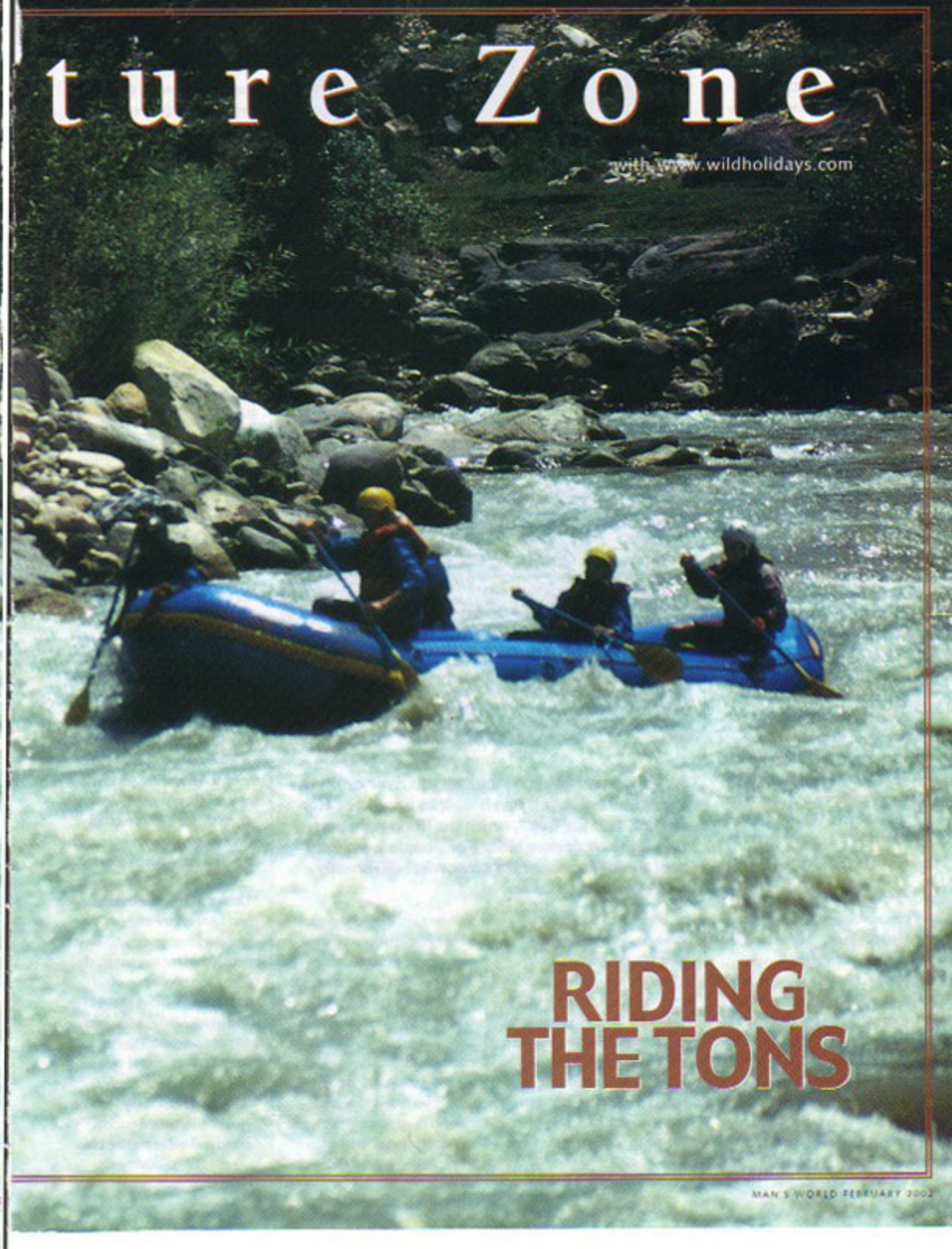


# The Adventure Zone

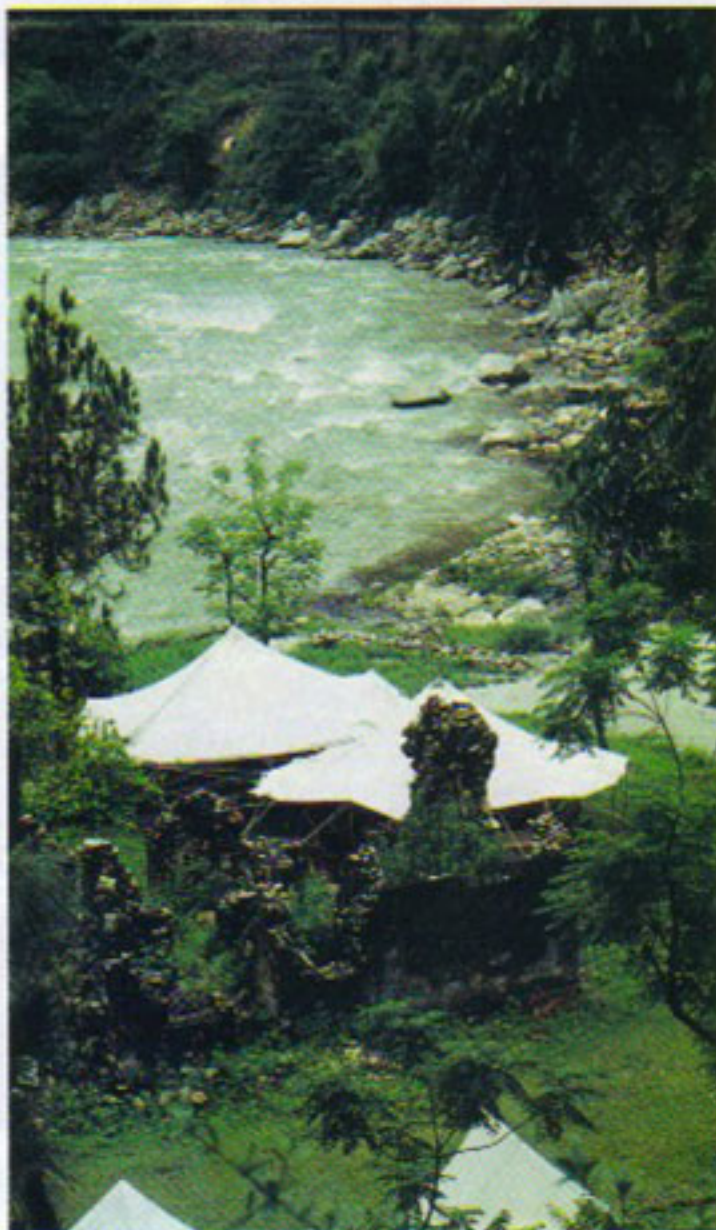
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## RIDING THE TONS

ALWAYS THOUGHT it was quite cute the way rapids are named. Rocky III, christened so for the three quick bursts of rock-strewn surges, socks us cold with the inaugural taste of the Tons. It's also my wife's first bash with white water and I notice the apprehension in her eyes being edged out by a tentative glint of glee. Bhawar Welcome's thumping reception is followed by more invigorating spray at Gimme Mori, the gusher below Mori village, and Anvesh's motley crew is well warmed up and raring for more. This river, it would appear, is hornier than a bull. Contorting and meandering in a rough display of manhood, it rises to the occasion no less than four times at the Horns Of The Tons. Under Anvesh's command, the rubber raft charges fleet-footed over the torrid waters. Lasciviously slithering through the narrow funnel of Tight Squeeze, we bob under an old bridge past Sandra village.

Looking Up Sandra, as they call the flow here, is not half as exciting as watching my friend Rana kayak ahead of us. Armed with a double-edged paddle, he rides whipping his craft up in an eider—a sort of a wheelie on water—then flipping smoothly under the chilly stream only to roll back upright with a cocky grin; like an agile gladiator revelling in his trade, he rotates his shoulders furiously, zipping across an eddy line, hovering in a hole or surfing vigorously over a white-capped swell. A bunch of children yell (appreciatively, we assume) from the bank. Anvesh, however, corrects our simple assumptions on the nature of joyful exclamations amongst ultra rural Garhwali bairns. Apparently, they are thumbing a lift on the inflatable cart and "wah, wahl" is actually "Aiwai." The message of global



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corporates has filtered through where government-supplied drinking water has yet to.

The Tons river that we are riding comes down from the snow-fields at the foot of Bandarpunchh peak, in the Garhwal Himalayas, and courses down, more or less, along the Uttaranchal-Himachal Pradesh border. In her short life, before sacrificing a flouncy identity to the sodate swirl of the Yamu-

na, near Kalsi, she kicks up a fair bit of fuss. But those who've danced on the Ganga's voluptuous waves above Rishikesh will find bonny Tonny more inclined to rock'n'roll than waltz. Reason being that the Ganga carries more volume of water. Therefore, while she of the venerable visage is more 'friendly and forgiving'—lifting in steep crashing swells and subsiding to long introspective

calms—the Tons will have none of that. Action with her is almost non-stop—flurries of sharp, rambling rapids, with short breath-catching breaks in between, enough only to wipe the mixture of sweat and water off the brow. Technically, it is graded a Class IV river. (Rapids are denoted on an international scale of difficulty from I to VI, where I signifies easy and VI unrunnable.) The commercial section consists of a 15-km stretch that can be powered through in about two-and-a-half hours.

We had started out from Mori, a small village-town in Jaunsar Bhawar (as this region is known), near where the camps and put-in points for this rafting adventure are located. It is about five hours (145 km) from either Shimla or Dehradun. Tons is almost completely off the tourist trail. Apart from burning rubber on the river or on the volleyball court you can hike into Sangla or Har-ki-Dun, fish for trout, or let the Tons help you fish for your darker side. For people here interpret their Mahabharata somewhat differently from the rest of India. Temples in the higher reaches have Duryodhana and the Kauravas as deities and priests praying with their backs to the images to reaffirm concord with the devil. And yes, on the way, you'll probably notice that the women of Jaunsar Bhawar are surprisingly forward.

We are now at Camp Lunagad. "There is a tale about this name," speaks Anvesh sombrely. "One night, the forest guard who lived in that ruined hut had too much to drink and hopped on to his Luna for a spin. Drove straight into a gaddha (hole) a few yards away and perished. They say his spirit still prowls around the place." Swipe the pineflies off your legs and look away from the hypnotic effect of the crackling fire and you realize that the tale

has a lesson in it. Roaring rivers, sandy beaches, a bright full moon and black rum make for pure white lies. No one's complaining though. Take another sip and simply stare back into the flames.

Later, after the stories have run their course for the night, we discover a real nocturnal being. Curled up in the crook of the tent ceiling, the little fellow almost escapes detection from the criss-crossing beams of two torches. Spotted, dislodged and stomped out in a swift pre-emptive swoop, it proves to be the first of three similar casualties over as many days. The next one turns up tucked in cosily under the tent-wall lining and the third as it scurries towards some dark goal between the bed covers. He's big, about two-and-a-half inches, and poisonously handsome. Something fatally fascinating about a coal-black scorpion against a fresh white sheet... I pause momentarily before messing up the picture with my hardback bird guidebook.

Down the valley, barely a dozen kilometres away, at Hanol, the forces of light and darkness had clashed above the din of crashing water in another age. In this case, Lord Shiva's trident dismissed the human-gobbling demon into the furthest depths of the nether world. Marking the victory stands a temple hemmed in by a rambling village. Women are prohibited from the sanctum sanctorum, however, and Timmy has to content herself pottering about the stone renditions in the courtyard. Meanwhile, the priest detaches himself graciously from an absorbing card game in the waning sunlight, unlocks the shrine doors and autographs my forehead with the customary smear of vermilion. Returning to the competition, freshly blessed and inspired by the Destroyer, he

thumps the hand with the Jack of Spades.

Up the valley, in Govindghat Wildlife Sanctuary, the Rupin and Supin discharge their ice-melt, adding tonnage to the Tons. A plump Khaleej mother waddles to the safety of shrubbery, chicks in tow, while at the end of a black-tea wait in Netwar—milk at the *dhaba* has curdled—a sepulchral pile of white feathers are all that remind of her two unfortunate domestic cousins, dispatched dispassionately by the cheerful neighbourhood butcher, to add meat to tonight's dinner table.

Mr Black's commands are clear and unruffled. "And-uh rrrright back paddle." Very consciously, I try and hold the fulcrum of the shaft close to my hip and rotate, rhythmically leaning forward and back, the idea being to use the force of the torso rather than the arms. Apart from improved

manoeuvrability, there's another reason to try and master the art of rowing a raft as quickly as possible. We're half way down the second river soiree and I'm gingerly feeling the effects of the free manicure that comes with a ragged action—uneven nails inevitably bent back by constant scraping against the hard rubber sides of the boat.

The craft noses into Gujjar Channel—the nomenclature referring to the red-bearded herdsmen inhabiting the area—and picks its way out of Jailhouse Rock's boulder garden. "Easy forward", Mr Black scans the sun-reflecting stream for pour-overs and stoppers, potentially dangerous rapid forms often difficult to spot until too late. Guide-boss and veteran of innumerable descents, his hunched shoulders carry navigating wisdom distilled from thousands of rowing

mileage. Incidentally, how do you identify a river runner? Check out the backs of his feet. They'll be striped fair and dark, the latter from the protection of sandal straps and the former from sunburn. Further, how do you distinguish a genuine river rat from a beach-combing mouse? In addition to the discoloration, the hair on his instep will be worn off—a pedicure affected from tenaciously wedging into that uncomfortable foothold under the deck-floor lines to keep the butt steady in the face of hydrological onslaught.

Bludgeoning through Big Splash, the boat ambles respectfully through the Lunagad Rapid. Camp looks picture perfect from here, except that the camera is snugly ensconced in the dry box and the contest between rubber and river too continuous to take a chance. We float past a rival camp and whoop out the ritualistic intimidatory war cries. Yonder, Mr Black points out a scraggly trunk straining above a nondescript grove of trees. At almost 61 metres in height, Asia's tallest pine tree is undoubtedly much more impressive gazed at vertically from up close within the silent forest, than from a fluvial perch.

Heave-ho, up a big wagging wave we go. Over The Hill, dropping down into the deep trough, Timmy and I scabble our paddles pathetically in air. Mrs Black, on the other hand, drives hers into the seething current with the same piercing precision she uses to deploy her knitting needles on webs of wool. Big Fart packs a more substantive amplitude than its ungracious title suggests. In fact, the gentle giant is one of the more enjoyable rocks on this run. Then suddenly, we swing into a calm cove and it's all over. It has been a trip without a flip, an exhilarating run of pure aqua white fun.



## FACT SHEET

REACHING MORI, THE SMALL VILLAGE-TOWN IN JALINSAR BHAWAR (AS THIS REGION IS KNOWN), NEAR WHERE THE CAMPS AND PUT-IN POINTS ARE LOCATED, TAKES ABOUT FIVE HOURS (145 KM) FROM EITHER SHIMLA OR DEHRADUN, OR A HARD DAY'S DRIVE FROM DELHI (410 KM). SO FAR, TWO RAFTING OUTFITS HAVE BEEN SETTING UP CAMPS ON THE TONS' BANKS. THESE OPERATE SEASONALLY, FROM BEGINNING-MAY TO END-JUNE, WHEN THE GANGA BEACHES ABOVE RISHIKESH—INDIA'S RIVER-RUNNING HUB—BECOME UNCOMFORTABLY HOT. ACCOMMODATION IS IN TENTS, WITH BEDS AND BLANKETS, AND AT 3,500 FT ABOVE SEA LEVEL, IN THE ENVIRONS OF PINE FOREST, THE WEATHER IS USUALLY PLEASANT AT THIS TIME OF THE YEAR. FOOD IS WHOLESOME AND THE MENUS PRETTY VARIED FOR THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. FIVE-DAY/ FOUR-NIGHT PACKAGES COST ABOUT RS 5,500 PER HEAD, ALL FOUND.

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