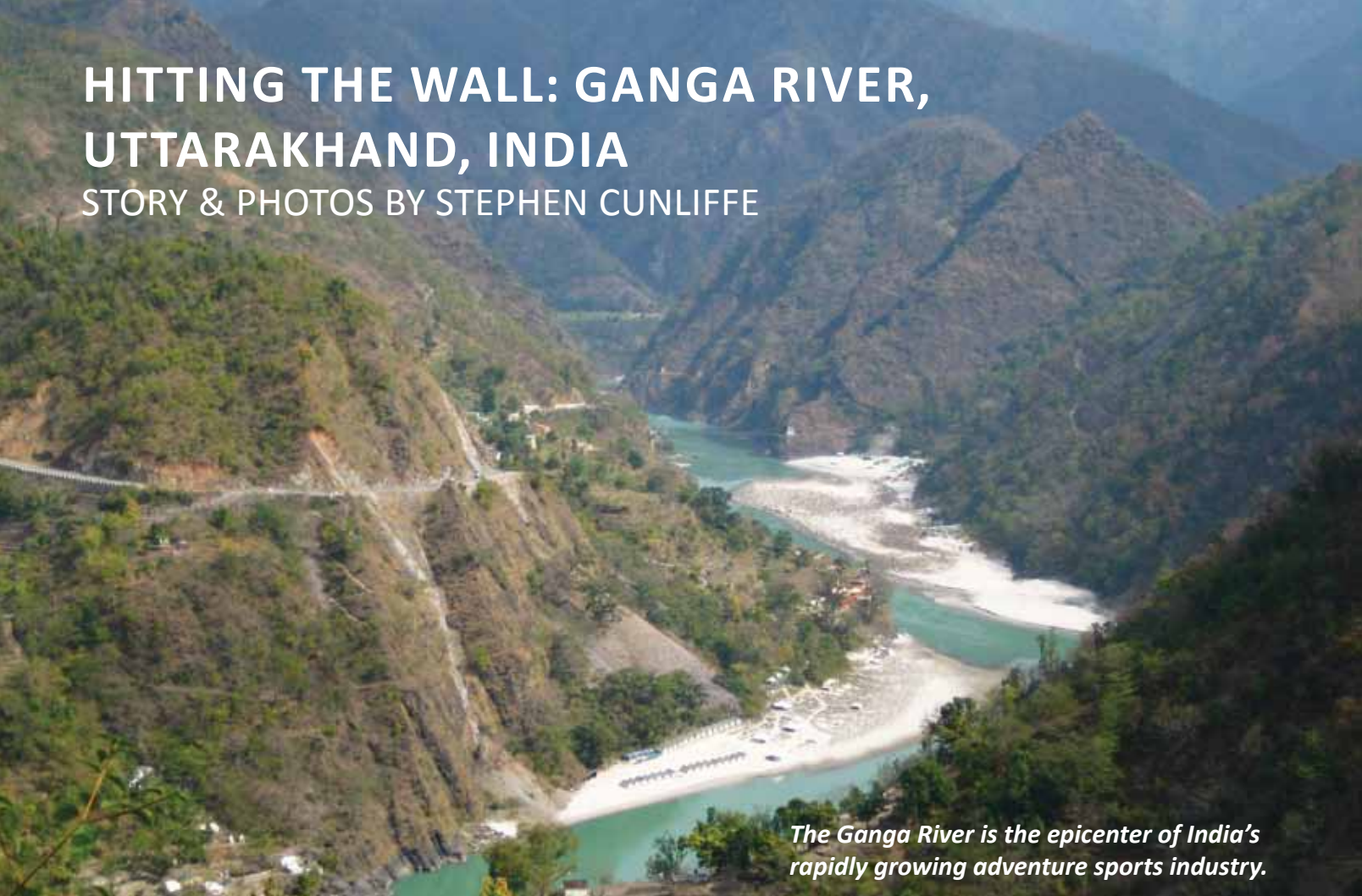


HITTING THE WALL: GANGA RIVER, UTTARAKHAND, INDIA

STORY & PHOTOS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



The Ganga River is the epicenter of India's rapidly growing adventure sports industry.

POPULARLY REFERRED TO as the national river of India, the Ganges takes its name from the Gangotri Glacier where it originates in the western Himalaya. Draining a staggering 1,000,000 km² basin, the Ganges is unquestionably the largest river on the Indian subcontinent. Beginning in Uttarakhand as the Bhagirathi River, it joins the Alaknanda River near the town of Deoprayag to form the Ganges before embarking on a 2510 km eastward journey until it finally empties into the Bay of Bengal inside Bangladesh.

The iconic Ganges, or Ganga, as it is known to Hindus, has long been considered the holiest of all the Indian rivers. For centuries this sacred waterway has been worshipped as the goddess Ganga by the faithful masses. The river holds sway over the hearts of its innumerable enraptured devotees and draws millions of pilgrims to its hallowed banks every year.

In recent times, however, the mighty Ganga has begun to attract a new, yet equally

fanatical, following. Thrill-seekers and adventure sport aficionados are finding themselves increasingly and irresistibly drawn to Rishikesh, gateway to India's whitewater capital, on the captivating Ganga. A booming whitewater industry has sprung up on the stretch of river between Kaudiyala and Rishikesh with over one hundred rafting companies operating commercial trips and seasonal camps along this popular stretch of the holy river. Catapulted to prominence on the back of over 3000 tourists per day running this trendy river section during peak season, the Ganga has become the undisputed epicenter of India's burgeoning adventure sport scene. So, come on, embrace the trend and join this fashionable joy ride...

"Holy shit! What the hell! You've got to be kidding me!" As we paddled our tiny craft deeper into the guts of an infamous Ganges River rapid, known as The Wall, bow paddler, Rory Pryde, was sounding more than a little anxious.

I was desperately trying to keep one eye on the line of our guide Pankaj Rana, in a hard-shell kayak just ahead, as he sliced through powerful breakers and weaved around holes in the chaotic whitewater. We paddled aggressively through the initial waves, propelling our two-man inflatable kayak forward with confidence, but as the waves got bigger and the whitewater wilder we faltered.

By midway through the furious rapid, we were solely concerned with trying not to capsize. There was no respite as whitecaps buffeted our little ducky from all sides. In the midst of all the whitewater confusion, I lost sight of Pankaj; we were on our own. Trying to read-and-run the remainder of the long Class IV rapid, we braced through crashing waves and paddled hard in between. But, as we swept around a sharp right-hand bend in the near-continuous whitewater melee, I suddenly recalled trip leader Nagendra Singh's parting words: "Whatever you do, make sure you avoid

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being pushed into that nasty-looking hole towards the tail-end of the rapid!"

I realized our biggest challenge was yet to come.

By the time we saw the monstrous hole, it was already too late. "Hard forward Rory; come on! Harder than that; paddle you bastard!" I pleaded with my bow paddler. Digging in deep, we paddled as if our lives depended upon it, desperately trying to avoid the inevitable. But the hydraulic had us locked in its tractor-beam and we were being sucked down a long green tongue into the churning depths of the hungry beast. Our valiant efforts at avoidance were in vain; there would be no escape for us that day. As we plunged over the edge into the bowels of the hole, I swung the Ducky round and pointed the nose straight into the massive standing wave that awaited us. We slammed into it at speed and Rory was swallowed by the steep stopper wave—an

aply named wall-of-water curling heavily back on itself with more than enough power to thwart our little boat's forward progress—before he emerged a few seconds later near the crest of the wave.

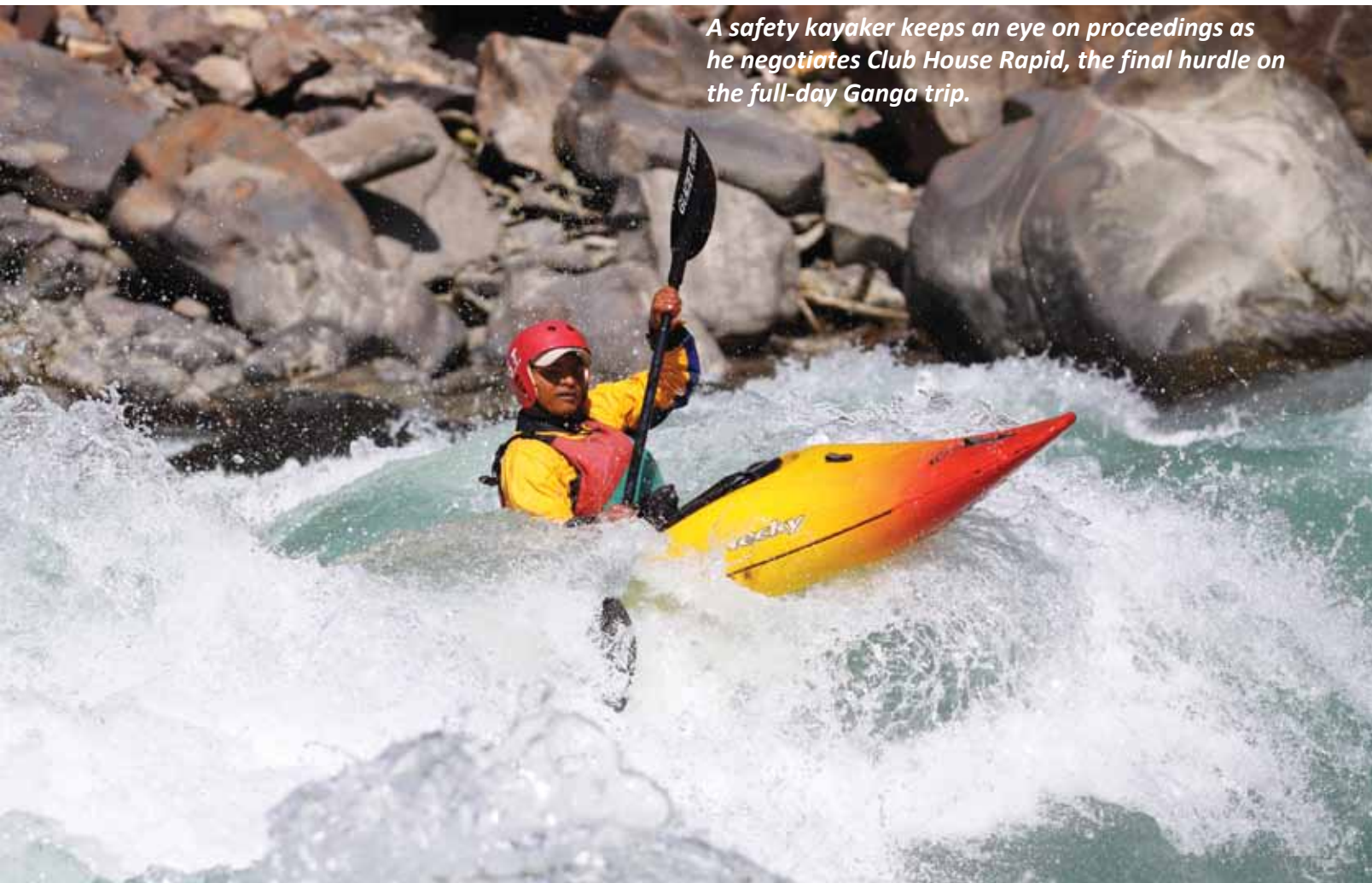
Miraculously, we found ourselves upright and surfing the monster. Water thundered by all around us, but the giant stopper stubbornly refused to grant our ducky its freedom. The river was toying with us, giving us an inkling of hope, when really we should have had none. Very slowly, the re-circulating water began to drag our boat back down the face of the wave into the inky depths below. Paddling was useless. I felt the water rising all around me and soon I was buried with only my head and paddle protruding; the end was nigh. I sucked in one last deep breath, then everything went dark.

While I willed my buoyancy aid to respond and reunite me with the light above, I

had time to consider how Rory and I had ended up in this predicament on India's holiest river...

Entertaining rapids and pleasant beach camps are the major drawcards on a Ganga getaway and, after a thoroughly enjoyable couple of days rafting the river, we were brimming with confidence and looking to spice-up our whitewater experience with something new and exciting. As we sat around a roaring campfire leisurely sipping rum 'n' cokes on the beach with newfound friends and reliving the day's thrills and spills, Nagendra launched into his sales pitch: "People who have plenty of rafting experience should consider the next challenge: tackling the mighty Ganga in a kayak or ducky. Because, when you paddle and steer yourself down the river, every rapid becomes an exhilarating challenge! Don't worry, the inflatable two-man kayaks we use are quick, maneuverable, easy to master, simple to navigate, and

A safety kayaker keeps an eye on proceedings as he negotiates Club House Rapid, the final hurdle on the full-day Ganga trip.



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very stable—provided you paddle with an aggressive spirit. I'll also assign you an experienced kayaker who'll advise and guide you on your adventure, making sure you stay safe. I'm telling you the Ducky is great fun; you're going to absolutely love it."

We were sold and, after a leisurely breakfast the following morning, we scrambled into

our wetsuits, collected our paddles and safety equipment, and drove upstream to Kaudiyala where we began our thrilling descent of a fun-filled 36 km section of the mighty Ganga. Rory and I turned out to be the only adventurous suckers to volunteer for Ducky duty that day, so we manned the lone inflatable kayak accompanying an Aquaterra Adventures rafting expedition. But, with an experienced river-running



Camp Five Elements boasts a spectacular beach location that is hard to beat.

LOGISTICS BOX:

Flights and Visas: Continental Airlines (www.continental.com) offers direct flights between New York and New Delhi, while American Airlines (www.aa.com) and Jet Airways (www.jetairways.com) have non-stop services from Chicago. Alternatively, most other major airlines connect US cities to Delhi via European hubs. Visas are required by US passport holders and must be obtained in advance. The standard tourist visa is valid for six-months; allow at least two weeks for processing. Consult the Trivisa website (www.trivisa.com) for visa application instructions.

Getting there: Rishikesh, the gateway to India's whitewater capital, lies 230 km from Delhi. It can be reached in five to six hours by road, or via a pleasant four-hour train journey to Hardwar with onward taxi connections to the rafting camps. Train reservations can be made online at: www.irctc.co.in.

Where to stay, eat: Camp Silver Sands, spread out along a sandy Ganga riverbank, accommodates a maximum of 70 guests in deluxe twin-share tents furnished with real beds and duvets. Meals are served as wholesome buffets in a central dining area. Hot showers are available on request and toilets are in the form of rustic, environmentally friendly, dry pit latrines.

What to do: Entertaining whitewater and idyllic beach camps are the major draw cards of a Ganga getaway. Aside from rafting, thrill-seekers might opt to try their hand at inflatable kayaking or join a kayak clinic. Other active attractions include beach sports like volleyball, frisbee, badminton and cricket.

Season: The Ganga can be paddled anytime between late September and May, although the river is at its absolute action-packed best shortly after the monsoon in October/November.

Outfitters: With over a 120 outfitters operating on a 36 km section of river, the rafting industry of the Ganga has been consumed by a "discount death-spiral." Remember, you get what you pay for: only sign up with licensed companies that have experienced teams, good safety records and use properly trained guides.

team and two safety kayakers in tow, we relaxed, reassured that we were in good hands, and reveled in the anticipation of the whitewater experience that awaited us.

As we paddled our tiny craft out onto India's holiest river, I wondered aloud, "Do you think the river gods will smile on us today?" Oozing confidence, we had cruised through Daniel's Dip, our first big rapid of the day, and dominated the fluffy whitewater thereafter, but the Ganga Gods were biding their time, knowing full well that they would have the last laugh: their wrath awaited us when we hit The Wall.

After our long swim and a highly entertaining morning paddling down the river, we floated into Camp Silver Sands, Aquaterra's base camp on the Ganges, just in time for a delicious wholesome lunch. Rory and I certainly needed the opportune time-out to replenish our energy reserves and recover our nerve before heading back onto the water for the afternoon session.

Spread out along a sandy riverside beach 256 km from Delhi and 30 km upstream of Rishikesh, this comfortable rustic camp is an idyllic escape from city stress. Silver Sands offers the complete outdoor experience. If you're looking for a day off from the river, you can experiment with

abseiling, rappelling, or hike to local villages in the surrounding hills. Whether you're after tranquil solitude or social campfires, succulent barbecues or reviving rum 'n' cokes, Camp Silver Sands is the ideal base from which to tackle the highly enjoyable whitewater that lies in store mere meters from your tent.

With the Ganga at her absolute action-packed best in the aftermath of a very wet monsoon, we decided to abandon our trusty little boat and skulked off in search of alternative river transport. Despite the fortifying lunch, we felt wiped out by the morning's intense action, so we jumped ship, trading our Ducky in for two seats on a big, stable, self-bailing raft and spent a thoroughly satisfying afternoon back on the river. In between skirting around menacing holes and punching through the large exploding waves of a host of exciting rapids—including the three biggies: Three Blind Mice, Roller Coaster and Golf Course—we floated along quiet stretches of tranquil water in a steep-sided valley brimming with colorful birds and cheeky monkeys. Jumping overboard, we bodysurfed through some of the smaller Class II rapids, before mooring the raft alongside the Ganga's famous Jump Rock. After watching some spectacularly painful-looking bellyflops from the top, we

TRIVIA BOX: THE HOLY GANGA

The revered Ganga, popularly worshipped as a goddess, is the most sacred river in Hindu mythology. According to legend, the river was sent down from the heavens to rinse away the sins of mankind. According to the Puranas (holy scriptures of the Hindus), the mere sight of the river can absolve your sins; however, immersing oneself in the holy waters of the mighty Ganga, especially on auspicious occasions or during religious festivals, not only ensures remission of one's sins, but also facilitates the attainment of salvation.

Originating from the holy pilgrimage site of Gaumukha at the foot of Gangotri glacier in the western Himalayas of Uttarakhand, the water of the Ganga, known as Gangajal, is regarded by Hindus to be the most pure and sacred water on earth and the very same holy water is used in all their religious ceremonies.

While other world-renowned rivers might be able to eclipse the River Ganga in terms of length and volume, none can match this holy waterway in terms of the reverence, affection and religious fervor bestowed upon it by the devoted masses of India.



summoned our courage and took the leap of faith off the ten-meter-high cliff. It was an exhilarating way to round off another superb day on the spectacular Ganga River in the heart of Hindustan

Stephen Cunliffe (www.stevecunliffe.com) is author of the soon-to-be-released book India Whitewater, which will inform adventurous whitewater enthusiasts from around the globe about some of the planet's finest multi-day river expeditions. Scheduled to hit the shelves in mid-2011, this book will showcase the very best of India's Himalayan whitewater with stunning images and entertaining accounts of the country's best whitewater.

A raft broadsides in Three Blind Mice, but manages to make it through unscathed.