

A woman in a black long-sleeved shirt and blue shorts is running on a grassy trail. The background features a massive, reddish-brown rock cliff on the left and a valley with distant mountains under a clear blue sky on the right.

British ultra running legend Lizzy Hawker finds herself moved by the wild beauty of the **Mustang Trail Race** in the remote region of Nepal

# A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

**WORDS**

**LIZZY HAWKER**

**PHOTOGRAPHY**

**RICHARD BULL**

With typical modesty, Lizzy Hawker (pictured) describes herself as 'an endurance athlete who loves the mountains'. One of the greatest ultra runners, she's a double world record holder and five-time winner of the iconic Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc, but remains driven not by success, but by her love of the sport and the beauty of the places it can take you. [lizzyhawker.com](http://lizzyhawker.com)

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ran, heads down, into the wild winds of the Kali Gandaki Gorge, swirling dust obscuring the stony river bed beneath our feet. A distant figure drew closer and finally we paused to exchange some words. Dressed in loose orange and white cotton, he was following a timeless tradition of travelling to sacred sites on foot. His destination: the holy site of Muktinath, where earlier in the day our own pilgrimage had come to an end as we

finished the final stage of the inaugural Mustang Trail Race.

I was running with race director Richard Bull back to the town of Jomsom, where we would join the rest of the race competitors for a final celebration dinner before our return to Kathmandu. It was a beautiful postscript to what had been an awesome experience, running through the most incredible of landscapes. Tired legs had sent me sprawling on the fast, steep gem of a trail between the Buddhist temple at Muktinath and the tiny, hidden village of Lubra. But, as with the rest of the race, the rewards had been well worth the aching muscles and bloody knees.

The remote Mustang region of Nepal is both harsh and wildly beautiful, a timeless, ancient, other-worldly landscape. Our race had taken 10 days, with eight stages of between 15K and 32K, and up to 2,000m of climb each day. That might not sound like so much in this era of popular ultra races, but racing and living at altitudes of 3,000-4,200m is as tough as it is rewarding.

With multi-day stage racing you experience life to every extreme and all the variations that lie between. There are moments when you feel like you can run for ever, and others when you feel like you can't take another step. You shift between feeling like you are barely moving forwards, and feeling as though wild horses couldn't hold you back. You feel the honest sweat of working hard on the climbs, and the joyful abandon of swift descents. Whether you are racing your heart out or taking your time, you find you get stronger day after day as your body gets used to the effort you ask of it. Your mind becomes quiet. You push yourself and find that your limits aren't where you thought they were. This is the wonderful reality of multi-day stage racing.

We were a small group, which made for a close-knit and caring environment. The reasons that had drawn us to the race were as varied as our abilities, but we were united in our shared journey and a hunger to dig under those layers of normality beneath which we all too often hide. It seemed it was less about times or the race itself, and more about exploring our own physical limits and mental strengths; about experiencing the landscape, the culture and simply



**STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN**  
The climb to Konchok Ling monastery is precipitous

THERE ARE MOMENTS

WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE WILD HORSES COULDN'T STOP YOU



**EARLY STAGE**  
Racers set off at the stage start at Luri Gompa



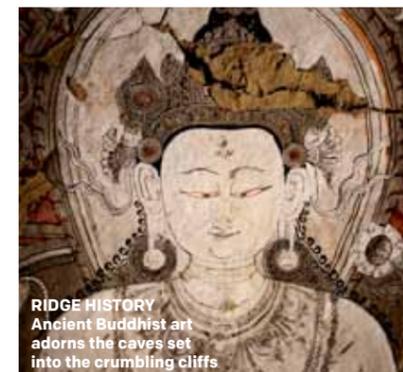
**FAMILY VALUES** The racers formed a small, close-knit group united in shared determination



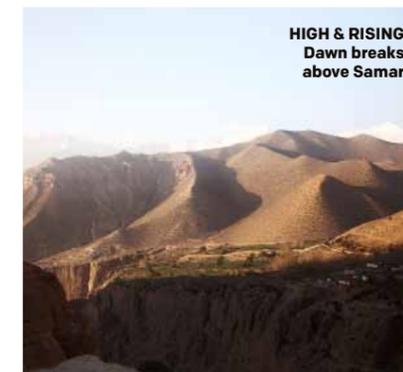
**PILGRIMS' PROGRESS** Heading for the pilgrimage site and race finish at Muktinath



**RESTED SOLES** Journalist Rebecca Beyerly at the foot of Konchok monastery



**RIDGE HISTORY** Ancient Buddhist art adorns the caves set into the crumbling cliffs



**HIGH & RISING** Dawn breaks above Samar



**DIVINE SIGHT**  
The region has a strong cultural and religious history



**CROSSING PATHS**  
A local boy races his bike to a nearby village



**MOUNTAIN PASS**  
Running through villages en route to Yara

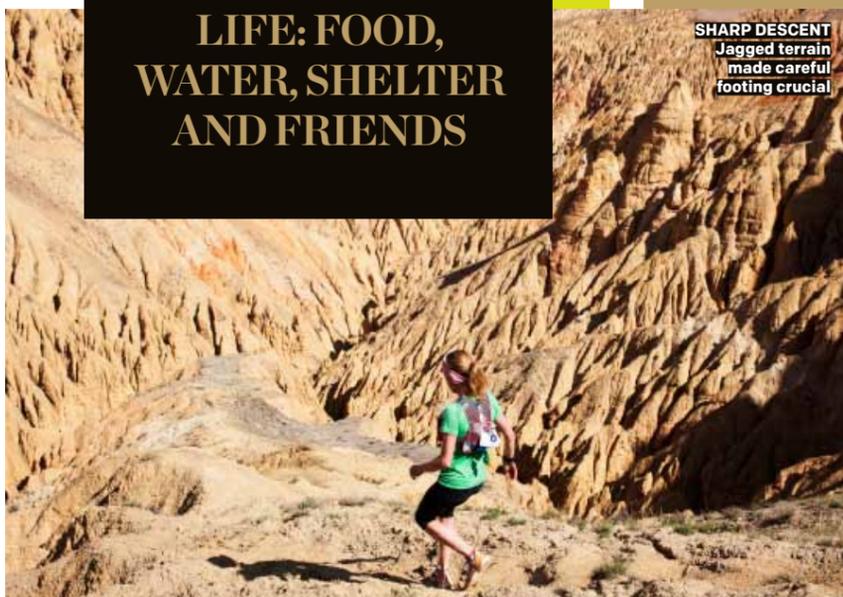


**CRAGS TO RICHES**  
Racing off the beaten track makes you 'take pleasure in the small things', says Lizzy



**ROUTES, ROCKS, REGGAE** Byerly finishes the multi-stage mountain race outside Muktinath's Bob Marley guesthouse

**THE RACE REMINDS YOU OF WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN LIFE: FOOD, WATER, SHELTER AND FRIENDS**



**SHARP DESCENT**  
Jagged terrain made careful footing crucial



**MUSTANG ALLEY**  
For some, this race is a rite of passage

enjoying the interactions with all the people we met.

Aside from the drama of its scenery, Mustang also has a remarkably rich cultural and religious heritage. An enclave of pure Tibetan Buddhist culture, the region has only been open to tourism since 1992, so it retains an almost mystical air. Race stages were broken by checkpoints at monasteries and cave temples, where we could marvel at the exquisite artwork as we savoured the restorative powers of a mug of hot lemon. One afternoon, post-run, we were privileged to make our way from the remote village of Yara to the rarely visited cave temple of Tashi Kabum. Our guide, Ambu, a young mother with a smile as wide as the sky above, cheerfully ran ahead of us 'runners' up the rocky ravine as though she were dancing.

And, of course, there was the landscape we were running through day after day. In Mustang, the ever-changing light casts its hue over a dramatic, almost overpowering panorama. Unlike any other part of Nepal, from the fiery red cliffs above Dhakmar village to the Grand Canyon-like badlands of Konchok Ling, it is an arid labyrinth of contorted cliffs, crags and canyons peppered with caves.

The luxuries that we have become accustomed to, such as running water and electricity, might have been in short supply, but there were plenty of other riches to enjoy. We learned to take pleasure in the small things. 'Doing without', relatively speaking, gives you a new perspective: so much of what we consider important is ultimately meaningless. An experience like this reminds you that what really matters in life is food, water, shelter and friendship. And not necessarily in that order.

Every day was both challenging and beautiful, and each gave us something new to enjoy. A much needed rest day in the ancient walled city Lo Manthang gave us a chance to just watch life go by. It is a fabulous, timeless place to sit and wonder at the world. Perhaps the highlight of the entire adventure, though, was the penultimate running stage. A long, 1,000m climb from the crossing of the Tanggye Khola river was rewarded with a fantastic trail along an exposed ridge top. We were still among the twisted rock of Mustang, but heading back towards a horizon dominated by the huge mountain peaks of Dhaulagiri (the 'white mountain', standing at 8,167m) and Nilgiri (the 'blue

**NIRVANA** The joy of surpassing mental and physical limits is at the heart of the Mustang Trail



mountain' at 7,061m). Then came a wonderfully dramatic descent to the oasis village of Chuksang. It felt like we were birds falling out of the sky, skimming over the rocks beneath our feet.

It was a wonderful adventure on the sky-high trails of Mustang and we were incredibly lucky to experience this wild, spiritually rich, ancient region – one of 'last frontiers' of the Himalayas. Despite the recent building of a road through to Tibet, Mustang will always remain a place of pilgrimage for curious outsiders like us. The winds will still be blowing, the dust still swirling, the cliffs still fiery red and the trails still awesome. And if you visit Yara, I'm sure Ambu will still be smiling. ☺

The next **Mustang Trail Race** will be run from November 23 to December 6, 2013. For more info visit [mustangtrailrace.com](http://mustangtrailrace.com).