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# Last days of the Subansiri

Assam, in India's little-visited northeast, harbours a wilderness rafting experience that will soon disappear with the completion of a controversial dam.

Story by Bodhi Garrett & Nicholas Grady-Grot  
Photography by Jock Montgomery



#### CHANGE OF GEAR

It's a tough two-day drive from the city of Dibrugarh, through timeless tribal villages, to the put-in.

THE FIRST DESCENT OF THE SUBANSIRI River back in 2004 didn't start so smoothly. Local boys threw rocks and even urinated from bridges, signalling their displeasure with outsiders on 'their' river. In the ensuing quarrel, bows and arrows were drawn and a drunkard with a machete even tried to slash the rafts. Luckily, cooler heads prevailed and the first descent was completed with boats and bodies unharmed.

Tucked away in a remote corner of Assam in northeastern India, the Subansiri has always been an enticingly wild river wrapped in a wider adventure thanks to surroundings seen by few outsiders. Thankfully, today locals are more welcoming than in 2004: more likely to wave to outsiders than wee on them. Still, in the whole of 2018, less than 30 people made the run down the river's length.

Sadly, just as the region begins to open to the outside world, the river, one of its chief physical attractions, is about to be changed forever. Construction of a downstream dam will flood over 50% of the rafting run.

Once completed, this dam will be the largest in India. Besides the power it will produce, it will also be a major step in India's development of a

truly remote area and will solidify its claim to a region that is still disputed. Many of the tribes there once considered themselves Sino-Tibetan, but the development brought about by the Indian government, in the form of roads, schools, health clinics and food subsidies, has changed perceptions.

With the dam project already well advanced, I joined a team of widely differing whitewater pedigree in December 2018 for a seven-day descent through the tribal villages and secluded canyons while it was still possible. Though we were a motley assortment paddling-wise, our professions suggested we had an alternative agenda, with a micro-hydropower consultant, Himalayan health researchers, ecotourism specialists and a retired civil engineer in our number. In fact this was purely coincidental, though it made for interesting campfire discussions.

Originating in the runoff from sacred Mt Tsari in Tibet, the Subansiri runs for roughly 50 kilometres to the Indian border, then tumbles through the high Himalaya to Tinshila village, where our rafting trip would begin. From there, it would take seven days to descend the remaining 145 kilometres of Class III+ rapids to the dam.

Our two-day drive to Tinshila began in Dibrugarh, second city of Assam state. An hour's drive out from there we crossed the Brahmaputra River, its far shore barely visible in the distance as we watched cars loaded precariously onto open-decked ferries.

Leaving the mighty river and its dusty, bustling plain, the road headed north and up, through idyllic tea plantations and rice fields, into Himalayan foothills. Along the way, clusters of traditional stilted houses dotted the hillsides. Small orchards of orange trees, pineapples and exotic leafy greens grew close around the houses, while above, terraced fields provided rice. We were told that the relative wealth of any given family could be estimated from their house's roof: palm fronds for the less affluent, tin sheets for the well-off.

No matter how lowly their roofing material may have been, we quickly found the village folk of the Galo tribe were delightfully friendly, coming out of their homes to chat in basic English and offer cups of rice wine. Many houses flew white flags emblazoned with a red sun – a symbol of the local Donyi-Polo faith. Other homes featured tall bamboo poles with a hanging star, a reminder that Christian missionaries made a significant number

of converts here from the 1950s through the 1970s.

In Basar, our overnight stop, a local lodge owner reported that in recent years, the trend has reversed and many people are returning to their traditional animist beliefs. Signs along the city streets read, “Imitation of Alien Faith is Spiritual Slavery”. We wondered how such signs would be received if displayed in front of the numerous yoga studios today found all across the Western world.

Reaching the Subansiri valley, the road wound upward towards the Tibetan border. At the base of a lingam-shaped outcrop, a Shiva-worshipping priest invited us to make an offering and receive his blessing. Further on, we experienced a delightful twist on the usual tourism cliché as local hunters and fishermen took pictures with their mobile phones of their ‘exotic’ visitors.

At the water at last, we had to turn our minds to the serious business of safely rafting the river. Our guides outlined our roles and theirs, and ran through various scenarios that might occur and how they would be handled. Avoiding a cold swim was everyone’s number one objective and that would mean working effectively as a team. Since our group ranged in experience from first-timers to seasoned paddlers, that would take practice – and there was only one way we were going to get that ...



#### TRANSIENT TRACK

The mud roads are barely wrested from the jungle and prone to be swept away in the next rains.

As it happens, day one on the Subansiri began with a particularly large rapid that rates up to Class IV+ in high water. Our guides, Dhruv and Jeetu, set a line, then called for us to dig in hard as we sped toward the rapid’s jaws. We dropped in and frigid Himalayan water poured over the bow. After days of dusty road travel, it was bliss to be washed of accumulated grime – and there was enough sun to make the cool splash refreshing.

Understanding the run of the river was often as simple as scanning the landscape to get an idea of

where the action might lie. Setting out from So Nala camp, our second day of paddling saw us descend through steep-sided canyons, yielding short pitches of whitewater, with boulders and boat-swallowing holes the main technical challenges. Between gorges, the valley widened to reveal dense forest backed by distant limestone cliffs. Rapids here were shallower, with long rollicking wave trains.

On the morning of our third day, Jock, our trip leader, brought out small inflatable ‘ducky’ kayaks that allow for maximum adventure



#### WAVE REVIEWS

A kayaker’s-eye view of the Subansiri, fuelled by Himalayan snowmelt, warmed in Assam sun.



**DEADLY DROP**

Day two brought the biggest rapid of the trip, a huge hole worthy of the utmost caution.



**CONFIDENCE BUILDERS**

Many rapids were bump-and-run Class II and III, great for breaking-in the less experienced.



#### CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

The expedition team bonds with meals and story-telling round the campfire.



#### HAPPY HUNTING

With an ancient rifle and pink-sheathed machete, this smiling hunter means business.

without the technical challenges of their hard-shell counterparts. I jumped in the ducky, and paddled ahead of the rafts, ready for action. Jock pulled up beside me, expertly summarised the in-stream hazards, and then charged downriver, disappearing into the whitewater. I was soon learning the exhilaration of cutting a sharp line from the top of a rapid to avoid a giant tree, and then slamming into a series of three-metre waves, while managing to stay in the ducky.

As the Subansiri originates in the wettest part of Tibet, monsoon floods have a big effect on the river's shape and that affects trip logistics. Beaches wander from bank to bank, year to year. Giant boulders and landslides obstruct flow and create new routes. The conditions meant frequent scouting from Jock, Dhruv and Jitu, and the occasional last-minute scramble to avoid an unseen obstacle. Campsites used in previous seasons had sometimes disappeared. Our third campsite had become a tiny sliver of sand, so steeply sloping that unloading gear was difficult. The tight space put the campfire cosily close to the tents. Less happily, the latrines weren't so far off either.

Local tribesmen were a useful source of intel. During our paddle to the Long Tree campsite, we saw a few travelling the river in wooden canoes or on rafts lashed together with forest vines. Equipped with bamboo backpacks and simple shotguns, they work the river, fishing, collecting edible bugs along the bank and harvesting wild rattan. These three commodities are not only useful for household purposes, but also generate much-needed cash to

buy clothes and other modern goods. Spending up to a week at a time in the wilderness, local foragers stay in small riverside huts with banana leaf walls and beds made of rushes.

We had anticipated the rafts giving us an ideal window from which to view the area's wildlife but the presence of hunters along the river has led many species to become wary.

Certainly there were plenty of clues to their presence. The beaches on which we camped, or even made quick stops for snacks or scouting,

often revealed fresh tracks of otter, bear, leopard and other wild cats.

On day four, I followed a set of deer tracks leading away from the campground into the forest. I quickly lost the trail, and spent several minutes crashing through sticky bushes and thorny vines before stumbling into a clearing. Looking more closely, I noticed that the trees had not been cut down, but knocked over and stripped of leaves. This could only be the work of elephants. Luckily for me, their tracks were not fresh.



#### FANCY A WING?

A bag of ugly bugs to some; dinner to the locals of the area.



#### GIVE US A TUNE

Sparks fly as a guitar is broken out. Bach, Bowie or Backstreet Boys?

The presence of elephant helped explain why every group of hunters and foragers carried at least one rifle. Few creatures are more feared than wild pachyderms and we heard several tales around the nightly campfire of near-fatal encounters.

Bird sightings were easier and safer, and we saw ospreys, kingfishers, wallcreepers, wagtails, ducks and many others. Even more dazzling were the long lines of butterflies, proceeding in single-file upstream, the bright white of their wings flashing in the sun. Despite our collective travel experience, no one in the group had ever witnessed such a delightful spectacle – one that none of us had an explanation for.

The next morning, we rose and packed early for a long day on the river. After a few Class II runs to get the blood pumping, we stopped for a scouting mission. Unlike the wave trains of previous days, this rapid welled up from the sides, leaving a narrow route through the middle for us to pass through. In the ducky, I set a line down the river and started paddling as hard as I could. Just as I entered the rapid, I hit a swirling patch of whitewater and was spun about. I flailed desperately to regain control, but was headed straight into the side wave. A wall of water rose to my left, and collapsed downward, tossing me out of the boat. After several seconds submerged in churning whitewater, I popped to the surface and managed to recover my paddle.

With the help of a safety kayak, I was soon reunited with my boat, grateful to have such a professional team on hand. Still, I was aching and shaken by my spill, not to mention five straight days of paddling, and looked forward to some chill time.

A rest day on day six afforded an opportunity to stay ashore for a change and we walked up a small tributary, passing a few of the foragers' huts, watching fish play in the crystalline stream.

The foragers' camp was far from any road or town, and it had a charming simplicity and deeply enjoyable sense of solitude; the only sounds to be heard were the ambling river and the rustling of wind in the trees.

By the end of our seventh day on the Subansiri, we had run the river's navigable course and arrived at the nascent dam. After so much natural splendour, it was upsetting to see such an enormous structure scarring the valley. The massive runoff wall stands 100 metres high, and our take-out site was overshadowed by eight hydro turbines that will churn out up to 250 megawatts of energy each.

When, or even whether, the dam will be completed is up for debate. Local project managers told me that it would be fully operational within two years, but the dam has undergone several delays: a land-licensing dispute, several design revisions, protests and

demands for further environmental assessments.

Many of those downstream are worried that the altered flow of the river will affect crop production, and there are concerns for those upstream as well. Flooding more than half of the raftable part of the river will take away one of the last nine 'long-run' rivers in India – rivers that take five days or more to descend. Beyond the threat to the revenues from adventure tourism, the potential loss highlights the rarity of such areas, and the precarious situation of their native inhabitants and ecosystems.

India is not alone in wanting more big dams. Across the Himalayan watershed, from Pakistan to China, more than 500 dams are planned or are already under construction. This frenzy of concrete-pouring is driven by desire for military advantage and the distribution of water and power to billions of people. Instead of increasing security, though, this may further destabilise the region by creating cross-border water conflicts, as well as threatening the region's incredible biodiversity, and increasing the risk to human populations living near dams in seismically active areas.

To paddle the Subansiri is to glimpse a fast-fading world. The forest is lush, yet well-travelled by hunters and fishermen who sustainably source much of what they need within it. The tableau reminds us how closely our species has lived with nature for most of history. Yet this beautiful place is being slowly inundated in the name of development, even while evidence grows that dams are often far more damaging and far less efficient generators of electricity than previously thought. It's a refrain of our time: common sense shows us in which direction we should proceed, but powers that be insist we are led elsewhere. **AA**



#### PLAYING TO THE CROWD

Villagers lined to the shore to watch grown men mess about in plastic duckyes.



## PRACTICALITIES

### When to go

Late November through December is the best time to try the run as it's otherwise too wet – Assam is among India's wettest states – or else too cold.

### How to get there

Fly to the city of Dibrugarh in Assam, on the banks of the Brahmaputra, from any of India's major international hubs.

### Further info

Side trips to Majuli Island, at the confluence with the Brahmaputra, and to see the rhinos of Kaziranga National Park, are recommended.

### Contacts

Compass Rose Expeditions, <http://compassroseexpeditions.com>, runs custom trips while Aquaterra Adventures, [www.aquaterra.in](http://www.aquaterra.in) has pre-scheduled departures.

#### END OF THE ROAD?

It's unclear if the dam will ever be finished as planned but it has already scarred the river.