

Inflatables



Taming the Tons – Tons River, Uttarakhand, India

Text & photographs by Stephen Cunliffe

“This is a very rocky one, so I need everyone to keep paddling through the rapid,” yells Sanjay in an attempt to be heard above the roaring river. “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.”

Sanjay Singh Rana, our highly capable river guide, is preparing us for what we might expect in the upcoming rapid, Sticky Sarla, as our raft bears down on the noisy whitewater 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-looking

stretch of whitewater. Our eager and inexperienced crew has been lulled into a false sense of security. One minute our raft is zipping through the whitewater, the next moment it catches on a rock just below the surface and grinds to an abrupt halt. We have run aground on one of the many rocks that pepper the river above and below the frothing surface! “Brace yourselves,” yells Sanjay. But it’s too late; our raft’s rapid forward momentum and the sudden unexpected stop eject one of our hapless bow paddlers over the front tube and into the angry white cauldron of Sticky Sarla. 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.

Sanjay’s years of river experience help him to see things happen in a slow motion that

Vaibhav Kala, owner of Aquaterra Adventures, guides a safety raft through the teeth of the infamous ‘Khunigad’ rapid

Photo by Stephen Cunliffe

escapes the rest of us. He 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 Sanjay’s timely advice and manages to grab hold of the bowline before disappearing overboard. Rookie is immersed in the icy river water but, luckily, 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 back slapping and a good deal of high fiving, we set off again, eager to see what the Tons might dish up around the next corner.

Aside from Sticky Sarla (which certainly got the better of us), 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 (called so as it's below the bridge at Sandhra) all under our belts, confidence returns to our eager rafting crew. We will need all this self-belief and our newfound experience as we progress onto the big rapids of the 35-kilometre 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 River before

ultimately emptying into India's revered Ganges River.

Camp Lunagad, Aquaterra's rafting base camp on the Tons River, is situated barely 100 kilometres from the Tibetan border. The camp has an enviable location perched on a grassy alpine meadow overlooking the river surrounded by pine forests and abundant wild marijuana. The campsite is at a pleasant 3,600 feet, making it the perfect escape from the stifling heat that afflicts most of India at this time of year. Sitting on the banks of the idyllic Tons, smelling the pine-scented breeze rustling through the shady trees, all city stresses seem a million miles away.

The Tons River is fed by glacial melt, with its frozen source in the snowfields of the 20,720

ft Bandarpunch Peak. It is a small-medium volume Class IV river with fast flowing water that could be politely described as bracingly cold. Wetsuits certainly are a welcome barrier against the icy waves that periodically crash over the raft. The Tons rafting season has a small window of opportunity that seldom exceeds 10 weeks. Operators relocate from Rishikesh in late April and begin running the river as soon as snowmelt provides sufficient water to allow the rafts to negotiate the

Horses wade across the braided river upstream of 'Give me Mori' rapid, while safety kayakers keep an eye on the rafts progress through a sweeping bend of shallow white-water

Photo by Stephen Cunliffe



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boulder-strewn river. The season draws to a close early in July with all personnel and equipment needing to be evacuated before the onset of heavy monsoon rains; otherwise, clients and equipment might remain stranded indefinitely in this remote part of Uttarakhand.

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 whitewater.

These obstacles add to the challenge and thrill of the rafting experience, although no sane rafter would willingly choose to abandon the safety of the raft.

Extremely low water levels have transformed the Tons into possibly the most technical river that I have ever run. Vaibhav 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 whitewater trains that dominate long sections of the Middle Tons. The Tons requires a cohesive rafting team that can respond instantly to the rapid-fire paddle commands being issued by the experienced river guides. This doesn't mean that you need to be a seasoned rafting junkie to visit the Tons. The guides spend the first few days drilling everyone—newbies and old-hands alike—on the use of safety equipment, the different paddle techniques, and the various paddle commands that they will be using. By the end of this intensive and fun training regime, everyone feels more confident and ready to tackle the river that rafting legend Jack Morison rated as “one of the top ten world-class rivers on the planet.”

With some big rapids lying in store for us at Khunigad, as well as the infamous Five Minus Rana rapid near Tiuni Bazaar, our superstitious guides decide that paying a respectful visit to the local Hanol temple (dedicated to Mahasu devta) is a prerequisite for our safe passage downstream. Offerings are made to appease the river gods, a goat is slaughtered and tikkas are issued. At the end of the



The Tons River is a small to medium volume Class IV river with fast-flowing glacial-melt water that could most politely be described as bracingly cold

Photo by Stephen Cunliffe

ceremony we feel spiritually fortified and ready to embrace the challenges of the Middle Tons.

We depart Camp Lunagad in bright sunshine ready to tackle the mighty river below. Our sunny day vanishes within minutes. Gale-force winds come howling up the valley, sending heavy rain clouds racing across the sky. With the approach of the monsoon, the Tons Valley is prone to sudden weather changes, and the occasional storm adds yet another dimension of excitement to the rafting experience. The strong winds neutralise the river current and at times it even appears as if the river has reversed its course and decided to flow upstream! We remain warm in our wetsuits and splash jackets as big raindrops thump on our helmets, smash into the raft and splatter on the surrounding rocks. The rafts become tough to control and it's a real challenge to manoeuvre them through the rock-strewn river. The roar of the wind drowns out Sanjay's urgent paddle commands and we flounder in the midst of the rapids. As the wind asserts its dominance over our hapless boat, we brace ourselves, bouncing off rocks in the

middle of this churning whitewater mêlée. Anxiety is building among our wannabe rafting crew as we ponder what next the storm might dish up. This is unpredictable rafting at its best!

Within a matter of minutes the storm moves off, the sun reappears and we find ourselves returned unscathed to the tranquil Tons Valley. The friendly smiling faces of inquisitive local villagers greet our procession of rafts as we paddle past small villages. Homesteads cling to the hillside surrounded by their tiny terraced wheat fields. Along remote stretches of the river even the villages disappear, and goats, cows and horses become the only spectators to our progress. They stare at us with a mild curiosity bordering on indifference, as we carefully negotiate our way through the tight lines of rocky rapids.

continued on page 55

Superstitious rafting guides felt that a respectful visit to Hanol temple was mandatory for everybody's safe passage downstream. In the foreground, the unsuspecting sacrificial goat curiously eyes our arrival...

Photo by Stephen Cunliffe



Jen Miller (Matanuska River, AK) © Kyle Amstadter

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continued from page 41

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, one of the lead guides, gets everyone singing and dancing to break the ice. Everyone is friendly and having a good time under the full moon. I slip away to my thoughts and reflect on a superb day of rafting that saw our rafting teams pull together to conquer long stretches of near-continuous high quality whitewater. Earlier in the day the Tons entertained and terrified us in equal measure. It was adrenalin-spiced entertainment at its very best and now I'm happy to see we have become a novel source of entertainment to our newfound friends.

Tons Technicalities

Accessibility: The Tons River rafting season is relatively short, running from May through to early July. Rafting is accessible to anyone over the age of 12 years and, although swimming ability is not mandatory, it certainly is desirable for anyone wanting to run the bigger Class IV rapids.

Rafting equipment: 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. Internationally imported self-bailing rafts and experienced river guides ensure your safe enjoyment of the river.

Camp Lunagad: Accommodation is in comfortable twin-bed deluxe tents with all linens and pillows provided. Meals are served as a buffet with a wide range of scrumptious Indian and mouth-watering western dishes on offer. Showers are provided at base camp with hot water upon request. Toilets come in the form of rustic, environmentally friendly, dry pit latrines.

Activities available: Whitewater 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, all add to the diversity of attractions on offer.

What to bring: In addition to personal items and toiletries, do not forget to bring your rafting sandals, a wind/water-proof jacket, towel, and flashlight, as well as a hat, sunglasses and sun block.

How to get there: Camp Lunagad and the Tons River are located 450 kms from Delhi and can be accessed in your own vehicle or via rail/flight to Dehradun and an onward vehicle transfer to the camp. The easiest option is to board the over-night Mussorie Express from Delhi's Nizamuddin station. On arrival in Dehradun you will transfer into an Aquaterra vehicle for the 6-hour drive to the Tons. The mountainous route boasts picturesque views as it passes Mussorie, Kempt Falls and on to the tiny village of Mori, located on the banks of the Upper Tons River.

Trip duration: Anything from 3 - 10 days is recommended dependent upon your available leave, your inclination for adventure and need of rest and recuperation.

Recommended operators: Aquaterra (www.aquaterra.in) and Himalayan River Runners (www.hrrindia.com).

Further information can be found at: www.indianhimalayas.net.