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SPLASHDOWN!

Whiteknuckle whitewater in Nepal

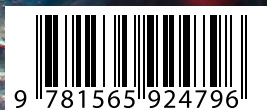


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The gnarly Karnali

Ride an epic whitewater rollercoaster through western Nepal – a river that may soon join the list of those dammed to provide hydroelectricity

Story & photography by Alex Treadway



THE BUS CRAWLS ALONG A MOUNTAIN ROAD NORTH OF NEPALGANJ, a major transport hub in southwest Nepal. I peek out of the windows as we inch our way around tight switchback turns. We're nearing the end of a two-day road approach and soon I glimpse our goal for the first time. Emerald green and as wide as a football field, the river snakes its way through a gorge. From our lofty vantage point high on the side of the valley it makes a peaceful sight but I know the truth, at water-level, is very different.

Below us is the Karnali – the country's longest river at 507 kilometres – which rises in Tibet to flow through far western Nepal's remote hills and forests. Unlike more technical rafting rivers in Nepal such as the Bhote Kosi and the Tamur, the Karnali is a big volume river which, along with its tributaries, drains most of west Nepal. For rafters this means many stretches of flat water but when the whitewater is big, it's really big.

Stretches of rivers are graded 1-6 on the International Scale of River Difficulty, with 6 being officially unraftable. We would be introduced to our first Karnali rapid the next day, a Grade 4 wake-up call named Sweetness & Light. There would be lots more Grade 4 and above to follow on this trip including well-known rapids such as Flip & Strip, Jailhouse Rock, Juicer and the notorious God's House – a Grade 5 monster with a hole the size of a bus. Holes are areas of whitewater that rush over drops in the river. The water rolls back on itself creating a hydraulic tumbling motion that can swallow kayaks and slam a raft upside-down in a heartbeat.

Our group of Canadians, Americans, Brits, Australians and Kiwis is a mixed bag, experience-wise. Some are seasoned kayakers, taking on the Grade 4 and 5 rapids solo, while others would be clinging on to the inflatable rafts to be escorted down the river by our experienced river guides. I am one such person, aiming to migrate between various rafts as the trip progresses to give myself as many photo opportunities as possible.

We duly arrive at Karaleghat, our put-in point on the river. Chisopani, our take-out point, lies 10 days downriver. Our two buses, fully laden with people, kayaks, rafts, food and equipment park as close to the river as possible and we all help unstrap the cargo and carry everything to the river. Rafts are inflated, equipment is checked and various safety briefings follow.

THE PEACE AND THE POWER
The Karnali runs through some of Nepal's most serene scenery, but its huge volume of water won't disappoint adrenaline junkies either.



Among our guides is an old hand at rafting rivers throughout Asia, Pat O’Keeffe. He first came to Nepal from Australia in the 80s, fell in love with the rivers and has since clocked up enough river miles to go around the world a few times over. He’s taken part in a number of major expeditions, most notably handling rafting support for renowned kayakers such as Mike Abbott and Steve Fisher on their first descents down tributaries of Burma’s Maykha River.

It takes a few hours to get everything organised into the boats but finally we all clamber into our various craft and drift off: our first day just a one-hour paddle to the first campsite.

Pat, who is perched up high at the back of the raft, dips his paddle in and uses it as a rudder. I look into the clear water and see that even though the river is flat, the riverbed is rushing away beneath us at a surprising rate.

The river rises to the north in Tibet near Mt Kailash and runs through the seldom-seen region of Humla. Along the way it offers some of the finest

fish habitat in Nepal. Giant catfish, golden mashers, crocodiles and the extremely rare Ganges river dolphin have all been seen in the Karnali. To the south it finds its way to Bardia National Park, which at almost 1,000 square kilometres is Nepal’s largest and most undisturbed wilderness area, home to

SOLO MISSION
A kayaker’s wet dream, but not for beginners. It is usually possible to stow a kayak on a raft for the big rapids, if you’re unsure.



rhinos, elephants and tigers.

“I saw a leopard trekking into the Tamur set-off point last time I was there,” says Pat at one point. “He took one look at me and legged it off back into the forest. We’ve had snakes in the rafts a couple of times too. But I haven’t heard of anyone seeing a dolphin for a long time.”

The future of the Karnali, and the people and rare species that depend on its water, lies in the balance. Nepal is in the midst of a drive to harness its water resources, not for its own people, but to meet the exploding energy demands of its powerful neighbours, India and China. The Government is looking for investors and financiers for several large dam projects on rivers including the Arun, Budhi Gandakhi, Seti and the Karnali. Little of the electricity will stay in Nepal.

Prior to being dammed, the Marsyandi river in the Annapurna region was considered by many to be the greatest rafting river in Nepal, if not the world. With a serrated backdrop of white peaks and exhilarating whitewater, it was on every paddler’s bucket list. The dam has flooded half of the river’s

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FISH FOOD

A raft loses control going through Flip N’ Strip, one of the Karnali’s more challenging rapids. There’s only one way this is going to end . . .

INTERNATIONAL SCALE OF RIVER DIFFICULTY

Grade 1 – Easy
Small waves. Passages clear. No serious obstacles.

Grade 2 – Medium
Rapids of moderate difficulty with passages clear. Requires experience plus suitable outfit and boat.

Grade 3 – Difficult
Waves numerous, high and irregular. Rocks, eddies and rapids with passages clear though narrow. Requires expertise in maneuvering and scouting usually needed.

Grade 4 – Very difficult
Long rapids and high waves. Dangerous rocks and boiling eddies. Best passages difficult to scout. Scouting mandatory. Powerful and precise maneuvering required. Demands expert boatman.

Grade 5 – Extremely difficult
Exceedingly difficult, long and violent rapids, following each other almost without interruption. Riverbed extremely obstructed. Big drops and violent current. Very steep gradient. Close study essential but often difficult. All possible precautions must be taken.

Grade 6 – Unraftable
Formerly classified as unrunnable by any craft. Some consider rafting on a Grade 6 river suicidal, and only extreme luck or skill will allow you through.



« Everyone huddles around the fire with a bottle and the group begins to bond as they contemplate the adventure to come. »

PAT O’KEEFFE’S OTHER MUST-RAFT RIVERS

- 1) Tamur**
Spectacular mountain trekking in a remote part of east Nepal and world-class rapids make this an adventure that’s hard to beat.
Trip length: 12 days (six river days)
Grade: 5+
At its best: Sep to Nov, Feb to May
- 2) Sunkosi**
Great in high water and some of the longest rapids in Nepal.
Trip length: nine days (eight river days)
Grade: 4-5
At its best: Sep to Nov, May to Jun
- 3) Bhotse Kosi**
The best short trip anywhere! Beautiful scenery and exciting rapids.
Trip length: 1-2 days
Grade: 3-5
At its best: Oct to Dec

raftable section and drained the other half. Although the river below the dam does still run it is sporadic and most outfitters in Nepal have stopped running this as a commercial trip.

I ask Pat what he thinks. “The problem is most people think the dams are green energy which studies have proven otherwise. Lots of people are displaced and huge areas get flooded which has a terrible impact on the wildlife. It’s not only the dams that destroy the landscape but getting the power out as well. They have to build massive power lines which means flattening forest and building more roads.”

The Karnali is the last big free-flowing river in Nepal. Pat believes the government must act quickly and stop private companies from buying the rights to build large hydropower projects that are of little benefit to the people who live in the river’s catchment. Micro-hydro projects which are low-cost and low-maintenance would have less impact on the environment and bring electricity to the communities that need it most.

The first camp is a secluded stretch of sand, 100 metres long. We pull rafts and dry bags up the beach and start pitching our tents, a routine that will be far more efficient by trip’s end. The Nepali cooks and staff show how it is done and in no time a campfire is crackling away and dinner is served. A feast of lentils, curried vegetables, chicken, various salads and steaming rice is piled into big bowls and everyone helps themselves.

The sun sets quickly in November and the evening grows chilly in a hurry. Guests have been invited to bring their own quota of beer and one of the gear rafts is consequently half-full of booze so everyone huddles around the fire with a bottle and the group begins to bond as they contemplate the adventure to come.

Day Two, the river trip proper begins. There’s no rush to get started as everyone waits for the sun to dry tents and warm up toes. Fresh coffee is produced and the cooks are busy frying pancakes while people get on with their packing. Dry bags are stuffed and strapped to the rafts and eventually the beach is picked clean of any rubbish and we’re ready to go.

I jump in Pat’s raft along with Amy, Bonnie and Chris who are all on holiday from Canada and novices like me. The river starts off fairly flat

which gives us the chance to practice steering the raft and paddling in unison. After about half an hour we reach the first bit of whitewater, a fairly chunky looking tangle of waves known as Cotton Pony. I stow my paddle and get ready to test the camera and my positioning in the raft.

We enter the rapid second behind the lead boat, with me at the bow looking backwards. I want to photograph faces, which means I’ve got no idea what’s coming. I turn to watch the first boat bobble its way in and hit the heavy water. They slam into the main section of the rapid and seesaw violently. An instant later I watch their guide catapult into the air like a cork shot from a champagne bottle. He flies two metres high and is ejected from the raft, and they’re a man down. I see the cork float off down the river but there’s no time to help, we’re entering the rapid ourselves. Amy screams out with excitement as the drama unfolds and, along with the rest of the crew, starts paddling furiously as Pat shouts orders from the back: “ALL FORWARD! DIG IN!”

There’s a whole jargon for rafting which we become more familiar with as the trip goes on. ‘Dig in’ simply means paddle as hard as possible. As we enter the whitewater the river takes control of our boat: we are completely at its mercy. The first big wave hits and I get smacked in the back with a wall of icy water. It’s so cold the shock of it locks me rigid for a second and before I know it another wave sends me flying into the raft and I find myself headfirst in Chris’ lap. I pull myself up and abandon any attempt to use the camera and brace myself, hands locked around the guide ropes. I see Bonnie – eyes wide open – in a similar state of chaos. The boat pitches up and drops down safely and we’re through.

GO WITH THE FLOW
It’s not all seat-of-the-pants stuff. Shorter days on the river leave plenty of time for drying out and chilling out with new-found friends.



‘Hmm, this photographic assignment is going to be like taking pictures in a bouncy castle,’ I think. I’m using a heavy camera single-handed while waves of freezing water are thrown at me from all sides. I was going to need a new approach.

Towards the end of Day Two we arrive at Sweetness & Light. If a rapid is particularly technical the guides first stop and scout the safest line, which all adds to the drama. This also gives me a chance to photograph the bigger rapids from the shore. To achieve maximum exhilaration, rafting seems to be about getting as close to catastrophe as possible, without actual catastrophe. A nearly flipped raft is ideal. Everybody wants to feel right on the edge of capsizing, without capsizing. The rafts come through one-by-one in case anything goes wrong, followed by the kayakers last, in case there’s anyone to rescue. This time all the rafts get through safely to the next camp which is immediately after the rapid. A gorgeous stretch of secluded white sand, it looks like it could be in the Caribbean.

Next morning I tie a foot-strap in the front of the raft, freeing up both hands for the camera and transforming my ability to stay in the boat. The others are able to wedge their feet under the raft’s inflatable dividers but I’m not able to do that right up front. The strap works well though: it’s amazing how much purchase one can get with a few toes when you are clinging on for dear life.

TAKING A LOAD OFF
On every commercial trip there is always at least one gear raft to carry the heavy stuff – and act as an impromptu dive platform.

It’s Day Three and we enter a section of the river known as the

Jungle Corridor. This is a very pretty and narrow tree-clad gorge with long stretches of relative calm between some big rapids. One of the major draws of rafting the Karnali is the surrounding countryside and drifting silently downriver is the perfect way to see it. Occasionally we pass little clusters of pretty red and white houses too, painted with the red clay found in the region and roofed with straw or wood.

As we drift further into the corridor the river narrows and becomes more of a torrent. There are long stretches of whitewater known as wave trains. This is what we had come for: a rollercoaster ride with rapids on every bend. I’m starting to get to grips with the camera (and my grip in the raft) although it’s a constant battle to stop the lens fogging because of the hot sun and cold water.

God’s House is the main event on Day Four. It’s not a long rapid but it’s rated Grade 5 and it’s immediately obvious why. The canyon has narrowed to its thinnest at this point creating a bottleneck in the river. The result is an extremely fast-moving section of water cascading over a massive submerged boulder. The drop-off on the other side is definitely something to be avoided. If a raft was to disappear in there it would almost certainly be disaster. A person can get stuck in holes like this and tossed around like a tennis ball in a washing machine forever. Pat once pulled someone out of the Tamur who had drowned, but eventually he managed to resuscitate him.

There is a narrow route around the hole that the rafts must get right and luckily they all do so. Everyone revels in the thrill of the near-catastrophe, with grins and high-fives breaking out.

Day Five brings the last big rapids before the river heads onto the



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lowlands that straddle the Indo-Nepali border. Juicer is first – a big Grade 4 – and I go through the whole thing pinned in the front of the raft with my legs splayed out like a tripod, fixated on getting my shots and never pulling away from the viewfinder as the raft bucks and contorts. It makes it feel like I am watching the action on a screen, except this movie is happening in real-time and the effects are off the scale.

Flip N’ Strip is next and just as we’re pulling through the worst of the whitewater, I look up to see another raft right next to us. They’ve lost control and seem to be going down sideways. I aim the camera at them and perfectly on cue they flip over onto their side. They’re in a state of chaos, mid-capsize, when miraculously the next big wave flips them upright again. It’s a perfect near-catastrophe and everyone onboard is screaming with delight at how close they came to disaster.

I’m happy too. I got the picture. **AA**



PRACTICALITIES

When to go

May is a good time as the water level is up and it’s quite warm (but there is a chance of rain). Just after the monsoon in October is even better because the water is high and the sky should be clear.

How to get there

Karnali trips usually start from Kathmandu although it’s also possible to organise from Pokhara, which is closer. From Kathmandu most people fly to Nepalganj and then it’s about eight hours by bus to the put-in point on the river. Alternatively you can make a 24-hour bus journey from Kathmandu but be prepared for a bumpy night! Your operator will make the necessary arrangements for you based on your budget.

What to take

The outfitter will provide all the specialist equipment: helmet, life jacket and paddles, but double-check everything before you set off. They will also supply a tent but you may want to bring your own as the quality in Nepal varies.

You’ll need proper river shoes, not flip-flops. Bring a hat and sun cream for long sunny days on the raft, and warm clothes and a sleeping bag for cool evenings on the beach.

First Aid-wise, bring anything you might need if you are prone to ear infections, foot rot or sinus problems. You will definitely want to carry medicine for diarrhea and upset stomachs, and you will also need a complete set of inoculations for Asia; ask your doctor for advice.

Personal treats and snacks can be handy and a powdered drink helps drown out the taste of iodine in your drinking water.

Rafting operators

Go sooner rather than later because the Karnali could be dammed in the near future! There are numerous rafting outfitters in Nepal but make sure you do your research and go with the best outfitter possible. White Water Asia, whitewaterasia.com, helped with this story. Other recommended operators include www.ultimaterivers.com.np, www.griffonexpeditions.com and www.ultimatedescents.com