

# INTERNATIONAL PADDLING

## RIVER OF DREAMS – KALI-SARDA RIVER, UTTARAKHAND, INDIA.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



**A**N EXPEDITION DOWN the Kali-Sarda can quite aptly be described as “a trip right out of *The Jungle Book*”: perfect weather, warm water, pristine wilderness, no roads, plentiful wildlife and big sandy beach campsites crisscrossed with fresh leopard tracks! I was expecting a fun-filled week dominated by aquatic adventures, but it was the beauty of the wilderness experience that took me completely by surprise.

The tone was set soon after we launched our rafts upstream of the uninspiring town of Jhulaghat, deep in the Kumaon region of north India. Almost immediately upon setting off, the river entered an attractive, steep-sided valley. Hundreds of tiny waterfalls cascaded down the lushly

vegetated cliffs in sheets of dripping water that nourished a dense covering of deep green moss, ferns and attractive phoenix palms. The vegetation clung precariously to the steep-sided valley walls. The juxtaposition of the river against the surrounding dark green hillsides, the protruding orange rocky outcrops and a deep blue sky, produced scenes of such extraordinary beauty.

As we stared up, flabbergasted by the rocky overhangs proudly displaying their calcified stalactites, troops of monkeys eyed us warily and skittish deer lurked in the shadows along the forest edge. Canadian raft guide Kim Hartlin eventually broke the silence. “This river has some decent whitewater in the days ahead, but the gob-

smacking scenery and pristine wilderness setting adds a whole different dimension to the trip. The Kali must surely be India’s most underrated river.”

In its upper reaches the Kali forms the international border between India and Nepal. Known as the Mahakali by the Nepalese, the Indians refer to it as the Kali-Sarda. Our Indian expedition was following a 110-kilometre stretch of the river where it cuts a swathe through thick tropical jungle, revealing a remote wilderness area interspersed with the terraced farms of occasional Kumaoni and Nepali villages. The combination of attractive scenery, wildlife, beaches and mild whitewater over the first few days makes this an ideal trip

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## TRIP PLANNER

**Flights and Visas:** All major airlines connect US cities to Delhi. Visas are required by US passport holders and must be obtained in advance. The standard visa is a six-month tourist visa and you should allow up to two weeks for processing. Consult the Travisa website ([www.travisa.com](http://www.travisa.com)) for how to apply.

**Getting there:** The Kali Sarda River is located in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand. The easiest option for getting there is to take the overnight Ranikhet Express from Old Delhi station to Kathgodam (AC III fares: Rs584 o/w). At Kathgodam, transfer to the service provider's vehicles for an eight-hour drive via Bhimtal (breakfast stop) and Almora to Pithoragarh, which lies 35 kilometers from the usual put-in point at Jhulaghata.

**What to do:** Whitewater rafting is the premier attraction of an expedition down the Kali. However, day hikes (the Niddle Village hike provides picturesque views across the Kumaon region towards the distant snow-capped Himalayan peaks), mahseer fishing, bird watching, wildlife spotting and relaxing on white sand beaches all add to the trip's attraction.

**Rafting seasons:** The Kali Sarda can be rafted from October to March with Oct/Nov and Feb/March offering the best weather. The rapids are biggest during the high water month of October. However, first time rafters might prefer a more tranquil low water run during February or March.

**Recommended operators:** Aquaterra Adventures ([www.aquaterra.in](http://www.aquaterra.in)) and Himalayan River Runners ([www.hrrindia.com](http://www.hrrindia.com)). Further information at: [www.treknraft.com/river\\_rafting\\_in-dia.htm](http://www.treknraft.com/river_rafting_in-dia.htm).



*These Kumaoni children from Niddle Village represent the total schoolgoing contingent in this sparsely populated region of India.*

for anyone with a sense of adventure and a love of nature.

Possibly more than any other Indian river, the Kali eases the novice into rafting. In the initial stages of the trip, easy half days allowed us to familiarize ourselves with the equipment and learn the important paddle commands of our guides. While we spent much of the first day drifting in awe of the picturesque surroundings, we also ran a series of smallish, easy-to-negotiate Class II rapids. These baby runs provided an inkling of the excitement that lay in store over the days ahead. Towards mid-afternoon we landed the rafts below a small rapid at the idyllic Matola Beach Campsite. It was barely the end of day one, but I was already stunned by what the Kali River had to offer.

Ahead of taking on the solid Class III+ whitewater on the Kali's bigger rapids, our guides recommended we beach our rafts on the Nepali bank and take a short walk to

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the tiny riverside Dev Tal temple. Far from the nearest road access and not important enough for a resident priest, we paid our respects at the rustic shrine and requested safe passage down the Kali-Sarda.

In retrospect, maybe we should have sought safe passage to the Niddle village. When we stopped to enjoy a rest day at the picture-perfect Kheth Beach, the more energetic members of our group decided to tackle a steep hike up to the hamlet. It was a long, sweaty climb, two-and-a half tiring hours of relentless uphill. But the fruits were sweet: We finally crested the valley rim to be greeted by breathtaking views north towards the snowy Himalayan peaks, punctuated in the foreground by terraced fields and scattered villages, while the Kali snaked far below to the east.

The spectacular views persisted into the second half of our Kali descent. But as the frequency and intensity of the rapids escalated during the course of days four

to six, appreciation of our surroundings was temporarily put on hold. The river had become steadily more demanding and engaging and by the time we tackled the solid Class III+ whitewater of the Kali's three biggest rapids—Dimberghat, Chookha and Arjun—everyone was pumped up and ready for action.

Although most of the members of our Kali expedition were riding in rafts, we did have one duckie with us on the trip. Thrill-seeking addict that I am, I opted to trade my place in the relative comfort and safety of a big self-bailing raft for the front seat of a small unstable duckie as we prepared to run the mighty Chookha rapid. Under the direction of our guide, Little Sanjay Rana, I was full of confidence and ready to take on the biggest of the Kali's infamous rapids.

"This is a very, very good rapid," began Sanjay. I was feeling excited and full of

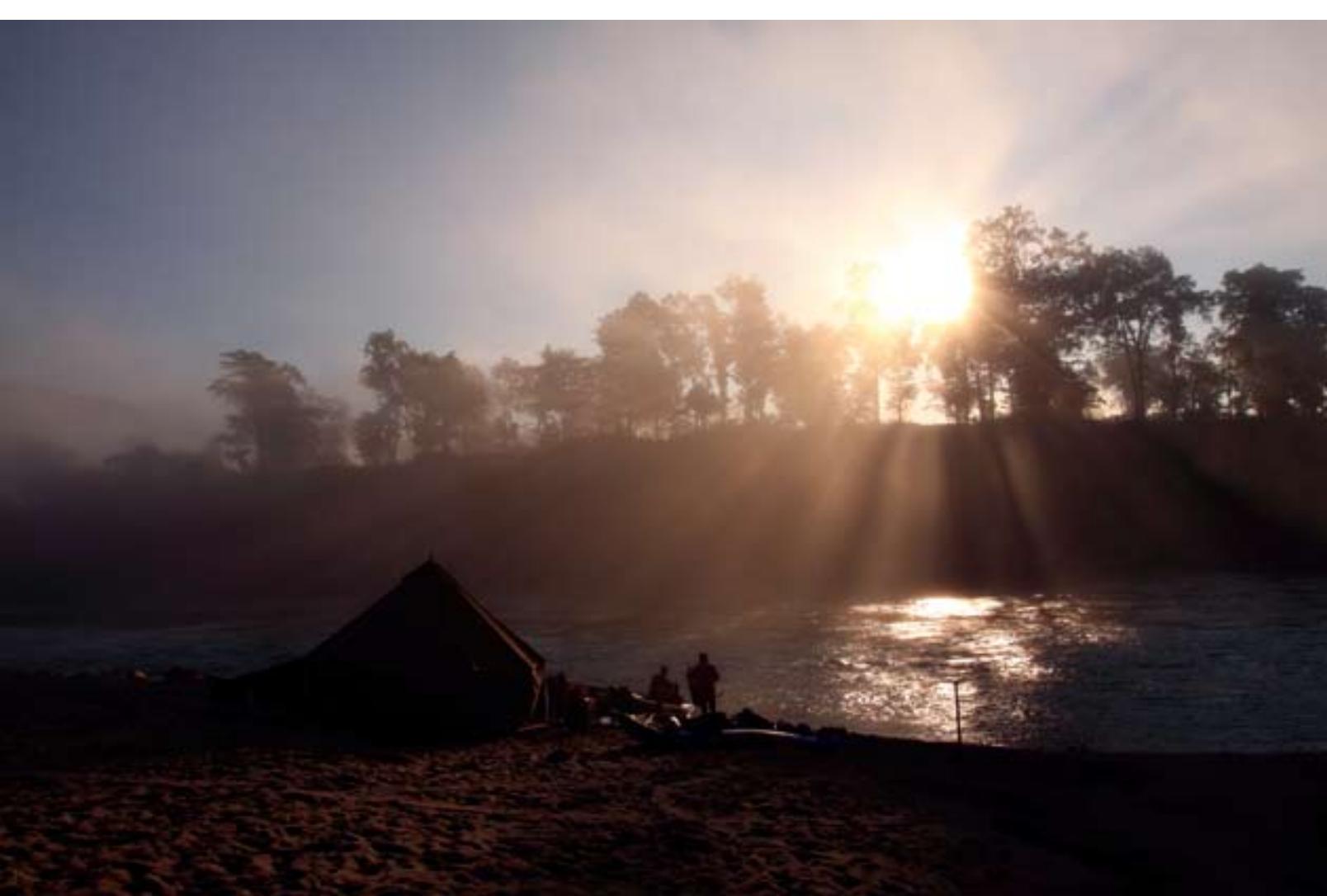
confidence until he added, "Are you ready for swimming?"

I wasn't sure if I had heard him correctly, but as the noise of angry whitewater grew louder, I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into. "Are we going into that?" I asked in disbelief. "Are you serious!" I was feeling decidedly nervous and the adrenalin was pumping as we entered the ferocious mayhem of the rapid and steered around some nasty looking holes.

Sanjay was the consummate professional: focused and determined. He barked commands loudly in quick succession, "Hard forward; stop; brace; balance." I did my best to obey. However, when I saw the size of the curling wave looming ahead, my paddle froze mid-stroke. I was in shock. "Come on paddle; hard forward," yelled Sanjay as a massive wall of water broadsided our little boat.

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*A rising sun warms the Pari Beach campsite, dissipating an eerie early morning fog.*



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The power of Chookha effortlessly flipped our tiny craft and we ended up swimming through the remainder of the whitewater. I emerged spluttering at the end of the rapid just in time to see a huge smile spread across Sanjay's face. He burst out laughing and threw me a high five as we pulled ourselves back into the duckie. "Very, very good swimming in the angry Chookha!" He announced with a big grin spread across his face. It wasn't hard to see that even our guides were having fun on the Kali.

An expedition down the Kali Sarda is a week long, action-packed adventure with the bonus of warm water and exciting (rather than terrifying) Class III whitewater to keep you suitably entertained along your journey. The trip is perfectly suited to first-

time rafters and experienced whitewater addicts alike. However, be warned, the mighty Chookha will not hesitate to show you what happens to those who let the scenery take precedence over the river.

The Kali is without doubt the most underrated river trip on offer in the Himalayas; India's best kept secret delivered on every level: weather, wilderness, wildlife, and whitewater!

*Stephen Cunliffe is a Delhi-based adventure sports photojournalist and co-author of the soon-to-be-released book India Whitewater. Scheduled to hit the shelves by early 2011, this inspirational book showcases some of the finest multi-day whitewater expeditions available on the planet. With extensive coverage of India's Himalayan rivers, it is a must-read for whitewater enthusiasts the world over. For more information on the author, or to keep track of the book's progress, please consult [www.stephecunliffe.com](http://www.stephecunliffe.com).*

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*Aquaterra safety kayaker Harendra "Gappu" Rawat remains focused and alert in the midst of the white-water action of Chookha Rapid on the Kali River.*

