



thrills & spills

Experience the thumping rush and rapids of the Subansari river over

an eight-day expedition covering 164 km, says **Stephen Cunliffe**

Subansiri, meaning ‘river of gold,’ is the largest tributary of the Upper Brahmaputra in north-east India. This mystical river begins its journey by draining the frigid waters of Tibet beyond the Great Himalayan Range – from Tsona Dzong up to the Great Loop of the Tsangpo – before slicing a deep gorge through the Eastern Himalayas and entering India at Asaphila. The eight-day expedition from So Nala to Gerukamukh covers a 164-km stretch of river, which sees the Subansiri drop 925 vertical feet as it cuts a swathe through the rugged hinterland in the remote tribal region of Arunachal Pradesh: an isolated and sparsely inhabited area characterised by wild terrain and dense jungle.

‘Everybody get down!’ yelled Vaibhav to his laid-back crew. I looked up to see the raft just ahead of ours getting sucked into a big hole where it began to surf on the recirculating water. As the river thundered over a submerged rock, the pourover created a strong backwash that latched onto the 14-foot raft and prevented it from breaking free. The boat gyrated wildly as it surfed the powerful hydraulic. Bow paddler Rohan Guptan was the first to go. Sucked overboard by the raging white-water, he clung precariously to the boat’s safety line as the powerful current tried to suck him away. Fellow bow paddler Sachin Bhatia moved across to try and haul him back into the raft. Their combined weight, along with Rohan’s drag, caused the raft to roll dangerously. ‘Highside left!’ Vaibhav screamed in vain. Despite the captain’s desperate instructions for a tactical manoeuvre to counter the toppling raft, the boat flipped. It was swim time and the entire crew was summarily dumped into the raging river.

‘OK team, let’s go save some swimmers,’ commanded our unflappable guide Sanjay Rana. We paddled hard to reach our wide-eyed companions as they bobbed around in the turbulent water. One by one, we manhandled them into the sanctuary of our raft while the safety kayakers picked up the stragglers in the calmer water a little further downstream. We were only a couple of hours into day one of our Subansiri adventure, but already the solid white-water, non-stop action and striking scenery had set the tone for an epic expedition: the Subansiri would be an experience to savour.

‘Play hole coming up on river right,’ yelled Aquaterra’s senior

kayaker, Khan Singh. A big smile washed over the face of British kayaker Matt Tidy; I could see that he was itching to test out the large, violent surf hole that beckoned just ahead. After catching the eddy and confirming it looked safe, he ferried across and dropped into the extremely powerful hydraulic. He managed to pull a few spins as he surfed the steep breaking wave, but his big riverboat was ill-suited to the fearsome play boating conditions. As he fought for control on the explosive wave, the recirculating water grabbed hold of him, thrashed him around for a while and spat him out the back. Next into the mix was Canadian kayaker Dave Prothero, and the beastly hole was ready and waiting for him. As he surfed the potent stopper, the unpredictable wave repeatedly latched onto his kayak, picking him up and slamming him violently back down again. As the river toyed with Dave, tossing him around, he managed to bob up wide-eyed in the strong backwash a couple of times before the raging torrent finally got the better of him, and unceremoniously ejected him.

After watching the two most experienced kayakers on our expedition team take a beating, no one else was brave – or silly – enough to volunteer for a thrashing, but these two untiring gluttons for punishment couldn’t get enough of it. Using the eddy and paddling strongly, they ferried across and dropped right back into the monster for round two of serious pummeling. There was no glassy face or gentle foam pile for pulling tricks; this was a steep crashing wave where the mighty river had all the control. The boats gyrated wildly as they surfed the powerful backwash, and all the kayakers could do was attempt to weather the storm by holding on and reacting to the sudden, violent mood swings of the gigantic stopper. There was no margin for error: one wrong move and they bobbed up forty metres downstream wondering what the hell just happened. It was a formidable, thrashy and uncompromising hole where the river reigned supreme. ‘Exciting, dynamic and bloody hard work,’ Matt described it afterwards.

Two Indian army teams initially opened the Subansiri in 1994, while Aquaterra’s 2006 trip was the first commercial descent of the river. While the kayakers were getting stuck into the near-continuous world-class white-water on day one of the 2010 expedition, it was the raft and support crews that made history with an epic first raft descent from So Nala to Koda. It was on this section of challenging white-water that Vaibhav and his complacent crew flipped and deservedly earned their ‘Subansiri Swim Team’ nick-



CHALLENGES AHEAD: Head guide Dhruv Naresh gives a safety briefing to rafting enthusiasts before tackling near-continuous rapids in the Upper Subansiri section

EXCITING FRONTIER:
Rafters at the
Wilderness Camp
in a completely
virgin area below
Daporijjo town



rough & tough

The Subansiri's white-water is world-class. While you don't need to be a professional kayaker or rafter, you would certainly want plenty of solid Class IV experience, because this is a river that keeps you on your toes

RIVER OF MIGHT:

Matt Tidy ferries into a surf hole and plays on the powerful standing wave



NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

A flight from Delhi takes you past snowy Himalayan peaks via Guwahati to Dibrugarh. Aquaterra arranges all permits and transportation, and road transfer to the raft put-in point at So Nala.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel accommodation in Dibrugarh and Basar is provided as part of the package. Meals are served as buffets. Hot showers are only available in Dibrugarh.

EN ROUTE

Interactions with Tagin and Galo tribals alongside the river add a fascinating cultural dimension to this expedition.

BEST SEASON

November and December

OPERATOR

Aquaterra Adventures offers guaranteed annual departures. For further information, log on to www.aquaterra.in or contact Fay Singh (fay@aquaterra.in).

name, which stuck for the remainder of the descent.

As the Subansiri traverses Arunachal, it dramatically alters its complexion from one day to the next. What starts out as a steep technical descent, steadily gains volume transforming itself into the textbook pool-drop river: ideal for an entertaining raft adventure. In its upper reaches, the river offers consistent and exciting white-water with plenty of opportunities for kayakers to be creative and play. Action attractions include big boofs, slots, drops and even a couple of small waterfalls to keep paddlers suitably entertained during their descent. However, you don't have to be a world-class oarsman to enjoy the Subansiri, the braided nature of the river means that there is always an option to take a more conservative line or even portage the occasional challenging rapid if need be.

Colorado-based raft guide and videographer, Jon Etters, shared his thoughts on the Subansiri and how the river rates on the international stage. "So far as grade is concerned, the Subansiri's white-water is world-class. While you don't need to be a professional kayaker or rafter, you would certainly want plenty of solid Class IV experience, because this is a river that keeps you on your toes. From the put-in at So Nala, it's a technical descent down a boulder-sculpted river that requires executing tight moves and precise manoeuvres through some gnarly rapids. The consistency of the white-water is phenomenal, and it doesn't let up for the first three days."

Due to the difficult terrain and steeply sloping valleys, the Subansiri has no arterial road link to either side of the Great Himalayan Range, so, it's not surprising that the upper reaches of this incredible river remain isolated and very sparsely inhabited. Our initial campsites attracted sporadic visits from local Tagin and Galo tribals who, with their own unique traditions and customs, were fascinated to watch the strange antics and rituals of the 'foreigners', but we soon left the track and tribals far behind. For many days, we paddled through a genuine wilderness devoid of people until a small group of mahseer fishermen from the Mishing tribe greeted us on the final stretch of our journey onto the plains of Upper Assam.

En route, the picturesque river descends through a breathtaking landscape of steep-sided, verdant valleys with lush, jungle-clad slopes that are home to elusive leopards and some of India's last free-ranging tigers. Vaibhav Kala, owner of Aquaterra Adventures, shared his thoughts: "The section below Daporijo is very special. There is absolutely no access into this area except by boat. The

remote valleys are totally devoid of people except for the occasional fisherman. This is one of India's greatest wilderness areas and home to the last truly wild river expedition in all of Asia." With its incredible beach campsites nestled below deep blue skies and hemmed in by an amphitheatre of densely forested hills, not to mention the solid and continuous white-water, I have to agree that this is a river journey like no other in South Asia.

Sadly, the days are numbered for India's ultimate wilderness experience. At Gerukamukh, just upstream of the confluence of the Subansiri and Brahmaputra rivers, a coffer dam blocked our passage at the site of what will soon become India's largest hydro dam. As we carried our boats and equipment up to the waiting trucks, we gawked at the 126-metre-high Hydel dam wall being constructed on the Lower Subansiri. Ultimately, 38,000 kilometre square of pristine rainforest will be submerged when the dam is flooded, robbing India of this precious natural treasure. With completion of the dam delayed until at least 2013, there is little time left to savour the undisturbed wilds of the Subansiri.

While a handful of activists still argue that a combination of the seismic activity in the area (which makes the site totally unsuitable for dam construction) and an upcoming election might still block the flooding of the dam, Kala cautions, "The real problem is that there is never sufficient public debate before dam construction commences. By the time people start to question a project of this nature, it is already at such an advanced stage that there is virtually no chance of it being scrapped. We just don't learn any lessons from the dams that have already been built all over India. You've seen the incredible valleys and stunning wild terrain of this river, and it's a real travesty that it's all going to be lost to future generations."

Sachin Bhatia, a member of our Subansiri expedition team, eloquently verbalised the mood of the group as our journey drew to a close, "What a tremendous opportunity to have been on this remote river; to see a dense jungle and pristine forest like this is a privilege in India. It's just such an incredible honour to be one of the very few people fortunate enough to have experienced this unique wilderness, which will soon be lost forever."

With its unique blend of epic white-water, spectacular scenery and extraordinary wilderness experiences, the Subansiri offers a truly unbeatable combination of attractions. This is a river that every white-water aficionado and outdoor enthusiast needs to paddle at least once in their lifetime. .