

WILD WHITE WATERS

Tackling huge rapids in the Siang and being spectator to nature's ferocious ways while rafting down the stretch from Tuting to Pasighat in Arunachal gave **Stephen Cunliffe** a chance to embrace the challenges of India's premier white water descent

PHOTOGRAPHS: STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

PRISTINE GLORY:
A cloudless day brings out the picture-perfect beauty of the campsite known as the Geku Twins

At six am, I woke up 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 sodden spray jacket, I yearned for the sunny weather we had taken for granted at the start of our adventure. Our raft guides had forewarned us that today would be a real challenge with huge white water rapids to encounter. The wet weather dampened the spirits of our intrepid team of rafters and kayakers. Everyone was uncharacteristically quiet as we broke camp and packed away soaking tents and equipment. Swirling mist and light rain added an ominous note to proceedings, as everyone mulled over the same question: how scary would today's massive rapids be?

We were on day five of an amazing adventure on what is reputedly India's wildest river. The Siang, effectively a continuation of the infamous Tsangpo River from Tibet, offers rafting enthusiasts a chance to embrace the challenges of India's premier white water descent. Our rafting expedition was tackling a 160 km section of the Siang River from Tuting to Pasighat in India's remote North-east.

We pushed the heavily-laden rafts off the beach and bid farewell to our sodden campsite at Ramsing. We tightened our life jackets, strapped on our helmets and paddled out into the current. While we propelled the rafts forward, the relentless drizzle refused to abate; however, when I shifted my gaze downstream and saw that the river disappeared into a wall of thick gray clouds, I had a premonition that serious action lurked just around the corner.

As we approached the big grade IV white water of a notorious rapid known as Mowing Madness, large raindrops exploded as it came in touch with the river. In the midst of this torrential downpour, we stopped above the rapid to allow the guides to scout the best route through the furious white water. After surveying the wild river for 10 minutes, our head guide Dhruv Naresh Rana returned to the anx-

ious 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 plunged into the white water 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 the deafening noise of the heavy rain. "Altogether now; hard forward," he yelled. The roar grew steadily louder as gigantic waves emerged from the mist ahead. My heart thumped wildly and our excitement mounted as we descended into the boiling mayhem of the rapid. Everyone was pumped up: high on adrenaline. Rana frantically shouted, "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, "Come on, paddle!" the urgency in his voice got through to us: there was no disputing the seriousness of our situation.

We were in the midst of some genuinely big white water. Waves crashed on 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. And by the time, 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 in for a rare adventure on India's wildest and remotest river and the experience was worth every penny. 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 a swim in these conditions! Rana barked instructions; we obeyed.

HIGH ON ADRENALINE

Encountering huge white water rapids, remote wilderness, spectacular scenery and beach campsites are the premier attractions on the 160 km-long self-contained run from Tuting to Pasighat which is easily one of the most inaccessible regions of the world. Apart from the thrill of adventure, add another fascinating dimension to this expedition by interacting with Adi tribals that live in remote areas of Arunachal Pradesh

DARING FEAT:

(Facing page) Captain Dhruv Naresh Rana coaxes his paddling team into the jaws of the Ponging Rapid





BY THE SIANG: The Pango Camp makes for quite a sight with blue skies, sunshine and a sandy beach

Navigator

GETTING THERE
From Delhi, Jetlite flight takes you past snowy Himalayan peaks via Guwahati and on to Dibrugarh.

Aquaterra arranges all permits and transportation for the three-day boat and road transfer to the put-in point at Tuting.

WHERE TO STAY
Hotel accommodation in Dibrugarh and Pasighat is provided as part of your Siang package. Thereafter, participants are accommodated in two-man dome tents with buffet meals. While on expedition, toilets are in the form of a rustic, environmentally friendly, dry pit pots.

RAFTING INFO
The best months to tackle the mighty Siang are November and December.

Although swimming ability is not mandatory, it is desirable. All rafting enthusiasts are supplied with 5mm neoprene wetsuits, booties, splash jackets, life jackets and helmets. Besides personal items and toiletries, bring a towel, wind/water-proof jacket, flashlight, hat, sunblock and sunglasses, plus warm clothing and a sleeping bag.

OPERATORS
Aquaterra Adventures (www.aquaterra.in) is the only operator to offer annual departures on the Siang. The Brahmaputra trip scheduled Nov 20-Dec 2, 2010 would cost Rs 1,30,000 (including flights). For further information, log onto www.treknraft.com/river-rafting-india/rafting-india-brahmaputra.htm



After five days of paddling together, we had become a cohesive team and responded to his commands in unison. Rana chose a perfect line threading us through the meatiest part of the rapid. We slipped past a huge pour-over, dodged a big hole and dominated the wave train. India's fiercest river was throwing everything at us, but under the guidance of our capable captain and his highly professional Aquaterra team, 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 white water 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 adventure.

While the kayakers animatedly discussed their tumultuous descent through the powerful white waters, I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the wilderness surrounding our Geku Twins Campsite. We had emerged from the steep-sided Ningguing 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 marvelled at the sheer rock walls that climbed from the water's edge towards an impenetrable-looking rainforest. Huge tree trunks were wedged on top of rocks at least 30 m 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 a massive landslide in Tibet gave way. This unleashed a gigantic wall of water 52 m-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 km into its side valleys and tributaries! By all accounts, it was mother nature at her most ferocious best...

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 enormous 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!

We reluctantly bade farewell to the Siang after 10 exhilarating days of high adventure. Sitting on the ferry and chugging homeward across the languid Brahmaputra, everyone reminisced about the wild white water 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.

Somewhat surprisingly, there was overwhelming consensus in the group that our day of torrential rain was actually one of the highlights of the trip. Everyone agreed that the tumultuous weather had added to the challenge of the rapids, increased our excitement and enhanced our experience.

I turned to our captain with one final question, "So Rana, all I want to know is: where do I sign up to do it again?" ■

STORY OF SIANG

The Holy Father River of Asia, the Brahmaputra begins its journey from Tibet through India and into Bangladesh, and is known by no less than 10 different names. Initially, as it flows gently eastwards across the Tibetan plateau, it is known as Yarlung Zhanbo. Upon entering the folds of the eastern Himalayas, it transforms into the inhospitable Tsangpo. In northern Arunachal, the river becomes the Chiang, which locals refer to as Siang before changing to Dihang just above the city of Pasighat. Next, where the Lohit feeds into the holy river, it becomes Lali. By this stage, the river has swollen dramatically. The breadth of the river is measured in miles as it traverses Assam as the mighty Brahmaputra, one of India's few male rivers

DAREDEVILS: (Facing page) A group of fearless Siang kayakers take time out to enjoy their first 'shower' in over a week