for extreme ascents and tricky areas. Little did I know that we'd be stuck in 4x4 Low for the next 5 days!

With 30 kilometres to go in the day, the tarmac gave way to boulders and rocks. The track became narrower, and after every corner, we seemed to climb up even further. And then to make things a little more interesting, the rain gods decided to shower us with a heavy downpour. At least we had a rainbow to follow.

As great as it all was, it did little to ease our minds, for the track was now super slippery and the drop on the right was getting steeper by the minute – and the

sight of Kali Gandaki river, with its raging rapids coursing through the narrow rock bed, wasn't comforting either. The whole drive felt like a natural obstacle course, with the difficulty level set to 'extreme.' The only difference being that a mistake here would cost you disqualification from life altogether!

Now, we were literally crawling at a speed of 8 – 10km/h, and only reached our night halt at Kalopani after a long 12-hour drive.

The next morning was an early start,

somewhat marred by a bone-chillingly cold and windy morning. However, since Kalopani sits bang in the middle of the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna range, the view from the hotel window was quite motivating. That day, we were headed to Muktinath via Jomson – a 55-kilometre drive that would take us around 4 hours.

The condition of the road was much

better, though, as it was more of a gravel trail. On the way, we passed Jomson, which is a quaint little town famous among trekkers and tourists, so it had a lot of interesting cafes and eateries – its apple pie is particularly famous.

Jomson also has a small airport that's connected to Pokhara. However, flights only operate in the morning because the wind gets stronger in the second half of the day. Above everything else, though, Jomson is where you get your first glimpse of Mustang – Lower Mustang, to be precise.

And it's quite visible from here, as lush green pine trees are replaced by vast desert highlands of absolute nothingness. On the way to Muktinath, we also came across a wide and spectacular bit of tarmac in between – where we disengaged 4x4 briefly – showing signs of development.

We reached Muktinath by 3pm. Now, if



you don't already know, the temple of Muktinath or *Lord of Salvation* is a relatively busy pilgrimage site, as it's of great significance to Hindus and Buddhists. And because of its religious value, some members of our group were quite excited to get there. However, irrespective of whether you're a believer or not, it is, without a doubt, quite the spectacle. It's at a height of over 12,000ft, where the air – or the lack of it – can really get to you if you're not careful.

THE FORBIDDEN KINGDOM

From Muktinath, we started for a completely new dimension – onwards and upwards to Upper Mustang. The great thing about going to Upper Mustang is that not every wannabe adventurer can turn up here. You see, it's a restricted region and was only opened to travellers in 1992. And, one has to shell out over 500 US dollars for a special travel permit to enter the region.

The whole region is in the rain shadow of the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna range, and is cut-off from the world because of its harsh environment. Not to mention the fact that Upper Mustang is right on the Himalayan edge of Nepal, where it borders China annexed Tibet. So, it's a sensitive area for obvious reasons.

Our final destination was Lo Manthang – the walled capital of the 'Kingdom of Lo,' or Mustang. Now, the drive to Muktinath wasn't easy at all, but from Muktinath to Lo Manthang, it's even more daunting – in fact, its heart-in-your-mouth daunting.

The road is under construction, so the



track gets even narrower, the boulders are even bigger, and you find yourself scaling heights so steep that it's enough for a normal person to develop severe acrophobia! The terrain is absolutely unpredictable – it goes from rocky to slushy to sandy within the span of a few kilometres. You really have to be deliberate with your throttle inputs, and where you place the wheels. Touching the clutch pedal is not an option, for the result could be as disastrous as pulling a grenade pin!

The drive was so excruciating and scary that even the atheists amongst us started praying! However, like they say, it's only difficult roads that lead to beautiful destinations. And Upper Mustang is simply gobsmacking. It's an untouched harmony of unreal colours and drop-dead gorgeous views – a magical canvas created by nature itself. Plus, when we

reached Lo Manthang, the very next day it received the first snowfall of the season – the temperature dipped down to -8 degrees – meaning it was the icing on the cake, quite literally.

As for Lo Manthang, it's a curious case, as it's torn in the geopolitics of Tibet and Nepal. It may be a part of Nepal, but people in Lo Manthang are mainly Tibetan Buddhists and have strong links to Tibet. As a result, the Chinese forces at the Nepal-Tibet border keep a close eye on them. Despite that, the place has a peaceful history and some interesting historical sites – including a palace with a king, although Nepal's government abolished the Mustang monarchy in 2008.

If you go further, you'll come across Jhong Cave, which is an ancient five-storey building with over 40 rooms and is believed to have been built around 1,000

BC. The view of the stunning landscape of Chhoser valley from the windows here is simply astonishing!

To top it all, our convoy went even further to say hello to our Chinese friends at the Nepal-Tibet border through the Kora La Pass. Of course, the Chinese were a bit alarmed on seeing a convoy of 17 Mahindra Thars approaching the border, but, thankfully, they were told that we're just a bunch of enthusiasts and not an army battalion from India.

Kora La pass is at a height of close to 17,000ft, and at the top it's flat – signifying that we were indeed at the *roof of the world*. And the surroundings? Well,



they were jaw-droppingly gorgeous.

I'M HAPPY!

On the first day, during the orientation, Nidhi had asked everyone about our expectations from the trip. I remember everyone, including me, waxed lyrical about the prospect of a challenging and enjoyable drive, and the adventure that lay ahead. However, what I remember even more clearly was the answer from the 8-year old girl who said, 'I'm expecting to be happy at the end of it.'

And when I come to think of it, I guess that's what I felt on the last day. Happy!

Happy to be one of the handful of people in the world to go to the Mustang Valley. Happy to experience the untouched wilderness of this part of the world – something that I may never experience again, given the fact the region is developing so rapidly, with new roads being built and an increasing number of tourists flocking to the region.

It's fair to say that when I look back at this trip, I feel jealous of my own former self for being able to experience it all – it was truly a once-in-a-lifetime journey.

And, last but not least, the Thar. As a driving enthusiast, I've never really been a fan of off-roading per se, and, frankly, I've always thought that the Thar was a pointless vehicle. But, today, I simply can't sing enough praises of the Thar. It took to the unforgiving terrain of Mustang like a duck to water – crawling over rocks, gliding over obstacles, and taking it all in without breaking a sweat.

I have to say that I now have a newfound respect for this machine, and I kind of love off-road driving as a result. Fair to say, then, it is true that travelling changes your perspective. What can I say, I'm a convert now!

Also, if you still somehow make the mistake of taking Nepal for granted, I hope and pray that you get to learn about its beauty the 'hard' way, just like I did. **CX**

