



# Cycle the Forbidden Kingdom

May 2020, 22 Days

## Day 1: Overnight Flight

For those of us departing from Melbourne, we'll spend our day catching up with family, packing or finalising last minute details at work, before a late evening departure from Melbourne airport.

## Day 2: Kathmandu/Fly to Pokhara Accommodation: Hotel Meals: D

We'll arrive at Kathmandu airport around lunchtime. After purchasing our Visa and clearing customs we transfer to domestic for our flight to Pokhara. The 30-minute flight runs parallel to the Himalaya range and offers amazing mountain views on the right side of the plane.

Once settled into our hotel, there may be time to explore the local area before attending a group briefing, meeting our guides and enjoying a welcome dinner.

## Day 3: Fly to Jomsom 2,270m Ride to Kagbeni 2,810m

Accommodation: Teahouse Meals: B L D



To avoid the winds that start blowing up the Kali Gandaki valley mid-morning, we take an early flight to Jomsom 2,720m, offering spectacular views of Dhaulagiri and Annapurna massifs. After assembling our bikes, we throw our gear in the support vehicle, grab a coffee or a bite and then start our first experience of riding at altitude, to Kagbeni.

A great way to acclimatise is to cycle high and sleep low. If everyone is coping with the altitude, around halfway we will leave the road and flattish sand and rock river trail behind, to head east into the mountains to the Bon village of Lupra 3,021m, where black magic is still practised.

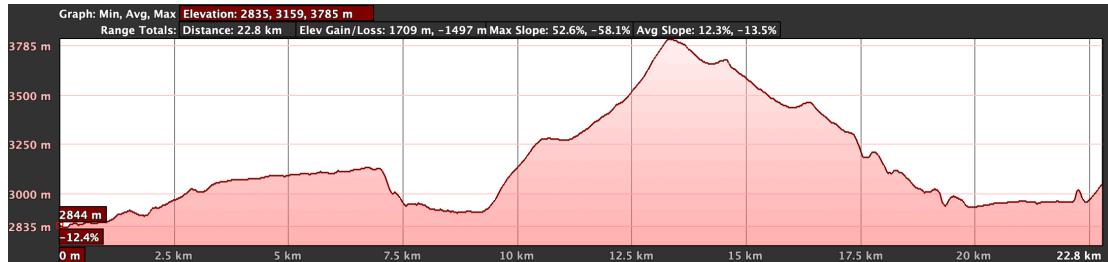
From here we'll cross the Panda Khola and head north again on a little used mountain trail, climbing to our top height of the day at around 3,160m, then enjoying our first descent to Kagbeni 2,810m, the gateway to the forbidden kingdom of Lo.



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**Day 4: Ride Kagbeni 2,810 to Chele 3,050m    Accommodation: Tea House    Meals: B L D**



After having our Upper Mustang permits recorded in the Police checkpoint at the northern end of town, we start our adventure in this long forbidden region.

We'll try a minor trail on the western side of the Kali Ghandaki, between the river and the road, climbing gradually for the first 7kms. Then after a small descent to cross the Gyalungbo Khola, we start a big 900m climb to Mani La 3,800m. At the top we'll be gasping for air and more than ready for the 6km descent back to the Kali Ghandaki, crossing over to Chhusang for a well-earned lunch.

Across the river are spectacular red organ pipe cliffs dotted with inaccessible, prehistoric caves and the ruins of dzongs, on the hills behind the town. The Mentsun Khang cave gumpa, which houses ancient and unrestored statues, is just above the southern part of town. If we can find the man with the keys, we can climb the wobbly ladders and step back into the atmosphere of ancient Tibet.

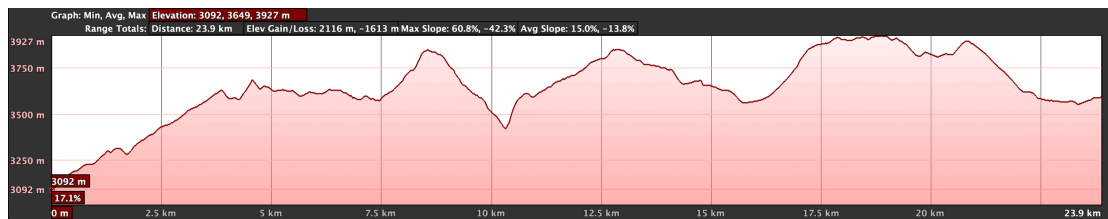
The trail then heads north, crosses the Narshing Khola, and hugs the Kali Ghandaki river, rising and falling according to the eroded banks. We descend to where a chunk of red cliff has fallen, blocking the valley and creating a tunnel for the river to flow through. Here amongst the many ancient caves in the cliff walls, we cross a steel bridge and leave the Kali Ghandaki valley behind with a short, steep climb into Chele.



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**Day 5: Ride Chele 3050m to Ghemi 3,520m      Accommodation: Tea House    Meals: B L D**



Heading north, the culture changes from Manangi to Tibetan. This morning starts with the choice of a steep, breathless, switchback climb along the side of a spectacular canyon or the thrill of riding across a high and long suspension bridge, with a slightly longer and easier climb. Both trails meet just before Dajori La 3735m, then a long gradual descent to Samar.

We'll take the right fork after exiting Samar and climb to Chungsi La 3810m. Then a long single track to the canyon floor before stopping to visit Chungsi Cave, an important Buddhist pilgrimage site. It is believed the famous Guru Rinpoche meditated here in the 8th century. A gradual climb through the canyon will lead us into the village of Syanboche, then a short steep ascent to Syanboche La 3850m, to pick up the road for a fast descent, before veering right onto the trail into Ghilling.

One more big climb for the day as we take an alternative trail north above Ghilling to our highest point of the day at 3927m. We follow the ridge east to a minor trail and head north along the ridge before finding the trekking trail again and descending down to Ghemi.



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**Day 6: Ride Ghemi 3,520m to Lo-Manthang 3,810m Accommodation:  
Tea House Meals: B L D**



We'll briefly head west out of Ghemi, cross the Ghami Khola and then a short climb over Sang La, providing stunning views of the cliffs of Dhakmar, coloured red from the blood of a dragon, slayed by Guru Rinpoche.

A steep drop to Dhakmar, then a gradual climb through a narrow valley of bizarre, eroded rock formations, leading to Mui La 4170m. After admiring the view of the Annapurna ranges, another short descent brings us to the one of the oldest monastery's in Mustang, Ghar Gompa.

Among the ancient alcoves and statues of this 8th century gompa are the real treasures of hundreds of painted, carved stones, hanging in frames

Lunch is an easy ride eastward in either Sakure or Marang, and then we hit the minor trails again up to Manga La 4230m. Some high plateau riding brings us back to the Lo-Manthang trekking trail, which is a fun single track leading to the white-washed, southern wall of the capital. We cycle around to the northeastern corner to enter.

Founded back in the 14th century, the forbidden Kingdom of Lo flourished, due to being part of the salt route between India and Tibet. By the 18th century it came under Nepal, but being hidden away in mountains, it was left alone and remained a Tibetan Buddhist enclave even after China entered Tibet.



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**Day 7 - 9: Lo-Manthang 3,810m and surrounds    Accommodation: Tea House    Meals: B L D**

Over these next few days we will use Lo-Manthang as our base, with the chance to explore the town and head out on exploratory rides, laying the first ever set of tyre tracks on the ancient trails in this unique part of the world.

After obtaining local knowledge about the more remote trails, we can choose where we want to explore each day. Some of our options include heading north to the Tibetan border, west to the glacial peaks or just playing around on single tracks in the more popular loop between Lo-Manthang and Garphu.

Originating in the 17th century, Tiji is a three-day festival celebrating the victory of a deity named Dorje Jono, who saves the Kingdom of Lo from destruction by his demon father.

Squeeze in with members of the Mustang Royal family and the local villagers, as they sit in, around and above the palace square. Traditional clothing and jewellery, monks in robes, elaborate masks and costumes, swords, butter cakes, gold cups of wheat, dogs, locals, kids, drunks, tourists, wind, sun, dust and a cacophony of sound, all make up the atmosphere. The King of Mustang presides in his crown of river pearls, red coral and turquoise.

Early, during the first afternoon, the ancient three-storey thanka of Guru Rinpoche, is unfurled down the south wall of the square, to the clashing sounds of horns, drums and cymbals. Masked dancers commence the Tiji story, highlighting all the outrageous activities of the demon and the battle attempts to destroy him. This continues on the second day.

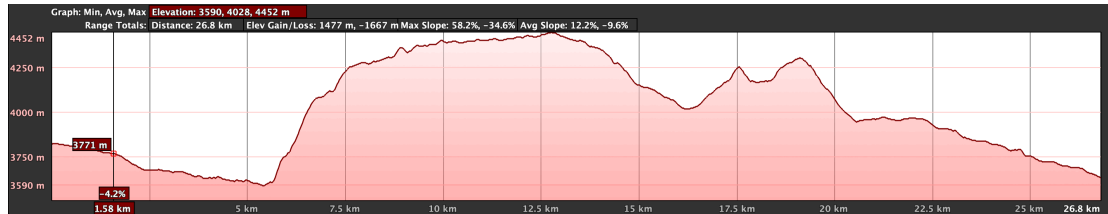
On the third day, Tiji ends with the ceremonial defeat of evil, represented by destroying all the demon statues and mincing long black yak hair and red torma cakes to a dark, red slurry. The remnants are set out on an old tiger skin, taken out of town, attacked with bow and arrows, slings, and ancient firearms. Each time the old blunderbusses explode there is wild cheering amongst the swirling smoke, which is as much about defeating the demon as being amazed that the person with the gun, still has his hands.



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**Day 10: Ride Lo-Manthang 3,810m to Yara 3,650m Accommodation: Tea House Meals: B L D**

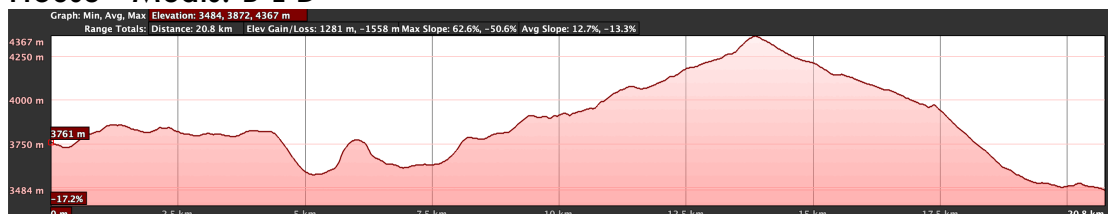


Heading east out of the capital, we soon leave the trail along the river and climb to a high plateau. Rolling at around 4,300m ride we eventually hook up with a quiet trekking trail to take us south over two passes and then detour to play in some canyons before emerging above Ghara. We drop down for some lunch followed by an easy ride to the extraordinary caves of Luri Gompa, hidden in a landscape of magical, fluted cliffs.

The 14th century gompa is situated on a ledge, about 100 metres above the valley floor. We climb a notched ladder to enter the inner chamber, a rounded space with one small window illuminating a six metre high chorten. Both the chorten and the domed ceiling above are decorated with painted images in Indian and Kashmiri style. The small lama portraits possibly reflect Persian or Byzantine influence.

Leaving Luri, it's a short gentle downhill along the Puyung Khola, before emerging on the plains around Yara, our stop for the night.

**Day 11: Ride Yarra 3,650m to Tangye 3,340m Accommodation: Tea House Meals: B L D**



Today is a shorter day on the bike, unless we decide to play on the high plateau above Dhey, where the stunning views continue to be with us.



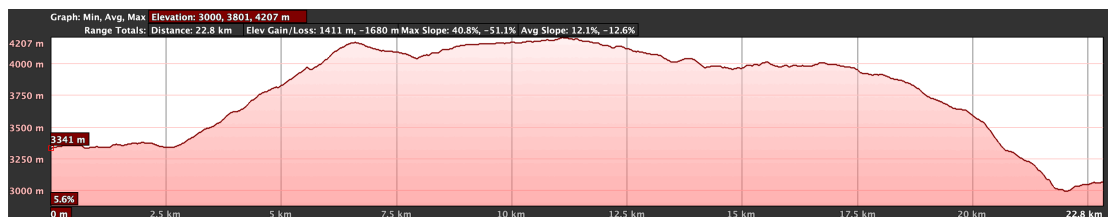
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Leaving Yara, we immediately cross the Puyung Khola and ride along a plateau until reaching the Dhechyang Khola. This area is well known for the abundance of black ammonite fossils. Roughly 65 million years old, they are remnants of ancient sea organisms dating back to the era when the Tibetan Plateau was the sea floor.

Taking the quieter trail to the east, it's a short stretch along the riverbed before climbing to Dhey. We'll continue climbing to Sertang La 4280m, then a long descent along the ridge and a steep drop to the Tanggee Khola brings us into Tangye village.

**Day 12: Ride Tange 3,340m to Chhusang 2,980m Accommodation: Tea House Meals: B L D**



This morning we follow the Yak Khola south for around 3kms, then a short steep climb back to the high plateaus and the soft, dusty yak trails. Here we spend the next 10kms or so cruising over 4,000m, with full-length views of the oddly eroded mountains, Kali Gandaki Valley, Annapurna, Nilgiri and Dhaulagiri peaks.

Above Chhusang, we cycle along the breathtaking edge of the 6km fluted ridge of Siyarko Tangk Danda, before dramatically dropping 800ms to the village below.

If we feel we want to stay on the trail longer today, we can always explore the gentler western face of Siyarko Tangk Danda, which leads down to the Mustang Khola.



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**Day 13: Ride Chhusang 2,980m to Jomsom 2,720m Accommodation:**  
**Tea House Meals: B L D**



Our last day in Upper Mustang is a big ride. We can take the main trail out of Tetang, climbing through a canyon to Gyu La 4,077m, or a more interesting and slightly longer ride going around the east.

For those of us feeling strong, the big challenge is just past Gyu La. A climb / carry up to 5,252m for the most spectacular, clear view of the Kali Ghandaki valley, Annapurna Massif and, behind us, all of Upper Mustang. Here, high on the border of the Forbidden Kingdom, the last 9 days of cycling are laid out below us. It's a chance to quietly absorb the enormity of our adventure and reflect on our achievements, the culture, and the people we met along the way.

But it's not over yet, as we turn for the exhilarating descent, down two knife-edge ridges and an endless set of rocky and dusty switchbacks before finally hitting the plateau for a short roll to the Muktinath Temple complex.

With one Hindu pagoda style temple and three Tibetan gompas, the complex is a sacred pilgrimage place for both religions. The current Buddhist-Hindu pagoda style temple was built in 1815, at the orders of the Nepali Queen, to venerate Lord Vishnu. The Hindus see Vishnu as Muktinath, (Lord of Salvation), while the Buddhists worship Vishnu as Avalokiteshavara (Lord of Compassion).

Around the temple is a semi-circular wall of 108 waterspouts, cast in the shape of bulls' heads and pouring forth sacred water from the Gandaki river. Pilgrims walk under each spout and then take a holy dip in the frigid waters of the two ponds (Kunda), to wash away negative karma and bring salvation. Those of us brave enough to save our souls are free to join them.





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All the way down to Pokhara, we will pass groups of Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims, Tibetan traders and Sadhus (wandering, Hindu ascetic holy men from as far as southern India), all making the holy journey, to be blessed at Muktinath.

After our ice-bath, we soon leave the main trail and ride down into the Lupra valley, cross the Panda Khola and climb high above Lupra village. Crossing the ridge to the next valley south, we have another wild descent of about 900m. The first half is switchbacks on the side of the mountain, the second half is along the descending valley floor, fast and free flowing, and bringing us into Jomsom.

**Day 14: Ride Jomsom 2,720m to Tatopani 1,190m Accommodation: Tea House Meals: B L D**



Even though we have become used to the howling Mustang winds, an early start before the mid-morning, southerly blow, will make our ride through the exposed upper part of the Khali Gandaki gorge easier.

It's a long day on the machine and a fun one with very little climbing. As we continue descending, the biggest plus is the extra oxygen we will be able to suck into our lungs, and we'll have never felt stronger.

If the height of the Kali Ghandaki River allows, we'll stay east avoiding the road, and soon leave the barren landscape behind, as we enter the tree-line and vegetation starts to appear all around us. Yak trains will be replaced by pony trains, dogs, chooks, kids, porters, trekkers, and pilgrims. The more we descend, the more the forest fights for space with farming on the patchwork, terraced hill-sides. Small villages are dotted everywhere with teahouses offering us all sorts of treats to help us along the trail.



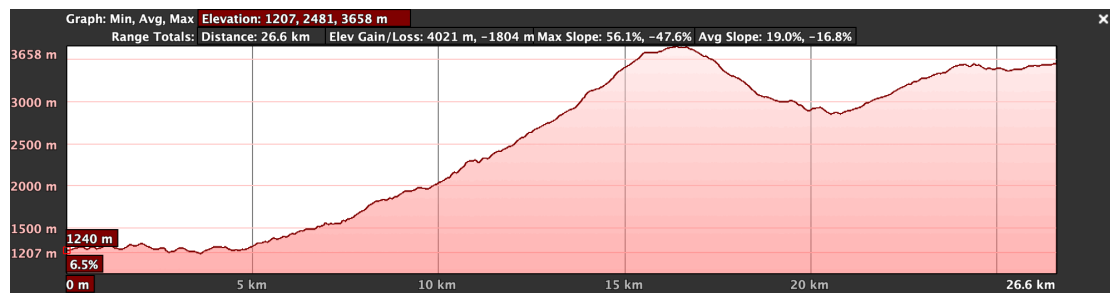
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Just before the halfway mark, we'll head diagonally inland with a small climb to Titi and the lovely traditional village of Kunjo, offering excellent views of Nilgiri, Annapurna, Dhaulagiri and Tukuiche peaks. The day so far has been a gradual, undulating downhill, but over the next 18kms we will drop 1500m to Tatopani.

Tatopani means hot water in Nepali, and below the town, next to the river are hot springs. Two stone pools of 37C have been built and it's bliss on our aching muscles after all those days in the saddle.

**Day 15: Ride Tatopani 1,190m to Dobato 3,426m Accommodation: Teahouse Meals: B L D**



We are almost at the end of two weeks cycling. So why not ride away from the roads, the crowds and our support vehicle, and take on one last gut busting grind to set ourselves up for stunning views and a massive 2,600m descent on the last day?

We'll make our way back to the eastern side of the river, veer left and climb through remote farmland to Paudwar, just over a third of the way to our highest point for the day. The steep ascent continues on rough narrow trails with lots of bike carrying and the air steadily gets thinner.

The small collection of community run lodges at Khopra Danda 3,660m is our highest point and feels like it's somewhere between heaven and earth. The vista behind us offers our final, distant view of Upper Mustang.



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Re-fuelled, it's a short descent into a forested valley before we grind back up to our second ridge and home for the night at Dobato. Even though we haven't got our support vehicle, we will be comfortable in the tea houses that are part of a new community-managed project run by the local Gurung and Magar community.

## Day 16: Ride Dobato 3,426m to Pokhara 870m Accommodation: Hotel Meals: B L



A short climb from our lodge is Mulde Peak 3,650m, which commands a majestic 180 degree sweep of the central Himalaya. We'll quietly make our way there before sunrise to lay prayer flags and pay our final respects to the mountains, as the early morning rays light up the Annapurna, Dhaulagiri and Lamjung Himal ranges. This is the best view in all of the Annapurna region.

And then we descend! 2765 metres in the first 17 kilometres. Through deep, lush thick pine, oak, rhododendron and bamboo forests. Past intricately terraced farm lands and through the villages of Magar, Gurung, Kami, Damai and Kshetri-Brahmin. Down bone shaking stone staircases, rock strewn tracks and smooth forest floors. Racing around blind corners, past ponies, porters, villagers, trekkers and kids. Continually descending.

Once we reach Syauli Bajar we have a flat 7km ride along a mixture of road and trail to Birethanti. Here we cross the bridge and compete with traffic for the last kilometre or so to Nayapul. After riding one of the most amazing places on earth, there is little point in choking on diesel fumes and playing chicken with the trucks and buses along the Baglung highway, so we will drive the 40kms to Pokhara. Our ride is over!



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**Day 17-18: Pokhara Accommodation: Hotel Meals: B**

Paradise is wrapped around a tranquil lake in sub-tropical Pokhara, a laid back version of Kathmandu. Lakeside is a 3km strip following the shoreline of Phewa Tal, where everything is available and everyone is chilled, and we have two days to kick back and indulge.

To relax, we can drink in hammocks by the lake, eat hourly in a different restaurant, be soothed with a pummelling massage, join a meditation or yoga class, or explore the myriad of shops selling everything from prayer flags to Khukuri knives and dubious antiques. Sights include old Pokhara, the International Mountain Museum, Gurkha Museum, Tibetan refugee settlement, carpet factory and monasteries.

If we feel like moving, we can row, kayak or stand-up paddle under the reflection of the mountains, hike up to the Peace Pagoda for stunning views, and there is great cycling everywhere for anyone who wants to stay in the saddle.

For the adrenaline junkies amongst us, behind the tranquillity of Lakeside is a growing adventure sports industry. Pokhara is the most picturesque paragliding and skydiving arena in the world and both disciplines offer tandem jumps as well as lessons. If you want a closer look at the mountains, fly through the clouds in an ultralight. Fall from grace with a bungee jump or hurtle through the air on the world's tallest, longest and steepest zip line - 1.8kms, a drop of 600 meters, and reaching speeds of 120kmh.

In the evenings, there is a healthy range of nightlife with every type of cuisine imaginable, an outdoor cinema and live music in many of the bars, most with free entry. Just remember, things start to wind down after 11pm and we all turn into pumpkins at midnight when everything closes.



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## **Day 19: Fly Pokhara to Kathmandu**

**Accommodation: Hotel   Meals: B**

The 30-minute flight from Pokhara to Kathmandu offers amazing Himalayan views if seated on the left side of the plane. For the rest of the day we can lose ourselves in the maze of back alleys and lanes, between our hotel and Kathmandu Durbar Square.

## **Day 20: Kathmandu   Accommodation: Hotel   Meals: B**

A free day to explore the craziness of Kathmandu. Explore ancient temples, take a guided sightseeing tour, cycle nearby hills, eat, shop or rest. The choice of restaurant will be difficult for our last night in Nepal, and hopefully our guides can join us for the final celebration of an amazing adventure.

## **Day 21: Overnight Flight   Meals: B**

A leisurely morning around the hotel, before goodbyes and transfer to the airport.

## **Day 22**

Arrive back in Australia.