



# Turning downstream

As the Subansiri rushes through the hillsides, it leaves a trail of wonder and amazement. With breathtaking landscapes, it calls upon travellers to respect and adore nature in all its nuances.

Text & photographs **Stephen Cunliffe**

“Everybody get down!” yelled Vaibhav to his laid-back crew. I looked up to see the raft just ahead of ours get sucked into a big hole where it began to surf on the recirculating water. As the river thundered over a submerged rock, the pourover created a strong backwash that latched onto the 14-foot raft and prevented it from breaking free. The boat gyrated wildly as it surfed the powerful hydraulic. Bow paddler Rohan Guptan was the first to go. Sucked overboard by the raging white-water, he clung precariously

to the boat’s safety line as the powerful current tried to suck him away. Fellow bow paddler Sachin Bhatia moved across to try and haul him back into the raft. Their combined weight, along with Rohan’s drag, caused the raft to roll dangerously. “Highside left!” Vaibhav screamed in vain. Despite the captain’s desperate instructions for a tactical manoeuvre to try to counter the toppling raft, the boat flipped. It was swim time and the entire crew was unceremoniously dumped into the raging river.

“OK team, lets go save some swimmers,” commanded our unflappable guide Sanjay Rana. We paddled hard to reach our wide-eyed compatriots as they bobbed around in the turbulent water. One-by-one, we bundled them into the sanctuary of our raft, while the safety kayakers picked up the last stragglers in the calmer waters a little further downstream. We were only two hours into day one of our Subansiri adventure, but already the solid white-water, non-stop action and stunning scenery had set the tone for an epic

expedition; the Subansiri would be an experience to savour.

### Making history

Two Indian army teams initially opened the Subansiri in 1994, while Aquaterra's 2006 trip was the first commercial descent of the river. Amazingly, our expedition was only the sixth time the river had been paddled in history. Day one was a first raft descent from So-Nala to Koda and it was on this section of near continuous, challenging white-water that Vaibhav and his complacent crew took their swim! The rapid was summarily christened Bilu's Folly after the hapless team member who was unjustly blamed for the capsizing of the raft even as his fellow crew members were jokingly referred to as the 'Subansiri Swim Team' for the remainder of the expedition.



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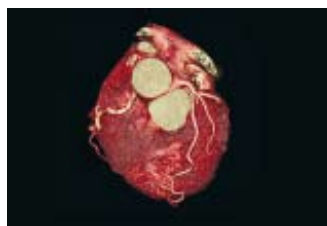
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### The exotic

Subansiri, meaning 'river of gold', is the largest tributary of the Upper Brahmaputra. This mystical river begins its journey by draining the frigid waters of Tibet before slicing a deep gorge through the Eastern Himalayas and entering India at Asaphila. Our rafting journey covered the 164-kilometre stretch where the river cuts a swathe through the rugged hinterland in the remote tribal region of Arunachal Pradesh; an isolated and sparsely inhabited area characterised by wild terrain and dense jungle. Our initial campsites attracted sporadic visits from local Tagin and Galoo tribals, who, with their unique traditions and customs, were fascinated to watch the strange antics and rituals of the 'foreigners.' We soon left the road and the tribals far behind. For many days we paddled through a genuine wilderness devoid of people until a small group of mahseer fisherman from the Mishing tribe greeted us on the final stretch of our journey onto the plains of Upper Assam.





En route, the picturesque river descends through a breathtaking landscape of steep-sided, verdant valleys with lush, jungle-clad slopes that are home to leopards and some of India's last free-ranging tigers. As the Subansiri traverses Arunachal, it dramatically alters its complexion. What begins as a steep, technical descent, rapidly gains volume to become the quintessential pool-drop river—an ideal spot for rafting adventures. I was not alone in believing that the Subansiri provides the ultimate untamed nature experience available in India today and also, quite possibly, the premier wilderness journey in all of South Asia. Vaibhav Kala, owner of Aquaterra Adventures, shared his thoughts: "The section below Daporijo is very special. There is absolutely no access into this area except by boat. The remote valleys are devoid of people except for the occasional fisherman. This is one of India's greatest wilderness areas, providing the last genuinely wild river expedition in all of Asia." With its incredible beach campsites nestled below deep blue skies and ensconced by an amphitheatre of jungle-clad hills, not to mention the solid and continuous white-water, I have to agree that this is a river journey like no other in South Asia.



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### The end of the road

Sadly, the days are numbered for India's ultimate wilderness experience. The 126-metre hydroelectric dam being constructed on the Lower Subansiri will ultimately submerge 38,000 square kilometres of pristine rainforest, robbing India of this precious natural treasure. With the dam's completion delayed until early 2014, there is little time left to savour the wilds of the Subansiri. While a handful of activists still argue that a combination of the seismic activity in the area (which makes the site totally unsuitable for dam construction) and an upcoming election might still block the flooding of the dam, Kala cautions, "The real problem is that there is never sufficient public debate before dam construction commences. By the time people start to question a project of this nature, it is already at such an advanced stage that there is virtually no chance of it being scrapped. We just don't learn any lessons from the dams that have been built all over India. You've seen the incredible valleys and stunning wild terrain of this river and it's terrible that it's all going to be lost to future generations."





Sachin Bhatia, a member of the Subansiri swim team, eloquently verbalised the mood of the group as our raft expedition drew to a close, “What an incredible opportunity to have been on this remote river; to see dense jungles and pristine forests like this in India is a rare privilege. It’s such an honour to be one of the very few people fortunate enough to have experienced this rare and unique wilderness, which will soon be lost forever.”



## Fact file

### Getting there

Jet Airways has regular flights to Guwahati from most major cities, and onward flight to Dibrugarh is available via JetLite. The tour operator Aquaterra arranges all permits and transportation for the two-day boat and road transfer to the raft put-in point at So-Nala.

### Accommodation

Hotel accommodation in Dibrugarh and Basar is provided as part of your Subansiri package. Thereafter participants are accommodated in two-man dome tents. Meals are served as buffets. Hot showers are available only in Dibrugarh. While on expedition, toilets are in the form of rustic, environment-friendly dry-pit latrines.

### What to do

Continuous white-water, remote wilderness, spectacular scenery and idyllic beach campsites are the premier attractions of a Subansiri descent. However, interactions with Tagin and Galoo tribals living alongside the river add a fascinating cultural dimension to this expedition.

### Recommended operators

Aquaterra Adventures ([www.aquaterra.in](http://www.aquaterra.in)) are currently the only operators offering guaranteed annual departures on the remote Subansiri River. For more information log on to [www.aquaterra.in/details/the-subansiri-river-expedition.html](http://www.aquaterra.in/details/the-subansiri-river-expedition.html) or contact Fay Singh ([fay@aquaterra.in](mailto:fay@aquaterra.in)) or visit <http://www.arunachaltourism.com/aboutus.php>

### Rafting technicalities

The best months to tackle the Subansiri are November and December. Although the ability to swim is not mandatory, it certainly is desirable for anyone wanting to run the bigger rapids. All rafting enthusiasts are supplied with 5mm neoprene wetsuits, booties, 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 a towel, wind/water-proof jacket, a flashlight, a hat, sun block and sunglasses. Warm clothing and a cosy sleeping bag are essential.