

# RIVERS OF NEPAL

## NEPAL'S WILD WEST: FIND BEAUTY AND ADVENTURE ON THE KARNALI RIVER

TEXT & PHOTOS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

**S**EASONAL SNOWMELT DRAINING off Mount Kailash in neighboring 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 in volume and intensity as it snakes its way southwards, the Karnali boasts some potent rapids interspersed with stretches of mellow water that permit boaters to relax and soak up the classic mountain scenery. The Karnali is high volume and pool-drop in character, with some big, but relatively straightforward rapids, making it an ideal river for novice rafters and intermediate kayakers alike. It's an entertaining river journey with plenty of continuous Class III and IV whitewater action during the middle stages, followed

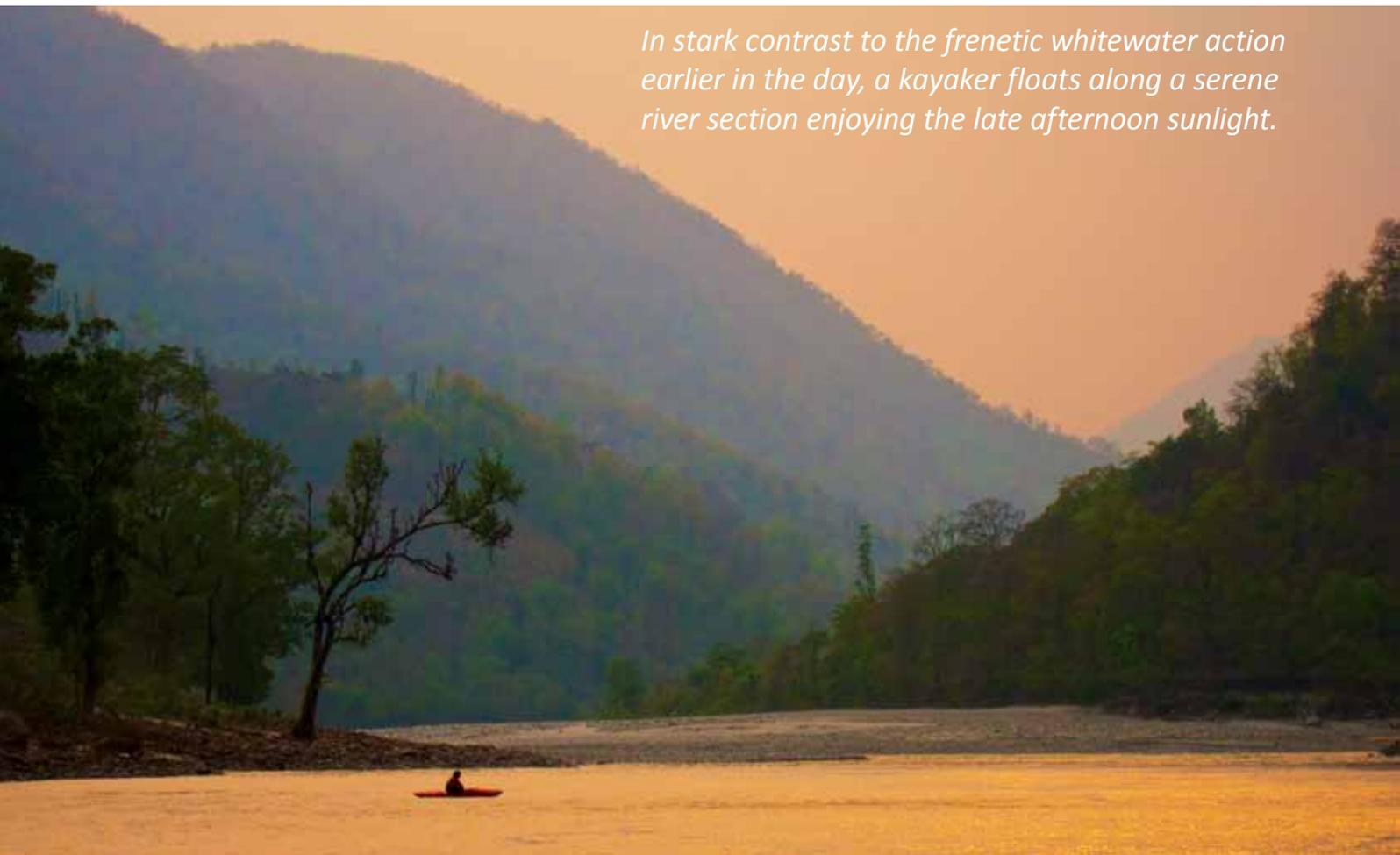
by a tranquil float into wildlife-rich Royal Bardia National Park on the Gangetic plains of the steamy-hot Terai lowlands.

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 enduring a long two-day bus trip, the rocky beach put-in below Sayuli Bazaar was greeted with weary smiles and deep sighs of relief from the team. Soothed to sleep by the reassuring noises of the rushing river and rejuvenated by a decent night's rest, we awoke sprightly and raring to go. A fairly relaxed 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. The forgiving nature of the river and its mellow start were a good thing, as a couple of the kayakers hadn't climbed into a boat for quite some time. Francis, a rambunctious Irishman on the trip, mused, "It must be 17 years since I last paddled a river." He was in for a rude awakening.

We didn't have to wait long. 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 realize at this early stage, but this punchy whitewater would dominate the next three exhilarating days!

On day two, as we paddled towards Jungle Ghat, a labyrinth of whitewater obstacles and challenges confronted the expedition team. After making a thrilling run through Sweetness and Light and overcoming the notorious Jailhouse rapid, we embarked on what is, without doubt, the most sustained section of river action on the Karnali. The maelstrom began at the infamous God's House rapid and continued through a series of canyons with 15 more rapids crammed into an unrelenting 7-kilometer stretch of high-octane, near-continuous Class III+ whitewater: an entertaining and demanding expanse of raging river. During this exhilarating ride, we threaded some

*In stark contrast to the frenetic whitewater action earlier in the day, a kayaker floats along a serene river section enjoying the late afternoon sunlight.*



SINCE 2001 KAYAK SESSION HAS GIVEN AW OVER \$160,000 TO SUPPORT IT'S TREMENDOUS EFFORT.  
LET'S MAKE IT EVEN MORE THIS YEAR!

# GET YOUR GREEN CARD TODAY!

**SUBSCRIBE TO KAYAK SESSION MAGAZINE, CONTRIBUTE TO AW EFFORTS EVEN FURTHER AND SAVE MONEY!**

*Here's how: As an AW member, you save money when subscribing to Kayak Session. If that's not enough, your purchase awards another 5 bucks back to AW's effort to change the world.*

*If that doesn't change the world, it can at least make it a little sweeter...*



**50% discount on Kayak Session Subscriptions!**  
**30 USD for one year subscriptions**  
**5 dollars back to AW for every subscription purchased**

**Save, Support, Enjoy**

Special offer available only with the use of the present form (photocopy accepted)

Please sign me up for one year (four issues)

Start my subscription with:  current  next issue

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State ..... Zip ..... Phone .....

Email (for customer service only) .....

Method of payment:  Mastercard  Visa  Check

Credit card number                    Exp. date:   / 20

Signature

You may fax this form and/or credit card orders to: 828-586-2840

Detach and mail to: American Whitewater / Kayak Session Subscription - Po Box 1540 - Cullowhee, NC 28723

Call toll free: 866BOAT4AW - info@amwhitewater.org or subscribe online @ www.kayaksession.com

# RIVERS OF NEPAL

## LOGISTICS BOX: KARNALI TRIP PLANNER

**When to go:** The best months to tackle the Karnali are March-May (low water) and October-November (high water season).

**Flights and Visas:** Most major airlines connect US cities to Kathmandu via New Delhi or European hubs. US passport holders require a visa, although this can be obtained at the airport upon arrival. Visitors have a choice between 14-, 30- and 90-day tourist visa options. Payment must be made in US dollars cash and two passport photos are required.

**Getting there:** Upon arrival at Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport, you can connect with one of the Nepali operators for the two-day bus ride to the river.

**Recommended operators:** Three Nepali companies advertise Karnali expeditions: 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)).

sweet lines through quality rapids, such as Juicer and the aptly named Flip and Strip.

Pulling into the swirling, surging eddy just above Flip and Strip, we were greeted by a thunderous roar and pulsating plumes of spray up ahead. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that some serious action lurked a stone's throw downstream. The usual laughter and banter between expedition members vanished. A nervous silence descended as the raft crew and rusty kayakers retreated into their thoughts and mentally prepared for the whitewater trials that lay around the corner. After a thorough scout of the rapid, our experienced river guide, Arun Gurung, returned and, with

*Picture-perfect riverside campsites are a highlight of any Karnali descent.*

his usual economy of words, announced, "Tighten your lifejackets, listen very carefully to my instructions and paddle hard!" The kayakers grabbed the initiative and set off, while the rafters clipped on helmets and checked PFDs. As we pulled on our paddles and propelled the raft towards the rumbling beast, I looked up to see how the kayakers were faring. Not far downstream, I spotted the unmistakable yellow kayak of Francis being worked in a particularly nasty hydraulic.

Arun barked paddle commands and we responded. Under the expert guidance of our imperturbable captain, the raft threaded a near-perfect line through the angry whitewater mayhem of the rapid. Adrenalin surged through our veins as we dodged rocks, skirted a ghastly-looking hole—henceforth to be known as FUBAR Francis's hole—and dominated a thrilling roller-coaster ride over a massive wave train. The nervous tension evaporated, replaced with yelps of enthusiastic delight as big waves crashed over the bucking boat. It was an electrifying joyride under bright blue skies and blazing sunshine.

At the bottom of the gauntlet we discovered a wide-eyed Francis spluttering and gasping



*Local children paddle in a dugout canoe to inspect the unusual-looking colorful boats floating past their remote village.*

**Photo by Steve Brooks**

for breath. We hauled the doughty Irishman onto our raft, only to be greeted by the humorous sight of his bare bottom: the rapid had not only flipped him, but stripped him of his swim shorts too!

After the team bonding experience of sharing a wild day on the river, Arun cracked a rare smile and briefly opened up to share some of his opinions about the Karnali. With 46 successful Karnali descents since 1996 to his name, his knowledge and experience is beyond question. "This is my favorite Nepali river," he began. "Western Nepal remains wild and unspoiled with only a handful of paddlers running the Karnali each year. There is no doubting





*Local knowledge is invaluable to intermediate kayakers wanting to tackle the Karnali's Class IV river action. American kayaker Bob McPherson follows his Nepali kayak guide through a sweeping bend of frothy whitewater.*

that this river has some really excellent rapids, although I prefer to run it during November when the water level is higher. The weather's really nice then too, plus the scenery is also greener and more vibrant after the monsoon."

Heavy monsoon rains cause the Karnali to swell dramatically during late September and October, transforming the river into a raging torrent and making it a seriously challenging undertaking. Late in the season—during April and May—lower water levels produce a more technical run down a constricted, bolder-strewn river. The bottom line is that the Karnali can entertain rafters and kayakers of the appropriate skill level during any season.

Sadly, though, like so many rivers in power-hungry Asia, dark clouds are gathering on the horizon for the Karnali. Arun reported: "Eighteen months ago they began work on the first of two dams to span the Karnali. The first dam site is above Sayuli Bazaar, so, although it will alter the river's flow patterns, the lower gorges and most of the rapids will remain. However, the second proposed dam will flood all of that and rob the river of pretty much all its whitewater." Still, the good news is that nothing happens quickly in Nepal. With at least ten years until the first dam comes on line and even longer for the second, the Karnali's whitewater should survive at least another decade or so.

After three days of regular rapids and non-stop whitewater 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 increasingly 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 convinced most of us to forgo tents in favor of sleeping around the campfire. As we lay on the sand, spotting shooting stars, we relived the exploits and frenetic river action of the preceding days. Eventually, one-by-one we drifted off and enjoyed a refreshing 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 tranquil two-day 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. We spent lazy days drifting slowly downstream, spotting exotic birds and playful monkeys, while cooling off with long swims alongside the boats. Endangered Gangetic dolphins still swim in these waters and we kept a

*A local craftsman cunningly uses a waterwheel-powered lathe to ply his trade and carve wood on the banks of the Karnali River.*

beady eye out trying to catch a glimpse of these rare creatures. For the more energetic and adventurous rafters, there was also an opportunity to test drive a kayak under the watchful eye of the safety boaters.

Remote western Nepal receives only a smattering of adventurous visitors each year and there is no better way to sample the "best of the west" than on a self-contained multi-day river expedition. The quintessential Karnali itinerary includes a couple of days of overland travel to reach the put-in at Sayuli, followed by a week paddling the Western Bend, a superb 180-kilometer stretch of wilderness boating.

Of course, while you're in the area, it would be great to spend a couple of extra nights exploring Bardia National Park after your trip down the Karnali. What better way to sign off on your wild west adventure than by spotting tigers and rhinos from elephant-back? It's the perfect grand finale to an epic river adventure.

