



Mustang English & Himalayan Culture Program

Participant Welcome Guide • Jomsom • Thini • Lower Mustang, Nepal

Welcome to Mustang

Welcome to the **Mustang English & Himalayan Culture Program**, a community-led cultural immersion experience in the spectacular Himalayan region of Lower Mustang, Nepal.

Over the course of the program, you will have the opportunity to live with a local family, experience daily life in a Himalayan community, explore historic villages and landscapes, and participate in an English-language program serving local students.

This is more than a trip to Mustang. It is an opportunity to live, learn, hike, share, teach, eat, and connect within a local community.

1. About Mustang

Mustang is one of Nepal's most culturally distinctive Himalayan regions.

The Kali Gandaki Valley has been a historic trading corridor between the Tibetan Plateau and the lower regions of Nepal. The area is known for its dramatic mountain landscapes, dry Himalayan climate, Buddhist monasteries, traditional villages, Thakali culture, apple orchards and ancient trails.

Lower Mustang includes communities such as Jomsom, Thini, Marpha, Tukuiche, Kobang, Kalopani, Kagbeni and Muktinath.

As you travel farther north, the cultural landscape increasingly reflects Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

2. Jomsom — Our Regional Hub

Jomsom is the administrative and commercial center of Mustang District and one of the most important settlements in the Kali Gandaki Valley. Located at approximately **2,740 meters (8,990 feet)** above sea level, the town sits between the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri mountain ranges. The Kali Gandaki River runs through the valley, while the mountains and dry, rugged landscape give Jomsom its distinctive Himalayan character.

Jomsom is often described as the **gateway to Mustang**. It is a major starting point for journeys toward Muktinath, Kagbeni and Upper Mustang, and it is also an important stop along trekking routes through the Annapurna region. Jomsom Airport, which has operated since the 1960s, provides an important air connection with Pokhara, although flights are particularly dependent on morning weather and the strong winds that develop in the Kali Gandaki Valley.

A Town Shaped by Trade

Long before Mustang became a tourism destination, the Kali Gandaki Valley was an important trans-Himalayan trade corridor connecting communities in Nepal with Tibet and the southern Himalayan regions.

Traders moved goods such as salt, wool, grain and livestock through the valley. Jomsom's position along this route helped establish it as an important commercial and administrative center. Although modern roads and transportation have replaced much of the traditional caravan trade, the town continues to function as a hub connecting the communities of Lower Mustang.

The name Jomsom is also associated with the term *Dzongsam*, commonly interpreted as “New Fort.” The town developed into an important center for administration and commerce in the region.

Thakali Culture

Jomsom is closely associated with the Thakali people, one of the major Indigenous communities of the Lower Mustang and Kali Gandaki region. Thakali communities have historically been involved in trade, agriculture, hospitality and commerce. Their influence can be seen throughout Jomsom and the surrounding villages in traditional architecture, food, festivals, religious practices and hospitality.

Thakali cuisine is particularly well known throughout Nepal. Visitors to Jomsom can experience traditional Thakali meals as well as locally produced foods from the surrounding villages. The cultural landscape around Jomsom is also diverse. Alongside Thakali communities are Gurung, Magar, Tibetan-influenced and other Nepali communities. Buddhist and Hindu traditions are both important, creating a remarkably diverse cultural environment within a relatively small geographic area.

Buddhism, Hinduism and Sacred Landscapes

Jomsom sits within a landscape that is spiritually significant to several religious traditions. Buddhist monasteries, prayer wheels, chortens and mani walls can be found throughout the surrounding villages. Nearby Thini, Syang, Marpha, Kagbeni and other communities have their own religious traditions and sacred sites.

The Kali Gandaki River is also important to Hindu pilgrims because of the Shaligram stones found along the river. These fossilized ammonites are regarded by many Hindus as sacred manifestations of Lord Vishnu. The sacred pilgrimage destination of Muktinath lies farther north of Jomsom and is revered by both Hindus and Buddhists.

This combination of traditions makes Jomsom an excellent place to begin learning about the religious diversity of the Himalayas.

The Famous Jomsom Wind

Jomsom is famous for its strong afternoon winds. The Kali Gandaki Valley creates a natural wind corridor, and winds generally become stronger later in the morning and into the afternoon. This has influenced local architecture, daily routines, trekking practices and aviation in the region. For visitors, mornings are often the most comfortable time for walking and hiking. The wind can also affect flights from Jomsom Airport, which is why flights are generally scheduled in the morning when conditions are more favorable.

Jomsom and Tourism

Tourism has become an important part of Jomsom's economy and identity.

The town serves trekkers, pilgrims, guides, porters, drivers and travelers exploring Lower and Upper Mustang. It is also an important stopping point for people traveling the Annapurna Circuit and the Jomsom–Muktinath route.

Tourism has created opportunities for local families through:

- Homestays and guesthouses
- Hotels and restaurants
- Guiding and trekking services
- Transportation
- Local shops and markets
- Handicrafts and cultural products
- Agriculture and locally produced foods
- Cultural and nature-based tourism

At the same time, tourism is changing the region. Roads, vehicles, modern buildings and new businesses have transformed some traditional travel patterns. Jomsom therefore offers participants an opportunity to observe firsthand how a Himalayan community is balancing tradition, economic opportunity and modernization.

Jomsom as a Base for Exploring Mustang

One of the advantages of staying in Jomsom is that participants can experience both the town itself and the surrounding villages.

Short excursions can include:

Thini Village – traditional Thakali culture, village life and nearby Dhumba Lake

Dhumba Lake – a sacred high-altitude lake and scenic walking destination

Kutsab Terenga Gompa – historic Buddhist monastery above the Jomsom/Thini area

Marpha – traditional Thakali village, apple orchards, local food and monastery

Tukuche – historic trading settlement and Buddhist heritage

Lupra – village known for its Bön religious traditions

Kagbeni – historic village, monastery, Hindu pilgrimage traditions and gateway toward Upper Mustang

Muktinath – major Hindu and Buddhist pilgrimage destination

These excursions allow participants to experience Mustang through walking, food, conversations, religion, architecture, agriculture and everyday community life, rather than simply passing through as tourists.

Jomsom Bazaar

Jomsom Bazaar is the commercial heart of the town. The market serves local residents as well as trekkers, pilgrims and travelers moving through the Kali Gandaki Valley. A walk through the bazaar gives participants a glimpse of contemporary life in Mustang: small shops, restaurants, hotels, local services, transportation, agricultural products and businesses serving both residents and visitors.

The bazaar is also a good place to observe the contrast between traditional Mustang and modern mountain life.

Jomsom provides many of the services you will need during your stay.

- Restaurants
- Cafés and bakeries
- Grocery stores
- Banks and ATMs
- Pharmacies
- Trekking shops
- Hotels
- Transportation services
- Mobile phone/SIM services
- Local markets

Jomsom is a functioning mountain town rather than a remote wilderness settlement. At the same time, infrastructure is considerably more basic than what you may be accustomed to in Kathmandu, Pokhara or major cities.

Why Jomsom Matters to the Program

For the **Mustang English & Himalayan Culture Program**, Jomsom is more than a convenient place to stay. It is the community in which participants will live, learn and interact with local residents.

Living in Jomsom allows participants to experience:

Thakali culture and hospitality

Himalayan Buddhist traditions

Hindu pilgrimage traditions

Traditional agriculture

Mountain tourism and trekking

Local food and cuisine

Contemporary life in a remote mountain community

The relationship between tourism and local livelihoods

Rather than simply visiting Mustang's famous sights, participants have the opportunity to spend time in the community, interact with local people and develop a deeper understanding of the region.

What Makes Jomsom Special?

Jomsom is a place where old and new Mustang meet.

Ancient trade routes have become modern roads. Traditional village life exists alongside tourism businesses. Buddhist monasteries stand alongside Hindu pilgrimage routes. Farmers continue to cultivate the land while younger generations pursue education, tourism and other professions. The result is a town that is both deeply traditional and constantly changing.

Jomsom is not simply the gateway to Mustang. It is the living heart of Lower Mustang—and an ideal place from which to experience the region's culture, landscapes, spirituality and people.

3. Thini — Our Community



Thini is one of the oldest and most culturally significant villages in the Jomsom area of Lower Mustang. Located just above Jomsom, the village sits on a hillside surrounded by dramatic Himalayan mountains, traditional farmland and the dry landscape of the Kali Gandaki Valley.

Thini is closely associated with Thakali culture and offers visitors a glimpse into traditional mountain life. The village is characterized by stone houses, narrow pathways, agricultural terraces, prayer flags, chortens and mani walls. Many families continue to maintain connections with farming and livestock, even as tourism and other modern livelihoods have become increasingly important.

One of the highlights of visiting Thini is experiencing the village at a slower pace. Walking through its narrow lanes, visitors can observe traditional architecture, meet local residents, see cultivated fields and learn about how communities have adapted to living in Mustang's high-altitude, dry environment.

Thini is also an important spiritual landscape. The village has Buddhist religious sites and is surrounded by sacred places, including Dhumba Lake and Kutsab Terenga Gompa. The area provides an opportunity to learn about the relationship between Buddhism, local traditions and the natural environment.

For participants in the Mustang English & Himalayan Culture Program, Thini provides an opportunity to experience Mustang beyond the main tourist route. Rather than simply visiting as a sightseeing destination, participants can spend time walking, observing, talking with residents and learning how a Himalayan community has maintained its cultural traditions while adapting to modern life.

Thini is close to Jomsom, but it feels like a different world—a traditional mountain village surrounded by sacred landscapes, farmland and some of the most spectacular scenery in Lower Mustang.

4. People & Culture

Lower Mustang is home to several ethnic and cultural communities. The Thakali are particularly prominent in Lower Mustang and the historic Thak Khola region. You may also encounter Gurung, Magar, Tibetan/Lopa and other Nepali communities, as well as people who have moved to Mustang for education, government work, business and tourism.

Both Buddhist and Hindu traditions are important throughout the region.

Cultural etiquette

- Ask before photographing people.
- Dress respectfully at religious sites.
- Walk clockwise around stupas, chortens and mani walls.
- Do not touch religious objects without permission.
- Do not climb on monuments.
- Respect people's homes and privacy.
- Follow your host family's household customs.
- Ask questions—curiosity is welcome!
- Remember that you are a guest in someone's community.

5. Your Homestay

One of the most important parts of the Mustang experience is living with a local family. The homestay is designed to give you a genuine experience of daily life rather than a conventional hotel stay.

Your room

- Private room
- Bed
- Mattress
- Pillow(s)
- Bed linens/bedding
- Basic furnishings
- Storage space where available

The rooms are comfortable and clean, but they are simple village accommodations, not hotel rooms.

Bathroom

Bathrooms are shared. The toilet is a basic squat toilet. Participants should be prepared for a more traditional Himalayan bathroom experience.

Hot water

Hot showers are available through a solar-heated hot-water system. Hot water availability depends on sunshine, weather, household use and water supply. It may not be available continuously throughout the day.

Tip: Shower earlier in the day when possible.

6. Laundry

Laundry is available at the homestays. Homestays will have washing machines available for participants to use.

Participants are responsible for washing their own clothing, providing or using appropriate laundry detergent, removing clothing promptly after washing, hanging/drying clothes where necessary, and keeping shared laundry areas clean.

Because the weather is dry but temperatures can be cool, drying clothes may take some time. We recommend bringing enough clothing for several days rather than planning to do laundry every day.

7. Kitchen & Meals

Participants will have access to the household kitchen, subject to the family's normal household routines.

This provides an opportunity to prepare simple meals, make tea or coffee, learn how local food is prepared, cook with your host family, share meals and learn about local ingredients.

The kitchen is a shared household space, not a private kitchen exclusively for participants. Please clean up after yourself and follow your host family's expectations.

8. Food in Mustang

You will have plenty of opportunities to experience traditional Nepali and Himalayan food.

Common foods

- Dal bhat
- Thakali meals
- Buckwheat dishes
- Tibetan bread
- Momos
- Thukpa
- Gundruk
- Sukuti
- Local potatoes
- Noodles
- Soups
- Apple products

Jomsom restaurants also serve dal bhat, momos, noodles, fried rice, pasta, pizza, sandwiches, yak/chicken burgers, pancakes, bakery items, coffee and tea.

Vegetarian options are widely available. If you have food allergies, dietary restrictions or special nutritional needs, please let us know before arrival.

9. Restaurants & Cafés

Jomsom has a good selection of restaurants and cafés for a Himalayan mountain town. Participants can explore local restaurants independently or with the group.

There are also cafés and bakeries where you can get coffee, work online, meet other travelers and buy snacks. Restaurant and café hours may change depending on season, weather and local circumstances.

10. Internet & Wi-Fi

Wi-Fi is available in Jomsom and at some accommodations. However, internet service in the Himalayas is not guaranteed to operate at the same level as in a major city.

You may experience slow connections, temporary outages, power-related interruptions, weather-related disruptions and limited connectivity in villages.

Thini and smaller villages may have less reliable connectivity than Jomsom.

Our recommendation

Have mobile data as a backup. We recommend purchasing a Nepal SIM card and data package. Nepal Telecom and Ncell are the major mobile providers.

If you depend on the internet for work, please do not rely exclusively on homestay Wi-Fi.

11. SIM Cards & Mobile Service

SIM cards are available in Nepal. Participants can purchase a SIM before arriving in Mustang, particularly in Kathmandu or Pokhara, where there are more options and easier access to customer service.

SIM/data services may also be available in Jomsom. Mobile coverage varies throughout the mountains, so expect some areas where service is weak or unavailable.

12. Money & ATMs

Jomsom has banks and ATMs. However, please do not rely entirely on ATMs.

Mountain ATMs can occasionally experience connectivity problems, power interruptions, cash shortages or temporary service outages.

Recommendation: Bring enough Nepalese rupees to cover several days of expenses. Cash is especially important when traveling to smaller villages where card payments may not be available.

13. Local Shops

Jomsom has grocery stores and small local shops where you can purchase everyday necessities.

- Bottled water
- Snacks and biscuits
- Chocolate
- Instant noodles
- Rice and dal
- Bread and eggs
- Tea and coffee
- Soft drinks
- Toiletries
- Soap and shampoo
- Toothpaste
- Batteries
- Phone accessories
- Basic medications
- Trekking supplies

Specialty items are better purchased in Kathmandu or Pokhara before heading to Mustang.

Quick Reference

- Home base: Jomsom & Thini, Lower Mustang
- Accommodation: Private homestay room with basic furnishings
- Bathroom: Shared squat toilet
- Hot shower: Solar-heated; availability depends on weather and household use
- Laundry: Washing machines available at homestays; participants do their own laundry
- Kitchen: Shared household kitchen available subject to host-family routines
- Internet: Wi-Fi available in some accommodations; mobile data recommended as backup
- Money: Bring cash; ATMs are available in Jomsom but should not be relied upon exclusively
- Transport: Pokhara–Jomsom flights are weather-dependent; road travel is another option
- Best outdoor time: Early morning, before the valley winds strengthen
- Separate packet: School & Student Information Packet will cover classroom and student-related information

14. Getting to Jomsom



By air

The fastest way to reach Jomsom is by flying from Pokhara to Jomsom Airport. The flight is approximately 20–25 minutes. The flight itself is one of the great experiences of visiting Mustang, with spectacular views of the Himalayan landscape.

Important: Flights are weather-dependent

Jomsom flights are particularly affected by mountain weather and the strong winds that develop in the Kali Gandaki Valley. Flights generally operate in the morning. Delays and cancellations can occur.

For this reason, participants should build flexibility into their travel plans and avoid scheduling an important onward flight immediately after a Jomsom flight.

By road

Jomsom is also accessible by road from Pokhara through the Kali Gandaki corridor. Road travel takes considerably longer but provides an opportunity to see the changing landscapes of western Nepal. Driving time can range from 6-8 hours.

15. Weather

Lower Mustang has a dry Himalayan climate because it sits in the rain shadow of the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri ranges.

- Strong sunshine
- Dry air
- Cold mornings
- Pleasant daytime temperatures when the sun is out
- Cold evenings
- Strong afternoon winds

The Mustang wind

The Kali Gandaki Valley is famous for its strong winds. The wind generally becomes stronger later in the morning. For hiking and outdoor activities, early mornings are usually the most comfortable time.

16. Altitude

Jomsom sits at approximately 2,700 meters, while Thini is around 2,800 meters. Other destinations in the region are considerably higher.

Participants arriving from lower elevations should give themselves time to acclimatize.

- Walk slowly.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Do not overexert yourself.
- Get adequate sleep.
- Limit alcohol.
- Pay attention to how you feel.
- Tell the program team if you feel unwell.

17. Places to Explore on Our Program

Lupra — A Quiet Village with an Ancient Spiritual Tradition



Lupra is a small, beautiful village in Lower Mustang, tucked into the mountains above the Kali Gandaki Valley. It is particularly interesting because of its connection to **Bön**, an ancient spiritual tradition of the Himalayan region that predates the spread of Tibetan Buddhism.

The village is home to **Lupra Monastery**, traditionally associated with the Bön tradition. Visiting Lupra offers participants an opportunity to learn about a lesser-known aspect of Mustang's religious and cultural history.

Lupra is also a wonderful place simply to **slow down and walk**. The village has traditional stone-and-mud houses, agricultural terraces and spectacular mountain surroundings.

For participants, Lupra can be experienced as a **village excursion or hiking destination from the Jomsom area**, depending on the group's interests, weather and trail conditions.

What makes Lupra special:

- Bön cultural heritage
- Historic monastery
- Traditional Himalayan village
- Beautiful mountain landscape
- Quiet alternative to the busier trekking routes

- Opportunity to learn about the diversity of Himalayan spiritual traditions

Muktinath — A Sacred Place for Hindus and Buddhists



At approximately 3,800 meters, Muktinath is one of the most important pilgrimage destinations in the Himalayas.

What makes Muktinath particularly special is that it is revered by both Hindus and Buddhists.

For Hindu pilgrims, Muktinath is associated with Lord Vishnu and is considered a sacred place of pilgrimage. The temple complex includes the famous 108 water spouts, where pilgrims traditionally bathe beneath the flowing water.

For Buddhists, the area is associated with sacred sites including the Sri Muktinath Temple complex and nearby Buddhist monasteries. The natural elements of fire, water and earth found in the area contribute to its spiritual significance.

The journey to Muktinath is also part of the experience. The landscape changes dramatically as you travel upward from Jomsom through the Kali Gandaki Valley toward the high mountain desert around Muktinath.

What participants can experience

- Muktinath Temple
- 108 water spouts

- Buddhist monasteries
- Sacred sites and pilgrimage traditions
- Dramatic Himalayan landscapes
- Views toward Dhaulagiri and surrounding peaks
- Traditional villages along the route

Cultural note: Muktinath is an active place of worship, not simply a tourist attraction. Visitors should dress respectfully and follow instructions from religious authorities and local guides.

Kagbeni — The Gateway Between Lower and Upper Mustang



Kagbeni is one of the most atmospheric villages in Mustang and an important historic settlement along the Kali Gandaki trade corridor.

Situated at roughly 2,800 meters, Kagbeni sits where the routes from the south meet the traditional route toward Upper Mustang and the Tibetan Plateau.

Walking through Kagbeni feels like stepping into another era. The village is characterized by:

- Narrow stone lanes
- Traditional mud-and-stone houses
- Ancient walls
- Chortens
- Prayer wheels
- Buddhist monasteries

- Agricultural fields
- Dramatic cliffs and mountain landscapes

The Kag Chode Thupten Samphel Ling Monastery is an important Buddhist site in the village.

Kagbeni is also known for its distinctive landscape at the meeting point of the Kali Gandaki and Jhong rivers.

Why visit Kagbeni?

Kagbeni offers an excellent opportunity to explore the intersection of trade, religion, agriculture and Himalayan village life.

Participants can spend time simply walking through the old village, visiting cultural sites, talking with local residents and observing traditional architecture.

It is also an excellent starting point for exploring the trails toward Muktinath and Upper Mustang.

A cultural connection

For the Mustang English & Himalayan Culture Program, Kagbeni is particularly valuable because it allows participants to see how geography has shaped culture.

The village's location made it an important stopping point for traders, pilgrims and travelers moving through the Kali Gandaki corridor.

Today, trekkers and visitors follow many of the same ancient pathways.

Marpha — The Apple Village of Mustang



Marpha is one of the best-known villages in Lower Mustang and an excellent place to experience Thakali culture, traditional architecture and local agriculture.

Located along the Kali Gandaki Valley at approximately 2,650–2,700 meters, Marpha is famous for its whitewashed stone houses, narrow flagstone lanes and apple orchards. It has also become an important stop for trekkers traveling through the Jomsom–Muktinath corridor.

The village's relationship with apples is one of its defining features. Local producers make a variety of apple products, including juice, dried apples, jams and other preserves, and Marpha is particularly associated with locally produced apple beverages.

For visitors, one of the pleasures of Marpha is simply wandering through its narrow lanes. Look for traditional homes, prayer wheels, small shops, courtyards and the monastery overlooking the village.

What to experience in Marpha

- Walk through the traditional stone-paved village
- Visit the monastery above the village
- Explore the apple orchards
- Try locally produced apple products
- Eat a traditional Thakali meal
- Visit local cafés and small shops
- Learn about Thakali culture and village life
- Continue toward Chhairo Gumpa, located south of the village

Marpha is also a wonderful place to observe how agriculture, tourism and traditional culture coexist in Lower Mustang.

Dhumba Lake — A Sacred Himalayan Lake



Dhumba Lake, also called Dhumba Taal, is a small turquoise-colored freshwater lake located above the Jomsom–Thini area.

At roughly 2,800–2,900 meters, it is close enough to Jomsom to make an excellent half-day excursion. The lake is traditionally reached through or in combination with Thini Village, making it possible to combine a cultural village walk with a nature excursion.

The lake is considered sacred by local communities, and stories about its origins and spiritual significance are part of the cultural landscape surrounding it. Visitors should therefore treat the lake as a sacred natural site rather than simply a swimming or recreational area.

The contrast between the intense blue-green water and Mustang's dry, rocky landscape makes Dhumba especially striking.

Chhema Lake — The Lake of Forgiveness

Chhema Lake is a much more remote and challenging destination than Dhumba Lake.

Located high above the Jomsom area at approximately 3,700–3,800 meters, Chhema is a beautiful alpine lake surrounded by dramatic mountain terrain, with views toward Nilgiri and the surrounding Himalayan peaks. Sources vary slightly on the exact elevation, so for participant materials I would describe it simply as around 3,700–3,800 meters.

Chhema is sometimes translated as the “Lake of Forgiveness.” It has a spiritual character and is associated with local stories and pilgrimage traditions.

The journey to the lake is part of what makes the experience special. The trail climbs through rugged Himalayan terrain and can include forested sections before reaching the more open alpine landscape around the lake.

Important: This is a high-altitude hike

Chhema Lake should **not** be treated like the easy Dhumba Lake excursion.

Participants should be prepared for:

- Significant elevation gain
- Thin air
- Steeper terrain
- A longer hiking day
- Changing mountain weather
- Strong sun and wind
- Cold temperatures
- The possibility of snow or ice depending on season

Why go?

For those who are prepared for the hike, Chhema offers something very different from the more accessible Lower Mustang attractions.

It is an opportunity to experience:

High-altitude wilderness + sacred landscape + solitude + Himalayan views

The sense of remoteness is part of the attraction.

18. Hiking & Sightseeing

One of the best ways to experience Mustang is on foot.

- Jomsom → Thini: A relatively easy cultural walk connecting the two communities.
- Thini → Dhumba Lake: A beautiful half-day outing combining village culture, mountain scenery and the lake.
- Jomsom → Marpha: A classic Lower Mustang walking route.
- Jomsom → Kagbeni: An overnight excursion.
- Jomsom → Muktinath: A longer journey that can combine hiking and local transportation.

- Village-to-village hiking: The Lower Mustang region offers many opportunities to connect villages on foot.

Hiking routes and itineraries may change depending on weather, road conditions, group ability and local circumstances.

Absolutely. Here is a **clean, participant-friendly version** with the ratings, addresses, hours, citations, and business-listing information removed so you can copy and paste it directly into your Welcome Guide.

19 Monasteries & Sacred Places of Lower Mustang

Mustang is one of Nepal's richest regions for Himalayan Buddhist and Indigenous religious heritage. Around Jomsom, Thini, Syang, Marpha, Lupra, Kagbeni and Muktinath, monasteries and temples are an important part of community life.

These are not simply historic monuments or tourist attractions. Many remain active sacred spaces where local people gather for prayers, ceremonies, festivals and religious rituals. Visitors should enter respectfully, ask permission before taking photographs, and follow any instructions given by monks, nuns, caretakers or local residents.

Thini Yangdung Monastery – Thini Village

Thini is one of the oldest settlements in the Jomsom area, and its monastery is an important part of the village's religious and cultural identity.

A visit to the monastery can be combined with a walk through Thini's traditional stone houses, agricultural fields, chortens and mani walls. It is a wonderful introduction to the way religion, agriculture and everyday village life are interconnected in Mustang.

Thini is close enough to Jomsom to visit on foot and can also be combined with an excursion to Dhumba Lake.

Kutsab Terenga Gompa – Dhumba Lake Area

Located above Dhumba Lake, Kutsab Terenga Gompa is associated with the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. The monastery contains religious images and traditional artwork and occupies a beautiful location overlooking the surrounding valley.

Dhumba Lake itself is considered sacred by local communities, making the monastery and lake particularly interesting to visit together.

A wonderful cultural walk from Jomsom is:

Jomsom → Thini Village → Dhumba Lake → Kutsab Terenga Gompa → Jomsom



Syang Tashi Lhakhang – Syang Village

Syang is a historic Thakali village near Jomsom with its own Buddhist monastery, commonly known as Syang Gompa or Tashi Lhakhang. The monastery is associated with the Nyingma tradition and contains images of important Buddhist figures, including Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), along with traditional religious paintings. Visiting Syang offers another opportunity to experience the religious and cultural heritage of the traditional Thakali villages surrounding Jomsom.

Dhi Che Ling Ani Gompa – Syang

Syang is also home to an Ani Gompa, or Buddhist nunnery, known as Dhi Che Ling. The nunnery is associated with the Nyingma tradition and provides an interesting opportunity to learn about the role of women in Himalayan Buddhist religious communities. For participants in the Mustang English & Himalayan Culture Program, this can offer another perspective on women's roles and leadership within Himalayan communities.

Samten Choling Gompa – Marpha

The Buddhist monastery above Marpha is one of the village's most recognizable landmarks. Situated above Marpha's famous whitewashed houses and narrow stone lanes, the monastery offers beautiful views over the village, apple orchards and Kali Gandaki Valley. A visit to the monastery can easily be incorporated into a day exploring Marpha's Thakali heritage, traditional architecture, orchards, local food and small shops.

Chhairo Gompa – Near Marpha

Chhairo Gompa is one of the historically important monasteries of the Lower Mustang region. Located near Marpha, on the opposite side of the Kali Gandaki Valley, the monastery is associated with the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism and Guru Rinpoche. The monastery has historical connections with the old trans-Himalayan salt trade route that once passed through the Kali Gandaki Valley. A visit to Chhairo provides an opportunity to explore the connections between religion, trade, migration and Tibetan cultural influence in Mustang.

Lupra Bön Monastery – Lupra Village

Lupra is particularly important because its religious heritage is associated with **Bön**, an ancient Tibetan religious tradition with a distinct history and identity, although Bön and Tibetan Buddhism have influenced one another over many centuries. Lupra is one of the important surviving Bön communities in Mustang. Its monastery and religious traditions provide visitors with an opportunity to learn about the diversity of spiritual traditions found throughout the Himalayas.

For participants, it is important not to describe Lupra simply as another Buddhist monastery. Its Bön heritage is one of the characteristics that makes the village particularly significant.

Kag Chode Thupten Samphel Ling Monastery – Kagbeni

Kagbeni is home to Kag Chode Thupten Samphel Ling, one of the historically significant monasteries accessible from Jomsom. The monastery is associated with the Sakya tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and is traditionally dated to the 15th century. Its distinctive red walls form an important part of Kagbeni's historic landscape.

Kagbeni itself was historically a crossroads for trade, pilgrimage and travel between Lower Mustang and the former Kingdom of Lo in Upper Mustang. Visiting the monastery provides an opportunity to explore Buddhism alongside Kagbeni's traditional architecture, agricultural landscape, trade history and Tibetan cultural influences.

Jharkot Monastery – Jharkot

Jharkot is a beautiful traditional village situated along the route toward Muktinath. Its monastery is associated with Tibetan Buddhist traditions and occupies a dramatic position overlooking the surrounding valley. The village itself is also worth exploring for its traditional architecture, narrow pathways, old buildings and mountain setting. Stopping in Jharkot allows participants to experience a traditional Himalayan settlement rather than traveling directly to Muktinath.

Dzong Chode Shedup Choephel Ling – Jhong

Jhong, also known as Dzong, is another historic settlement in the Muktinath area. Its monastery, Dzong Chode Shedup Choephel Ling, is associated with the Sakya tradition and is particularly interesting because of its relationship with the ruins of an old fortified settlement. Jhong provides an opportunity to explore how religion, political authority, village defense and traditional settlement patterns were historically interconnected in Mustang.

Muktinath / Chumig Gyatsa

At approximately 3,800 meters, Muktinath is one of the most important pilgrimage destinations in the Himalayas. The site is sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists.

For Hindus, Muktinath is associated with Lord Vishnu and spiritual liberation. For Buddhists, the sacred landscape is known as **Chumig Gyatsa**, often translated as “Hundred Waters.” The wider sacred complex includes Buddhist and Hindu shrines, monasteries, prayer areas, sacred ponds and the famous 108 water spouts.

Muktinath provides participants with an especially interesting opportunity to learn about the ways Hindu and Buddhist traditions have coexisted and interacted within the Himalayan region. Because Muktinath is considerably higher than Jomsom, participants should also be mindful of altitude when visiting.

Narsingh Gompa / Marme Lhakhang – Muktinath

Within the wider Muktinath sacred landscape is Narsingh Gompa, also known as Marme Lhakhang. The site has Buddhist associations with Guru Rinpoche while also having significance for Hindu pilgrims, who associate Narsingh with Narasimha, an incarnation of Vishnu. This overlapping religious significance makes the site another interesting example of the shared Hindu-Buddhist sacred traditions found around Muktinath.

Visiting Monasteries Respectfully

Participants should remember that monasteries, temples and sacred sites in Mustang are active places of worship.

Dress respectfully and avoid overly revealing clothing. Speak quietly inside religious buildings and around people who are praying. Walk clockwise around Buddhist stupas, chortens and mani walls unless local tradition indicates otherwise. Do not touch statues, religious texts, paintings, ritual objects or offerings.

Always ask before photographing monks, nuns, local residents, ceremonies or the interior of a monastery. Some monasteries prohibit photography altogether.

Shoes may need to be removed before entering certain rooms or shrines. If you are uncertain about what to do, simply observe local people or ask your host or guide.

A small donation is appropriate at many monasteries, particularly when a caretaker has opened the monastery for your visit.

Most importantly, approach these places as **living sacred spaces belonging to local communities**, rather than simply as sightseeing attractions.

20. Hindu Spiritual Sites & Pilgrimage in Mustang

Although Mustang is widely known for its Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and culture, the region is also an important destination for Hindu pilgrimage. The Kali Gandaki Valley, Muktinath, Kagbeni and the surrounding mountains contain numerous sites considered sacred by Hindu communities.

Hindu and Buddhist traditions often overlap in Mustang. Some sacred places are revered by both communities, while others have particular significance within Hindu traditions.

Muktinath Temple – Mukti Kshetra

At approximately 3,800 meters, Muktinath is one of the most important Hindu pilgrimage sites in Nepal. Hindus know the area as Mukti Kshetra, meaning the “place of liberation.” The main temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu, and Muktinath is associated with the belief that visiting this sacred place can bring spiritual liberation. The temple complex is famous for its 108 sacred water spouts, where Hindu pilgrims traditionally bathe as part of their pilgrimage. The water is extremely cold, but pilgrims undertake the ritual as an act of purification.

Muktinath is also significant because it is a shared Hindu-Buddhist sacred site. Buddhists know the area as Chumig Gyatsa, meaning “Hundred Waters,” and worship the site in connection with Buddhist traditions. The Nepal Tourism Board describes Muktinath as one of Nepal’s major Hindu pilgrimage destinations and notes that the temple is revered by both Hindus and Buddhists.

Jwala Mai Temple – Muktinath

Near the main Muktinath temple is Jwala Mai, a small but particularly fascinating sacred site. The shrine is famous for its eternal flame, traditionally understood as a naturally occurring flame associated with the sacred combination of fire and water. The site is revered by both Hindus and Buddhists.

For visitors, Jwala Mai offers an opportunity to see how natural elements—fire, water, mountains and springs—become incorporated into Himalayan spiritual traditions.

The 108 Water Spouts – Muktinath

The 108 water spouts, also known as *Mukti Dhara*, are one of the most recognizable features of the Muktinath pilgrimage complex. Hindu pilgrims traditionally pass beneath the water spouts as part of a ritual bath. The number 108 has deep spiritual significance in Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Participants should remember that this is an active religious ritual rather than a tourist attraction. Visitors who are not participating in the pilgrimage should observe respectfully and avoid interfering with pilgrims.

Shaligram Stones – Kali Gandaki River

One of the most distinctive Hindu spiritual traditions of Mustang is connected to the Shaligram. Shaligrams are fossilized ammonites found along the Kali Gandaki River. For many Hindus, these naturally occurring black stones are sacred manifestations of Lord Vishnu. The Kali Gandaki is therefore much more than a river in the religious imagination of the region. Its riverbed is considered a sacred landscape because of the Shaligrams found within it. The Nepal Tourism Board notes that Shaligrams are particularly associated with the Kali Gandaki and are regarded by Hindus as sacred representations of Vishnu.

Participants may encounter Shaligrams along the river, but should never remove sacred stones from religious sites or private areas without permission.

Kagbeni – Hindu Ancestor Pilgrimage

Kagbeni is important not only for its Buddhist monastery and Tibetan-influenced culture but also as a Hindu spiritual destination. The confluence of the Kali Gandaki and Kag Khola rivers is regarded as a sacred place where Hindu families perform shraddha, rituals honoring deceased ancestors. These rituals are

connected to the Hindu belief in maintaining spiritual relationships between the living and their ancestors. The Nepal Tourism Board specifically identifies the Kagbeni river confluence as a place where Hindu pilgrims perform *shraddha* rituals.

When visiting Kagbeni, participants may encounter families conducting these ceremonies. These are private religious observances and should be treated with particular respect. Photography should only be done with permission.

Pitri Shraddha – Honoring the Ancestors

The Kali Gandaki Valley around Kagbeni and Muktinath is an important pilgrimage landscape for Pitri Shraddha, or rituals performed in honor of deceased ancestors. Families may travel long distances to Mustang to perform these ceremonies. The river, sacred stones and confluence of waterways all contribute to the spiritual importance of the area.

For participants, this offers an opportunity to learn about an important aspect of Hindu culture that is less visible in ordinary tourism: the continuing relationship between families, ancestors and sacred landscapes.

The Sacred Kali Gandaki Valley

For Hindus, the Kali Gandaki is itself part of the sacred geography of Mustang. The river is closely connected with Shaligram stones, pilgrimage routes, ancestor rituals and Muktinath. The spiritual landscape therefore extends well beyond individual temples.

As participants travel through Jomsom, Kagbeni, Muktinath and the surrounding villages, they are moving through a landscape that has been used for pilgrimage for generations.

Hindu and Buddhist Traditions Together

One of the most fascinating aspects of Mustang is that Hinduism and Buddhism are not always separated into completely different religious landscapes. Muktinath is the clearest example. Hindu pilgrims worship Vishnu, while Buddhists revere the same sacred landscape through Buddhist traditions. Jwala Mai is also revered by both communities.

Kagbeni similarly brings together Buddhist traditions, Hindu ancestor rituals and the sacred Kali Gandaki River.

This religious diversity provides participants with an opportunity to learn about how different spiritual traditions have coexisted, interacted and shared sacred landscapes in the Himalayas.

Visiting Hindu Sacred Sites Respectfully

Many of the Hindu sites in Mustang are active pilgrimage destinations rather than tourist attractions.

Participants should:

- Dress respectfully when visiting temples and pilgrimage sites.
- Remove shoes when required.
- Ask before entering restricted areas.
- Avoid touching religious objects, statues or offerings.

- Ask permission before photographing pilgrims or religious ceremonies.
- Do not photograph people performing private ancestor rituals without permission.
- Do not remove Shaligram stones or other objects from sacred places.
- Keep voices low around temples and during ceremonies.
- Follow the instructions of priests, caretakers and local guides.
- Remember that people may be visiting these places for deeply personal religious reasons.

Above all, approach Mustang's Hindu sacred places with the same respect given to its Buddhist monasteries and Bön sites. The landscape itself is part of the spiritual heritage of Mustang.

21. Festivals & Cultural Celebrations

Festivals are an important part of life in Mustang. Celebrations reflect a mix of Thakali traditions, Tibetan Buddhist practices, Hindu traditions and Nepal's broader national festival calendar. Festival dates often follow lunar calendars and therefore change from year to year. Celebrations also vary by village, so participants should confirm the local date and program with their host family or program team.

A Year of Festivals in and Around Mustang

Approx. time	Festival / celebration	What you may experience
Jan–Feb	Losar / Tibetan & Himalayan New Year	Family gatherings, prayers, traditional foods, music, dancing and visits to monasteries. Timing varies by community and lunar calendar.
Feb–Mar	Holi	Nepal-wide festival of colors. Celebrations in Mustang are generally smaller than in southern Nepal.
Mar–Apr	Tibetan Buddhist monastery festivals / local pujas	Village or monastery-based prayers, rituals and community gatherings. Exact dates differ by gumpa.
Apr–May	Buddha Jayanti / Buddha Purnima	Buddhist observances, prayers and visits to monasteries and sacred sites.
May–Jun	Tiji Festival — Upper Mustang	A major three-day Buddhist festival in Lo Manthang featuring sacred masked dances and rituals. This is an Upper Mustang event, but Lower Mustang residents and visitors may travel north for it.
Jul–Aug	Janai Purnima / Raksha Bandhan	A major Hindu festival; in Mustang it can overlap with other Himalayan community celebrations.
Aug	Yartung / Yartung Mela	One of Mustang's best-known horse and community festivals, associated with the end of summer. Horse riding/racing, dancing, music, food and community gatherings are key features.

Aug–Sep	Falo / Thini Bhadau	A traditional Thini celebration associated with the end of the cultivation season and the beginning of winter, with traditional dances, music, archery and community gatherings.
Sep–Oct	Teej	A major Hindu women's festival observed in Nepal. Local observance varies by community.
Sep–Oct	Dashain	Nepal's major Hindu festival, marked by family gatherings, blessings and feasting.
Oct–Nov	Tihar	Festival of lights with household rituals, lamps, music and community celebrations.
Nov–Dec	Local monastery / village festivals	Some communities hold annual pujas and monastery celebrations according to their own calendars; dates vary by village.

Important festival notes

- Tiji is primarily an Upper Mustang festival in Lo Manthang rather than a Jomsom/Thini festival. It can nevertheless be relevant to participants who want to extend their trip north.
- Yartung is celebrated in Mustang communities including Lower Mustang and Muktinath, and is associated with the end of summer. The exact celebration and dates vary.
- Falo, also known as Thini Bhadau, is especially relevant to our Thini community experience. A 2024 celebration included traditional dances, music, archery and community gatherings.
- Festival dates should never be assumed from the Gregorian calendar alone. Many Mustang festivals follow Tibetan or other lunar calendars.
- If your program dates overlap with a local festival, participation should always be guided by the host community and festival organizers. Some religious ceremonies are appropriate to observe respectfully rather than actively participate in.

22. Language: A Few Words to Learn

Nepali is the main language you will use for everyday communication in the wider community. Thakali is an important heritage language of Lower Mustang, but it has several dialects, and local speech can differ between communities such as Thini, Marpha, Tukuche and other villages. For this reason, the Thakali words below should be treated as a small cultural introduction rather than a complete phrasebook. Ask your host family or local friends to teach you the form used in their community.

Useful Nepali

Nepali	Pronunciation	Meaning
नमस्ते	Namaste	Hello / goodbye
धन्यवाद	Dhanyabad	Thank you
कृपया	Kripaya	Please
हन्छु	Huncha	Okay / yes / that works
हजुर	Hajur	Yes / respectful response
कस्तो छ?	Kasto cha?	How are you?
राम्रै छ	Ramrai cha	I'm fine / it's good
माफ गर्नुहोस्	Maaf garnuhos	Excuse me / I'm sorry

पानी	Pani	Water
खाना	Khana	Food / meal
चिया	Chiya	Tea
घर	Ghar	House / home
शौचालय	Shauchalaya	Toilet
कति हो?	Kati ho?	How much is it?
मलाई थाहा छैन	Malai thaha chaina	I don't know
फेरि भेटौंला	Feri bhetaula	See you again

A few Thakali words

Thakali is a distinct language of the Mustang/Myagdi region, and its dialects are not all identical. Published linguistic resources document multiple varieties, including Marpha, Tukuche, Syang and other forms. The examples below are selected from published Thakali vocabulary resources; pronunciation may vary locally.

Thakali	Meaning	Use / note
या फ्यासी म्:	Namaste / greeting	A recorded Three-Gaunle Thakali greeting; ask a local speaker to demonstrate pronunciation.
क्यू	Water	Recorded in a Thakali vocabulary source.
सोलो	Eat / please eat	Recorded in a Thakali vocabulary source; confirm the locally used form.
खेवा	Cheap	Useful shopping word; confirm pronunciation with your host.
कोमो	Expensive	Useful shopping word; confirm pronunciation with your host.
छुवा	Fun / enjoyable	Recorded vocabulary; ask your host for the natural conversational form.
मिहन्तो	Flower	Recorded vocabulary.

Make language learning part of the experience

- Ask your host family to teach you three new Nepali or Thakali words each day.
- Write new words in your phone or a small notebook.
- Practice ordering food in Nepali.
- Learn the names of foods, household objects and places around the village.
- Ask local students or community members how a word is pronounced rather than relying only on written transliteration.
- Remember that Thakali has multiple dialects and is a tonal language; a word may sound different from one village to another.

Language is one of the simplest ways to show respect. Even a few words spoken with a smile can create a much warmer connection with your hosts and the wider community.

23. What Should I Pack?

Clothing

- Comfortable hiking pants
- T-shirts/base layers
- Fleece
- Warm jacket/down jacket

- Windproof layer
- Warm socks
- Hat
- Gloves
- Comfortable walking shoes
- Sandals/slippers for the homestay

Personal items

- Sunscreen
- Sunglasses
- Lip balm
- Reusable water bottle
- Personal toiletries
- Personal medications
- Small daypack
- Headlamp
- Power bank
- Phone charger
- Universal adapter

Homestay items

- Small towel
- Earplugs
- Sleeping liner if desired
- Laundry bag
- Small padlock
- Personal toiletries

You do not need to bring luxury camping equipment for the homestay.

24. What Is Different About Life in Mustang?

Life here moves at a different pace.

- Power interruptions
- Limited hot water
- Shared bathrooms
- Weather-related travel delays
- Mountain roads
- Early mornings
- Strong winds
- Simple meals
- Shops with limited selections

These are not necessarily problems to be solved—they are part of adapting to life in a Himalayan community.

The best participants arrive with flexibility, curiosity and a willingness to participate.

25. What This Program Is About

The Mustang English & Himalayan Culture Program brings together education, cultural exchange, community engagement and responsible tourism.

- LIVE — with a local family.
- LEARN — about Himalayan culture, history and everyday life.
- TEACH — English through our community-based school program.
- HIKE — through villages and mountain landscapes.
- EAT — local food and learn about regional cuisine.
- CONNECT — with local people and communities.
- EXPLORE — Jomsom, Thini and Lower Mustang.

The program is designed around meaningful cultural exchange rather than simply consuming a destination as a tourist.

26. Your School Experience

A separate School & Student Information Packet will be provided to participants.

That packet will cover the school, student demographics, class structure, English levels, teaching expectations, lesson planning, classroom activities, teacher collaboration, cultural considerations, child safeguarding, photography/social media guidelines, school schedule and volunteer responsibilities.

This Welcome Guide intentionally focuses on your life and experience outside the classroom.

27. A Note About Responsible Travel

As a participant in this program, you are entering a community as a guest, learner and contributor.

- Shop locally.
- Eat at your homestay and local restaurants.
- Use local guides.
- Respect local customs.
- Avoid unnecessary plastic.
- Refill water whenever possible.
- Ask before photographing people.
- Learn a few Nepali words.
- Support locally owned businesses.
- Be respectful of local resources.
- Leave places better than you found them.

The goal is for tourism and cultural exchange to create meaningful benefits for local communities, while giving participants an authentic experience of Mustang.

28. Finally — Slow Down

Mustang rewards people who slow down. Do not worry if you do not see everything. Sit with your host family. Drink tea. Walk through the village. Talk to someone at the market. Watch the mountains change color. Learn how to make a local dish. Take a morning walk before the wind arrives. Listen to the stories of the people who call Mustang home.

This is your opportunity to experience the Himalayas not simply as a visitor, but as a temporary member of a community. Don't try to become an expert visitor. Become a curious participant. Festivals, food, language, household routines and village walks are opportunities to learn directly from the people who live here.

Welcome to Mustang. Come ready to learn. Come ready to connect. Come ready to experience the Himalayas differently.