

RIVERS OF INDIA

THE GRAND CANYON OF THE ZANSKAR

BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

The scenery on the Grand Canyon of the Zaskar rivals that of any river canyon in the world.

Photo by Stephen Cunliffe



AS THE SOUND of distant blasting and pneumatic drills faded, replaced by the reassuring gurgle of the fast-flowing river, Sanjay said simply, "Now we are on our own."

Our expedition through remote western Ladakh, along one of India's most spectacular yet unheralded rivers, was about to enter The Grand Canyon of the Zaskar. During the first two days of the descent, we had already been treated to an ever-changing kaleidoscope of scenic beauty as India's famed Zaskar River delighted us with breathtaking vistas, dramatic landscapes and authentic cultural experiences. We were rapidly approaching the midway point of our 110-mile paddle through the Land of White Copper, yet, amazingly, the best was still to come.

Three days earlier, after visiting the hilltop Rangdum Gompa, a kindly monk had agreed to leave his monastery and travel a full day by road over the Pensi La Pass (14,000 ft) to perform a ritual blessing of our boats and crews. The riverside sanctification ceremony was conducted at Remala alongside one of the Zaskar's major tributaries, the Stod River. The monk's spiritual chanting reassured our team of whitewater enthusiasts ahead of what promised to be an exciting six-day rafting adventure. Prayer flags fluttered proudly on the bows of the rafts and kayaks, as our flotilla entered the Stod's swift current.

We were immediately immersed in an enthralling landscape of arid beauty sprinkled with tiny hillside villages and towering snow-capped peaks. In the early stages of our descent, as we paddled through mild Class II whitewater, the

tameness of the river permitted us ample time to appreciate the stunning scenery. The photographers amongst us became so overwhelmed by the wealth of scenic diversity that panic ensued as they fretted over which direction to point their cameras. In the end they settled on the only sensible course of action and shot it all!

On day two the Stod River joined the Tsarap Chu to form the Zaskar proper. Although the volume of the river increased, the Zaskar's temperament remained placid. We floated past multicolored rock strata that had been buckled into the strangest shapes. Surrounded by these bizarrely contorted formations, I couldn't dispel a nagging feeling that I wanted to become a geologist! Chatting to my fellow paddlers, I discovered it was a common sentiment: no doubt inspired by the landscapes and rock formations that continued to astound

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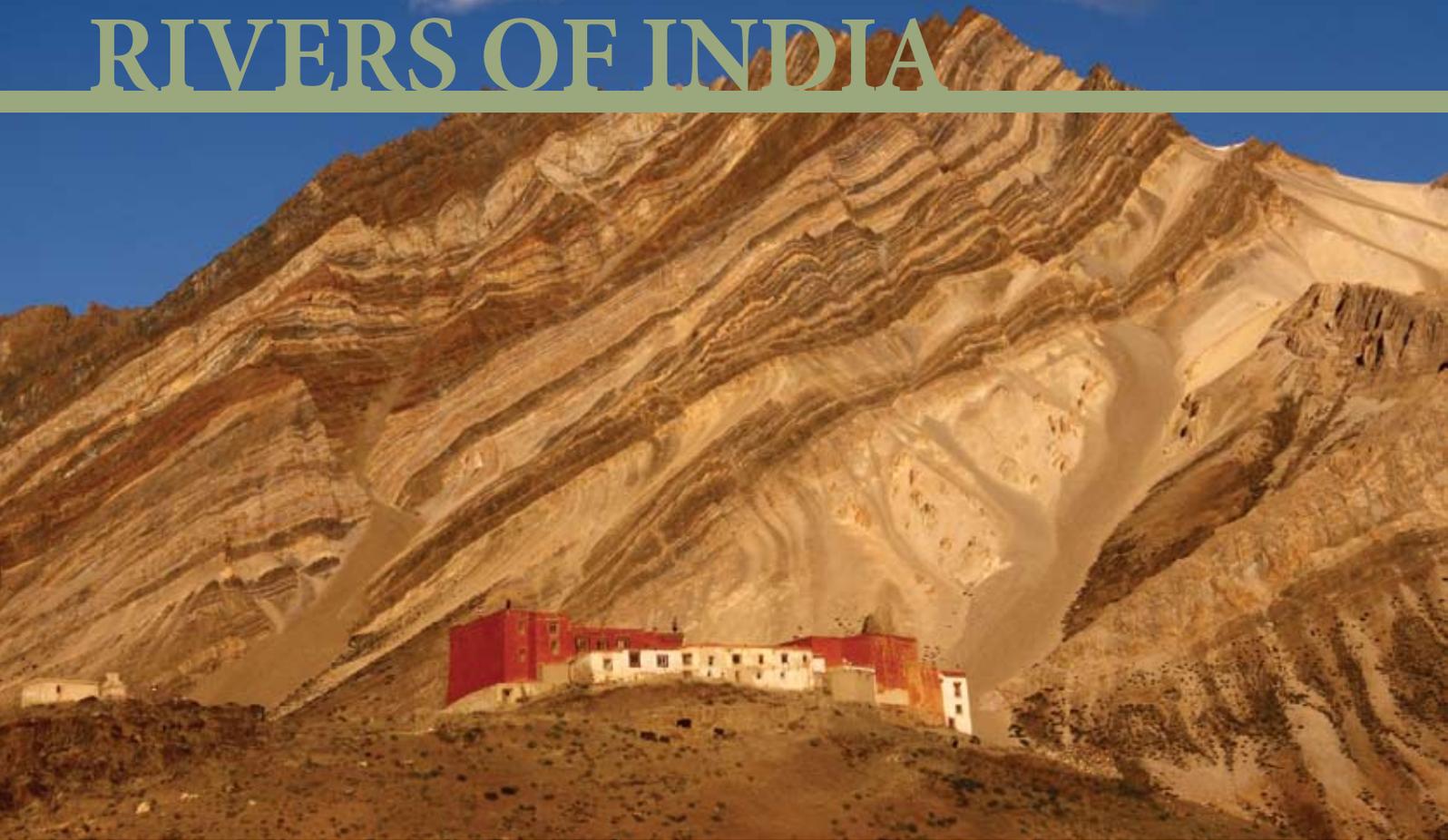
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us with their ever-increasing magnificence, especially upon entering the world-class Grand Canyon of the Zaskar.

As we left the Bihari road builders behind and paddled into the depths of the canyon, I felt like an explorer paddling off the end of the map in search of the unknown. When we made camp below the cliff-top village of Nyerak in the heart of the gorge, we were a four-day walk, across rugged mountain trails, or a three-day paddle, through Class III+ whitewater, from the nearest road.

feeling. In the depths of the gorge, with our tiny boat dwarfed by the sheer rock walls that climbed hundreds of vertical metres towards the bluest sky, it was hard not to become over-awed by a canyon that surely deserves to be recognized as one of the Natural Wonders of the World.

White-water guru, Peter 'Slime' Knowles, eloquently voiced the view held by many of the world's top paddlers and white-water specialists, "This savagely magnificent landscape, dominated by the Grand

"I'M NOT ALONE IN BELIEVING THAT IT RIVALS THE GRAND CANYON OF THE COLORADO FOR SHEER MAGNIFICENCE"

- PETER "SLIME" KNOWLES

Suddenly Sanjay's statement about being alone seemed very real.

Far from being scary, however, the canyon was breathtakingly beautiful. I overheard members of my raft crew uttering a long list of superlatives—mind-blowing, miraculous, astounding, gobsmacking—as they attempted to convey what they were

Canyon of the Zaskar, is a natural asset crying out for World Heritage Site status and protection." He continues, "It is, undoubtedly, the grandest canyon in all of Asia and I'm not alone in believing that it rivals the Grand Canyon of the Colorado for sheer magnificence. The problem is that almost nobody in India or abroad has even heard of it! No matter how valuable and

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Rangdum Monastery lies on a low hill silhouetted against spectacular rock formations.

Photo by Stephen Cunliffe

unique an asset it is, it's very difficult to garner support to protect something that no one knows about."

A massive wave of frigid glacial-melt water swept over the bow and jolted me out of my reverie. The river was swiftly gaining momentum and the whitewater was becoming wilder. The time for mulling over Peter's wise words and appreciating the scenery was over; now we needed to paddle hard to avoid two huge holes in the infamous 18-down rapid. (This notorious rapid inherited its strange name from a previous expedition in which two boats flipped in quick succession and sent all 18 crew members swimming down the

A monk blesses the rafts and their crews at the start of the expedition, on the banks of the Stod River.

Photo by Stephen Cunliffe

LOGISTICS

Flights and Visas

All major airlines connect US cities to Delhi. Visas are required by US passport holders and must be obtained in advance. The standard visa is a six-month tourist visas and you should allow up to two week for processing. Consult the Travia website (www.travia.com) for application directions.

Getting there

From Delhi a spectacular early morning flight (www.flykingfisher.com or www.jetairways.com) skims Himalayan peaks before descending into the Indus Valley and landing at Leh. Rafting operators provide transport and hotel accommodation as part of their Zanskar packages. Two days acclimatizing in Leh is recommended ahead of the three-day road transfer via Kargil to the put-in point at Remala on the Stod River.

Where to stay, eat

Hotel accommodation (with hot showers) is provided in Leh and Kargil before

switching to two-man dome tents for the expedition. Meals are served as buffets. While on expedition, toilets are in the form of rustic, environmentally friendly, dry pit latrines.

What to do

Whitewater rafting, spectacular landscapes and the breathtaking canyon are the premier attractions on a Zanskar descent. However, short hikes to visit gompas (monasteries) and remote villages (like Nyerak in the Zanskar Canyon) add a fascinating cultural dimension to the Zanskar expedition.

Season

The Zanskar can be paddled from mid-July to early-September.

Recommended operators

Aquaterra(www.aquaterra.in), Himalayan River Runners (www.hrrindia.com) and Splash (www.splashladakh.com). Further information at: www.treknraft.com/zanskar.htm.



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A typical scene from the first few days of the trip: tame whitewater is more than compensated for by the breathtaking scenery.

Photo by Stephen Cunliffe

Zanskar). With the water barely above freezing and no sunshine in the depths of the canyon, our crew were determined to thwart the Zanskar's best efforts to eject us from the relative warmth and safety of our raft.

Under the expert guidance of our captain, Sanjay Rana, our raft deftly negotiated the churning whitewater and big wave trains that characterized our journey through the latter parts of the canyon. We dodged holes, punched through standing waves and rode some classic whitewater on the Zanskar's biggest rapids below the village of Chilling but, thankfully, we succeeded in avoiding taking a dreaded swim. Our friends in the kayaks were not so fortunate. When the whitewater m el ee engulfed their little boats, three of them ditched and went swimming. We fished the exhausted swimmers out of the frigid water and hauled them onto our raft. They came aboard spluttering with eyes the size of saucers but, within seconds, they were all smiles and ready to go again!

There is no denying that a trip down the Zanskar is an expedition in the truest sense of the word; however, half the fun is the epic undertaking of just getting there. A three-day drive threads its way along high altitude mountain tracks through picturesque mountain valleys, while snowy peaks and glaciers complete a mesmerizing landscape. Only the most dedicated and intrepid travellers have the inclination and stamina required for the long journey. These lucky few will be handsomely rewarded with an opportunity to enjoy a world-class whitewater adventure through the Land of White Copper on one of the top ten multi-day river trips available worldwide.

A mere 600 of the world's most fortunate souls have been treated to the life-changing experience of a foray down the remote Zanskar River and through its deep gorge. Only in India, with its wealth of natural assets and world-class landscapes, could one of the world's greatest canyons escape becoming a World Heritage Site, let alone

be denied national park status! It seems that an ambitious road project is determined to try and carve a route through the Grand Canyon of the Zanskar over the course of the next ten years. Sadly, in the process, this desire for development will scar one of India's most pristine wilderness areas, so be sure to check out this trip-of-a-lifetime before they blast the beauty and serenity out of Asia's most spectacular river canyon.

*Stephen Cunliffe is a Delhi-based adventure sports photojournalist and coauthor of the soon-to-be-released book **India Whitewater**. Scheduled to hit the shelves by early 2011, this inspirational book showcases some of the finest multi-day whitewater expeditions available on the planet. With extensive coverage of India's Himalayan rivers, it is must read for whitewater enthusiasts the world over. For more information on the author, or to keep track of the book's progress, please consult www.stevacunliffe.com.*