



RIVER of DREAMS

— Stephen Cunliffe —

An expedition down the **Mahakali** can quite aptly be described as ‘a trip right out of *The Jungle Book*’: perfect weather, warm water, pristine wilderness, no roads, plentiful wildlife and big sandy beach campsites crisscrossed with fresh leopard tracks! I was expecting a fun-filled week dominated by aquatic adventures, yet the Kali surpassed even my wildest expectations.

Almost immediately upon setting off from Jhulaghat on the Indian bank, we entered an attractive, steep-sided valley. Hundreds of tiny waterfalls cascaded down the lushly vegetated cliffs in sheets of dripping water that nourished a dense covering of deep green moss, ferns and attractive phoenix palms. The vegetation clung precariously to the steep-sided valley walls. Periodically rocky overhangs jutted out of the verdant jungle foliage proudly displaying their calcified stalactites to the flabbergasted raft crews down below. The juxtaposition of the river against the surrounding dark green hillsides, the protruding orange rocky outcrops and a deep blue sky, produced scenes of such extraordinary beauty that everyone was rendered speechless.

On the first day we spent just three hours on the water as we concentrated on familiarising ourselves with the rafting equipment and learning the important paddle commands of our Aquaterra guides. Although much of our day was spent drifting in awe of the picturesque surroundings, we also ran three smallish grade II rapids that whetted my appetite for what lay ahead. Towards mid-afternoon we landed the rafts below a small rapid at the idyllic Matola Beach Campsite. It was barely the end of day one, but I was already bowled over by what the Kali River had to offer.



In its upper reaches the river forms the international border between India and Nepal; known as the Mahakali on the Nepali side and Kali Sarda on the Indian bank. Our expedition was following a 110-kilometre stretch of the river as it cuts a swathe through thick tropical jungle, revealing a remote wilderness area interspersed with the terraced farms of occasional Kumaoni and Nepali villages. The combination of attractive scenery, wildlife, beaches and mild white-water over the first few days makes this an ideal trip for anyone with a sense of adventure and a love of nature.

Day two saw us once again paddling in mild grade II white-water as the river threaded its way through deep valleys surrounded by indigenous forest. Troops of monkeys scampered along the banks while wary deer lurked in the shadows along the forest edge. Shortly before lunch we beached our rafts on the Nepali bank and paid our respects at the small riverside Dev Tal temple, before floating on towards our campsite for the next two nights at picture-perfect Kheth Beach.

A rest day here allowed the more energetic members of our group to tackle a steep hike up to Niddle Village. It was a long, sweaty climb; however, the views north towards the snowy Himalayan peaks were spectacular and well worth the effort.

The river livened up considerably as we entered the second half of our Kali descent. During the course of days

four to six we continued to paddle through eye-catching scenery and pristine wilderness; however, the river became more demanding and engaging. Appreciation of scenery was temporarily put on hold, as we tackled some solid grade III+ white-water on the Kali's three biggest rapids: Dimberghat, Chookha and Arjun.

Although most of the members of our Kali expedition were riding in rafts, we did have one 'ducky' with us on the trip. The 'ducky' can best be described as a small two-man inflatable kayak. Trip leader Harendra 'Gappu' Rawat advised, "Only have a go in the ducky if you're thirsty for adventure! You need to be happy with lots of water and taking a few swims!"

I enjoy swimming, so, the thrill-

seeking addict that I am, I opted to trade my place in the relative comfort and safety of a big self-bailing raft for the front seat of a small unstable 'ducky' as we prepared to run the mighty Chookha rapid. Under the direction of Aquaterra guide 'Little Sanjay' Rana, I was full of confidence and ready to take on the biggest of the Kali's infamous rapids.

"This is a very, very good rapid," began Sanjay. I was feeling excited and full of confidence until he added, "Are you ready for swimming?"

I wasn't sure if I had heard him correctly, but as the noise of angry white-water grew louder, I began to wonder what I had got myself into. "Are we going into that?" I asked in disbelief. "Are you serious!" I was feeling decidedly nervous and the adrenalin was pumping as we entered the ferocious mayhem of the rapid and steered around some nasty looking holes.

Sanjay was the consummate professional: focused and determined. He barked commands loudly in quick succession, "Hard forward; stop; brace; balance." I did my best to obey. However, when I saw the size of the curling wave looming ahead, my paddle froze mid-stroke. I was in shock. "Come on paddle; hard forward," yelled Sanjay as a massive wall of water broadsided our little boat.

The power of Chookha effortlessly flipped our tiny craft and we ended up swimming through the remainder of the white-water. I emerged spluttering at the end of the rapid just in time



to see a huge smile spread across Sanjay's face. He burst out laughing and threw me a high five as we pulled ourselves back into the 'duddy'. "Very, very good swimming in the angry Chookha!" he announced with a big grin spread across his face. It wasn't hard to see that even the guides were having fun on the Kali.

An expedition down the Kali is a weeklong, action-packed adventure with the bonus of warm water and exciting (rather than terrifying) grade III white-water to keep you suitably entertained along your journey. The trip is perfectly suited to first-time rafters and experienced white-water addicts alike. The Kali is without doubt the most under-rated river trip on offer in the Himalayas and it delivered on every level: weather, wilderness, wildlife, and white-water.

TRIP PLANNER

Getting there: The Kali River is most easily accessed from the Indian side. From the Nepal side there are domestic flights from Kathmandu to Nepalgunj from where travellers can take local buses or hire vehicles to the rafting point. Nepal Airlines Corporation also flies to Delhi daily, which is the ideal international gateway for your whitewater adventure. The easiest option for onward travel is to take the overnight Ranikhet Express from Old Delhi station to Kathgodam (AC III fares: Rs584 o/w). 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 kilometres from the usual put-in point at Jhulaghat in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand

Where to stay and eat: Aquaterra provides comfortable overnight accommodation at the Hotel Zara Residency in Pithoragarh. Thereafter guests are accommodated in two-man dome tents on the river. 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 an expedition down the Kali. However, day hikes (the Niddle Village hike provides picturesque views across the Kumaon region towards the distant snow-capped Himalayan peaks), temple

visits, mahseer fishing, bird watching, wildlife spotting and relaxing on white-sand beaches all add to the attractions on offer.

Rafting seasons: The Kali Sarda 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.

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 on arrival 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). Further information at: www.trekraft.com/river_rafting_india.htm.

Upcoming departures:

Aquaterra offers regular fixed departure Kali trips with their next expedition scheduled for 29 October – 6 November 2010. Contact Fay (fay@aquaterra.in) to make a booking.



All photos:- Stephen Cunliffe