



Shinta Mani Mustang

NEPAL

Nestled between snowcapped peaks, a new mountain lodge designed by Bill Bensley is a treasure trove of local crafts.

Words: Lisa Kjellsson • Photography: © Elise Hassey

The arrival into Jomsom couldn't be more dramatic. During the 20-minute flight from Pokhara, the small propeller plane soars through the Kali Gandaki gorge – one of the deepest in the world – before landing at a tiny airport at the foot of the Himalayas.

Not far from Nepal's border with Tibet, Jomsom is a gateway to Upper Mustang – the so-called Forbidden Kingdom that was closed to outsiders until 1992. Today, hikers and pilgrims journey there to visit the walled city of Lo Manthang and the ancient temple of Muktinath, sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists.

Lower Mustang is just as beguiling, with its turquoise lakes, monasteries and villages, where time seems to have stood still for centuries. Jomsom, which sits along the Annapurna Circuit trekking trail, is an ideal base from which to explore the region. Despite being a one-street town, there's no shortage of hotels, but until recently, they were of the basic guesthouse variety, and this is a place that deserves a hotel as spectacular as its surroundings.

The ideal site and property were hiding in plain view, it turns out. A few minutes' drive from the airport up a rocky mountain road, at an elevation of 2,800m, is a two-storey structure built in local grey Baglung stone and timber in keeping with Mustang's traditional Thakali architectural style. Camouflaged against the Himalayan mountainside, the building would almost go unnoticed were it not for the golden yak statue standing guard on the forecourt beneath the strings of colourful Tibetan prayer flags fluttering in the wind. It's a welcoming first impression, yet only a hint of the treasures that await inside.

Shinta Mani Mustang, A Bensley Collection is Shinta Mani's first hotel outside Cambodia. The property is owned and operated by Kathmandu-based Sherpa Hospitality Group, which has lodges across the Everest and Annapurna routes and strong ties to the mountains – CEO Namgyal Sherpa's mother, Pasang Lhamu, was the first Nepalese woman to climb Everest. The intention with the Jomsom lodge is to bring the



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beauty of Mustang to the global stage in a way that does justice to one of the most remote and culturally well-preserved places on Earth.

Designed by Nepalese architect Prabal Thapa and built in 2017, the lodge is protected from the valley winds by berms and bioswales incorporated into the landscape. The building's U-shaped floorplate creates an elongated courtyard at its centre, planted with native flora and serving as a walkway to the lobby. Flanked by Nilgiri Restaurant and Aara Bar – the latter named after a local liquor – the lobby opens to an outdoor terrace to reveal panoramic views of the snowcapped peaks. Two wings running alongside the courtyard house the 29 suites – each with floor-to-ceiling windows – and a 2,400ft² events space, gym and spa, where a team of massage therapists are on hand to help guests recover from strenuous treks in the mountains. The USP is a consultation with a local Tibetan medicine doctor, Tsewang Gyurme Gurung, whose knowledge of the ancient healing tradition goes back several generations.

Also raising the bar is the thoughtful interior design concept by Bill Bensley and developer Jason M Friedman, completed in collaboration with Sherpa. Throughout the property, the aesthetic draws on local craftsmanship and symbolism, with handmade Tibetan rugs featuring alongside pieces of slate engraved with Sanskrit poems and a generous sprinkling of yak fur. Artwork includes Bensley's own pieces, as well as drawings by the late Australian artist and architect Robert Powell, who captured Mustang's traditional buildings in great detail.

The earthy tones of the region's mountain landscape are echoed in the base palette, complemented by flashes of colour seen on rattan chairs painted lime green, and orange bed throws with whimsical goat appliques.

Upcycling – another Bensley trademark – played a key role in the project. The designer scoured local antiques stores and junkyards for discarded items that, with a little imagination and some TLC, could be turned into decorative objects. Bensley took a similar approach to





sourcing materials and finishings too, for reasons of both sustainability and availability.

Thapa, whose architectural work has a strong emphasis on eco-conscious design strategies and sense of place, appreciates the same ethos in Bensley’s interiors. “Once again, Bill has demonstrated his brilliance by seamlessly integrating traditional features into a contemporary context,” he explains. “His skilful touch has not only transformed the space but also captured the essence of Mustang with its mystical atmosphere.”

How Bensley was able to pull it off is no mystery, however. Over the past four decades, he has made more than 100 trips to Nepal, purchasing art and antiques for his own famously eclectic home in Bangkok, so he knew just where to find the ornate chests that now adorn the lodge’s lobby. “I would rather salvage and repurpose junk than specify the most expensive of Italian furniture,” Bensley reveals. “I find it a great deal more satisfying.”

As a result, Shinta Mani Mustang is distinctly

unique, much like all of Bensley’s projects. Though unlike his designs for Marriott, IHG, Capella and Rosewood, Shinta Mani Hotels is the designer’s own venture, and one that is particularly close to his heart. Aside from providing a memorable stay, the group exists to support the work of the Shinta Mani Foundation, which benefits local communities and ecosystems. As such, Bensley is currently collaborating with RH and Baker on two lines of furniture, and a collection of Jim Thompson fabrics – made from recycled materials, of course – for which all profits will go towards the various conservation and education projects of the foundation.

As for the Himalayan mountain lodge, it may well see future additions that will further add to the guest experience. “A swimming pool would be wonderful, but my goal, if we can find the money, is to build a series of exploration camps further up the Mustang Valley,” concludes Bensley. “That is really what draws visitors to this remote land.”



EXPRESS CHECK-OUT

Owner: Sherpa Hospitality Group
 Operator: Shinta Mani Hotels
 Developer: Jason M Friedman
 Architecture and Lighting Design:
 Prabal Thapa Architects
 Interior Design, Landscaping and
 Art Consultant: Bensley
 Branding: HMD Asia
www.shintamanimustang.com



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