



The Siang challenge

A group of fearless big-water kayakers take time out to enjoy their first 'shower' in over a week!

Whitewater doesn't get any bigger than the ferocious Upper Brahmaputra, but this fearsome river is tempered by fascinating folklore and a powerful cultural heritage concealed in the forgotten reaches of Arunachal Pradesh.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

The Siang, effectively a continuation of the notorious Yarlung Tsangpo River from Tibet, offers rafting and kayaking enthusiasts an opportunity to embrace India's premier whitewater descent. Rechristened the Siang (or Upper Brahmaputra) upon entering Arunachal Pradesh, this formidable river is gaining a reputation as the Holy Grail of Himalayan river-running. Word of its tumultuous descent through the remote north-eastern rainforests of India has spread like wildfire. Boaters, awed by the sheer size and power of the rapids, justifiably claim that the river is at par with the best whitewater you'll find anywhere in the world.

The Siang is a larger-than-life big-volume river adventure and the sheer size of its rapids overwhelms everything. So, be warned, in the sober light of day as you approach the monster-sized rapids of Ninguing, Pulsating Palsi and Ponging, you will undoubtedly find yourself wondering whether you've bitten off more than you can chew!

THE CALL FOR EXPEDITION

Originating as a glacial trickle east of holy Mt Kailash and snaking its way across hundreds of inhospitable miles of barren Tibetan plateau, the Tsangpo and its infamous Big Bend have long been the stuff of myth. In 1880, unsure of the

'no-man's land' that lay just across the frontier, the British Empire dispatched spies in various guises to survey the area. Kinthup, an intrepid Sikkimese explorer, was one such 'probe' and he discovered that the Tsangpo in Tibet and the Brahmaputra in India were one and the same river. In the 130 years following his epic conquest, the raging river and its fearsome waterfalls have forced numerous expeditions to retreat. To this day, the Big Bend persists as one of the last largely unexplored regions on our planet.

Crossing the border the river becomes more manageable and accessible, although expeditions through remote Arunachal remain a serious logistical challenge. Just reaching the river put-in on the outskirts of Tuting (a stone's throw south of the Tibetan border) requires intrepid river runners to undertake two plane rides, a day-long ferry voyage up the broad Brahmaputra, a two-day rickety jeep journey and, ultimately, they must negotiate a long and rickety suspension footbridge, before they can get their paddles wet.

After the long journey in, it is a surreal feeling to finally be gearing up on the bank of the legendary Siang. For us, anticipation boiled over as we considered the virgin riverine territory



Clockwise from above: With Captain Rana on the oars and his team paddling powerfully, their raft emerges from the whitewater mêlée of Ponging with more than a couple of the crew members looking unmistakably terrified by the size of the furious rapid; Spectacular scenery dominates a descent of the Siang with jungle-clad hills giving way to snow-capped Himalayan peaks; Arunachal Pradesh is another world ...cars and kayaks give way to working elephants in this fantastical land.

before us, musing over what would, undoubtedly, prove to be one of the most memorable 180 km whitewater descents of our lifetime.

A few paddle strokes was all it took to make us realise that this was no ordinary river: the size, the speed, the power – even on the flat – were enough to make us all wonder what on earth we were doing out there. With the two behemoths of Ningguing and Palsi lurking as menacing obstacles on the opening day, the river refused to let us settle in gradually. There was no room for the faint-hearted as the river swiftly put to rest any lingering misconceptions about its awesome power. Swiss boater Tomi Bohnenblust summed up the epic whitewater on day one when he later confessed, “The view down that first huge ramp into the guts of Ningguing rapid will be engraved in my memory for all eternity.”

Waves crashed over the raft from all directions. It felt like an eternity that we were buried in the unruly rapid before the Siang spat us out the other side.

HEAD-ON

Tackling huge waves, potent chutes, challenging swirlies and killer eddies soon become a daily ritual, not to mention a rite of passage of sorts for intrepid raft crews. Ningguing, Pulsating Palsi, Rikor, Zebra Rock, Tooth Fairy (portage), Hairy Hari, Broken Oar,



Moing Madness, Karko Killer and, finally, the sting in the tail, Ponging – great names for some classic rapids. The whitewater sections tend to be long and continuous with menacing breakers that can rear up to a whopping 30 ft when you include their lethally exploding crests. Needless to say, you take on the Siang with no illusions about violent ejections and consider yourself a conqueror of sorts – or just plain lucky – if your foot braces hold firm and you manage to survive the relentless whitewater assault.



For all this, a shot at the mighty Siang is quite within the grasp of amateur paddling crews. The river is big, but forgiving. Drop-pool in nature, it's a predominantly safe river where raging waves ebb out into long, calm stretches of flat water, allowing for comfortable rescues of swimmers in case of a raft flip.

In addition to boasting world-class whitewater, the Siang unlocks the door to a geologist's paradise. The river actually predates the Himalaya and over the millennia it has carved out the staggeringly impressive Ningguing and Marmong gorges. We paddled through this inaccessible 50-km canyon section during a two-day run at the start of the expedition. The campsite at the end of day 3, perched above the deafening roar of Tooth Fairy rapid, made for an especially awe-inspiring spot to spend a night.

The next morning, we tightened life jackets, strapped on helmets and shoved our heavily laden rafts off the beach. When I shifted my gaze downstream, I had a premonition that serious action lurked ahead. As we navigated our way through the final stretches of the Marmong gorge, we powered into wave trains 25 ft high on Hairy Hari and conquered massive eddy line whorls on Kim's Broken Oar rapid. Upon exiting the turbulence, the valley suddenly opened up; however, the river refused to let us go without a fight.

The mammoth whitewater of a notoriously unpredictable rapid known as Moing Madness lurked around the bend. After surveying the wild river for 10 minutes, head guide, Dhruv Naresh

Rana, returned to our anxious crew and, with a cheeky grin, asked, "Everyone ready to have some fun?"

We pulled hard on our paddles to get the raft on the right line before we dropped into the whitewater mêlée. Our guide had to shout to be heard above the roar of the river and the deafening noise of a brewing storm. "All together now; hard forward!" he yelled. The roar grew steadily louder as gigantic waves emerged from the mist ahead.

Below: Buddhist monks say prayers and bless team members.

Bottom: Team members negotiating a long and wobbly suspension footbridge before they can finally get their paddles wet.



Adventure



Above: Swiss kayaker Tomi Bohnenblust paddles strongly through Ningguing rapid on the first day of the Siang descent.

Below: The Siang is surrounded by thick jungle and pristine wilderness typical of the wild Northeast India.

Facing page: British kayaker Graham Helsby paddles into a cave on the Siang.

My heart thumped wildly and excitement mounted as we descended into the boiling mayhem of the boisterous rapid. Everyone was pumped up: high on adrenaline. Battling to make himself heard above the din, Rana bellowed, "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 an angry sky. But, when his voice ratcheted up an octave on the next urgent command, there was no disputing the seriousness of our situation and we knew we had to paddle as never before.

We were in the midst of some genuinely big whitewater. Waves crashed over the raft from all directions. It felt like an eternity that we were buried

in the unruly rapid before the Siang spat us out the other side. With adrenaline coursing through our veins and the ecstatic thrill of a wild river ride reverberating through our bodies, we emerged super-charged from the final wave train. The storm failed to dampen our mood and as we danced on our boat another raft crew spontaneously broke out in song. We had all signed on for a rare adventure on India's biggest and wildest river and we were absolutely getting our money's worth!

CULTURE BY THE RAPIDS

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 as our adrenaline-fuelled merriment gave way to a steely determination to make sure our raft did not flip. Nobody wanted to take a swim in these atrocious conditions. Our captain barked instructions; we obeyed. After many days paddling together, we had evolved into a cohesive team capable of responding to his commands in unison. Rana chose the perfect line, threading us through the meatiest part of the turbulent rapid.

As the day wore on, the clouds emptied and a watery sun broke through once more. Everyone applauded. We dragged the rafts onto a beautiful sandy beach at the picturesque Geku Twins Campsite, pitched the tents and spread out our wet gear to dry. As soon as everyone got some hot food in their bellies, the laughter and banter returned.



Adventure

After the trials and tribulations of a truly memorable day on the water, we all welcomed a rest day at our idyllic riverside camp. From sunrise to sunset a non-stop procession of curious local tribals sporting traditional dress stopped by our beach camp to greet the 'foreigners'. It was both a rare privilege and a fascinating cultural experience to interact with these Adi tribals, some of whom had never laid eyes on 'outsiders' before. Arunachal was closed to foreigners until recently and indigenous tribes have retained much of their cultural identity; they still carry their signature daos (all-purpose machetes), bows and arrows, wear boar tusk or hornbill embellished helmets and live in cavernous bamboo houses.

Through an interpreter we engaged them in conversation and soon learned that wealth in the Siang valley is measured not by money, but rather by the number of mithuns (a domestic hybrid of an Indian bison), pigs, chickens, and mice a family possesses. Furthermore, this livestock is essential if a young man wishes to wed. At marriages, the groom must settle the bridal price with animal stock that he owns. Our amiable visitors went on



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QUICK FACTS

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to December

GETTING THERE

JetLite has daily flights to Dibrugarh from Delhi. Aquaterra arrange all permits and transportation for the three-day boat and road transfer to the put-in point at Tuting.

ACCOMMODATION

Hotel accommodation in Dibrugarh and Pasighat is provided as part of your Siang package. Thereafter participants are accommodated in two-man dome tents. Meals are served as buffets. Hot showers are only available at the hotels. While on expedition, toilets are in the form of rustic, environmentally friendly, dry pit latrines.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Aquaterra Adventures (www.aquaterra.in) is currently the only operator offering guaranteed annual departures on the challenging Siang River. For further information contact Fay Singh: fay@aquaterra.in

to convey the essence of a mithun sacrifice with a graphic rendition of the gruesome act. We were left in no doubt that this bloody ritual is certainly not recommended for anyone with a weak stomach.

The following morning we bade farewell to the friendly Adis and 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 relax and appreciate distant snow-capped peaks and the pristine jungle-clad valleys. Mist clung to hills swathed with silent, impenetrable rainforest. As the sun climbed over the ridge and bathed the rafts in warmth, we dozed off and floated peacefully downstream.

The Siang, however, was not quite done with us. A final battle lay in store at Ponging: the last monstrous rapid of the trip. With several thousand tons of water propelling the rafts through this chaotic section of the angry river, it was a furious farewell from Siang and a potent reminder of the raw power ensconced in this great river. As we closed in on Pasighat and a rendezvous with the ferry that would take us home, the Siang ceased to exist. Renamed the Brahmaputra, son of the supreme Hindu god Brahma, it is the only male river in India. As we beached our boats for the last time,

expedition members were overcome by emotion. The thrill at having successfully descended one of the world's great rivers gave way to a feeling of privilege at having journeyed through an area that would easily rank as one of the most inaccessible and culturally fascinating places on the planet. ■

New Zealand kayaker Mike Savory appreciates the pristine wilderness and white-sand beaches of the remote Siang River.

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