

# WHITEWATER KAYAKING IN THE ARUNACHAL PRADESH

## The Mighty Brahmaputra River

Article by Ian Beecroft, images by Steve Cunliffe

Ever wondered where old whitewater river dogs get their bar stories from? For one group of 'Ol Timers' it was time to head off for another epic adventure in search of new material, and if you're looking for a tale to tell you might as well make it a BIG one. The Mighty Brahmaputra River in Northern India provided the setting and Ian Beecroft picks up the story...

It all started in a seedy backstreet pub off Rusholme's 'curry mile' where a selection of Manchester's most degenerate old-timer paddlers was gathered to plot their next big trip. It was decided that nothing less than the mighty Brahmaputra, in the extreme northeast of India, would do. After a couple of swift pints everyone was enthusiastic and committed to the challenge, but, in the sober light of day, we did wonder more than once if we had bitten off more than we could chew!

A year later, lots more plotting, two plane rides, a river ferry, a three-day rickety jeep ride, and a suspension footbridge from hell later, found us at the put-in near Tuting (just south of the Tibetan border and the 'Great Bend'). It felt almost surreal to be gazing over the legendary Brahmaputra River after so many months of waiting for what amounted to a 160 km descent of a lifetime. We joined forces with an Aquaterra Adventures rafting trip (only the 9th commercial descent of this stretch) as we were too few for a private trip and backup seemed a good idea in a wild and disputed land to which China still holds a territorial claim.

### The Name of the Game is... BIG

A few paddle strokes were enough to realise that this was no normal river, the size, the speed, the power – even on the flat – was enough to make all of us ask ourselves what the hell we were doing here. The first big rapid Ningguing (IV+) was about three times bigger than it had looked from our camp at sunset the previous evening. We all made it through the carnage, but the view down that first huge ramp will be engraved in my memory for all eternity.

The descent was spread over seven days with big rapids on all but one of the days. Massive ramps, waves up to six-metres and extremely challenging swirls and killer eddies became our daily fare. This was certainly not a good river for swimmers or the faint-hearted. Ningguing, Pulsating Palsi, Rikkor, Zebra Rock, Tooth Fairy (portage), Harry, Broken Oar, Mowing Madness, Karko Killer, and finally (the sting in the tail) Ponging – great names for some classic rapids.



**Ancient Passageway**

Days 1-4, in addition to the whitewater, the river is a geologist's paradise and, as I recalled from my O Level geography, the Brahmaputra predates the Himalaya. Over the millennia it tore-out the amazing Ningguing and Marhong gorges that we paddled through during the initial stages of the expedition. The camp 3 bivi, perched above the deafening roar of the Tooth Fairy, was an especially memorable and awe-inspiring spot to camp for a night!

**A Storm Rising**

Day 5 of the trip and it had rained continuously through the night. Everyone was uncharacteristically quiet as we broke camp and packed away soaking tents and equipment. Swirling mist and light rain added an ominous note to proceedings, as we mulled over the same question: how scary would today's massive rapids be? We bade farewell to our sodden campsite at Ramsing. The relentless drizzle refused to abate and downstream the river disappeared into a wall of thick grey clouds, a premonition that serious

action lurked just around the corner.

As we approached the big grade IV water of the notorious 'Mowing Madness', in the thick of this torrential downpour, we stopped to scout the best route through the furious white-water. The heavy rain and mist obscured the lower reaches of the rapid making it difficult to be sure of the right line. One thing was for sure; nobody wanted to swim in these horrendous conditions!

Back in our kayaks, raindrops exploded on impact with the river, pelted onto our boats and drummed noisily against our helmets. The roar grew steadily louder as gigantic waves emerged from the mist ahead. A loud clap of thunder temporarily drowned out the growls of the enraged river as lightning streaked across the angry sky. We were in the midst of some seriously big whitewater; reminiscent of being caught at sea in the teeth of a

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vicious storm. Waves crashed-in from all sides until the rapid finally spat us out.

Early afternoon we pulled the boats onto a beautiful sandy beach at Geku Twins, pitched the tents and spread out our wet gear to dry. The AT cooks had a delicious hot lunch on the go and soon the laughter and banter returned. As we relaxed on the sand around a blazing fire, a bottle of rum came out and we drank a toast to the successful completion of another exciting day of wet and wild adventure.



**The Great Flood**

We had now emerged from the steep-sided Ningguing and Marhong gorges into a wide valley where the olive green Siang was offset against dark green rainforest, snowy Himalayan peaks and a pale blue sky – a spectacular wilderness setting for a riverside campsite. Sheer rock walls that climbed from the water's edge towards an impenetrable-looking rainforest. Huge tree trunks were wedged on top of rocks at least thirty-metres above the water level. We were awed by the thought of the huge volumes of water and forces of nature that

were capable of dumping massive trees up there; inevitably Rana's (Aquaterra's lead guide) tale of the Great Flood came drifting back:

'In June 2000, a mud dam that had been created by a massive landslide in Tibet gave way. This unleashed a gigantic wall of water up to 100m high that swept down the valley scouring out the river, uprooting the forest and destroying everything in its path. All the bridges were swept away and the river backed up 12-kilometres into its side valleys and tributaries! By all accounts it was Mother Nature at her most ferocious.'

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**NAVIGATOR BOX: TRIP PLANNER**

**Getting there:** From Delhi a spectacular flight ([www.jetlite.com](http://www.jetlite.com)) takes you past snowy Himalayan peaks via Guwahati and on to Dibrugarh. Then it's a 3-day boat and road transfer to the put-in point at Tuting near the Tibetan border.

**The trip:** Huge white-water, remote wilderness, spectacular scenery and beach campsites are the premier attractions on a descent of the Siang. However, cultural interactions with Adi Tribals add another fascinating dimension to this expedition through remote Arunachal.

**Season:** The best months to tackle the mighty Siang are November and December.

**Self-support:** Would be feasible but permits and logistics are not simple, so collaboration with an Indian operator is recommended.

**Recommended operators:** Aquaterra Adventures ([www.aquaterra.in](http://www.aquaterra.in)) is currently the only operator offering guaranteed annual departures on the challenging Siang. Further information at: [www.treknraft.com/river-rafting-india/rafting-india-brahmaputra.htm](http://www.treknraft.com/river-rafting-india/rafting-india-brahmaputra.htm).



**PHOTOGRAPHY**

Steve Cunliffe

Is a Delhi-based adventure sports and wildlife photo journalist. Originally from South Africa, he currently resides in India where he is working on his first book \* \*India Whitewater. \* \*Please consult [www.stevacunliffe.com](http://www.stevacunliffe.com) for more information on the book or to view a portfolio of Steve's published work.





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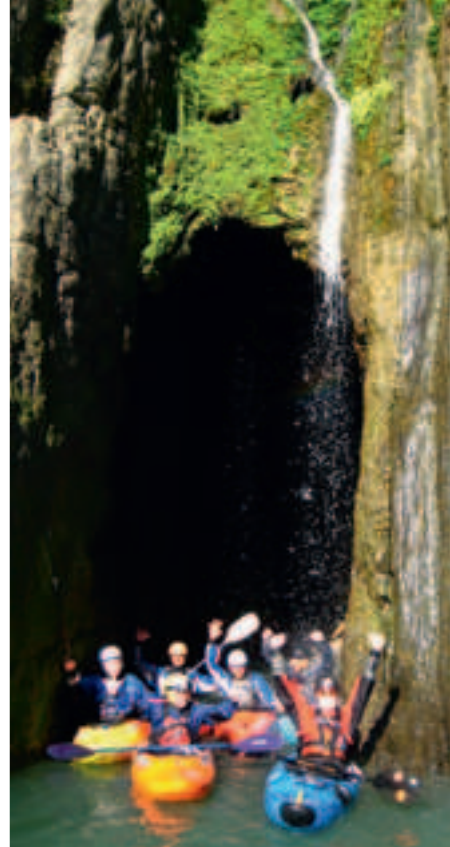
### Lazy Days With a Sting in the Tail

Days 6 and 7 the river had become lazier and there were long flat sections to sit back and enjoy the scenery. East Siang then threw a new culinary experience at us - with live beetles on the lunchtime river menu! The river, however, was not quite done with us. A final test lay in store at Ponging: the last enormous rapid of the trip and site of our biggest wobble.

It was a great privilege to have been a part of an extraordinary expedition into the seldom-visited region of Arunachal Pradesh. Rana reckoned that fewer than 50 kayaks have ever run this stretch. Somewhat

surprisingly, there was overwhelming consensus that our day of torrential rain was actually one of the highlights of the trip - the tumultuous weather had added to the challenge of the rapids and enhanced our experience.

This huge and powerful water left our team of seven kayaks and three rafts gob-smacked. All-in-all a mighty river – certainly one to do before its too late. 📷



**Kayak team:** Ian Beecroft (CH/GB), Tomi Bohnenblust (CH), Graham Helsby (GB), Bill Lockton (GB), Mike Savory (NZ) – plus the rafting crew and two safety kayakers from Aquaterra.



## AUTHOR

### Ian Beecroft

Has kayaked for 38 years (since the age of 13) - initially with Manchester Canoe Club in slalom - then on rivers all over Europe. He particularly enjoys exploring the rivers of the Himalayas. Lives in Martigny, Switzerland.



## Info



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