

A new chapter in Indian ecotourism is unfolding along the upper reaches of the country's holiest river, where a ban on rafting camps and the area's first upscale wilderness resort are contributing to a greener ethos on the white water.

Ganges

SAFEGUARDING THE

BY JASON OVERDORF PHOTOGRAPHS BY ABHISHEK BALLI



Stream of Consciousness
A bend in the Ganges as it flows past the town of Tapovan, eight kilometers upstream from Rishikesh.

Midway through

a float down the Ganges toward the Hindu pilgrimage town of Rishikesh, on a smooth, green stretch of river between the run's most exciting patches of white water, our guide ships his paddle and declares recess. Within seconds, the rest of the eight-man crew—a bunch of young management trainees from India's ITC Hotels group—is up and over the side of the raft and into the swift-flowing water for a holy dip. "You should have gone in," one of the teenagers tells me later. "It's the experience of a lifetime." Then he confesses that he can't swim.

It's a classic story.

Over the last decade or so, as domestic tourism has exploded, India's rapidly growing middle class has discovered the great outdoors. Figures from the World Travel & Tourism Council and the Adventure Tour Operators Association of India indicate that Indian tourists already account for more than 80 percent of the country's travel business, with the number of local adventure travelers having more than quadrupled over the past five years, attracting outdoor-oriented companies ranging from Portland-based Columbia Sportswear to Seattle-based mountaineering firm Alpine Ascents to open branches here. But the outdoor industry is growing faster than environmental consciousness, and the typical weekender is a first-timer with a limited understanding of the impact that so-called "ecotourism" can have on the wilderness. The results threaten to be disastrous, environmentalists warn.

"Self-regulation is not working, in any manner," advocate Rahul Choudhary told me in the Delhi offices of the Legal Initiative for Forest & Environment (LIFE), a law firm that focuses on environmental cases.

The first flashpoint has emerged here on the sacred Ganges, along a 36-kilometer section of river between Kaudiyala and Rishikesh that cuts through protected forest and features varying grades of rapids. Since an Indo-German expedition down the Indus introduced white-water rafting to India in 1975, the sport has swiftly emerged as the most easily commercialized outdoor activity. Rishikesh's proximity to Delhi and its already established status as a tourist center has concentrated the boom here. According to a survey by the Forest Research Institute in nearby Dehradun, rafting camps along the river mushroomed from four in 1994 to nearly 100 by 2010.

Despite rules that prohibit flush toilets, generators, electric lights, and disruptive activities, these camps have been great for business, but not so great for the foothills of the Garhwal Himalayas. All it takes to call yourself an outfitter is a business license. There are no

park rangers to ensure that tourists and tour operators follow basic wilderness etiquette, so big loudspeakers blaring Bollywood tunes, whirling disco lights, thickets of discarded beer bottles, and even drownings became commonplace on this popular stretch of the Ganges, where until recently every patch of sand bristled with tents. "It was like a slum had been set up there," Choudhary said.

Thankfully, that's now set to be a thing of the past. Following petitions from a nonprofit environmental group called SAFE, or Social Action for Forest and Environment, and two similar organizations in early 2015, India's National Green Tribunal ordered a stay on the issue of new camping permits last March and was considering a blanket ban of rafting between Kaudiyala and Rishikesh. In December, the tribunal banned all camping and the use of disposable plastic along this stretch of river, but stopped short of putting an end to rafting.

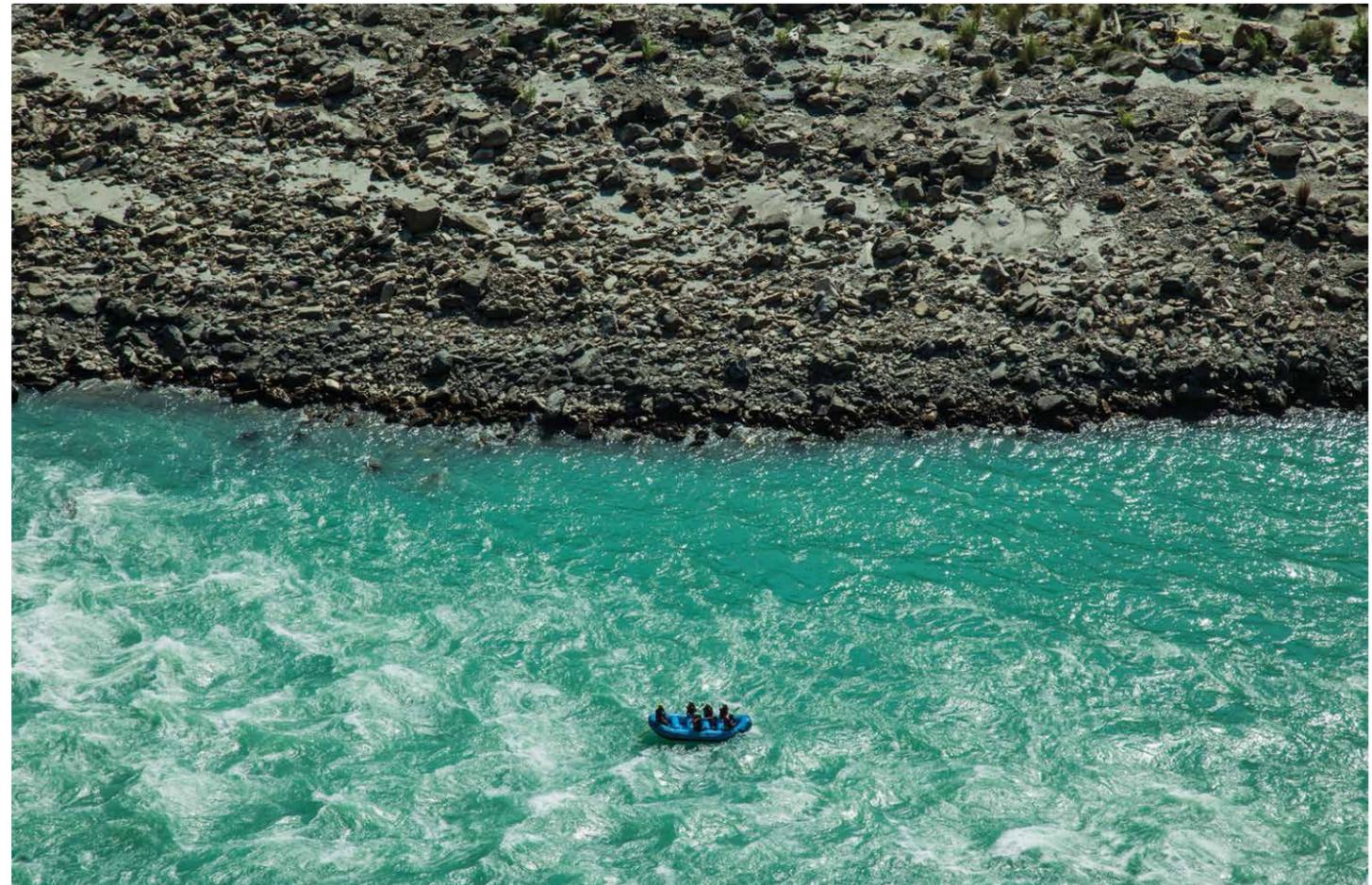
The conflict has pitted Hindu holy men and environmentalists against outfitters. But after the dust settles, the river and the mountains could emerge as the winners, says Vaibhav Kala, who recently invested several hundred thousand dollars to build Atali Ganga, an upscale wilderness resort smack in the middle of the contested zone.

"This is going to be the defining discussion on how outdoor activities and events are conducted in India. We are hoping this will initiate an era of regulation in the outdoors," Kala told me.

Last September, I traveled to Rishikesh for the opening of the nine-month rafting season to see for myself how Kala is working to change the industry, even as he and a handful of serious outfitters battled against a complete ban on their bread-and-butter business in India's foremost environmental court. Thanks to the stay on licenses there wasn't a single beach camp on the river; on the water, it was like a trip back to the 1990s. But the congested nightmare of blaring horns and eye-watering pollution in Haridwar and Rishikesh made it clear that stopping Indians from enjoying the great outdoors won't be enough to protect it. Although it goes against the wilderness ethos of roughing it, Kala believes the luxury services offered at Atali Ganga could be part of the answer.

A burly, avuncular man who reminds me a bit of Balu, the cartoon bear from the old Disney version of *The Jungle Book*, Kala isn't your typical hotelier. Over the past 20-odd years, his Delhi-based tour company Aquaterra Adventures has specialized in elite-level rafting expeditions on India's toughest rivers, logging several first descents. He's also taken Indian adventurers up Kilimanjaro, down the Zambezi, and along the frozen Zaskar to the most isolated villages of high-altitude Ladakh. So what turned him from trail mix and sleeping bags to champagne and 400-thread-count sheets?

"We've been begging for more regulation for years, because the whole essence of rafting being a premium, exclusive product is being lost," Kala, who is also the spokesman for the Indian Association of Professional

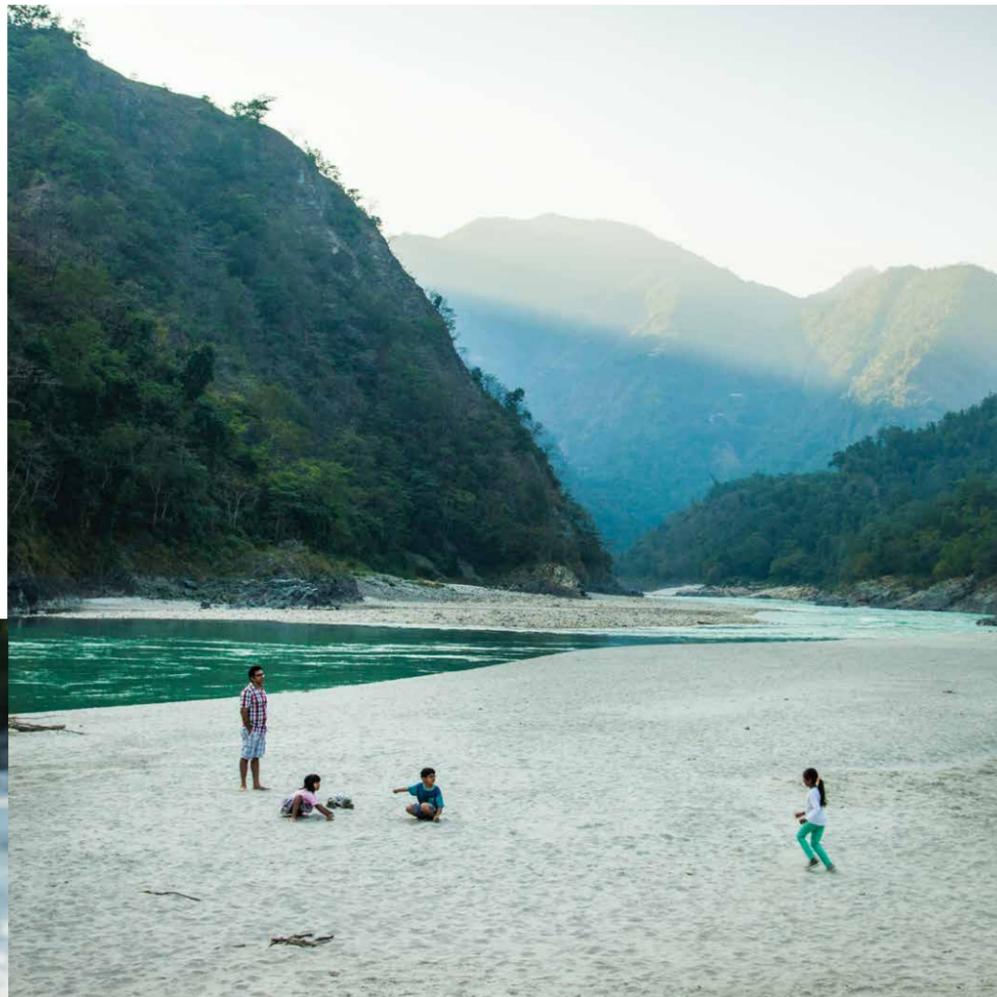


Go with the Flow
Opposite: Aquaterra guide Sohan Singh Rana leading guests through a run of white water.



Course Correction

Still a popular put-in point for rafting outfitters, Shivpuri (above) and other beaches along the Kaudiyala-Rishikesh stretch of the Ganges—including the one pictured far right, now used as a picnic spot by Atali Ganga—once bristled with camp tents. Top and right: Aquaterra rafting guides Avval Singh Bhandari and Sohan Singh Rana.



Rafting Outfitters, told me over coffee on the terrace of Atali's White Water Café. "In Rishikesh, everybody is selling rafting. We set up Atali to get out of the price war. There was no option."

Built with stone, reed, and steel wire in an organic style vaguely reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright, Atali Ganga features 22 ski-resort style cottages and a central lodge set on hillside terraces above the Ganges about an hour's drive from Rishikesh. There's a swimming pool that overlooks a bend in the river, a rope challenge course, and a seven-meter climbing wall on the premises, not to mention rafting and kayaking facilities. Kala's business partner, Manoj Biswas, who manages the property, spent 14 years with the Oberoi Group before striking out on his own, so the amenities and level of service are top-notch. With just the right level of creature comforts, my room reminded me a little of the safari lodges operated by Taj Hotels and &Beyond in India's tiger reserves—neither too basic nor too opulent.

After a morning on the river, I relaxed with my Kindle and a cup of coffee on the terrace of my cottage, watching a group that was leaving on a 10-day hike troop up and down the hillside. Earlier, I'd tromped a few kilometers through the surrounding sal and teak forest with one of Aquaterra's trekking guides, so I figured I'd earned the rest. But it wasn't long before the clamor of the boys from the ITC group lured me down to try a few scrambles up the climbing wall.

Kala conceived Atali as a "complete back-to-nature product," as he puts it. So rafting and other activities, as well as all meals, are included as part of the package. All-inclusive rates are nothing new, but here, there's a messianic aspect to the strategy, since the idea of Atali is in part to introduce a new generation of Indians to the outdoors, and inspire them to want to protect it.

"When everything is billed à la carte, people don't tend to step out," Manoj told me. "To make sure everybody is able to experience what Atali has, it's critical for it to be all-inclusive."

That philosophy, as well as the Oberoi-style attention to detail, has also protected Atali from the ever-present temptation to try to be all things to all customers—an especially difficult problem in India, where agents routinely make false promises to get bookings and leave hoteliers to deal with the consequences. On the one hand, the emphasis on outdoor activities provides an alternative focus to the usual roster of beers, bonfires, and Bollywood. On the other, Atali's elegant—and permanent—architecture instills a feeling of respect for the river and the hills that the haphazard and transient beach camps, which by their temporariness encouraged the illusion that they had no impact on the forest around them, had always failed to do. Ugliness is the enemy of conservation.

In overcrowded India, though, it will take more than a few good architects to make that problem go away.

I'd known about rafting on the Ganges for several years, but the concern over the industry's impact on the environment first came to my attention last May, when the *sadhus* responsible for setting the agenda of the right-wing Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) spoke out against the business at their annual gathering in the pilgrimage town Haridwar. In their flowing orange robes, dreadlocks, and long beards, the ascetics looked, well, less than scientific, and their claims seemed misguided. Millions of liters of raw sewage and factory effluent spill directly into the Ganges from Haridwar and larger settlements downstream. Yet for the *sadhus*, it was the rafting camps on the river that had ensured no pure "Ganja jal," or holy water, could be found in Haridwar, one of the seven most sacred cities of Hinduism.

In a sense, they're right. As the case before the NGT made clear, nobody conducted a study of the potential impact of the 100-odd rafting camps before granting them permits, and many, if not all, of the companies operating on the river had been violating the forest department rules. Yet zeroing in on rafting, because it happens on the river and amid the protected forest, suggests that islands of conservation can be isolated from the country around them—as if trash, sewage, and industrial poison don't flow downstream.

A few kilometers down the Ganges from Atali, the ITC boys—split between my raft and another one—raced shoreward for a selfie break on the spot that Aquaterra had used for its campsite in years past. For the last hour, I'd been watching the shoreline for such beaches, trying to imagine what it must have been like when all of them were occupied. More than once, Kala and his rafting guides had expressed some rueful pleasure at the suspension of camping permits, saying that they could hardly remember a time when the river was so pristine.

"People used to follow the rules that limited the size of the camps to match the number of rafts," Dhruv Naresh Rana, a guide who's piloted rafts for Aquaterra in Zambia, Norway, and China over the past 15 years, told me. "But lately, you had companies with two rafts [with a capacity for 16 people] that were keeping 200 people in their camp."

Another longtime Aquaterra guide, Jitender Singh Rana, said that in high season, the river used to be so congested it sounded like the highway outside New Delhi's Interstate Bus Terminal. "So many rafts were going down the river at the same time, it was like the traffic on the road. Guides are blowing whistles to say 'Let's go.' And when we get to the take out point, there are 100 cars there."

It's not hard to see how this happened—or why so many different groups wanted it stopped.

The holy status of Haridwar and Rishikesh has not saved them from the problems of modern India. From the moment my train arrived in Haridwar from Delhi, I was engulfed in choking car exhaust and blaring horns. The route to the highway from the station was lined

In the Swim
Terraced down a hillside above the Ganges, Atali Ganga features amenities such as a 14-meter swimming pool—a real luxury in these mountains.



Where To Stay

Should accommodations be required before or after the cruise, the best lodgings in Siem Reap include upscale boutique hotel **Shinta Mani Club** (Oum Khun St.; 855-63/761-998; shintamani.com; doubles from US\$150) and the well-located **Park Hyatt Siem Reap** (Sivutha Blvd.; 855-63/211-234; siemreap.park.hyatt.com; doubles from US\$410), known as the Hôtel de la Paix before its 2013 rebranding and renovation.

In Ho Chi Minh City, the **InterContinental Asiana Saigon** (Hai Ba Trung; 84-8/3520-9999; ihg.com; doubles from US\$224) is among the town's newer five-star addresses.

on both sides by construction projects, mostly for new hotels and guesthouses, and there was no escaping the petrol-pump aesthetic of India's small towns, where every building seems to be a concrete bunker with a steel shutter bearing hand-painted advertisements for J.K. Cement.

This, not white-water rafting, was in a broad sense what the National Green Tribunal was set up to combat in 2010. Comprising 10 judges and 10 environmental experts, the NGT was designed to function like a supreme environmental court, combatting the apparent abuse of natural resources by industry and providing remedies for the victims of pollutants and other environmental damage. Almost everything falls within its purview. The tribunal has ordered tanneries in the city of Kanpur to shut down and fined sugar factories in the state of Uttar Pradesh for dumping effluent in the Ganges. In Rajasthan, it has banned mining near a tiger reserve, and on the highway from Manali to Leh, it has barred tour operators from running paragliding and other commercial activities around the high-altitude Rohtang Pass.

Yet the NGT's powers to institute real change appear to be extremely limited. Whatever orders it issues must be enforced by the same defunct regulatory agencies that allowed the violations to happen in the first place. That's why it so often favors bans and shut-downs rather than improved standards: It's easier for bribed officials to pretend that a factory is not dumping untreated waste in the river than it is to pretend that it is not operating at all. Still, too often the NGT seems to offer a choice between continuing with business as usual and bringing the country grinding to a halt. In the case against the rafting camps, the weaknesses of this system were glaringly obvious.

Both sides of the conflict argued that the forest department—which drafted the rules for the beach camps in the protected area—had no manpower or method for monitoring them once they were set up. Only at the end of the season, after the camps were dismantled, was a sweep conducted to make sure that the beaches were left in good condition. An official in Rishikesh told me the forest department conducted checks “on a complaint basis,” but he declined to provide details about the number and amount of any fines the department had issued or permits that had been revoked. Representatives of both the rafting companies and the environmentalists told me they didn't think there had been any.

At the same time, nobody else has made any effort to identify the violators, either, points out Jiten Mehra, an advocate who represented the rafting companies. Though the violations it mentions are specific, the NGT case was directed at everybody operating a beach camp, regardless of the measures they were taking to protect the environment. Moreover, because the NGT takes up each and every case with equal vigor, seemingly without regard to the degree of environmental damage involved, it has allowed one set

of apparent violators to persecute another, Mehra and others told me.

Compared with the noise, pollution, and illegal building activity of the numerous riverside ashrams surrounding Haridwar and Rishikesh, they pointed out, the impact of the rafting camps was miniscule. Sadhus and groups like the Vishva Hindu Parishad object to rafting less because of concern over environmental pollution than the spiritual kind, tying their call for a ban to moral strictures about how to behave on the holy river. “The camping companies not only do rafting, they also indulge in fun and frolic and playing with the water,” Rajan Singh Pankaj, who heads the VHP's Ganges Protection Society, told me. To that line of thinking, drinking alcohol and eating meat on the beach, even if you leave no signs of it behind you, is as bad as polluting the water.

“If you go farther upstream, there are big, big garbage dumps,” said Dhruv, the rafting guide. “If the NGT is shutting down rafting camps, they should shut down some ashrams also, they should shut down some towns also.”

The result, essentially, is that two sets of people who are concerned about the fate of the Ganges wound up fighting each other over one of the few activities with the potential to inspire young, upwardly mobile Indians to care about the environment, rather than joining forces to stop violators and improve standards. According to Kala, Aquaterra and two or three other environmentally responsible adventure-tourism companies covered the bill for a court case that implicated nearly 150 smaller businesses, many of which were to blame for the problems. Meanwhile, many fly-by-night firms became violators simply because they didn't have the expertise or the motivation to push back against customers who ask for DJs and flush toilets.

“We've got evidence of 20 years of telling the government that we need better regulation,” Kala explained, adding that rather than relying on an understaffed and undermotivated forest department, the NGT should partner with industry groups like the Indian Association of Professional Rafting Outfitters to establish mandatory certification and licensing.

Until that changes, Atali may be Aquaterra's best opportunity to lead by example. With the camps gone, the resort is practically alone on the banks of the river, and its high-comfort approach to the outdoor life is a great way to make converts, if the ITC boys who took over the place during my stay were any indicator. Despite hailing from some of the dirtiest corners of urban India, they were quick to parrot the Atali ethos of “take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints.”

“We get a lot of families with eight- to 15-year-old kids,” Kala said. “I tell Manoj that he's building the next generation of clients for our tougher expeditions.”

It doesn't even matter if they can swim. ☉