

WET AND WILD IN THE HIMALAYAS: INDIA'S BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER

STORY AND PHOTOS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



The stunning Alubadi Beach proved to be the perfect place to take a rest day midway through the week long Siang descent.

I AWOKE AT 6 am to a grey morning. It had rained continuously through the night and everything was drenched. As I struggled into a freezing cold wetsuit and pulled on a sopping wet spray jacket, I yearned for the sunny weather we had taken for granted at the start of our adventure. The wet weather inevitably dampened the spirits of our intrepid team of whitewater enthusiasts and everyone was uncharacteristically quiet as we broke camp and packed away soaking tents and equipment. Swirling mist and light rain added an inescapably ominous note to proceedings. Forewarned by our guides that today's big rapids and intense river action would undoubtedly pose the greatest challenge of our trip, everyone mulled over the same question: would today's massive whitewater prove entertaining or downright terrifying?

We were five days into an adrenalin-fueled descent of what is reputedly India's wildest river, the 160-kilometer Siang section of the mighty Brahmaputra River between Tuting and Pasighat in the remote northeast of India. The Siang, effectively a continuation of the infamous Tsangpo River from Tibet, offers rafting and kayaking enthusiasts a chance to embrace the challenges of one of the Himalaya's premier whitewater journeys.

We tightened our life jackets, strapped on our helmets and pushed the heavily laden rafts off the beach. The relentless drizzle refused to abate as we paddled out into the current and bade farewell to our sodden campsite at Ramsing. When I shifted my gaze downstream, I couldn't help but notice that the river disappeared into a thick wall of threatening gray clouds; I had

a premonition that serious action lurked just around the corner.

The rain intensified as we approached the big Class IV whitewater of a notorious rapid known as 'Mowing Madness'. Large raindrops thumped into the river and exploded on impact all around us. In the midst of this torrential downpour we stopped just above the rapid to scout the best route through the furious whitewater. After surveying the wild river for ten minutes, head guide Dhruv Naresh Rana returned to our anxious crew and, with a cheeky grin, said, "Are you ready to have some fun?"

We pulled hard on our paddles to get the raft onto the right line before we dropped into the whitewater mêlée. Raindrops pelted into the boat and drummed noisily against our helmets. Rana had to shout to be heard above the roar of the river and

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the deafening noise of the heavy rain. “All together now; hard forward,” he yelled. The roar grew steadily louder as gigantic waves emerged from the mist ahead. My heart thumped wildly and excitement mounted as we descended into the boiling mayhem of the rapid. Everyone was pumped up: high on adrenalin. Rana bellowed, “Come on team hard forward; a little harder; harder than that; come on, paddle!” A loud clap of thunder drowned out his next instruction as lightning streaked across the angry sky. However, when he screamed, “F – ing paddle!” the urgency in his voice demanded we paddle as if our lives depended upon it: there was no disputing the seriousness of our situation.

We were in the midst of some genuinely big whitewater. Waves crashed over the raft from all sides. It felt like an eternity that we were buried in the midst of the ferocious

rapid before the Siang spat us out the other side. As we emerged from the final wave train, everyone was cheering and throwing high fives.

The storm could no longer dampen our mood: one of the raft crews spontaneously broke out in song, while our team danced on top of the raft. We had signed on for a rare adventure on India’s wildest and remotest river and we were truly getting our money’s worth! Before we had a chance to relax too much, however, we were confronted by another monster rapid. Up ahead the gurgling growls of Karko Killer grew ominously louder. The singing and dancing stopped abruptly. Our adrenalin-fuelled merriment gave way to a steely determination to make sure our raft did not flip. Nobody wanted to swim in these conditions!

Rana barked instructions; we obeyed. After five days paddling together, we had finally become a cohesive team capable of responding to his commands in unison. Rana chose the perfect line, threading us through the meatiest part of the rapid. We slipped past a massive pour-over, dodged a huge hole and dominated a wild wave train. India’s fiercest river was throwing everything at us, but, under the guidance of our capable captain, we were more than up to the challenge.

As the day wore on, the clouds emptied themselves and a watery sun eventually broke through. Everyone cheered. In the early afternoon we pulled the boats onto a beautiful sandy beach, pitched the tents and spread out our wet gear to dry. The cooks had a delicious hot lunch on the go and soon the laughter and banter returned to our adventurous group of whitewater

Captain Rana coaxes the best from his crew of whitewater enthusiasts as they drop into the gaping jaws of infamous Ponging Rapid.



TRIVIA BOX: INDIA'S GREAT HOLY FATHER RIVER

Under the shadow of Mount Kailash, water from the glacial-fed Manasarowar Lake spills through the Horse's Mouth and begins its course towards the Great Holy Father River of Asia, the Brahmaputra. Along its journey, from Tibet through India and into Bangladesh, the river is known by no less than ten different names. Initially, as the river flows gently eastwards across the Tibetan plateau, it is known as the Yarlung Zangbo. Upon entering the folds of the eastern Himalayas it transforms into the infamous and inhospitable Tsangpo. Steep vertical drops, inaccessible gorges and large waterfalls make the Tsangpo arguably the world's most inaccessible river. Upon leaving Tibet and entering northern Arunachal, the river becomes the Chiang. Local tribes refer to the section of the river featured here as the Siang before it changes to Dihang near the city of Pasighat. Next, where the Lohit feeds into the great holy river, it becomes known as Lali. By this stage the rapids have abated and the river has swollen dramatically. The breadth of the river is measured in miles as it traverses Assam as the mighty Brahmaputra. It changes its name three more times to Luit, Jamuna and Padma before finally emptying into the Bay of Bengal.



Spectacular scenery dominates a descent of the Brahmaputra with jungle-clad hills giving way to snow-capped Himalayan peaks.

enthusiasts. 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 Himalayan adventure.

While the kayakers animatedly discussed their tumultuous descent through the powerful whitewater, the beauty of the wilderness surrounding our Geku Twins Campsite overcame me. We had

emerged from the steep-sided Ninguing and Marmong 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.

As I lay on the beach enjoying the warmth of the fire and late afternoon sun, I marveled at the sheer rock walls that climbed from

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A Buddhist monk journeyed from his monastery in Tuting to perform a riverside ritual and blessing that would ensure our safe passage down the mighty Brahmaputra in northeast India.

the water's edge towards an impenetrable-looking rainforest. Huge tree trunks were wedged on top of rocks at least thirty meters above the water level. I was 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 tale of the Great Flood came drifting back to me...

In June 2000, a mud dam that had been created by an enormous landslide in Tibet gave way. This unleashed a gigantic wall of water 52 meters 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 kilometers into its side valleys and tributaries! By all accounts it was Mother Nature at her most ferocious.

After a welcome rest day, we set off on the penultimate day of our expedition. By this stage the river had become lazier and there were long flat sections where we could sit back and appreciate the scenery. The Siang, however, was not quite done with

us. A final test lay in store for our crew at Ponging: the last Class V rapid of the trip. After our stormy experiences a few days earlier we felt like hardened professionals and, under a blue sky and blazing sunshine, we aced it!

Reluctantly, we bade farewell to the Siang after ten exhilarating days of high adventure. Sitting on the ferry and chugging homeward across the languid Brahmaputra, everyone started to reminisce about the wild whitewater and our successful descent of the Siang. This was, after all, only the ninth commercial descent of the river in history! I felt very privileged to have been a part of an extraordinary expedition into the seldom-visited region of Arunachal.

I turned to our captain with one final question, "So Rana, all I want to know is: where do I sign up for next year's expedition?"

LOGISTICS BOX:

Flights and Visas: Most major airlines connect US cities to Delhi via European hubs. Continental Airlines offer direct flights between New York and Delhi. Visas are required by US passport holders and must be obtained in advance. The standard visa is a six-month tourist visa; allow up to two weeks for processing. Consult the Trivisa website (www.trivisa.com) for application directions.

Getting there: From Delhi a spectacular flight (www.jetlite.com) takes you past snowy Himalayan peaks via Guwahati and on to Dibrugarh. Outfitters take care of all permits and transportation for the 3-day boat and road transfer to the put-in at Tuting.

What to do: Huge whitewater, 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 paddle the mighty Siang are November and December.