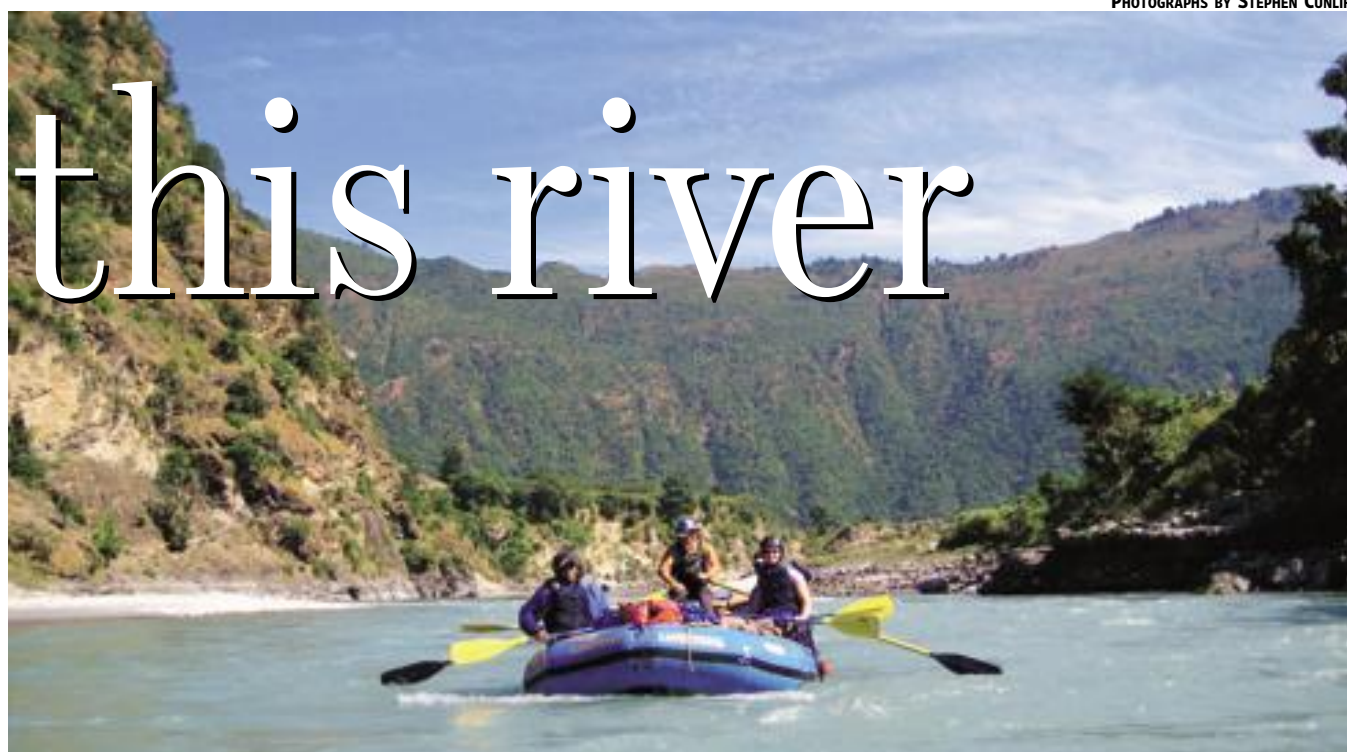


KALI SARDA

Shiver down this river

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



Ebb and flow: The Kali Sarda has calm waters for the novice as well as fiery rapids for the expert rafter.

BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

A “ducky” is best described as a small, two-man inflatable kayak. “Only have a go in it if you’re thirsty for adventure!” advises trip leader Harendra “Gappu” Rawat. “You need to be happy with the idea of taking a few dips!”

Thrill-addict that I am, I opted to trade my place in the relative comfort and safety of a big self-bailing raft for a front seat in the unstable ducky as we prepared to run the mighty Chookha, the biggest of the Kali Sarda’s infamous rapids.

“This is a very, very good rapid,” began Aquaterra guide “Little Sanjay” Rana. I was bubbling over with excitement until he added, “Are you ready for some swimming?”

I wasn’t sure if I had heard him correctly, but as the noise of angry white water grew louder, I began wondering what I had got myself into. “Are we going into that?” I asked in disbelief. “Are you serious!”

Adrenalin thumping, we entered the ferocious mayhem of the rapid, steering around some nasty-looking holes. Rana was the consummate professional, focused and determined. His commands came in quick succession: “Hard forward! Stop! Brace, balance!” I did my best to obey. However, when I saw the size of the curling wave looming ahead, my paddle froze mid-stroke in shock. “Come on, paddle; hard forward,” yelled Rana as a massive wall of water broadsided our little boat.

The power of the Chookha effortlessly flipped our tiny craft and we ended up swimming through the remainder of the rapid. I emerged spluttering from the white water just in time to see a huge smile spread across Rana’s face. He burst out laughing and threw me a high five as we pulled ourselves back into the ducky. “Very, very good swimming in the angry Chookha!” he announced with a big grin. Even the guides have fun on the Kali.

An expedition down the Kali Sarda could seem straight out of *The Jungle Book*: perfect weather, relatively warm water, pristine wilderness, no roads, plentiful wildlife and big sandy beach campsites criss-crossed by fresh leopard tracks. While I was expecting

a fun-filled week of aquatic adventures, it was the beauty of the wilderness experience that took me completely by surprise.

The tone was set soon after we launched our rafts upstream of the uninspiring town of Jhulaghat, deep in the Kumaon. Almost immediately after we set off, the river entered a steep gorge where hundreds of tiny waterfalls cascaded down sheer cliffs covered with a dense foliage of deep green moss, ferns and phoenix palms. The pristine beauty was a stark contrast to the dusty, dirty town we had just left behind.

As we stared up, flabbergasted by the rocky overhangs proudly displaying their calcified stalactites, troops of monkeys eyed us warily, while skittish deer lurked in the shadows along the forest edge. Canadian raft guide Kim Hardin eventually broke the silence. “This river has some decent white water over the days ahead, but the wilderness setting adds a whole different dimension to the trip. The Kali must surely be India’s most underrated river.”

In its upper reaches, the Kali forms the international bor-

der between India and Nepal; after its confluence with the Saryu at Pancheshwar, it is known as the Sarda. Our expedition followed a 110km stretch of the river as it cut a swathe through thick tropical jungle, revealing a remote wilderness area interspersed with the terraced farms of occasional Kumaoni and Nepali villages.

Possibly more than any other Indian river, the Kali eases the novice into rafting. In the initial stages of the trip, easy half-days on the river allowed us to familiarize ourselves with the equipment and learn the important paddle commands. Although much of our time was spent drifting in awe of the picturesque surroundings, we also ran a series of smallish, easy-to-negotiate grade 2 rapids. These baby runs provided an inkling of the excitement that lay in store: The Kali’s “big three”—Dimberghat, Chookha and Arjun—have notorious reputations.

Ahead of taking them on, our guides recommended we beach our rafts on the Nepali bank and take a short walk to the tiny riverside Dev Tal temple. Far from the nearest road access and not important enough for a resident priest, the rustic shrine is where

we paid our respects and requested safe passage down the Kali Sarda.

In retrospect, maybe we should have sought safe passage to Niddle village. On a rest day at the picture-perfect Kheth beach, the more energetic members of our group decided to tackle a steep hike up to the hamlet. It was a long, sweaty climb, two-and-a-half tiring hours of relentless uphill. But the fruits were sweet: We finally crested the valley rim to be greeted by breathtaking views north towards the snowy Himalayan peaks, punctuated in the foreground by terraced fields and scattered villages, while the Kali snaked far below to the east.

The spectacular views persisted into the second half of our Kali descent. But as the frequency and intensity of the rapids escalated, appreciation of our surroundings was temporarily put on hold. Until the mighty Chookha, of course, decided to show us, once and for all, what happens to those who let the scenery take precedence over the river.

Write to lounge@livemint.com



If your child is over 12 and has a sense of adventure, a low-key rafting trip would be an ideal way to spend a holiday.

TRIP PLANNER/KALI SARDA



The Kali Sarda river is located in Uttarakhand’s Kumaon region. Take the overnight Ranikhet Express from Old Delhi station to Kathgodam (AC III fares: Rs584 one way). At Kathgodam transfer to the service provider’s vehicles for an eight-hour drive via Bhimtal (breakfast stop) and Almora to Pithoragarh, 35km from the usual put-in point at Jhulaghat.

Stay Eat Do Rafting

Aquaterra provides comfortable overnight accommodation at the Hotel Zara Residency in Pithoragarh. Thereafter guests are accommodated in two-man dome tents on the river. Tasty meals are served as buffets. Showers come in the form of natural springs and small waterfalls! Toilets are rustic, environmentally friendly, dry pit latrines.

White-water rafting is the premier attraction of an expedition down the Kali. Day hikes, mahseer fishing, bird watching, wildlife spotting and relaxing on white-sand beaches are valuable add-ons.

The Kali Sarda can be rafted from October to March with Oct/Nov and Feb/March offering the best weather. The rapids are biggest during the high water month of October. However, first time rafters might prefer a more tranquil low water run during February or March. It makes for a weeklong adventure that’s as suitable for novices as experienced white-water rafters: The Grade III rapids are exciting, rather than terrifying. Although swimming ability is not mandatory, it certainly is desirable for anyone wanting to run the bigger 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 rafting sandals, a sleeping bag, towel, and flashlight, as well as a hat, sunglasses and sun block.

Recommended operators: Aquaterra Adventures (www.aquaterra.in) and Himalayan River Runners (www.hrrindia.com). Aquaterra has fixed departure Kali trips scheduled for 19-27 February and 29 October-6 November 2010.

AHMED RAZA KHAN/MINT

Wet games: White-water kayaking is both dangerous and thrilling.

