

Rafting the “Unrunnable” Tsangpo

AN ARDUOUS
FIRST DESCENT
RAISES THE
PROSPECTS FOR
GUIDED TRIPS
ON TIBET'S
SACRED RIVER

By Michael McRae

Since 1992, when the Chinese began admitting foreign adventurers to Tibet's “Great Canyon,” the chasm's white-water rivers have acquired a sinister reputation. The Yarlung Tsangpo has so far claimed the lives of two kayakers attempting first descents: Yoshitaka Takei, a Japanese man who

vanished in a monstrous rapid in 1993, and Doug Gordon, a virtuoso former U.S. Team member who disappeared under similar circumstances in October 1998 (see *ADVENTURE*, Spring 1999, “Trouble in Shangri-la”). Other world-class paddlers who've challenged the lethal currents of the Tsangpo (in the upper gorge) and its tributary, the Po Tsangpo, have come away humbled, and some have declared the rivers all but unboatable. But this same river system that is only now revealing its dangerous power is also, incongruously, giving hints of what some believe to be enormous recreational potential. Last October, after two years of scouting, an international team led by Provo, Utah, outfitter Steve Currey and Earth River Expeditions safely completed a four-day, first rafting descent on the upper Po Tsangpo. Afterward, the expedition leaders announced that they believe the stretch of the Po Tsangpo they had completed is viable for commercially led rafting trips, and Currey went on to predict that even parts of the Yarlung Tsangpo itself may soon be run with paying, nonexpert clients.

If that turns out to be true, that would be major news for proficient recreational boaters with dreams of pioneering select portions of one of the world's last great untapped river systems—provided they are willing to take the significant risks necessary to do so. The heart of the system, which is in southeastern Tibet at the eastern terminus of the Himalaya, is the 200-mile-long, 16,500-foot-deep Yarlung Tsangpo canyon, the world's deepest river gorge, and one of the least explored. The canyon's upper reaches contain rapids that even the daring expeditionary kayaker Scott Lindgren characterizes as “right off the Richter.” Everyone who has sized up this forbidding stretch of the Yarlung Tsangpo agrees that it will never see guided rafting trips. The river descends an average of 65 feet per mile—eight times the rate of the

Stretches of the Po Tsangpo River such as this one may soon play host to groups of commercial rafters.



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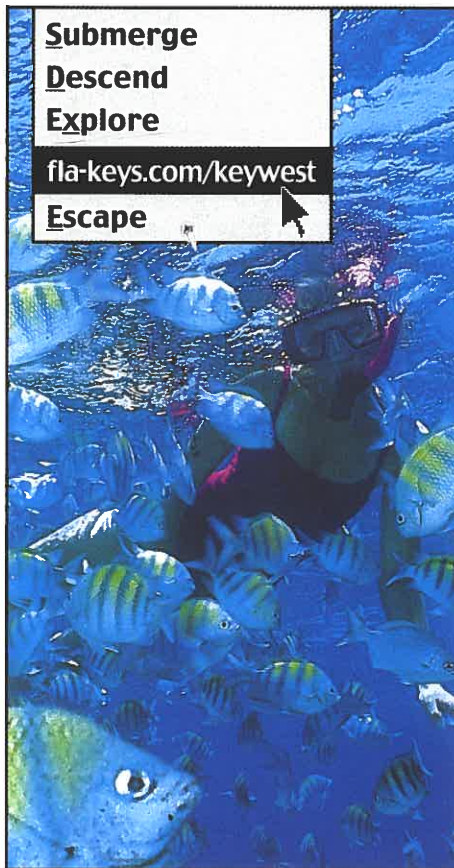
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“Death holes” cluttered the mid-channel.

“IT WAS CHAOS,” SAYS MUNSEY, “IF YOU MADE A MISTAKE, YOU WERE DONE.”

Colorado through the Grand Canyon—and portions drop more than 250 feet per mile. Many consider the inner gorge to be an impossible run for even the most seasoned professional paddlers. The Po Tsangpo, however, which connects to the main river below the inner gorge, contains stretches that are, by comparison, manageable. Earth River Expeditions plans to run commercial trips on a 65-mile section that averages a steep but sane 30-foot-per-mile descent with Class V rapids.

“The Po Tsangpo is the most spectacular river I’ve ever been on,” says Currey, a 30-year veteran of wilderness rivers from Alaska to Asia to Patagonia. “You look ahead at one 23,000-foot snowcapped peak, turn around, and there’s another one behind you, and two more on each side. Your neck gets sore.” Eric Hertz, the president of Earth River Expeditions, likens the scenery to “Mount McKinley rising out of the Middle Fork of the Salmon River,” and ranks the Po with such epic rivers as Chile’s Futaleufú, the Grand Canyon’s Colorado, Africa’s Zambezi, Tibet’s upper Yangtze, and Peru’s Colca.

“The Po Tsangpo has the potential to become one of the world’s greatest white-water trips,” Hertz claims. “To find a river like that nowadays is almost unheard of.”

But Richard Bangs, a founding partner of Mountain Travel-Sobek, was less effusive. “Eric has a vested interest in promoting the river that way,” says Bangs, who has led first descents on more than 35 of the world’s great rivers in the past 30 years. “Look at a map of western China. There are hundreds of rivers to be run there alone, most of them with huge

tributaries that also haven’t been done. Look at Afghanistan, Pakistan . . . you begin to see what a lot of water is left to run.”

Few of those rivers can match the raw power of the Tsangpo system, though. Originating in western Tibet, the Yarlung Tsangpo flows wide and muddy across the breadth of the Tibetan Plateau before pouring into a canyon scarcely wider than Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue. At its narrowest, steepest point, the Tsangpo crashes between the adjacent peaks of Namche Barwa (25,446 feet) and Gyala Pelri (23,462 feet), whose glaciated summits are only 13 miles apart. Then the river enters the so-called Great Bend, where it joins forces with the Po Tsangpo, doubles back on itself, and continues crashing down through a subtropical jungle. Currey believes it is this lower stretch of the Yarlung Tsangpo (in addition to the Po) that has commercial potential. The first runnable section, he says, begins about 50 miles downriver from the confluence, where the average gradient has melted to ten feet per mile. Currey is planning a 50-mile, week-long expedition that would end just north of the Indian border.

Below: Robert leads clients down a rapid on the Po Tsangpo. Right: Reaching the Po required several footbridge crossings.



A "world's greatest" raft trip.

SO CLAIMS OUTFITTER ERIC HERTZ ABOUT THE PO TSANGPO.

ren plateau. The couple came home from a fall 1998 trip enthusing about the possibilities on the upper Po. "It's solid Class V water," says Boyd, "but by avoiding the worst rapids and unscoutable gorges, you could kayak from the plateau all the way down into the jungle."

With Boyd's mile-by-mile scouting report in hand, Currey recruited Earth River Expeditions to run the trip, including three of their premier oarsmen on the international river-running scene: Steve Mahan (trip leader), Roberto Currie, and Ben Fadeley. Earth River's Chinese partner Jiyue Zhang organized the team's logistics. To subsize the trip, Eric recruited six clients with Class V experience, all from the United States, ranging in age from 24 to 59: three doctors, a son of one of the doctors, a building contractor, and a retired cabinetmaker.

The team gathered in Lhasa on October 19, 1999, around the time that water levels on Tibetan rivers typically are dropping, and reached the put-in, above the military outpost of Tangmai, two days later. (For Tsangpo trips, proper timing is essential. Generally speaking, river levels in the Himalaya are at their low-est—and thus safest—from October through March.) As the expedition's catarafts were being assembled, Colorado orthopedist Peter Weingarten, 58, and his 24-year-old son, Jed, a 200-day-a-year paddler, took off in their kayaks to investigate downstream. "My dad and I were apprehensive about the trip," confesses Jed. "I'd seen a video of Scott and Charlie on the lower Po, and I knew what had happened to Doug Gordon."

At the first bend in the river, the two encountered a huge rapid. Jed negotiated it successfully, but the elder Weingarten "flipped and was being pulled upside down toward the main current," Jed says. "I was thinking, 'This is how Gordon died,' but my dad rolled up on the first try."

The pair paddled about eight miles farther and was forced to portage twice. Based on their recommendation, the catarafts were dismantled and moved downstream to a safer put-in. After launching the next day, the team members found themselves in what they considered to be a Class V Shangri-la. "It was awesomely fun white water," says Peter, "and it was a thrill to be making a first descent."

After four days, the crew had knocked off 46 miles of river. While the rapids were nearly continuous, the run was relatively straightforward compared to the extremely

treacherous sections immediately above and below it, where the river's translucent blue waters burst through blind canyons, and where the average gradient leaps from 40 feet per mile to nearly twice that.

Nonetheless, the boaters did not downplay the section of river they had successfully boated. "There's nothing in the U.S. I'd compare it to," says Peter.

Currey is similarly careful with his descriptions of the Po. "The power of the river is not to be taken lightly," he says. "You can look at it from shore, but you can only get the true perspective from a boat. Rapids that you thought were a certain size while scouting turned out to be twice as big as expected. The river is also totally unpredictable as far as fluctuations in volume. It can rain and the river will suddenly jump up on you. We happened to catch it at a perfect level, and it was dropping. I would not have wanted to run it at even two feet higher."

After leaving the river, the group trekked to the confluence of the Yarlung and Po. "That was the hairiest part of the trip," explains Currey. "We had to crawl on our hands and knees across a landslide of unstable scree. One slip and that would have been it. I'll take Class V rapids any day." A plague of leeches set upon the group, and Matt Bergey, a 24-year-old contractor from Oregon, got into something similar to poison oak, which he says caused his face to expand "to the size of a basketball." One eye was swollen completely shut.

"It got to the point where I was taking two steps with the eye open and two with it closed," says Bergey. "My foot went over a cliff, but fortunately a porter was right there—a 15-year-old kid who might have weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet but was unbelievably strong. He yanked me back up on the trail like I was a rag doll."

Given the killer white water and treacherous jungles, the Great Canyon is not very likely to be overrun with adventure tourists. But Currey and Earth River Expeditions' Eric Hertz think its potential for rafting and trekking is wide open. Earth River plans to offer a run on the upper Po this year,

Right: The river at the intended put-in for the fall 1999 Currey/Earth River trip was too wild for the rafts. Above: The group moved downstream and found better conditions.



and Currey hopes to lead a trip down the lower Yarlung in 2001. In addition, Currey plans to organize commercial treks into the deepest heart of the inner gorge.

Currey may be rushing things, however. In Buddhist scriptures, the gorge is known as *Beyul Pemako*, or "The Hidden Land of the Opening Lotus." Certain religious texts caution that the sanctuary shall remain sealed off from the outside world until three reincarnated lamas gather at the confluence of the two rivers and open the sacred realm. Before that time, it is written, those who attempt to venture in do so at their own peril. ▲

Adventure Guide Tsangpo

Though both Steve Currey and Earth River Expeditions are leading trips on segments of the rivers that they consider relatively safe, these are nonetheless pioneering outings on massive, unpredictable—and dangerous—Himalayan waterways. In other words, go at your own risk.

■ Earth River Expeditions' two-week trip is scheduled to depart the United States in mid-October and will include sightseeing in Lhasa and rafting on the Po Tsangpo in 18-foot boats navigated by experienced guides. Though clients without white-water experience can join the expedition, they must be in good physical condition. The cost is \$5,000, not including airfare to Lhasa. Contact Earth River at 800-643-2784; www.earthriver.com.

■ Steve Currey's trip on the lower Yarlung Tsangpo is slated for October 2001; the team will be limited to 16 physically fit participants who have Class V rafting experience. The trip will be more rigorous than Currey's Po Tsangpo trip last October because the lower gorge is roadless; it will probably require hiking out afterward via the 13,500-foot Doshong La Pass. Currey will also offer less arduous hiking treks into the upper Yarlung Tsangpo gorge. Details to be announced. Contact Steve Currey Expeditions at 800-937-7238; www.expeditioncompany.net.

TIBET Rafting a Hidden Himalayan River

The Yarlung Tsangpo River hurtles through the world's deepest gorge as it slices between adjacent peaks that rear up 23,462 feet and 25,446 feet in southeastern Tibet. The 1998 death of kayaker Doug Gordon, who was swept away while attempting a first descent of the defile, and the discovery of a massive waterfall in the canyon triggered a blitz of book projects and magazine articles (see *ADVENTURE*, Spring 1999, "Trouble in Shangri-la," and March/April 2000, "Rafting the 'Unrunnable' Tsangpo"). They also confirmed that the inner gorge of the Yarlung Tsangpo is too wild to boat. Just around the corner, however, up a tributary called the Po Tsangpo, is a recently discovered 65-mile stretch of white water that offers challenging but manageable rapids on one of the world's greatest untapped river systems. "It

blows away the Futaleufú in terms of scenery," says Steve Mahan, an Earth River guide. In terms of white water, the Po and the Fu are cousins: Both have relatively warm turquoise water that flows at about 10,000 cubic feet per second through technical Class IV rapids, though the Po's Class V rapids are a tad less challenging than those on the Fu.

After flying as a group from Chengdu, China, to Lhasa, participants in Earth River's October trip will travel east for two to three days along the Yarlung's south bank to the put-in, stopping at villages and monasteries along the way. En route to last year's first descent, Currie passed a Buddhist pilgrim prostrating himself, inchworm style, along the road. He'd traveled this way, one body length after another, from Sichuan and was heading for Lhasa, a journey of 800 miles (seven months down, three to go). —D.N.

OUTFITTER: Earth River Expeditions; 800-643-2784; www.earthriver.com. **LENGTH:** 17 days. **DATE:** October 2001. **RATE:** \$5,100, departing from Chengdu.

PHOTOGRAPHS: FROM LEFT, JAMES MARTIN; D. GOERING/HIDDENPLACES.NET

