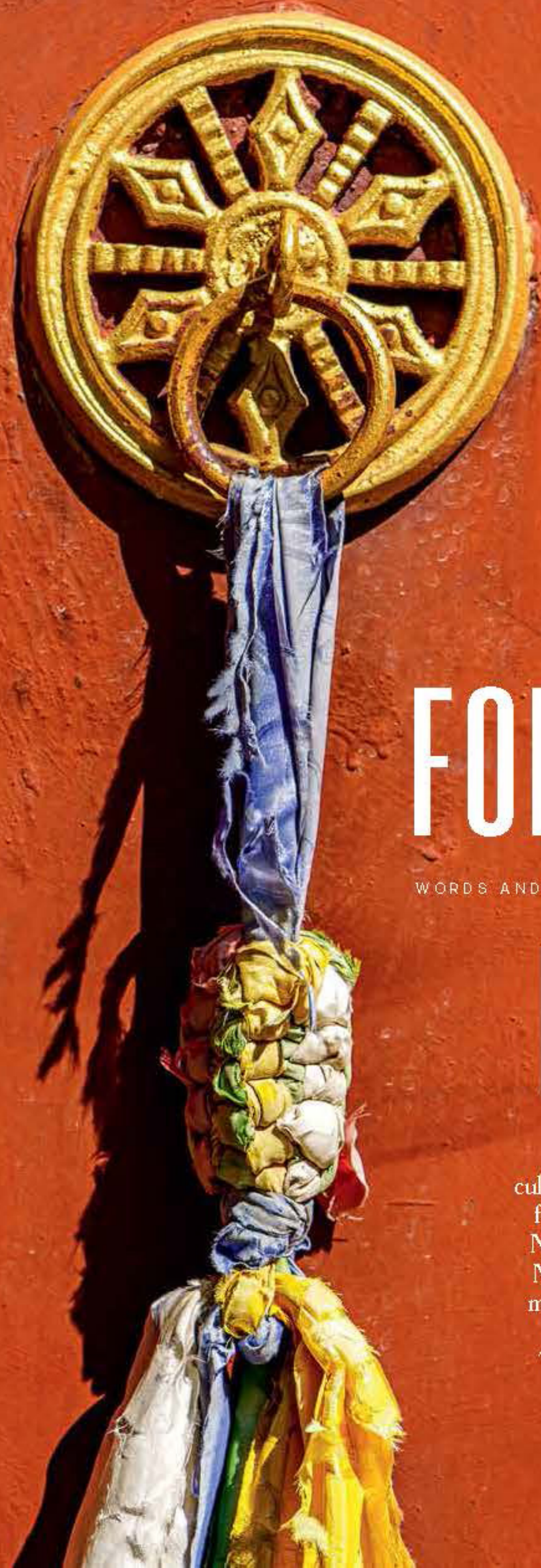


EXPLORE

VERTICAL LIMIT
An intricate handle on
a temple gate in Lhoka.
Opposite: The Nilgiri
massif, seen from a suite
at Shinta Mani Mustang.



FORBIDDEN

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS SCHALKX

FRUIT

Breathtakingly scenic,
culturally rich and inaccessible
for many years, Mustang is
Nepal's most fabled region.
Now a majestic new retreat
makes an ultra-luxe base for
exploring the wonders of
The Forbidden Kingdom.





PEAK CONDITION
 Left: The summit of Nilgiri North. Below: A colourful chorten on a hill above the village of Lubra. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Jhong village, seen from a walking trail; Nilgiri Restaurant at Shinta Mani Mustang; a Nepalese thali lunch at the lodge; healer Tsewang Gyurme Gurung; prayer wheels at the Kag Chode monastery in Kagbeni.

The remoteness makes Shinta Mani Mustang, Nepal's first true ultra-luxury lodge, admirably ambitious. Created in a partnership between Thailand-based hospitality whiz Jason Friedman, architect Bill Bensley and Nepali entrepreneur Namgyal Sherpa, the lodge teeters on an escarpment above Jomsom town. While the stone building, which melts into the mountainside when viewed from afar, has been around for a few years, Bensley and his team refreshed its 29 suites and public areas with the studio's signature eye-popping style. Upon arrival, I was greeted by a life-sized golden yak and led into a courtyard through a gate painted in maroon, white and dove-grey stripes. I was told they signify prosperity, knowledge and longevity, and could be found on chortens (stupas) and Sakya monasteries throughout the region.

I clocked similarly rootsy references all around the lodge. In my room, furnished with Tibetan tiger rugs, yak fur-covered stools, and cashmere throws in Hermès orange, three mani stones inscribed with Sanskrit mantras were embedded in the wall. "Taking refuge inside during Mustang's bitter winters, people set to carving these poems and prayers into slate as a form of penance,"

Bensley explained. "Come summer, stacks of these prayer stones signify years of wintertime penance – it's this unique way of seeing the world that we wanted to carry throughout the Shinta Mani experience."

In a lesser way, the road trip leading me here was my penance, and the lodge's spectacular setting and plush amenities the mani-like reminders that the hardest journeys can lead to the biggest rewards. It made my session with resident "amchi" Tsewang Gyurme Gurung, an 11th-generation Tibetan healer, in the lodge's glass-walled wellness centre all the more fulfilling. And it made dinners at the restaurant, which every night hosted a feast themed around Mustang farmers' bounties or the numerous momo dumplings found across the Himalayas, seem even more nourishing.

There was supposed to be a mountain outside my window. A real pretty one: 7000 metres high, with cypress-covered slopes and three peaks perennially tucked under a snowy blanket. I'd be able to see it from my bed at the just-opened Shinta Mani Mustang in northern Nepal – or so I was told. In reality, my room's floor-to-ceiling windows framed a sea of clouds, bluish-grey puffs that filtered out all the vibrancy of the Jomsom valley unfurling below. The same clouds prevented my 20-minute helicopter transfer from taking off in Pokhara that morning. Instead, I made the journey by jeep, a seven-hour slog over a road that was more holes than road, swerving uncomfortably close to deep gorges and hurtling buses with names like Road Warrior and Night Queen ("non-stop service guaranteed") emblazoned on their bumpers.

Such is the precarity of travelling to this sparsely populated region on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. A Buddhist bastion in a Hindu nation, Mustang was off-limits to outsiders until the early 1990s, when it was still ruled by a Tibetan king, who remained in power until Nepal abolished the monarchy almost two decades later. As an ancient trading route, the trails crossing the Kali Gandaki Gorge that cleaves through the district first carried Buddhist teachings from Tibet, and later saw caravans with Himalayan salt and wool pass between the surrounding ochre-coloured cliffs. The treacherous roads allowed much of Mustang to steep in isolation, shaping it into a region that, as some would argue, has remained more Tibetan than Tibet itself.

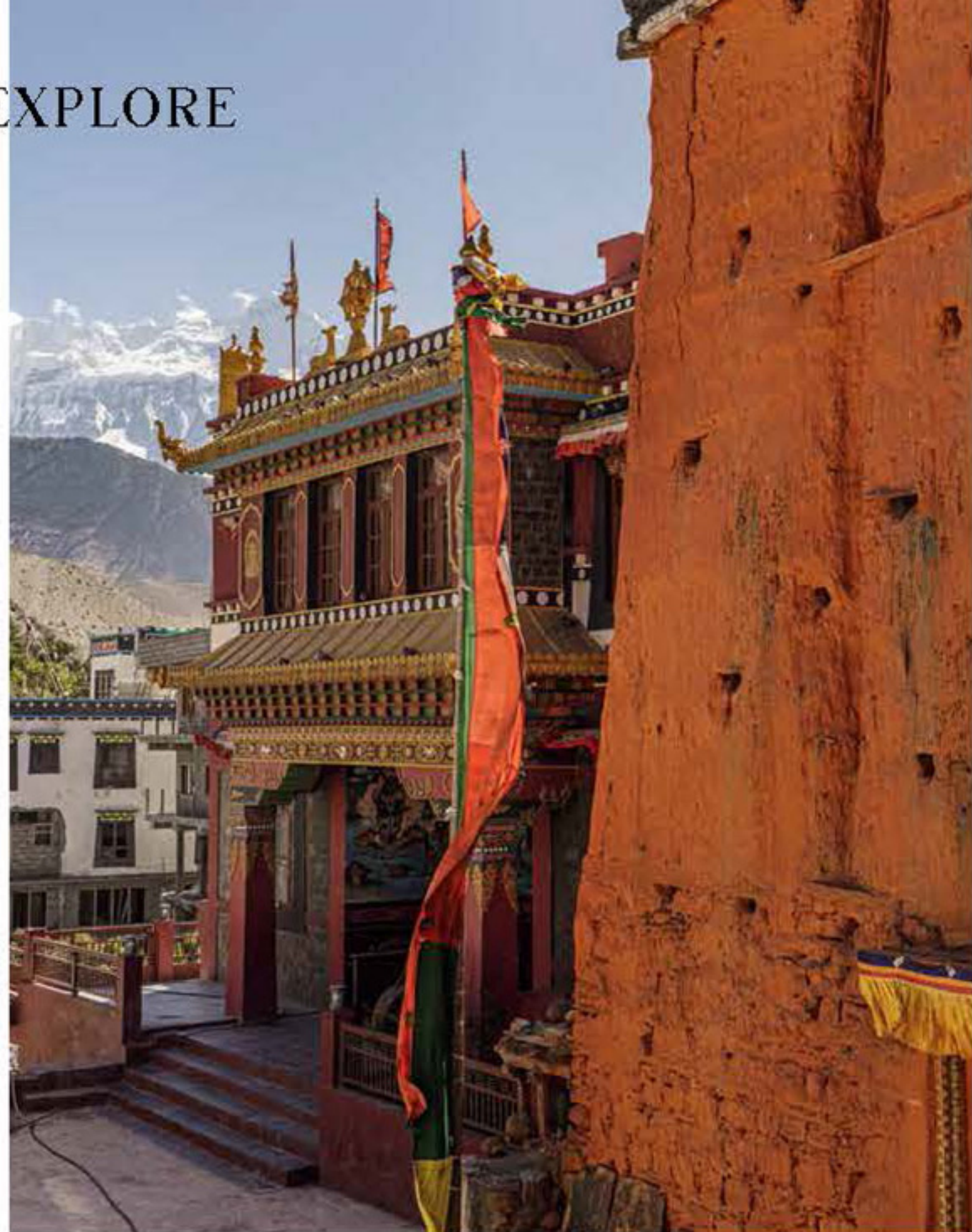


EXPLORE



MOUNTAIN HIGHS
Lubra village, seen from the
meditation caves across the river.
Opposite, clockwise from top left:
The monastery in Jhong, one of
the lunch spots; a local woman
welcomes guests to her home
in Jhong; the momo lunch on the
monastery's roof; stacked cups at
a teahouse in Marpha, the lobby
at Shinta Mani Mustang.





By day three, the clouds had finally cleared and I woke to the peaks of the Nilgiri massif in all their snow-capped glory. After a breakfast of buckwheat crêpes, my guide, Krishna, and I set off on a trek across the Jomsom valley sprawling out below the lodge. We passed apple orchards and fields of buckwheat, and zig-zagged upwards over dusty mountain trails lined with pine and juniper (the branches of which, Krishna told me, Tibetan Buddhists turn into incense). Two hours later, familiar voices filtered through the trees. As we reached the glacier-fed Chhyama Lake at the base of Nilgiri, Shinta Mani's culinary team appeared. Here they had set up a lakeside picnic with folding chairs and tiffin boxes painstakingly carried along the trail we had just traversed. As I nibbled from a charcuterie board and sipped chilled rosé, only the rumble of an avalanche in the distance broke the pastoral silence.

Over the following days, these pop-up lunches became highlights in excursions flush with awe-inspiring sights. With the lodge as our base camp, we set out on drives over bone-rattling roads and dried-up riverbeds to reach the frozen-in-time villages that dotted the barren hillsides like the oases of fruit orchards and potato fields, brought to life by the braided streams of the Kali Gandaki River (Mustang translates to "fertile plain" from Nepali). We crossed suspension bridges wrapped in wind-frayed prayer flags to reach settlements such as Jharkot, an ancient Jenga-stack of buildings of mud and stone so timeworn, they've seemingly become one with Earth. On their flat roofs, apples and Marsi rice were laid out to dry alongside firewood branches that looked like gargantuan bird's nests. We followed meandering alleys that dissolved into rubble and dust and crossed the valley to Jhong,



MONASTIC MAGIC

Left: The Kag Chode monastery in Kagbeni. Below: The prayer room in a home in Jhong. Opposite, clockwise from top left: A footbridge leading to Lubra village; leather couches and local antiques adorn the lodge's lobby; a kaleidoscopic alcove at the temple in Lubra; a teahouse in Marpha; lanes strung with prayer flags in Marpha.

a little-visited village pinned with whipping prayer flags, where the Shinta Mani team had set up lunch on the roof of a centuries-old monastery's dormitory.

One afternoon, while sipping milky tea at a teahouse in Lubra, another dust-covered hamlet overlooked by an ancient Tibetan pillar, my eyes fell on a newspaper clipping on the wall. "Mustang Forced to Adapt to Climate Crisis", its heading read alongside two aerial photos that showed how the rising riverbed had slowly started eating away at the village's perimeter, and how increasingly heavy landslides may force this community to abandon the homes their ancestors have inhabited for centuries. Krishna told me that for the first time, no snow had fallen that winter, and how extraordinarily powerful monsoon rains had made opening the lodge a logistical challenge.

It was a bitter reminder that even in a region so seemingly Shangri-La, climate change spells trouble. "Mustang is home to a very fragile society," Bensley told me later. "The young leave the valley for Kathmandu and beyond, and, as such, their culture is slowly dying." A brand with philanthropy embedded in its DNA, Shinta Mani works closely with the Pasang Lhamu Foundation,

named after Namgyal Sherpa's mother, who was the first Nepali woman to reach Mount Everest's summit, but lost her life during the descent. Part of the lodge's revenue will flow to the foundation's community-outreach projects that will work on the preservation and promotion of the region's cultural and environmental interests. "We'd love to be able to generate high-value, low-impact tourism and lure back the talented locals who have left, reviving the customs of this ancient society," Bensley added. "While most of Nepal could use the helping hand of Shinta Mani, I was especially thrilled to be able to pitch our flag in Mustang." 🏳️

The writer travelled as a guest of Shinta Mani Mustang – A Bensley Collection. Rates at the all-inclusive lodge start at \$US1,800 per couple per night for a minimum five-night stay.

