



FAST & FURIOUS

Rafting through the 'Grand Canyon' of the Zaskar in the remote and arid

As the sound of distant blasting and pneumatic drills faded, replaced by the reassuring gurgle of the fast-flowing river, Sanjay said simply, 'Now we are on our own.' Our expedition through western Ladakh, along one of India's most spectacular yet unheralded rivers, was about to enter the Grand Canyon of the Zaskar. During the first two days of the descent, we had already been treated to an ever-changing kaleidoscope of breathtaking vistas and dramatic landscapes. We were rapidly approaching the midway point of our 110-mile paddle through the 'Land of White Copper', yet, amazingly, the best was still to come.

Three days earlier, a kindly monk from the hilltop Rangdum Gomba had agreed to travel a full day by road over the Penze La to ritually bless our boats and crew. His chanting reassured our team of white-water enthusiasts and prayer flags fluttered proudly on the bows of the rafts and kayaks as the flotilla slid into the swift currents of the Stod, one of the Zaskar's major tributaries.

We were immediately enraptured by the arid beauty of the landscape, dotted with tiny hillside villages and dominated by towering snow-capped peaks. In the early stages of our descent, the mild grade II white-water did nothing more than splash water over the bow providing welcome relief from a searing Himalayan sun. The swiftly-flowing river allowed us ample time to appreciate the stunning scenery that characterises the remotest corner of Ladakh.

Even on day 2, as the Stod joined the Tsarap Chu to form the Zaskar proper and the volume of the river increased, the Zaskar's temperament remained placid. We floated past multi-coloured rock strata that had been buckled into the strangest shapes. The contorted rocks spoke of nature's raw power and an angry upbringing at the hands of inconceivably powerful tectonic forces.

Surrounded by these bizarrely contorted formations, I couldn't dispel a nagging feeling that I wanted to become a geologist! Chatting to my fellow paddlers, I discovered it was a common sentiment: no doubt inspired by the landscapes and rock formations that continued to astound us with their



PHOTOGRAPHS: STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

western Ladakh, provides a thrill none can match, says **Stephen Cunliffe**

ever-increasing magnificence, especially upon entering the world-class Grand Canyon of the Zaskar.

Asia's most spectacular canyon cuts a swathe through the parched mountainous terrain of remote western Ladakh. A ride down the Zaskar is a multi-day river adventure through arguably India's most arresting scenery. It's a true wilderness of extreme natural beauty, yet this pristine landscape is being invaded by an army of dogged Bihari labourers. Every summer these determined road gangs hack and blast their way a little deeper into one of India's most alluring natural treasures. The official line is that the road is essential to bring development to the far-flung reaches of Ladakh. However, somewhat surprisingly, many of the local Ladakhis we spoke to were against the road. What began as a trickle of tourists drawn to the Zaskar has grown steadily into a stream.

Rafters and kayakers come during the summer while intrepid trekkers come to walk the notoriously challenging Chadda ice trek along the frozen Zaskar during mid-winter. The road

threatens to destroy the area's pristine wilderness feel and, in the process, dry up the valuable tourism revenue.

As we left the road builders behind and paddled into the depths of the Grand Canyon of the Zaskar, I felt like an explorer paddling off the end of the map in search of the unknown. When we made camp below the cliff-top village of Nyerak in the heart of the gorge, we were a four-day walk from the nearest road – across rugged mountain trails – or a two-day paddle, through grade III white-water. Suddenly Sanjay's statement about being alone seemed very real.

Far from being scary, however, the canyon was breathtakingly beautiful. I overheard members of my raft crew uttering a long list of superlatives – mind-blowing, miraculous, astounding, gobsmacking – as they attempted to articulate their feelings. The chocolate-frothing river snaked its way through colourful layers of geological history scripted on the canyon walls. In the depths of the gorge, with our tiny boat dwarfed by sheer rock walls

NON-STOP ACTION:
(Far left) Tackling a big wave at the Chilling rapid; a view of one of India's most picturesque campsites

NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

From Delhi, take an early morning flight to Leh. Rafting operators provide transport and hotel accommodation as part of their packages. Two days acclimatising in Leh is recommended ahead of the three-day road transfer via Kargil to the put-in point at Remala on the Stod river

WHERE TO STAY:

Aquaterra provides hotel accommodation at the Mogol in Leh and Siachen in Kargil. Thereafter, participants are accommodated in two-man dome tents. Buffet meals are served.

WHAT TO DO:

Plan short hikes to visit gompas and remote villages (like Nyerak in the Zaskar Canyon).

TECHNICALITIES:

Mid-July to early-September is the ideal time. It is desirable for anyone wanting to run the bigger grade IV rapids to know swimming. Everybody is supplied with 5mm neoprene wetsuits, booties, splash jackets, life jackets and helmets. In addition to personal items and toiletries, bring a towel, wind/water-proof jacket, and flashlight, as well as a hat, sun block and sunglasses. Warm clothing, thermals and a cosy sleeping bag are essential.



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that climbed hundreds of vertical metres towards the bluest sky, it was hard not to become over-awed.

It was day six and, as we exited the canyon, a massive wave of frigid glacial-melt water swept over the bow and jolted me out of my reverie. The river was swiftly gaining momentum and the white-water was steadily becoming wilder. The time for appreciating the scenery was over; now we needed to paddle hard to avoid the huge holes in the infamous '18-down' rapid. This notorious rapid inherited its strange name from a previous Aquaterra expedition after two boats flipped in quick succession and sent all 18 crewmembers swimming down the Zaskar.

With the water barely above freezing level and no sunshine in the depths of the canyon, our crew were determined to thwart the Zaskar's best efforts to eject us from the relative warmth and safety of our raft. The boat surged forward like a well-oiled machine as it carried our team of rafting enthusiasts into battle with nature. Days of paddling together had produced a battle-hardened crew that displayed camaraderie and timing.

Under the expert guidance of our captain, Sanjay Rana, the raft deftly negotiated the churning white-water and big wave trains that characterised our journey through the latter parts of the canyon. The placid river of previous days was replaced by an angry torrent of churning three metre-high waves. We dodged eddies and whirlpools, punched through massive standing waves and rode some classic white-water on the Zaskar's biggest rapids below the village of Chilling.

The screams of our crew were drowned out by the roar of the river as paddles dug into the angry water and propelled our boat through thundering waves of icy glacial-melt water. Sanjay lead from the front with urgent and unambiguous

commands. We obeyed his every instruction and, thankfully, succeeded in avoiding taking a dreaded swim.

Our brave friends in the kayaks were not so fortunate. When the white-water mêlée engulfed their little boats, three of them ditched and went swimming. We fished the exhausted swimmers out of the frigid water and hauled them onto our raft. They came aboard spluttering with eyes the size of saucers but, within seconds, they were all smiles and ready to go again. Kayaking is certainly not for the fainthearted!

There is no denying that a trip down the Zaskar is an expedition in the truest sense of the word; however, half the fun is the epic undertaking of the three-day journey to the put in point on the Stod river. It allows intrepid explorers access to a stunningly beautiful and largely inaccessible region of western Ladakh. Only the most dedicated and adventurous travellers have the inclination and stamina required to appreciate the rewards offered by a rafting adventure through the 'Land of White Copper'.

A mere 600 of the world's most fortunate souls have been treated to the life-changing experience of a foray down the remote Zaskar and through its deep gorge. Only in India, with its wealth of natural assets and world-class landscapes, could one of the world's greatest canyons escape becoming a World Heritage Site, let alone be denied a national park status!

It seems that an ambitious road project is determined to carve a route through the Grand Canyon of the Zaskar. Sadly, in the process, this desire for development will scar one of India's most pristine wilderness areas. So, be sure to sign up for the trip-of-a-lifetime before they blast the beauty and serenity out of this spectacular canyon. ■

FOR THE BRAVE-HEARTED: (Left) a spectacular waterfall erupts from the cliff face; a monk blesses the rafts and crew