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HIGH HIMALAYAN ADVENTURE

PERHAPS THE INEVITABLE SATISFACTION OF MOVING DOWNSTREAM IS ROOTED WITHIN OUR VERY BEINGS. THE HUMAN IS AN INQUISITIVE CREATURE AFTER ALL. AT TIMES OUR INNER DRIVE LEADS US TO REMOTE CORNERS OF THE WORLD AS WE SEEK TO QUIET THE CALL OF CURIOSITY. SOMETIMES IT TAKES US ON ADVENTURES WE HAD NOT EVEN DREAMT OF BEFORE THEY PRESENT THEMSELVES ON OUR DOORSTEP. IN NOVEMBER OF 2012, AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM OF PADDLERS SET OUT TO THE DISTANT REACHES OF THE LANGU KHOLA, ON JUST SUCH AN EXPEDITION.

WORDS: RON FISCHER WITH MARIANN SAETHER - PHOTOS: RON FISCHER, RAFF THIEBAUT, JAKUB SEDVY

Langu Khola - Nepal
Put-in: 29°12'29.55"N - 83°16'43.34"E
Take-out: 28°36'31.57"N - 81°16'56.09"E



Rachael captures Francesco and Ben as they paddle while they're passing by a sacred shrine along the trail that connects the few villages in the Upper Dolakhand.

We are warmly welcomed for tea and dal baht in Charka Bhot, a small, medieval village along the trek near the headwaters of the Thule Sheri River.



One of the porters entering Phalyak, the first overnight stop on our nine-day trek.

Kurt Casey and I sat on the floor in his house in Púcon, Chile. It was April 2011 and I had just come back from a trip to the far south of Patagonia. Despite the past two months of peering at maps, bushing-whacking through thick Patagonian vegetation and paddling almost only new runs, the itch was still there: an urge to explore that could not be ignored. In this regard, Kurt is definitely the man for ideas. We were looking at maps in his study, taking one after the other out of the fully filled shelves, staring at them like little kids in the candy store.

We were mainly hunting through the abysses of Peru, a country where Kurt made the first descents on more than 25 of the runs that are now considered classics. Although we were not looking for a specific river or adventure, there was still anticipation in the air. Then Kurt nonchalantly pulled out a map and pointed at the remote Upper Dolpo region of Nepal. "This was one of the greatest kayaking trips I have ever done! I think it is called the Langu Khola and we were in there in 1999," he recalled. And so it all began...

BIRTHDAY PLANS

Half a year later I was chatting to long-time friend Francesco Salvato (IT) during the Konumese in Germany. Ever since I had watched the movie *Mothership Connection* more than ten years earlier, Francesco had been an inspiration. Our chat on this particular day was about the Humla Karnali River in Nepal. Francesco had been part of the second descent of the river in 1996. Later he completed the first, and only solo, descent of the total 366 kilometers from Simkot to Chisapani. The

journey took him only six days. In 2012, Francesco would celebrate his fiftieth birthday, and he was looking for a river adventure. We quickly agreed on a birthday plan: A complete descent from the Humla's source in Tibet. The Humla Karnali, Indus, Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) and Sutlej rivers all find their source at Mount Kalash, a peak regarded as the most sacred place for four religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Bön and Jainism.

Raphael Thiebaut (FRA), another long-time friend and idol, soon joined the conversation. As it happened, he was turning 40 in 2013, and was also keen on being on a remote Himalayan river to celebrate, even if it would be a year in advance. Raph had paddled the classic lower Karnali before, and I had run the Humla from Simkot in 2008; together with Francesco we were a motivated crew, and we started plans for a trip in 2012 or 2013.

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

One year, almost to the day, after sitting in Kurt's house studying maps, I awoke on a cold Himalayan morning to the noise of porters preparing kayaks for a long hike over multiple passes into the Upper Dolpo region. The trip is at last underway. Our team is a truly international one: along with Francesco, Raphael and I, we have Jakub Sedivy (CZH) and Stéphane Plon (FRA). Jakub has been roaming the whitewater world for some years now and he also has three years of medical school under his belt, which means he will be more than helpful in case of emergency. Stéphane brings unwavering positivity and impressive video skills to our team, both of which will prove valuable on this mission. One Swiss, one Italian, two Frenchies and a Czech - what can possibly go wrong?



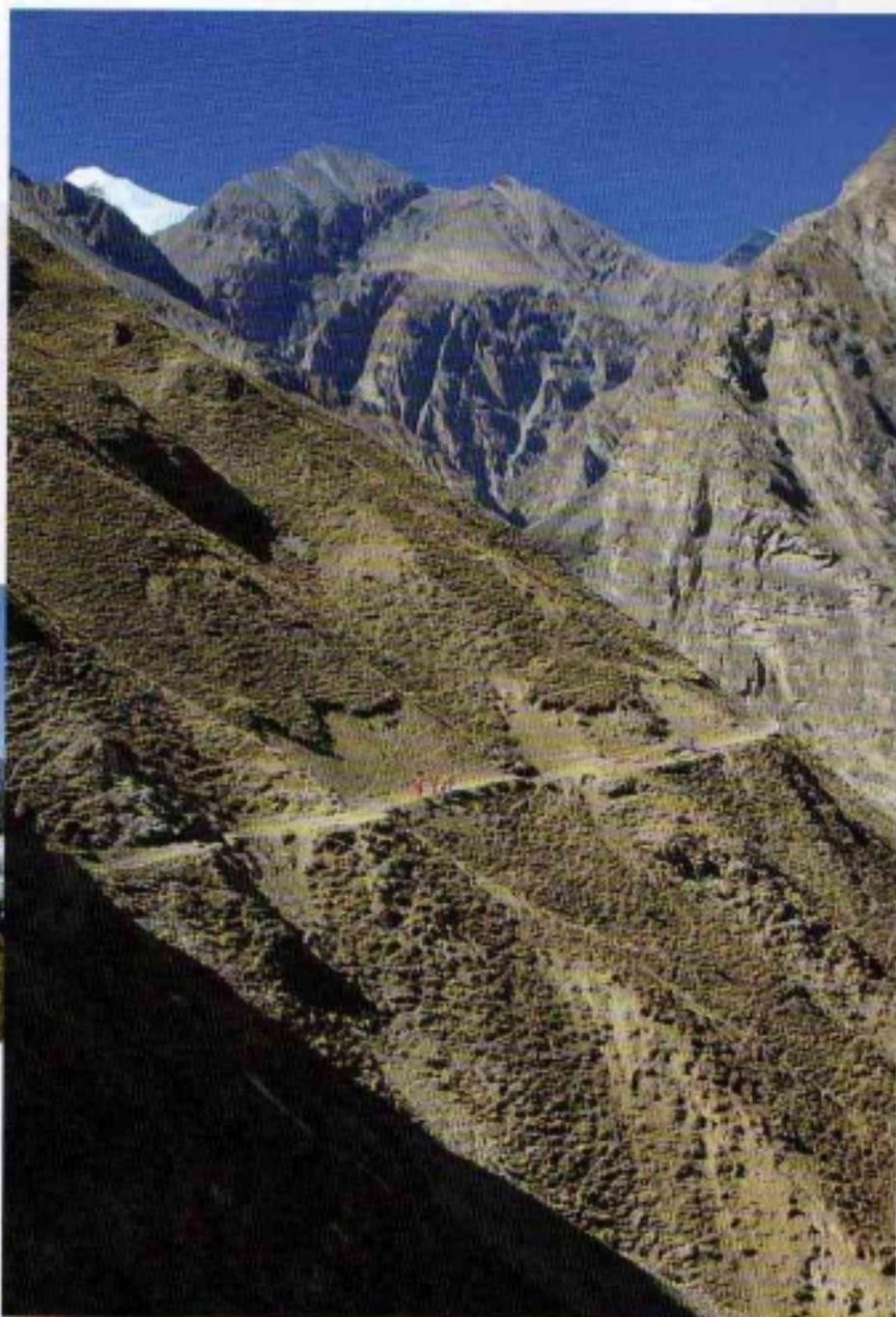
A herd of goats being driven through the narrow streets of Charka Bhot.

The challenging journey through the wild and arid scenery has made an incredible impression on the group. There is little time for reflection or celebration, however, as Stephane and Francesco still show acute symptoms of altitude sickness and need to descend.



The team gets ready to put on the Langu Khola at 4500 meters above sea level.

The porters about to face several days of hard work making it over the mountains.



Along with additional team members, the plan itself has changed considerably from the one originally made at Kathmandu. Tibetan protests against Chinese rule escalated in 2012, including a number of self-immolations. No foreign groups consisting of mixed nationalities are allowed to enter Tibet, and they are certainly not allowed to embark on an adventure such as ours. We could have walked from the remote town of Simikot toward the sacred realm of Mount Kailash, but instead we have decided to hike into the remote Langu Khola, a tributary to the Humla Karnali, and thus follow in Kurt and crew's footsteps from 1999. All in all, it took their six-person group five weeks to complete the journey. It deserves an approving nod from the paddling community as one of the great Himalayan whitewater expeditions of the '90s. We estimate it will take us about the same amount of time, if it all goes well!

Raphael is already outside helping the porters to prepare the kayaks. It is dawn and the Annapurna range rises tall above the small town of Jomsom, our starting point. Our food for twenty days is sorted: sugar, salt, milk powder, coffee and rice fill empty PET bottles. Tea, soups, chocolate bars, pasta, tuna and some freeze-dried food is packed into the hand woven baskets carried by the porters. Personal clothing is chosen carefully: it has to be warm enough for an eventual snowstorm, but light enough to carry over three 5000-meter passes. The porters are not sure how to carry the kayaks and try different systems. For the most part each carries 30 kilos, and the rest we shoulder ourselves. There is a sense of camaraderie in the air. We need them, and they need us; together we are definitely embarking on an adventure.

FORBIDDEN DOLPO

The Langu Khola's source lies at an altitude of approximately 6000 meters in the mountains and glaciers splitting western and central Nepal. It is surrounded by the majestic peaks of Dhaulagiri (8167 m) and Annapurna (8091 m) to the south, the ancient kingdom of Mustang to the east, Tibet to the north, and the Mugu district to the West. Even by Himalayan standards, this region is as remote as it gets. In its upper proximities the river flows through the Dolpo district, which sees quite a few tourists every year. However, the river soon enters the heavily restricted area of Upper Dolpo, which only sees a minimum number of foreign visitors each year. The first Westerners explored Dolpo in the '60s but the region was closed for foreigners soon thereafter, until its reopening in 1994.

Five thousand people live in this Himalayan highland area, and the essential ingredients in their lives are Buckwheat, barley, and yaks. Their settlements are among the highest on earth, most rest above 4000 meters. Other elements of Tibetan culture provide evidence that few restrictions are maintained on this wild border between Nepal and China. The high mountain passes that provide access to the Dolpo are closed by snow for half the year, creating intense isolation and ensuring that old traditions and ways of life are maintained throughout the long winter months.

The Langu Khola flows through an open valley for forty kilometers before it cuts through deep and totally inaccessible canyons until the confluence with the Mugu Karnali some 80 km further downstream. These canyons are the heart of the Upper Dolpo and are the anticipated gems of our birthday celebration.

Almost at the top with only a few meters left to reach the highest point on the trip, 5560 meters. The creek in the valley below is completely frozen.

Stephane cruising through a small box canyon. These giant marl stones (a sacred prayer carved into rock) are not visible from the kayak, but many others are visible only from the river.



Sacred stupas on the trail heading towards Upper Dolpo.



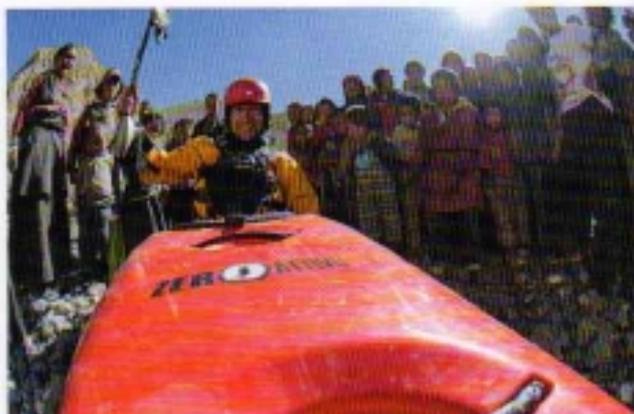
THE JOURNEY IS THE GOAL

For any great reward, there is always a price to pay. It is 2:30 pm, we are all cold, and Francesco is suffering the typical symptoms of altitude sickness. We still have a 4560-meter pass to cross, but after that we guess the trail will begin to lose altitude. It doesn't. The trail instead runs horizontally along the mountainside for a few more kilometers. There is a certain tension in the air, with the porters now far behind us and Francesco in bad shape. We are still well above 4000 meters when Dorji, our guide, catches up with us and tells us that the porters will spend the night up high. Bad news, indeed. They have all our food, the stove and the tents. Yet we decide to push on, hoping to find a teahouse in the next village called Santa. A hunch tells me there will not be one, and Jakob and I wait for the porters to collect our gear. Stephane, Raphael and Francesco push on. We are lucky as the clear sky and full moon guide our steps. Then comes the split in the trail even though the map shows no such crossing. We are again lucky and reach some buildings half an hour later. Raphael, Stephane and Francesco are already sleeping under a little shelter they have built. Jakob soon disappears

The Langu Khola's source lies at an altitude of approximately 5000 meters in the mountains and glaciers splitting western and central Nepal. Even by Himalayan standards, this region is as remote as it gets.

into dreams of the coming whitewater, but I struggle with the cold and thirst. The journey has already been long, will it all be worth it?

In the morning we get up with the first warmth of the sun. Francesco has regained his strength. The village is abandoned, and we notice fresh snow on the next pass we need to cross. Around noon, the porters show up and together we build a proper camp. We need a full day and night of rest to become better acclimatized. The next camp is planned for approximately 5000 meters, and we have already seen the effect the altitude can have. We are worried, so we get an early start the following day. All of us feel good and we are motivated to make it over the passes into the high plateaus of the Dolpo district. Only 500 meters from the pass, Stephane suddenly feels sick. Grasping Raphael's backpack for balance, they move forward step by step, shuffling slowly along like an old couple. Upon reaching the top I am not the only one to have tears in my eyes. The challenging journey through the wild and old scenery has made an incredible impression on the group. There is little time for reflection or celebration, however, as Stephane and Francesco still show acute symptoms of altitude sickness and need to descend. Dropping down the far side we can feel ourselves inching closer to the sacred waters of the Langu Khola. That night we pitch our tents near the confluence of two small creeks that form the very source of the Thule Sheri (KS #36). We are in awe of the spiritual feel of our surroundings despite the altitude sickness and the plummeting temperatures, which reach a low of -20 degrees Celsius that night.



Francesco feels watched putting on the Langu Khola after a great local lunch at Kaghears.



Ron is one of the numerous class 4 rapids in the canyons of the Langu Khola.

One of many impressive canyons along the journey down the Langu Khola.



The first six days are the coldest the team has ever experienced on a river. A campfire is the first priority to get going once they find a camp spot, each night.



THE BIRTHDAY FAREWELL

After days of walking, we finally reach the last camp we will share with the porters. In perfect synchronicity, it is Raphael's 39th birthday! He opens a small bottle of Jack Daniels he has secretly carried all the way from Kathmandu. Everybody is in good spirits, and my thoughts wander as we sit together in the kitchen tent. In the past nine days we have crossed three passes, each at more than 5000 meters, and the burning staps of JD feel like a well-earned reward. Yet the real mission still lies ahead in the deep canyons of the Langu Khola. Hearing our birthday songs for Raphael, the porters come over to the kitchen tent and eventually add their own songs to the celebration. There is a shared bond of connectedness within the group after such a long and arduous journey, and their songs are like a small farewell. It is hard not to feel moved as their voices are accompanied by a starlit sky and mountains towering around our camp.

The next morning, Dorji presents each one of us with a khata, or ceremonial scarf, on behalf of all the porters. Saying goodbye to all of them suddenly feels quite emotional, and we are immensely grateful for the job they have done. Some ended up carrying 60 kilos or more, taking on weight for their fellow porters who struggled with sickness or physical ailments. Together they have endured cold and hunger but their team spirit and pride kept them going, and in that they have provided inspiration for the rest of us.



On his 39th birthday, Raph is very excited to open the birthday present from his wife that he has carried all the way from France to the pet in of the Langu Khola.

We will soon come to call the Langu Khola the river of a thousand canyons. Day by day we enter vertically walled gorges with the only way out downstream. Eagles follow us for long stretches at a time and almost every day we surprise musk deer drinking from the river.

THE RIVER OF MANY NAMES

Our first day on the water, the river has just enough volume to paddle, but dries with every beam of sun on the snow. We begin by scraping over rocks and by the end of the day we are paddling on fast flowing glacier melt. Now that we are floating towards the Upper Dolpo region, its essence is almost tangible: remote wilderness, ancient traditions and hidden places. Ruins of a fortress along the river hint at stories of an old kingdom with a forgotten name. Just like the river, the Langu Khola has a different name on all the maps we encounter. The locals are the only ones who refer to it as the Langu Khola, yet we figure out early on who we can trust.

A footbridge suddenly appears, spanning the river and too low to pass underneath. Children are crossing it when Francesco pulls into an eddy, forcing them to notice us. The smallest girl starts crying, not understanding who we are or where we have come from. She is so scared she will not stop screaming until an older woman takes her hand and leads her over the bridge she must have crossed endless times before. Whether she has not seen a Westerner before or whether it is our bright boats and outlandish paddling attire that are so shocking to her, we will never know. But either way it suddenly makes us recognize how far we are from home.

After the sun goes away, the temperature falls immediately below zero. We make it to Tnje, a small medieval style village, but find no teahouse or any other place we can stay for the night. Eventually we find shelter in the township's market tent, drinking tea and enjoying a spicy dal bhat. Many of the market men are from Tibet, defying the mountain passes to sell their products to the mountain people of Dolpo.



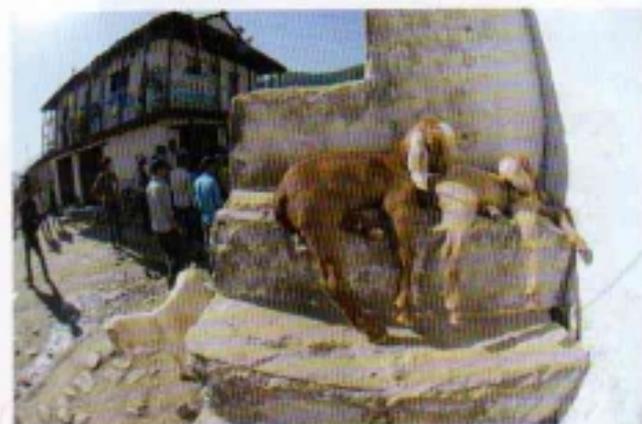


THE RIVER OF A THOUSAND CANYONS

Back at the river the following morning we find an almost dry riverbed. Some of it is covered in ice and we have no choice but to wait for the snow to melt. By one p.m. the river has opened up and we can paddle class 3 lines with little blocks of ice floating in between us. Soon we lose sight of civilization and enter the first big canyon. It is inaccessible in the summer, but in the winter the locals go through the gorge to trade their goods in Tinja. We can tell by the massive markings carved into the canyon walls, only reachable by kayak or in the winter when the river is frozen. We cast our eyes down in respect as we paddle by these impressive works of art.

We will soon come to call the Langu Khola the river of a thousand canyons. Day by day we enter vertically walled gorges with the only way out downstream. Eagles follow us for long stretches at a time and almost every day we surprise musk deer drinking from the river. We are amazed to think that Kurt and his team had gone through the same depths 13 years earlier and respect for their journey deepens within our group as we rely on their beta for safe passage.

On the fourth day on the river, we hit a fresh landslide that has created



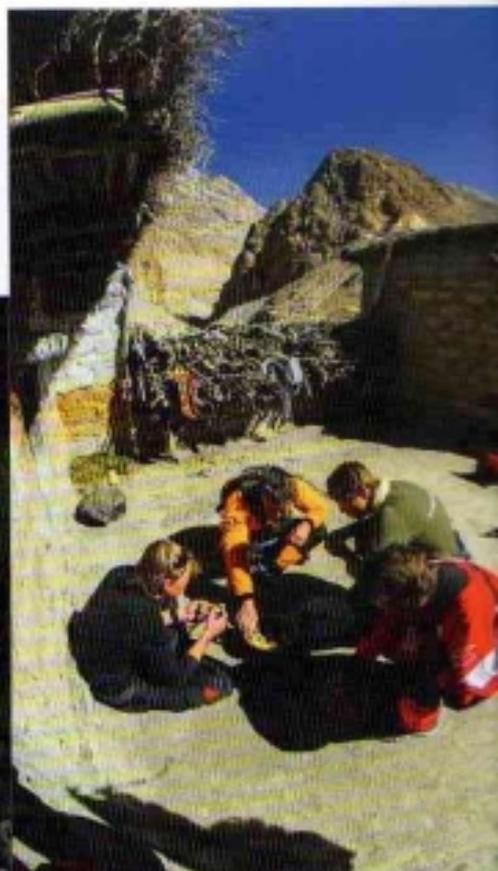
a ghastly unrunnable rapid. Stephane and Francesco are standing on river right under some big boulders, unable to see ahead. I am on the left side, and from there I can see the dimensions of the landslide. It is clear that the mess of sharp, loose rock has been created recently and it seems that single rocks or the whole mountainside might come down with only a whisper. "Move on!" I shout nevertheless, immediately realizing how scary it is simply standing there.

After the hard days of hiking and navigating steep and technical whitewater, we welcome the Mugu with its copious amounts of quality whitewater. There are still some big portages in this section, but the fun factor is definitely taken up a notch, with clean class four-five rapids set in a spectacular valley.

We spend nine nights alone in these canyons, seeing no other people. A campfire keeps us warm, and soup fills our bellies. The few times Francesco pulls out some carefully divided Italian parmesan or smoked bacon, our appreciation for such simple pleasures is enormous. On a trip such as this, one inevitably learns to be happy with less.

After six days of paddling a lot of read and run with some scouting and portaging, we enter a section in which we scout almost every rapid. Some are runnable, some we portage. It takes time to make decisions, especially in the Himalayas. How much do we really want to push on dangerous whitewater in these hidden canyons in the backlands of Nepal? If something happens we are done for, as waking to the closest village with a telephone will probably take several days, and that is after making it out of the gorge. On some rapids we charge nevertheless, as portaging is always hard and involves maneuvering around huge boulders. Nothing comes for free on the Langu, it has gone from the river of many names to the river of a thousand canyons. Now we ominously call it the river of a thousand sphans, and we never let our guard down.

Raphael taking it seriously in the steepest section of the Langu.



The crew is served a delicious lunch in the town of Kaghepa. The only local villages in the heart of the Langu Khola canyon have seen very few foreigners.

During the hardest three days of paddling, in between hard rapids and portages, the team finds a nice natural platform to make a camp.

THE RIVER HITS BACK

The horizon line is like many others we had encountered and Raphael jumps out to scout. Jakub goes first and after a double thumbs up, Stéphane disappears over the lip. Then all I can see is Raphael ripping open his throw bag and pitching it down to the water. As I run down the riverbank I can see Stéphane's hand gripping the rope, hanging on with all he has. We are in the middle of one of the steepest sections on the river and a swim is not good. Not good at all. Siphons litter the riverbed. Margins are small and errors can quickly become very serious on a river like the Langu. While Stéphane is hauled to shore, Jakub rescues the boat and dry bag full of camera equipment. A little further downstream I get hold of the paddle and the situation is back under control. Still, situations such as this can easily erode team morale, and everyone tiptoes their way down the river for a while afterward.

In the middle of the wilderness there is no space to play with the limits. The character of these upper reaches is consistently unforgiving. Ice covers the rocks we are trying to portage over, the air temperature is frigid and more often than not the rapids are complex. Often we find ourselves stuck in eddies wondering what is around the corner yet with few options to figure it out. Huge boulders block the flow and the view, making the river resemble a huge maze of narrow whitewater channels. The combination of frigid temperatures, shallow waters and heavy loads is hard on our kayaks and welding cracked boats becomes part of the daily routine. One thing is for sure: the Langu is teaching us humility.

We continue downstream and at the confluence with the Mugu Karnali we feel like we have temporarily re-entered civilization. Here the great Upper Dalpa trekking trail follows the river and we have plenty of eyes upon us as we spend the next few days getting to Gamghadi, the capital of the Mugu district. Yet, the river is not finished with us.

I have set safety at the bottom of an especially tricky rapid when Jakub comes flying around the corner, down the slope, and straight into a hole in the bottom center. He does some unpleasant loops before managing to exit the recirculation, only to find himself drifting straight towards a massive undercut there is no chance to avoid. The complete kayak gets pushed under the massive rock in front of my eyes and my pulse is racing. From the scout, the water bubbling up behind the rock made it seem as though there were no obstructions. But it is impossible

to tell for sure. Jakub manages to stay impressively calm and simply waits for the undercut to let him out. The sense of relief is enormous as we watch him safely catch the eddy before the next horizon line. There have been enough blind rapids leading straight into deadly siphons littered with logs in the past many days and the river has us constantly on the edge.

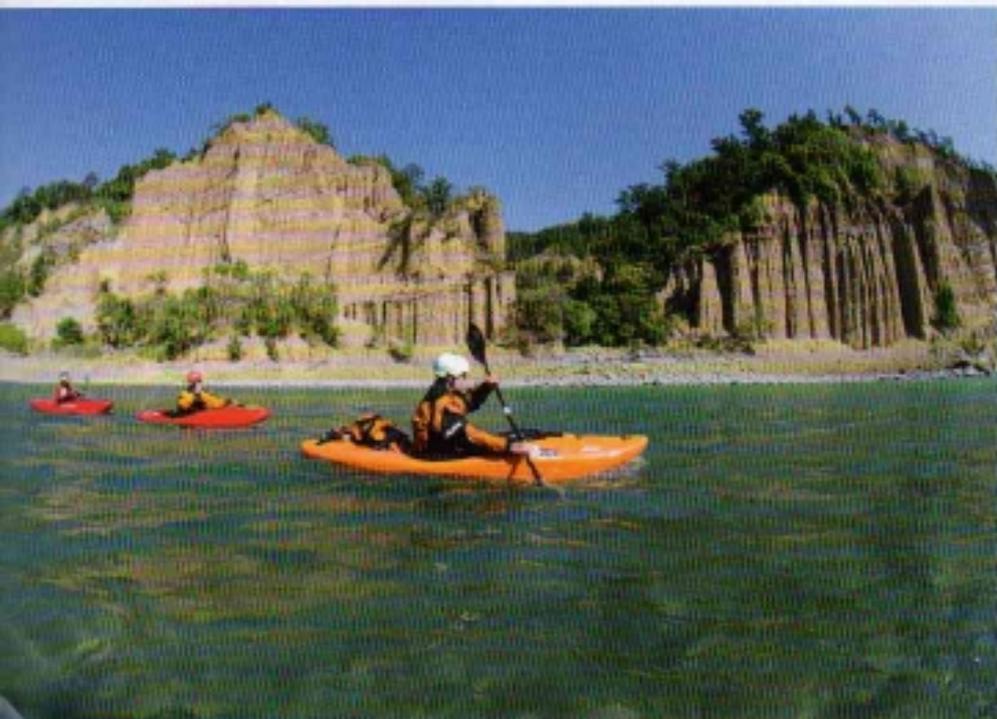
THE MUGU

After the hard days of hiking and navigating steep and technical whitewater, we welcome the Mugu with its copious amounts of quality whitewater. There are still some big portages in this section, but the fun factor is definitely taken up a notch, with clean class four-five rapids set in a spectacular valley. We also get the first possibility to sleep in a teahouse right next to the river after eleven days out under the stars. The dal that we eat is very likely the most delicious meal I have ever had, and I am not even a big fan of the dish! A shabby bed and cheap, warm beer put us in a heavenly state for the night. And yet, as people gather around for hours to watch us intently, as they always do in Nepal, I somehow find myself already missing the loneliness of the canyons upstream. Perhaps one of the reasons I love trips of this kind is the intense contrasts they present.

Four days later and after 14 days on the water, we happily reach the confluence with the Humla Karnali. The place is simply magic. The Humla comes turquoise green out of a stunning canyon, the major and hardest canyon on a descent down the Humla Karnali from Simkot some 80 kilometers further upstream. The confluence creates a perfect campspot. Three hundred kilometers still lie ahead of us, yet the most intimidating and challenging whitewater is safely behind. What we have to look forward to are beautiful rapids and scenery, a more relaxed atmosphere and less tiptoeing. There will certainly be no icy portages or blind canyons waiting around the corner. If it perhaps the most memorable night of the whole trip as we sit staring at the campfire, sharing stories of old times until early dawn. The Karnali is not only a holy river for four different religions, it is also a river with its own spirit, containing an undefinable energy that is impossible to describe.

The flow is high on the Humla and the further downstream we paddle, the bigger the rapids get. Just like the grins that never leave our faces for this part of the trip, who wouldn't take truck-sized pour-overs in exchange for nasty siphons?

Leaving Kathmandu for a one-month adventure.



Stephane, Francesco and Raphael on the classic lower Karnali.

The team at take out after having paddled 550 kilometers through the wilderness!

THE AFTERMATH

On day 25 of the journey and day 16 on the river, we reach the classic lower Karnali, a popular commercial multi-day rafting run, which now has road access. Again we experience the strange re-entry into civilization! We are incredibly hungry and go immediately to look for a place to eat. Soon we are busy emptying the nearby village of food, with the locals watching us eat more than most of them would eat in a week. The owner has to send kids out to buy our orders in other places because he runs out of ingredients. By the end of the meal, we have eaten all the samosas and donut rings in town, with the bill showing 29 Samosas, 10 donuts, 10 eggs and eight plates of chowmein noodles.

The classic lower Karnali takes six or seven days in a raft, but we paddle the entire 180 kilometers in two and a half days. Still, we thoroughly enjoy the last leg of the adventure. The Karnali flows along the border of the Bardia National Park, which is full of wildlife and covered in thick vegetation. We enjoy some of the best camping of the whole trip on this section, and the scenery provides a huge contrast to the start of our paddling trip. With monkeys hopping along the river, all kinds

of bird species and the Nepali Bardia Tiger somewhere in the dense forest, it seems unreal that we had only three weeks earlier camped in the cold, dry, barren remoteness of the Upper Dolpo plateau. The contrasts are yet again breathtaking.

As a thick fog covers the flatland of lower Nepal, the Thule Bheri joins the Karnali from river left, closing the circle. We float through the last canyon, excited to paddle around this final corner of wild nature to reach the take out. The first and only road bridge to cross the Karnali is at the take-out and it also happens to be Asia's largest single strutter suspension bridge. Needless to say, it's hard to miss the take out! We stumble off the river into the small town of Chisapani, but the adventure is still not over. A seventeen-hour bus ride back to Pokhara awaits us. Most bus rides in Nepal are scary, smelly, and overcrowded and this one is no different, so I grab my sleeping bag and jump onto the roof of the bus. With bags of rice as a mattress, it turns out to be a comfortable ride. Enjoying the starry night I fall asleep, happy to leave the wilderness behind yet strangely sad to enter the world of civilization once again.

निर्देश

Elevation gain and loss:	2860 mts up by foot, 4410 mts down by kayak
Highest point:	5560 mts, Mwar Pass
Lowest point:	150 mts, Chisapani
Distance paddled:	550 km
Distance walked:	80 km
Broken boats:	3
Broken paddles:	0
Amount of food carried:	97 kg
Amount of Aspirin taken:	38 pills
Coldest temperature:	-20 °C
Warmest temperature:	not warm at all
Trip costs:	17500 USD
Permit cost:	3000 USD
Chill factor:	1 out of 10
Satisfaction factor:	12 out of 10

