

Authentic Mustang Nepal with Mahindra Adventure

Introduction



Whenever someone says Mount Everest or even Nepal for that matter, trekking in the snow-capped peaks of Himalayas is what comes to mind. And it's no child's play, climbing up a mountain in freezing temperatures while struggling for breath. I always shuddered to the thought knowing for sure that it's not my thing.



So, when I was told that we were about to embark on an extreme terrain expedition to Mustang Valley, one of the most remote regions of Nepal; I was both nervous and excited. More so, because we were going to take a route which was attempted by less than 100 people from India, a country which now has a population of over 1.35 billion! This journey would also take us through the ice cold

waters of the grand canyons of the Mustang river, 4000 meter high passes, arid deserts and what not. And when I got to know we would have a bunch of Mahindra SUVs at our disposal for this, I knew I had nothing to worry! Also, after all, the best experiences in life I've mostly had have been off the beaten path.



Apart from having a history of building utility and 4X4 vehicles, Mahindra and Mahindra has been conducting off-road adventure trips, training sessions and multi-day expeditions too. Out of the 100 odd Mahindra vehicles that they have in their expedition fleet, 17 cars were waiting for us at Kathmandu. These included a mix of Thars, Scorpios and Getaways. We were a group of 40 people from different parts of the world. Getting them together was Mahindra's job. But then, keeping them together was a bigger task taken up by Nidhi and Satty from Wander Beyond Boundaries (WBB). This expedition crew not only gave us info about the place, the convoy and the plan but also threw light on vehicle care, weather, uncertainties, medical awareness, first aid, etc.



Leg 1

Challenging drive across Lower Mustang to Muktinath



The first thing we did every morning was to check the vehicle thoroughly for engine oil level, tyre pressure, any possible tyre air leaks, usual wear and tear inspection amongst other things. "Lead rolling...Adventure 1 rolling...Sweep rolling" squeaked the radio as we started from Kathmandu towards Pokhara. These are well connected cities with paved roads, so it was a pretty straight-forward drive. But still, we had to be cautious while navigating through the narrow lanes with traffic in a new country.



The next day, the traffic and roads started to disappear on the way to Kalopani through Beini. At times, there would be so much dust that the vehicles in front would barely be visible. Moreover, it was quite sunny while we were traversing the road along the river Kali Gandaki. But then, sudden showers not only settled the dust but also greeted us with a double rainbow. The spectacular sight kept us content despite the paths getting worse. Post the nice Nepali Thali at Beini for lunch, it was time to engage the 4X4 system of the Thar to 4Low. From here on, we kept on slowly creeping ahead towards Kalopani for the night. A nicely bunched up convoy snaking up the hills at night looked fantastic!



The following day, an early start to the day meant waking up in the dark with a majestic view of the snow clad mountains which was enough to get us pumped up for our journey. The road conditions remained the same with just a path being carved out in the mountains. There were times when a JCB

would clear off a section where there was a fresh landslide. We understood the true meaning of treacherous conditions here.



Jomsom on the way is where we had to buy loose fuel for the journey ahead towards Muktinath. We were driving really slow but still climbing relatively fast. And in no way we were getting well-acclimatised to the prevailing weather conditions. By early evening, we were back on tarmac to head to Vishnu temple that is sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists. Temperatures started dipping quickly and in no time, it was bedtime. I can remember having a sleepless night trying to fight the cold with the blanket on. And within a few moments I was fighting back, gasping for air and taking deep breaths for oxygen. That was one long, long night.



Leg 2

Crossing the world's deepest gorge through Kali Gandaki river bed



Obviously, most of us didn't have quite a great start to the day after that sleepless night. But getting behind the steering is something that always automatically charges me up. We took a route from the back of Muktinath village when we realised the puddles on the way had frozen as the temperatures had dropped to below zero degree celsius overnight. Trees had a thin layer of ice with each flake having that typical pattern. Looked mesmerising!



Now, not having proper sleep has so many adverse effects and it was just 2-3 hours in the morning of driving in that terrain when I had already started feeling sleepy. Thankfully, my co-driver Shivank volunteered to drive and I managed to catch some sleep despite the Thar tossing me on my seat.



The process of learning and unlearning had started on the first day itself, and it's surprising how things can be different from what we assume. A vast expanse of the river bed lay in front of us. Knowing that the cars were equipped with snorkels, we didn't have second thoughts whether we should cross the river or not. That said, we first set out on foot, analysed the depth and then cautiously stepped into the water. What a feeling it is to know that you are crossing one of the deepest gorges in the world.



Leg 3

Drive across the most treacherous and scenic vistas that Himalayas have to offer



We had already climbed some of the tallest mountains, twice the height of the ones we had ever climbed earlier. We had also followed the steepest of trails. All of this while traversing our way out from lower Mustang to Upper Mustang. We relished the local food on the way along with a warm abode at a homestay despite the bone-chilling cold at Tsomar. Meanwhile, things were getting difficult yet more exciting. The rock faces were opening their high jaws to pour beautiful waterfalls. And then, the cliffs were showcasing a myriad of layers with a canvas of colours like brown, red, yellow, white and so on.



Leg 4

Drive up to historic Jokhang caves and the Nepal-Tibet border



After about 6-7 days of driving, we reached Lo Manthang, a restricted territory of Upper Mustang that was once the capital of the Kingdom of Lo. Thakali cuisine took a back-step for Tibetan bread with dal. This place is sandwiched between Tibet Autonomous Region of China in north and Dalome rural municipality of Mustang District in south. It's a small village where houses have a typical Tibetan style of architecture. It opened for tourists only in 1992 with people trekking or using horses and mules to reach here. Now, only some 4X4 vehicles, Mahindra Campers and Tata trucks are able to make their way on this dirt track. It was shocking as to how the locals traversed through the terrain like it was a mere cake-walk for them. Land-slides block the path and the only other way is to wait for the JCBs to clear the route or navigate through the river.



The temperatures were predicted to drop to minus six degrees that night. This meant that despite the anti-freeze additives in the fuel, we had to constantly start the car at night at periodic intervals. Most of us took up the task sportingly despite the cold. In fact, it turned out to be an electrifying experience watching the stars glitter and also witnessing some shooting stars.



It was only the next morning when we realised that the fresh snowfall had turned everything around us white. All of us were super thrilled as it continued to snow. We headed to the Jokhang caves, which are an amazing example of how humans can adapt to nature. Then, the drive to the China-Nepal border was even more fun with super stunning views enroute. Our convoy making its way through the white blanket looked even more marvellous.



Leg 5

Return leg with a bag full of dust and memories



The Mahindra vehicles with their robust 4x4 set-up is what got us so far. It wouldn't have been possible for any other 2WD vehicle to make it through, which is also why only 4x4 vehicles were spotted after Muktinath. Our Mahindra SUVs handled all the steep ascents with multiple hairpin bends over a short distance without breaking a sweat. The vehicles were in 4Low for most part and the way the car crawled was fabulous! Be it climbing a slope or getting down one, the engine braking and the mountain goat grip from the off-road spec tyres never made us feel nervous. Thanks to these vehicles, we not only went up the Himalayas but also came back safely.



The barren and winding roads led us to the passes from where the mountains with snow-clad peaks looked even more beautiful. Pictures just can't do justice to the feeling of being there in person. Furthermore, there's this unforgiving climate. Yet it amazes me how the locals survive despite these hardships. Then, there are these cyclists and trekkers walking their way to eternity. And we are forced to think whether they are fools to put themselves through those conditions. If yes, we too are a part of them. Because that's how you probably appreciate the beauty of nature in these regions. The stunningly beautiful and humbling mountains are bound to leave you awestruck. You end up thanking the almighty that you could bravely face the adverse conditions and appreciating your sheer luck to have survived to cherish these memories. And you hopefully desire to come back as the mountains call you back.



Courtesy – Ninad Ambre (CarWale)