



Stephen Cunliffe eyes a rapidly approaching whitewater, and lines up his 'ducky' to take on the big waves of the Dimberghat Rapid



PARI CAMP BREAKFAST: Hungry whitewater enthusiasts tuck into a riverside breakfast spread laid out by the resourceful Aquaterra chefs every morning

DIMBERGHAT RAPID: The angry white-water of mighty Chooka Rapid swallows Rana's raft for a second before spitting it out the other side. PICS/STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

WET AND WILD ON THE KALI-SARDA

STEPHEN CUNLIFFE
smidna@mid-day.com

AS I approached the roaring rapid, I looked downstream and saw Canadian safety kayaker Dave Prothero vigorously pumping his fist in the air: it was the signal that the rapid was safe and we could run the meatiest part of the wild water-rafting that lay ahead. As I lined up my small boat on a collision course with the guts of the rapid, I watched Captain Rana guide his raft into the white-water mayhem in front me. One moment, the raft was cruising powerfully through the big waves, and next second, it had vanished, swallowed by the gurgling, growling rapid. It suddenly dawned on me that this rapid was big. Really big. My heart was pounding as the current sucked my small craft forward, but turning back was not an option. I took a deep breath and paddled the 'ducky' forward like my life depended on it.

grew ominously louder, I recalled trip leader Dhruv Naresh Rana's earlier advice. "Only paddle the ducky if you are thirsty for adventure and aren't scared of taking a few swims!" Adrenalin-junkie that I am, I opted to trade my place in the relative comfort and safety of a big self-bailing raft for a solo-seat in the small unstable ducky: best described as an inflatable kayak prone to capsizing.

By now I was engulfed in frothing white-water, and was paddling hard. Waves crashed over the ducky and spray obscured my vision. I was charging into the furious rapid when suddenly a gigantic gaping hole opened up in the river just ahead. It appeared as if the river was being sucked down and swallowed by a massive standing wave. I knew I was supposed to keep paddling into the three-metre wave at the bottom of the chute, but involuntarily froze mid paddle stroke. There was absolutely no way a ducky could make it through this. My boat smashed into the wall of seething water

and ejected me over the bow. For an instant, I was airborne, sucking down one last deep breath before the wild river swallowed me. I tried to relax. Within seconds my life jacket rocketed me to the surface and I gasped for breath as I swam through the remainder of the white-water.

Through the waves I saw Dave paddling his safety kayak hard towards me. As soon as he saw my 'okay' signal, he broke into loud cheering. Once he had towed me to the safety of the riverbank, I broke into a big smile. I wanted an action-packed white-water adventure and I certainly felt I was getting my money's worth!

Leopards and Kali

Not everyone enjoys swimming through rapids, and sturdy rafts provide a welcome sanctuary to those who are looking for a more tranquil ride through the class III+ rapids on this big volume pool-drop river. For the majority of the week-long descent, the Kali-Sarda is a benign river peacefully snaking its way through a wilderness

paradise under blue skies and blazing sunshine, with only the occasional puffy white cloud to enhance the picture-perfect setting.

Hans Bohnenblust, a kayaker from Switzerland, enthused, "The Kali-Sarda offers a truly holistic river experience with beautiful scenery, great beach campsites, social campfires under star-studded skies and some entertaining white-water on a journey through a chunk of genuine Indian wilderness." As if to corroborate his musings, when we beached our boats later that afternoon, fresh leopard tracks criss-crossed the white-sands of our riverside campsite.

Wilderness experience

A self-contained river journey down the Kali-Sarda is arguably the ultimate way to see the lower reaches of the Kumaon Himalaya. The complete lack of road access makes for a real wilderness experience. From the put in point at Jhulaghat, the river flows past the terraced farms of Kumaoni and Nepali villages, gigantic white-sand

beaches, and dense tropical jungles with plentiful wildlife. It's a predominantly peaceful river journey through deep valleys and pristine wilderness. After the first few days of serene floating, you pass the confluence with the Saryu River and the famous mahseer fishing spot at Pancheshwar. Suddenly the big rapids — Dimberghat and mighty Chooka — loom large on the horizon: a final white-water challenge that's sure to get the adrenalin flowing before the expedition terminates at Boom on the outskirts of Tanakpur.

A trip down the Kali-Sarda is a week-long, action-packed adventure with the bonus of warm water and exciting (rather than terrifying) grade III white-water to keep you suitably entertained during your descent. The river offers an unparalleled outdoor wilderness experience perfectly suited to both first-time rafters and experienced white-water addicts. India's best-kept secret delivers on every level: weather, wilderness, wildlife and white-water.

GETTING THERE

The Kali Sarda River is located in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand. The easiest option to get there is to take the overnight Ranikhet Express from Old Delhi station to Kathgodam (AC II fares: Rs 516 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 kilometres from the usual put-in point at Jhulaghat.

From Delhi the overnight Ranikhet Express takes participants to Kathgodam, followed by an eight-hour drive to Pithoragarh where you stay overnight before putting into the Kali at Jhulaghat the following morning. Account for one travel day and the two overnight trains from/back to Delhi.

KALI TRIP PLANNER

WHERE TO STAY, EAT: Aquaterra provides comfortable overnight accommodation at the Hotel Zara Residency in Pithoragarh. Thereafter, guests are accommodated in two-man dome tents on the river. Tasty meals are served as buffets. Showers come in the form of natural springs and small waterfalls! Toilets are environment-friendly, dry pit latrines.

WHAT TO DO: White-water rafting is the premier attraction on an expedition down the Kali-Sarda. However, half-day hikes to idyllic waterfalls, mahseer fishing, bird watching, wildlife spotting and relaxing on white-sand beaches add to the trip's appeal.

RAFTING SEASONS: The Kali can be rafted from March to October, with Oct/Nov and Feb/March offering optimal weather conditions. Rapids are biggest during the high water month of October. However, first-time rafters might prefer the more tranquil low water run during February or March.

RAFTING TECHNICALITIES: Although knowledge of swimming is not mandatory, it's desirable for anyone wanting to run the bigger grade III+ rapids on offer. All rafting enthusiasts are supplied on arrival with splash jackets, personal flotation devices and helmets. The use of this state-of-the-art safety equipment is compulsory. In addition to personal items and toiletries, bring your rafting sandals, a sleeping bag, towel, and flashlight, as well as a hat, sunglasses and hi SPF sun block lotion.

UPCOMING DEPARTURES AND TRIP COSTS: Aquaterra (www.aquaterra.in) has fixed departure Kali trips scheduled for February 11 to 19, and October 15 to 23, 2011. The week-long expeditions cost Rs 30,398 (including tax). Contact Fay Singh (fay@aquaterra.in) to make a booking.

Further information at: www.trekraft.com/river-rafting_india.htm.

NIDDLE CAMP: Sitting around a campfire, sipping on rum and coke and reflecting on the days white-water adventures is a time-honoured river running tradition



Dhruv Naresh Rana guides his raft and crew safely through the big white-water of the infamous Diberghat Rapid

An expedition down the Kali Sarda river is one of the best ways to experience the majestic Himalayas. On offer are pristine white sand beaches, leopard tracks, and some heartstopping white water rafting action, of course. Are you game?

Type: **ADVENTURE**
Best from: **DELHI**
You need: **7 DAYS**