

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



TONS

Rough and tumble

In the Himalayan white waters of the Tons valley, a single command marks the fine line between safety and danger on the rapids

BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

This is a very rocky one, so I need everyone to keep paddling through the rapid. Speed is essential for us to steer and to avoid all the rocks; if it looks bad, then I'll give you the 'get down' command, so just be ready for anything," yells Rana in an attempt to be heard above the roaring river.

Sanjay Singh Rana, our highly capable Aquaterra river guide, is preparing us for what we might expect in the upcoming rapid, Sticky Sarla, as our raft bears down on the noisy white water ahead.

Although the rapid is shallow

and steep, our enthusiastic team of paddlers is overconfident and dismissive of what appears to be a relatively benign stretch of white water. One minute our raft is zipping through the white water, the next moment it catches on a rock just below the surface and grinds to an abrupt halt. "Brace yourselves," yells Rana. But it's too late; our raft's rapid forward momentum and the sudden unexpected stop cruelly combine to eject one of our hapless bow paddlers over the front of the raft and into the angry white cauldron. There is little margin for error on the Tons, and slow reactions are the difference between the relatively dry safety of the raft and the dangers of an ultra-refreshing, rocky river.

Rana reacts quickly, shouting, "Grab the line." Rajat 'Rookie-Cookie' Mathur is already airborne and heading towards the angry river. Luckily, he has the presence of mind to heed Rana's timely advice and grabs hold of the bowline before disappearing overboard. Rookie is immersed in the icy water but he remains connected to the all-important raft. Fellow bow paddler Arvind Vermani moves across the raft and quickly executes a textbook rescue of the "short swimmer". After much backslapping and a good deal of high-fiving, we set off again, eager to see what the Tons might throw up around the next corner.

Aside from Sticky Sarla (named after the village upstream), we successfully negotiate the remainder of the rapids on the Upper Tons. With Give Me Mori (after Mori village), Sharp Horn (one of the rapids on a long section called the "Horns of the Tons") and Looking Up Sandhra (so called as it's below the bridge at Sandhra) all under our belts, confidence returns to our crew. We will need all this self-belief and our new-found experience as we progress to the big rapids of the 35km Middle Tons section of our rafting expedition in the days ahead.

The Tons Valley cuts through

the Jaunsar Bawar region of Garhwal where the river marks the boundary between Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. The Tons feeds into the Yamuna before ultimately emptying into the Ganga. 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. Camp Lunagad, our rafting base camp, is situated barely 100km from the Tibetan border.

Although we are repeatedly told that the water levels are particularly low this year, Vaibhav Kala, head guide and owner of Aquaterra, confides in me that the last few seasons have seen decreased precipitation, possibly as a result of global warming or abnormal El Niño conditions. The result is an incredibly bony river that requires well-honed technical skills and teamwork to negotiate. Aside from being shallow and rocky, the river boasts a multitude of obstructions and challenges, such as half-submerged tree trunks and whirlpools in the midst of the churning white water. These obstacles add to the challenge and thrill of the rafting experience.

Extremely low water levels have transformed the Tons into what is possibly the most technical river that I have ever run. Kala concurs, "This is arguably the most technical raft trip in the Himalayas and on a shallow, rocky river, there is no substitute for training, technique, timing and teamwork."

Rafting crews need to practise and fine-tune their skills before venturing into the continuous white water trains that dominate long sections of the Middle Tons. This doesn't mean that you need to be a seasoned rafting junkie to



Breaking the waves:

(top) Rafts negotiate the Tons rapids; a campsite by the riverside.

flow upstream!

The rafts become tough to control and it's a real challenge manoeuvring them through the rock-strewn river. The roar of the wind drowns Rana's urgent commands to paddle and we flounder in the midst of the rapids.

Within a matter of minutes, though, the storm moves off, the sun reappears and we return unscathed to the tranquil Tons valley. The friendly, smiling faces of inquisitive villagers greet our procession of rafts as we paddle past small villages.

When we stop to camp on the riverbank for the night, a large crowd of children gather on the fringe of our camp. They sit quietly and observe the strange goings-on until Rana gets everyone singing and dancing to break the ice. Earlier in the day, the Tons entertained and terrified us in equal measure. Now I'm happy to see we have become a novel source of entertainment to our new found friends.

Write to lounge@livemint.com



If your child is above 12 and possesses a sense of adventure, rafting would be a great way to spend a holiday.

TRIP PLANNER/CAMP LUNAGAD

Camp Lunagad and the Tons river are located 450km from Delhi. You could drive there via Meerut and Mussoorie. The easier option is to take the overnight Mussoorie Express from Delhi's Nizamuddin station (AC II fares: Rs586) and transfer at Dehradun to the service provider's vehicle for the 6-hour drive to Mori village, located on the banks of the Upper Tons.

Stay Aquaterra has twin-bed deluxe tents. Meals are served as buffets. Showers are provided at base camp with hot water on request. Toilets come in the form of rustic, environment-friendly, dry-pit latrines.

Do White-water rafting is the premier attraction on the Tons. However, trout fishing, day hikes (the Sandhra-Mora loop walk is a very pleasant 3-hour stroll that provides picturesque views across the Tons valley), overnight trekking options, forest walks to hidden rock pools, bird-watching and relaxing on the riverbank, add to the diversity of attractions on offer.

The Tons can be rafted from mid-April to end-June and in late-September. Although swimming ability is not mandatory, it certainly is desirable for anyone wanting to run the bigger grade IV 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 wind/waterproof jacket, towel and flashlight, as well as a hat, sunglasses and sunblock.

Recommended operators: Aquaterra (www.aquaterra.in) and Himalayan River Runners (www.hrrindia.com). Further information at: www.indianhimalayas.net. Costs start from Rs20,000 and go up to Rs55,000, plus taxes.

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