

## Rafting

# The adventure strip

**A classic weeklong white-water expedition on the Karnali River in Nepal's remote and sparsely populated 'wild west'.**

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The seasonal snowmelt draining off Mount Kailash in neighbouring Tibet gives rise to the Karnali – Nepal's longest and largest river. During its tumultuous descent through the Churia Hills, the river cuts a jagged swathe through stunning Himalayan landscapes. Steadily gaining volume and intensity as it snakes its way southwards, the Karnali boasts some powerful rapids. However, this big volume, pool-drop river is relatively safe and straightforward to negotiate with large, yet fairly easy rapids, making it ideal for first-timers and white-water addicts alike. It's an entertaining river journey with plenty of solid white-water action in the middle stages followed by a tranquil float into Royal Bardia National Park on the Gangetic plains of the steamy Terai lowlands.

▲ An enthusiastic and determined team of rafters paddle into Sweetness and Light rapid, the first major white-water obstacle on a Karnali expedition.



### Thriller

The hot, dusty overland journey to reach the river requires stamina, but the rewards are sweet: a chance to sample one of the finest multi-day river adventures available in all of Asia. After our long bus trip, the rocky beach put-in below Sayuli Bazaar was greeted with weary smiles and undisguised relief. But, after being lulled to sleep by the sound of the rushing river and having enjoyed a good night's rest, we awoke rejuvenated and raring to go. A relatively easy first day on the water eased everyone into the adventure with some splashy rapids that merely hinted at the excitement and challenges that lay ahead. We didn't have to wait long. The next morning the river entered a picturesque jungle corridor, carving a series of imposing gorges through the breathtaking scenery and, in the process, producing long uninterrupted stretches of broken water. Little did we realise at this early stage, but this punchy white-water would dominate the next couple of exhilarating days!

Our second day on the river was a big one. As we journeyed downstream towards Jungle Ghat, a labyrinth of white-water challenges and obstacles confronted our boats. Undoubtedly, the most sustained section of river action began with God's House Rapid and continued through a series of canyons with 16 rapids crammed into an unrelenting 7 km expanse of high octane, near-continuous Class III and IV white-water: a highly entertaining and demanding stretch of raging river. During this thrilling ride, we negotiated some quality rapids, such as

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Sweetness and Light, Flip and Strip, God's House, Juicer and the notorious Jailhouse Rock.

### Rapidly changing

Pulling into a swirling, surging eddy just above Jailhouse Rapid, we were greeted by a thunderous roar and pulsating plumes of spray ahead. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that some serious action lurked downstream. The usual laughter and banter between crew members vanished. A nervous silence descended on the team as people retreated into their thoughts and mentally prepared for the white-water trials that lay ahead. After a thorough scout to examine the rapid, our experienced Equator Expeditions guide, Arun Gurung, returned to the boat and, with his usual economy of words, announced, "Everyone tighten your lifejackets, listen carefully to my instructions and

▼ Below: Boats are beached around midday and an alfresco lunch is served alongside the river, enabling weary crew members to refuel before tackling the afternoon session.

Bottom: Big sandy beaches litter the banks of the Karnali, ensuring an idyllic riverside campsite around nearly every bend.



paddle hard!" Our team of enthusiastic river runners dug the paddles in deep and propelled the raft towards the rumbling beast.

Arun barked paddle commands and we responded. Under the expert guidance of our imperturbable captain, the raft threaded a near-perfect line through the white-water mayhem of the angry rapid. Adrenalin surged through the veins as we dodged rocks, skirted some nasty-looking holes and dominated a thrilling roller-coaster ride over a massive wave train. The crew's nervous tension evaporated and was replaced with squeals of enthusiastic delight as big waves crashed over the bucking raft. It was an electrifying joyride through heart-thumping white-water under bright blue skies and blazing sunshine.

After the team bonding experience of overcoming Jailhouse, Arun cracked a rare smile and briefly



▲ Above: Watched by his two young sons, an innovative local craftsman uses a waterwheel-powered lathe to fashion wooden pots and other furnishings on the riverbank.

Below: A safety kayaker floats peacefully downstream, enjoying the late afternoon glow as another entertaining day on the river draws to a close.

opened up to share some thoughts and opinions about the Karnali. Having successfully completed 46 Karnali expeditions since 1996, his experience is beyond contestation. “The Karnali is my favourite river in Nepal; it’s still wild with some really excellent rapids. However, I prefer to run it during November when the water is higher, the weather’s really nice and the scenery’s also much greener after the monsoon.”

The high post-monsoon water levels during late September and October cause the river to swell into a raging torrent, transforming it into a seriously challenging undertaking. Late in the season – during April and May – the lower water levels make for an exhilarating run down a more constricted boulder-strewn river. The bottom line is that the Karnali can entertain rafters and kayakers during any season.

### Row, row, row

After three days of regular rapids and non-stop white-water action, our flotilla of rafts and kayaks exited the final gorge of the western bend. The hills retreated, the river broadened dramatically and the rapids abated as the gradient mellowed. We paddled past pristine white-sand beaches that became bigger and more beautiful as we approached the lowlands. These idyllic sweeping stretches of sand made for awesome riverside campsites, while the warm weather and dazzling star-studded skies ensured that most people chose to forgo the tents and sleep around the campfire. We spotted shooting stars and relived the frenetic action of the day’s white-water exploits before drifting off and enjoying a fitful night’s rest in the fresh air of the great outdoors.

After the trials and tribulations of the preceding action-packed days, our crew welcomed the two-day tranquil float past the confluence with the Seti and Bheri rivers en route to the take-out at Chisopani on the outskirts of Bardia National Park. Lazy days were spent floating slowly downstream, spotting exotic birds and playful monkeys, while cooling off with long swims alongside





▲ Top: Crew members pull hard on their paddles and power through the notorious Jailhouse rapid.

Below: A rabble of eager local kids can't resist paddling their dugout canoe over to take a closer look at a strange-looking kayak.

the raft. Endangered Gangetic dolphins still swim in these waters and we kept a beady eye out to try and catch a glimpse of these rare creatures. For the more energetic rafters, there was also an opportunity to test drive a kayak under the watchful eye of our safety boaters.

Remote western Nepal sees only a handful of adventurous tourists each year and there is no better way to sample the 'best of the west' than on a self-contained Karnali River adventure. The quintessential ten-day Karnali itinerary includes a couple of days of overland travel to the put-in point, followed by a full week on the water covering a 180 km river section known as the 'western bend', and an overnight bus journey back to Kathmandu or Pokhara. However, there is also a highly recommended and well worthwhile add-on option whereby you can easily tack on a couple of extra nights to explore wildlife-rich Bardia National Park, signing off your 'wild west' adventure in style by spotting tigers and rhinos from elephant-back: the perfect grand finale to an exciting river adventure.



## Fact file

### Getting there

Jet Airways has daily flights to Kathmandu from Delhi and Mumbai.

Aquaterra Adventures ([www.aquaterra.in](http://www.aquaterra.in)) offers an annual Karnali departure during February–March and arranges all overland transportation for the road and rail journey from Delhi via Lucknow to the put-in point at Sayuli Bazaar.

### Best time to visit

The best months to tackle the Karnali are March–May and October–November. Although swimming ability is not mandatory, it certainly is desirable for anyone wanting to run the bigger rapids. Warm water negates the need for wetsuits; however, the use of lifejackets and helmets is compulsory. In addition to a sleeping bag, personal items and toiletries, bring a towel, wind/water-proof jacket and flashlight, as well as a hat, sunglasses and plenty of sunscreen.

### Accommodation

Rustic hotel accommodation is provided in Kohalpur as part of your Karnali package. Thereafter, participants are accommodated in two-man tents, although sleeping under the stars comes highly recommended. Meals are served as buffets. While on expedition, toilets come in the form of rustic, environmentally friendly, dry pit latrines and bathing is done under picturesque waterfall showers.

Choose between either Tiger Tops Karnali Lodge ([www.tigermountain.com/kjl/](http://www.tigermountain.com/kjl/)) or Rhino Lodge ([www.rhinolodgebardia.com](http://www.rhinolodgebardia.com)) if exploring Bardia National Park.

### For more information

Three Nepali companies run river trips on the Karnali. Log on to Equator Expeditions ([www.equatorexpeditionsnepal.com](http://www.equatorexpeditionsnepal.com)), Paddle Nepal ([www.paddlenepal.com](http://www.paddlenepal.com)) and Ultimate Descents Nepal ([www.udnepal.com](http://www.udnepal.com)) for details and departure dates.

Aquaterra Adventures ([www.aquaterra.in](http://www.aquaterra.in)) is currently the only Indian raft operator offering guaranteed annual departures on the Karnali River. Contact Fay Singh at [fay@aquaterra.in](mailto:fay@aquaterra.in) with enquiries.