

Wet and wild in the Himalayas

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

Many of north India's finest rafting rivers remain largely unvisited: the preserve of adventure-seekers and wilderness-lovers alike. Here's where to begin your rafting adventure.

India has been blessed with an unparalleled wealth and diversity of Himalayan rivers that offer year-round access to world-class white-water. Mentioned below are some of the best rapids to ride.

FUN AND GAMES ON THE GANGA

Just north of Rishikesh lies the epicentre of India's white-water and adventure sports industry. Well over a hundred rafting companies operate commercial trips and camps along this popular stretch of the holy Ganga River. It's worth remembering that the Upper Alaknanda (a nearby tributary of the Ganga) is a great option for those who have a few more days at their disposal and want a quality white-water experience without the crowds.

Dummy As part of the Village Ways Walking Tour, the villages in the Binsar region host the guests.



India, with its vast rural tracts and biodiversity, is finally tapping into its potential for such tourism.



the river with Himalayan River Runners and Camp Five Elements occupying two of the Ganga's finest beaches. India's white-water Mecca lies eight hours by road from Delhi, to where Jet Airways operates daily flights from most major cities across India.

TACKLING THE TONS

The put-in point for raft trips on the Tons River is located 450 km from Delhi. You could drive there via Meerut and Mussoorie. However, the easier option is to take the overnight Mussoorie Express from Delhi's Nizamuddin station and transfer at Dehradun to the service provider's vehicle for the six-hour drive to the village of Mori, barely 100 km from the Tibetan border. Rafting companies

Above: The houses in the Village Ways circuit are modest, but comfortable.

Left: The Wild Brook Resort was set up with a view to educating visitors on the benefits and methods of conservation.

Rafting companies offer half- and full-day descents on three consecutive sections of the Ganga. The first, from Kudyla to Marine Drive, boasts the Ganga's most notorious rapid known as The Wall. The second section from Marine Drive to Shivpuri has an exciting rapid: Three Blind Mice; while the final section from Shivpuri to NIM Beach on the outskirts of Rishikesh offers the Ganga's most solid white-water. Three big rapids – Roller Coaster, Golf Course and Club House – ensure hearts are pounding and adrenaline pumping as rafts skirt deep holes and punch through gigantic standing waves.

The Ganga season runs from late-September until the end of April when heat drives thrill-seekers to higher altitudes in search of wild white-water. A plethora of seasonal raft camps line both sides of



Village Ways: Smriti Mukherji



keep you suitably entertained along your journey. It is an action-packed trip that suits first-time rafters as well as experienced white-water addicts.

The Kali-Sarda River is located in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand. It can be rafted from October to March with Oct/Nov and Feb/March offering the best weather. The rapids are biggest during the high water month of October; however, first-time rafters might prefer a more tranquil low-water run during February or March.

The easiest option for getting there is the overnight Ranikhet Express from Old Delhi station to Kathgodam. Jet Airways has daily flights to Delhi from all across India. At Kathgodam transfer to the service provider's vehicles for an eight-hour drive via Bhimtal (breakfast stop) and Almora to Pithoragarh, which lies 35 km from the usual put-in point at Jhulaghat.

India's best-kept secret delivers on every level: weather, wilderness, wildlife, and white-water.

GRAND CANYON OF THE ZANSKAR

The magnificent Zanskar River, situated in isolated western Ladakh, is one of India's most spectacular yet unheralded rivers. A mere 600 of the world's

establish seasonal base camps on the Upper Tons from mid-April until end-June.

The Tons Valley cuts through the Jaunsar Bawar region of Garhwal where the river marks the boundary between Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. A glacial-melt river with its frozen source in the 20,720-ft Bandarpunch peak, the Tons is a small-medium volume class IV river with fast flowing water that could be politely described as bracingly cold.

While the Upper Tons boasts rapids such as Sticky Sarla (named after the village upstream), Sharp Horn (one of the rapids on a long section called the 'Horns of the Tons') and Looking Up Sandhra (so-called because it's below the bridge at Sandhra), the real action takes place on the Middle Tons: a 35-km stretch of near continuous white-water with some monstrous rapids at Khunigad and Tiuni Bazaar.

Rafting legend Jack Morison rated this river as 'one of the top 10 world-class rivers on the planet'. The Tons is adrenaline-spiced entertainment at its best!

GOING WILD ON THE KALI-SARDA

An expedition down the Kali-Sarda seems to come straight out of The Jungle Book: perfect weather, pristine wilderness, no roads, plentiful wildlife and big sandy beach campsites crisscrossed by fresh leopard tracks! The Kali offers a weeklong aquatic adventure with the bonus of warm water and exciting (rather than terrifying) grade III rapids to



Above: Adventure Hills Cycling Tours are all customised keeping in mind the fitness of the riders and the tourist interests of the group.

Below: The Chitvan Jungle Lodge manages to bring together luxury and eco-friendliness.

Chitvan Jungle Lodge; © Ling Xia | Dreamstime.com

This is probably the only place and the only time in all of India where you can witness both man and god paying obeisance to gods.



Adventure

most fortunate souls have been treated to the life-changing experience of a foray down this remote river.

During the descent, rafting aficionados are treated to an ever-changing kaleidoscope of scenic beauty as the Zaskar delights with its savagely magnificent landscapes. As you approach the midway point of the 180-km paddle through the Land of White Copper, you will enter The Grand Canyon of the Zaskar: undoubtedly the grandest canyon in all of Asia.

To reach the Zaskar is a major undertaking. From Delhi, a spectacular early morning Jet Airways flight skims Himalayan peaks before descending into the Indus Valley and landing at Leh. Rafting operators (Aquaterra, Himalayan River Runners and Splash Ladakh) provide hotels for acclimatisation and transport for the three-day road transfer via Kargil to the put-in point at Remala on the Stod River. The Zaskar can only be rafted between mid-July and early-September due to high altitude and extreme weather conditions.

BIG WATER BRAHMAPUTRA

A trip down the Brahmaputra, also known as the Siang, is a once-in-a-lifetime adventure on 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. Rafting expeditions typically tackle a 160 km

section of the river from Tuting to Pasighat in the remote northeast.

The surrounding beauty of jungle-clad mountain slopes enhances the tumultuous descent through powerful white-water and challenging rapids. The steep-sided Ninguing and Marmong gorges of the first two days give way to wide valleys where the olive green Siang is offset against dark green rainforest, snowy Himalayan peaks and a pale blue sky – a spectacular wilderness setting for an extraordinary expedition into the seldom-visited region of Arunachal Pradesh.

Aquaterra Adventures is currently the only operator offering guaranteed annual departures on the challenging rivers of the northeast. Their 2010 expeditions include multi-day descents of the Siang, Subansari and Kameng rivers. From Delhi a picturesque flight takes you past snowy Himalayan peaks via Guwahati and on to Dibrugarh. Aquaterra arranges all the permits and transportation for the three-day boat and road transfer to the put-in point at Tuting.

Below: Not only do villages in the Binsar Reserve provide accommodation for guests, they take care of all the meals as well.

Bottom: The Chitvan Jungle Lodge can arrange for guests to go on trails through the Kanha National Park.

QUICK FACTS

ACCOMMODATION

Guests are accommodated in two-man dome tents during multi-day river expeditions. Tasty meals are served as buffets. Showers come in the form of natural springs and small waterfalls! Toilets are rustic, environmentally friendly, dry pit latrines.

WHAT TO DO

White-water rafting is the premier attraction of a multi-day river trip. However, cultural interactions, day hikes, mahseer fishing, bird watching, wildlife spotting and relaxing on white-sand beaches are added attractions.

RAFTING TECHNICALITIES

Although swimming ability is not mandatory, it certainly is desirable for anyone wanting to run the bigger grade III+ rapids on offer. All rafting enthusiasts are supplied with 3mm neoprene wetsuits, splash jackets, life jackets and helmets. The use of this state-of-the-art safety equipment is compulsory. In addition to personal items and toiletries, bring your rafting sandals, a sleeping bag, towel, and flashlight, as well as a hat, sunglasses and sun block.

RECOMMENDED OPERATORS

Aquaterra Adventures (www.aquaterra.in) and Himalayan River Runners (www.hrrindia.com).

FOR MORE INFORMATION Log on to www.treknraft.com/rafting3.htm



Chitvan Jungle Lodge; Village Ways