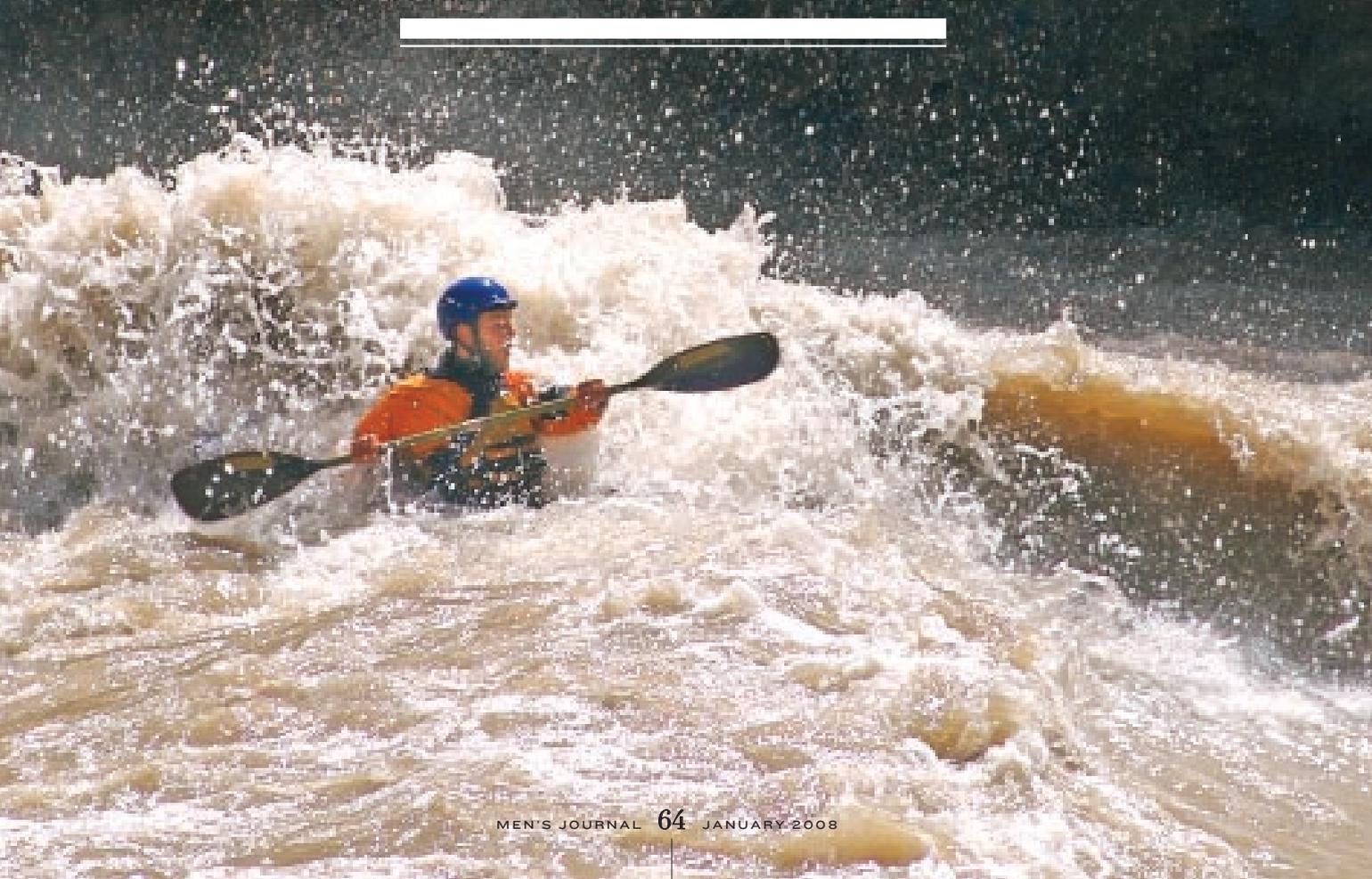


KISSING THE ANGRY RIVER

ONE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA'S LAST UNTAMED RIVERS, THE SALWEEN RAGES DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAINS OF TIBET, PAST ISOLATED MONASTERIES THAT HAD SEEN FEW WESTERNERS — UNTIL OUR TEAM OF WHITEWATER PIONEERS SET OUT IN QUEST OF A HISTORIC FIRST DESCENT. WOULD THE RIVER LET THEM THROUGH?

BY *Craig Childs* PHOTOGRAPHS BY *Kyle George*





■ Expedition leader Travis Winn surfs a Grand Canyon-size wave, opposite. Jetsar, a Nyimapa Order monk, stands in a doorway of Castle Monastery.



helmets and drysuits. Men made death faces, tongues hanging out, and pointed at me, then pointed downstream. Waving their hands, they beckoned us to give up this foolish venture and come to shore with the living, where they would no doubt treat us from house to house with hot yak-butter tea.

I didn't know whom to believe. Maybe they were right. Maybe this was suicide. One American and two Chinese had died on a river in southwest China the week before; then four members of a six-man Russian team perished on a first descent in northwest China. Now we were up to bat: 13 Americans, one Tibetan, one Chinese, and one large, hairy German, running one of the last unknown stretches of the Salween River.

An old woman bowed toward me, her hands fused together in a desperate blessing. I did not know what expression to return as I bowed to her in reply. To these locals the

river was a dangerous boundary splitting the world in two. Its only purpose was to carry the message of prayer flags downstream; it was not a place for fleshy mortals. I wanted to touch her shoulder and explain that it was all right, we were river people.

THE CHINESE CALL THIS THE Nu Jiang, the Angry River. Local Tibetans know it as the Gyalmo Ngulchu, the Tears of Princess Wen Cheng. The rest of the world calls it the Salween. After passing two small hydroelectric dams in its upper reaches, the 1,500-mile watercourse flows unfettered out of Tibet and south through China proper, eventually forming the border between Thailand and Myanmar. Although 13 dams have been proposed for a downstream section, this upper stretch remains far too isolated for industrialization.

The roads were a mess. Three days out of Lhasa we had nothing but one-lane mud tracks and bridges half out, our World War II-style transport truck grinding up and over 16,000-foot storm-swept passes. When we finally reached the Salween we stood dismayed before the brown sheen of a flood, watching the river rise more than 40,000 cubic feet per second, several times what you usually see in the Grand Canyon. We had been counting on 15,000 cfs. Monsoons were weeks late leaving the country, and every river in Tibet and the rest of China was swollen and dangerous.

Travis Winn, the 23-year-old expedition leader, crouched on a river boulder taking his first look at the Salween. He was not comfortable with what he saw. A playfully strong kayaker, lanky and confident, Travis has a wisdom well beyond his years. He runs a Chinese river-rafting company called Last

AT THE HIGH END of northeast Tibet, glaciers pour their hearts over the edge of the Tibetan Plateau into hundreds of rivers that race down like Technicolor waterfalls. Even in the most remote country, several days' walk from the nearest road, prayer flags stretch across these rivers. Catching downstream wind, they flutter with a sound as quiet as flame.

We brought four kayaks and four rafts to one of these rivers, where we worked the iron split of a canyon that no one had ever navigated before. Tibetan villagers feared it and gave unreliable reports of what lay downstream. Dead ends. Waterfalls. We sent one kayak ahead to scout, to see what the water might do.

Brandy Ladd, the 33-year-old daughter of a Yellowstone backcountry ranger, maneuvered her boat through waves and foam. A slight, wiry woman, she had a fierceness about her. Growing up in bear country, she had carried a handgun since the age of eight. Brandy hit a wave that knocked her backward, then a whirlpool sucked her down. For a few seconds we saw nothing but her kayak's bright belly and her paddle blade thrashing up from below. The freezing water kept shoving her down. Finally she pulled the escape cord and swam to the surface, gasping.

"Swim for your fucking life, Brandy!" the boatman next to me yelled.

Towing her kayak with one hand, Brandy swam doggedly into a huge eddy where she went limp. We swept in behind her with a raft and yanked her up by her life jacket, her hands shaking, water still coming out of her



■ A rare interlude of quiet water, top, as the Salween carves its way into the Tibetan Plateau. Author Craig Childs, above, hitches a ride with a member of the Nyima Order at Castle Monastery near Sadeng, Tibet.

mouth. When her capsized kayak spun past we hauled it up onto our raft frame. This was the first hour of a 200-mile journey, the beginning of a chain of unexplored gorges leading through nameless 17,000-foot mountains. You flip in a place like this and you don't know what's around the corner, how long it will be until you see the light of day again. We were edgy with expectation.

Above the eddy stood a small yak-herding village, adobe rooms etched into the mountainside, fresh barley hung out to dry. People poured down on us, many of them wielding sticks and branches, anything to save us. One man carried a long wooden staff with a crook in the end. As we passed near him he reached out, clamped the crook onto the raft frame, and held us fast.

While we waited for Brandy to regain her composure I glanced over my shoulder at about 60 Tibetans. Every set of eyes I met was filled with concern and warning. They had never seen anything like us, in our brightly colored

Descents River Expeditions, and already he had made several first descents in the region, spending months at a time hopping from river to river, engrossed in their remote beauty. One of his closest friends, a Chinese riverman named Guo Zheng, had been among those who drowned the week before. Zheng's trip leader, an American, had made a foolish choice to enter a difficult river at high water, and it had cost not only Zheng's life, but the lives of five others as well. Now Travis was missing the funeral to be here, looking grimly at high water and considering the same decision.

"It's a textbook mistake," he concluded. "You don't put in for a first descent in water like this."

So we didn't. We set up camp next to a riverside monastery and waited in the rain, watching uprooted trees plunge down the current. While we argued whether it had come up a few inches or gone down a few inches, monks in cranberry-colored robes invited us into their quarters.

Creaking hallways led between dim, smoky rooms, their walls draped in dingy but colorful fabric. The monks showed us their kitchen, a hearth fire where they poured cups of yak-butter tea. The tea tasted strongly of boiled animal, and every sip we muscled down was promptly replaced from a battered kettle.

We sat in their prayer hall, where they positioned themselves on woven red cushions and chanted the day's benedictions, punctuating their drone with blasts of horns and clanging cymbals. The young monks, 14 or 15 years old, peered over their instruments and grinned at us like antsy kids at Sunday school.

It turns out they were praying for more rain. This was their responsibility to nomadic yak herders and barley farmers living all over Tibet. As they prayed, rainwater leaked through the hall's ceiling and tapped on the wood-plank floor.

Every afternoon I ventured alone to an upstairs room in which a lama sat behind a partition of scripts and drums. He chanted in an ancient tongue as a younger monk attended to the candles and incense burning all around him. An older, pock-faced man with a robe over one shoulder, the lama looked up from the texts and smiled, inviting me to sit. I knew only how to say hello and thank you in Tibetan; he knew how to say "okay-okay" in English. Each day he gestured to me to sit closer, until finally I was at his side, helping him turn pieces of finger-greased parchment, their inked calligraphy a thousand years old.

To the monks we were objects of fascination, our arm hairs mesmerizing. We dressed like astronauts. We were only the third group of Westerners to visit this place in the last 60 years. They milled about our camp for hours, some mustering the courage to touch my frazzled beard. It was a prize to thumb through the foreign gibberish of my journal. In a spate of sunshine, a monk took one of our Sharpie pens and wrote a blessing on a drybag. The

pen went to another hand, and a second monk put daggered Tibetan script all over someone's river helmet. These were holy sayings: invocations to the bodhisattva of compassion, *om mani padmi hum*, and offerings to travel in the light, *tashi delek*.

The pen went from hand to hand. Monks took hold of life jackets, drysuits, paddle blades. Feeling prolific, one of them penned an entire dragon and surrounded it with benedictions. This didn't make the river come down, but at least we stopped staring at it. We practiced tossing throw lines in the grass, and the monks quickly found amusement by helping us. Soon we had them jumping rope two and three at a time as we sang schoolyard chants. This led to a tug-of-war, 30 monks dragging the 16 of us through the mud. They worked themselves up into a playful frenzy and started body-tackling one another, their holy beads clashing and rattling.

After the games I sat on a log with the friendly older lama, who had proved one of the more boisterous of his team. He showed me his palms, red with rope burn, and he grinned with great satisfaction.

Maybe that was all we needed. The river was still up, but we quietly let go of our American, goal-oriented mission. We changed our

plans and hauled gear for two days up a nearby tributary gorge, where we set out on swift, glacier-blue water. Though Brandy took that bad kayak flip in the first hour and the villagers begged us to stop, we kept going, tightening our skills down washboards of rapids. Kayaks led the way, sending paddle signals back to us: right, left, or run the gut. We slept among driftwood and woke to rain after rain. When our tributary reached the mud-clouded Salween, the massive river had dropped only a bit, but it felt different this time.

Travis again crouched on a boulder and peered at the water. The boulder and every rock around it had been painstakingly carved, bearing the same blessings the monks had written all over our equipment. The stones, called *mani* stones, had been placed by pilgrims, set into the water so their holy messages would flow downstream. To these mountain Buddhists, water and wind transport whatever you put into them, broadcasting words and intentions out into the world.

Perched on the stones, eyes downriver, Travis nodded, "We're going to do it."

So we did it. We put in for a first descent at high water, not because Travis sounded heroic or even hopeful, but because he now believed something.



■ When the Salween proved too high to run safely, monks and locals helped hike the rafts out of the valley. Fearing for the rafters' safety, the monks covered their gear with scrawled blessings.



■ Expedition co-organizer Eric Ladd, right, exults after trip leader Travis Winn, left, decides to run the Salween despite dangerously high water.

waves. Water soaked into my sinuses. Kristen McDonald was on the oars, shouting orders, spinning us around. All I could see was froth, rock, froth, and the silken tongue of a massive wave that rose over my head and exploded.

We slammed into an eddy, joining the flotsam of kayaks and rafts seeking shelter. Time enough to breathe, to wait as two kayaks spun back into the current to scout ahead. They popped in and out of sight, engulfed, spit back up, then slung around the bend.

For three minutes we waited for Travis's voice on the radio. No one said anything, just listened to the bass-note roar of the river.

Five minutes passed in radio silence. Kristen studied the river, emptying herself of doubt. Tall and exquisitely intense, she was not as highly trained as the others. Rafting was simply one of her many obsessive hobbies; she played cello in a string punk band in San Francisco and is finishing her doctoral dissertation on the political climate of dam-building in China. For now there was nothing

OUR GROUP CONSISTED OF THE usual suspects: ski patrol, off-season river guide, attorney for Trout Unlimited; some friends, some strangers, and one hardy married couple from Big Sky, Montana. Together we scoured the shore of the Salween for a campsite in the dim of an early evening rainstorm, the canyon hung with fog. We floated around a bend to see that a fresh landslide had crossed the river. The mountain was scarred gray a thousand feet up. Now a massive, newly formed rapid surged up and over the debris, continuing for a quarter-mile downstream and disappearing where the canyon cut left.

Oars and paddles slapped the water at first sight of this. We caught a skim of the last possible eddy, grinding against a bouldered shoreline. As ropes were heaved out and tied to anything solid, boatmen leaned against their oars and gazed at the rapid. Pegs of hail began popping off our helmets. Everyone was thinking the same thing: Rapids always look worse in a storm.

The first decision was to just ghost the rafts — push them in unmanned and try to collect the carnage downstream. Brock DiSanti, an Outward Bound guide with the lean face of a wilderness junkie, scouted as far as he could around the corner. Walking back, he said, "If we're just going to ghost them, I might as well be in the raft."

That was the final decision: to run the rafts down this rapid with just captains and gear, and hope for the best. Those of us who were nonessential set off on a scramble among newly cleaved boulders and sheets of rock pulverized into mud and sand. A woman with a flair for the dramatic — she'd been a finalist in an audition for the television show *Survivor* — pulled

ROPES WERE UNTIED, LIFE JACKETS CINCHED.

"EVERYONE GOT THEIR LINES?" SHOUTED JASON. "VOMIT NOW IF YOU NEED TO."

out racks of climbing gear and set up a line around a rock outcrop. In the middle of rigging harnesses we stopped to watch kayaks slice through the rapids, paddles flying. Behind them came a train of rafts, bucking, shoving, twisting. Each made it through upright, then slipped around the bend.

The rest of us passed the landslide and worked our way into a steep mossy forest at 12,000 feet. I paused in the silence, let my breathing settle among purple-coned spruce and rhododendrons big as cottonwood trees, spindly herbs brushing my calves. Mist wet my lungs, the smell of an enchanted wood.

THE MAPS WE HAD WERE Soviet-made from the 1970s, and although not wholly accurate, they did predict certain topographic junctures and the probabilities of big rapids. A few days downstream they showed a place where mountains closed around the river like praying hands. Just above this, villagers who teemed around us gave the universal sign language for waterfall as they pointed downstream. We camped at the mouth of this gorge, and some of us did not sleep particularly well that night.

The next morning everything went vertical. Cliffs up, water down. I leaned over a raft tube and dug with a paddle as we broke through

on her mind but getting through whatever lay downstream.

Ten minutes passed and still no word. No one wanted to say it, but the kayakers were either dead or could not figure out what to do. Either way there was only one choice from here.

The radio crackled with Travis's voice. "Big water," he said. "Be ready. Run left of center, then right of center, then hard right, then eddy right."

Ropes were untied, life jackets cinched. "Everyone got their lines?" shouted Jason Moore, a 37-year-old physician's assistant from Vail, Colorado. "Left, right, hard right, and we grab an eddy on the right side. Let's see smiles, everyone. Vomit now if you need to."

I jumped into Kristen's raft and did exactly what she said. We pushed into the roar. Midway down I glanced up to see Jason's raft jacked skyward, as if about to cartwheel into us. He shouted, "Hang on for your lives!"

Suddenly my head was buried in a wave. When we blew out the other side, the other raft was gone and Kristen was yelling, "Dig!" I drove my paddle as deep as I could down a roller-coaster drop. We exploded into a plume of marble-size drops up the other side.

As fast as we could we found the eddy with everyone else. It was a dangerous sanctuary, unsteady and spinning. Quick count of heads. We were all here but for the two lead kayaks

continuing downstream. Splintered granite monoliths surrounded us, some toppled into the river. It was likely no human being had ever been in this place. There is no reason to come here, no route but the river. I tried to comprehend this isolation, feel its depth, but my heart was beating too quickly.

The next radio message arrived from downstream: "Run left of the first hole. It is very important you miss the hole. Then set up for a large wave train."

As we banked around a hole the size of a small house, we each realized at about the same time that the radio message had been greatly abridged. Beyond the hole lay a labyrinth of bursting haystacks with no clear line. One raft nearly went end over end in the waves. The oarsman of another boat was thrown free but managed to grab onto a piece of webbing that dragged him along through the rocks and whitewater as someone else jumped to the oars. Meanwhile, Kristen's raft sliced through the water like a fin. She finessed her way around the rapids, facing into the currents, then out. She had me leaping all over the boat, paddling draw and back, then using the ballast of my body to break us through a wave.

The rapid was continuous, six miles long, and every boat ran it without flipping. When the water finally settled, Kristen draped herself on her oars, exhausted. Walls parted into a valley. On one bank stood a whitewashed shrine with poles of prayer flags sticking out of its roof. There we tied off. People in coats and beads came down from a village and surrounded us, amazed. They saw on our gear the messages written with a Sharpie pen. Though we could speak hardly a word to them — even our Tibetan crew hardly understood the dialect spoken this far back — they saw we were bringing blessings from upstream.

That evening we camped in a steady downpour, our hot meal spooned into metal cups. Later we drank tequila, congratulating ourselves with toasts from the bottle. Travis laughed as he said, "When you consider how much we're going through without having to portage — I mean, this is incredible."

His smile beamed into the rain. "Where logic hasn't worked for us," he said, "it must be karma."

Brock, the Outward Bound guide, crouched in the mud with the Tibetan and Chinese crew members, keeping their cigarettes from going out. They looked downstream at the dim limestone gates of the next chasm. Applaud ourselves as we might, we still did not know what was down there.

HUGE MOUNTAINS SLID PAST one another as we floated downstream, into the door of one chasm after the next. The rain abated, and our nights were flooded with stars. Not a single airplane crossed the sky. It felt as if we had fallen out of time into a primeval cradle, all

of our gear, our rafts and tents, consumed by the dark as the river rumbled by.

In six days and nearly 200 miles of river, we flipped only one raft and had no injuries. We named only the largest rapids: Kata Falls, Golden Yak, Waimea. Most just stayed the way we marked them on the Russian maps: Rapid #11, Rapid #12.

No one expected Rapid #13, however. It was a wild card that showed up during the last hour of our trip, five miles before the bridge at Lhorong. We rounded into a gorge that looked like a split through a Yosemite big wall, 4,000-foot limestone palisades glittering in the sun and leaving not an inch of shoreline at the bottom. The river slowed to a lulling pace. Oars stopped moving as we gawked straight up, sliding through the core of an 18,000-foot mountain. Any hope for personal distinction we might have nursed this far down the river was finally squelched. Then the walls turned, and the river disappeared over an edge, roaring down into something unseen.

"Oh, shit," said Brock, throwing himself into the oars, pulling against the current. Everyone jumped, shaken out of personal reveries. There was no room to scout, hardly enough time to pause or think. The kayaks were swept down first. Then rafts, one by one. Brock's and mine was second to last. From the very edge we saw the rapid below, a wild maw of waves caving into the center. The canyon took a turn and the rapid clawed up the outside wall. There was no clean approach. Everyone had to plunge in and figure it out on the fly.

"I'm going to stick your nose in it!" Brock shouted to me. "You'll break through for us. Just throw your weight."

I braced between twin cataraft tubes as we glided into a pit of whitewater. A wave broke across my face, and I sputtered river out of my mouth. Behind me a Tibetan on our raft jumped onto the oars with Brock, the two of them now facing each other, doubling the muscle to build momentum up the wall of the next wave. "Push, push, push!" Brock shouted with every stroke.

I stared into a curl of water rising over my head, the wave beginning to collapse on itself, cutting off our path. Brock yelled one last time, and then I was underwater, listening to the

furiously garble of air bubbles until we broke into the light and slid down the backside.

We spun out of the end of the rapid, heads reeling, laughing with astonishment; we should have flipped. "Jesus Christ!" our Tibetan crewman shouted.

The gorge fell open. Still dripping, we floated toward a concrete bridge. We'd seen a few other bridges along the river, each rickety and bunted with prayer flags, but none like this, spotless and communist gray. Three police officers appeared at the rail, their blue suits and perky hats sharp against a clear sky. They had sent word up to villages to ask if we'd been seen, but no one had reported back. With the water so high and the shadow of recent river deaths behind us, they must have expected bodies to come floating down.

It could have easily happened that way, our expedition reduced to wreckage. The river was far bigger and more complex than we'd anticipated. Rafts could have flipped one after the next, swimmers hurled down alleyways of rapids with no shore, no escape. From the beginning we knew this was a one-way trip, a tongue of water leading straight down into the unknown, where we navigated more by visceral intuition than brawn.

The teams that died this season had a flaw somewhere, a bad decision, and misfortunes stacked up on one another. I could say we were just lucky, but it was more a fine balance of deftness and fate. It was the perfect way to run a first descent. We imagined ourselves making it alive to the other side, and we did.

Below the officers' small, round faces, just out of their view, were hundreds of *mani* stones. Buddhist pilgrims had leaned over to place them on a concrete lip so that they spanned the entire river. As we came closer I saw that each stone bore an inscription that I recognized from what the monks had written on our helmets and life jackets.

Brock lit a cigarette and pulled on the oars, inhaling smoke through his teeth as if it hurt. Our raft passed through the shadow of the bridge, carrying the message down. ☐

Last Descents River Expeditions will offer trips on the Salween in 2008 (lastdescents.com).

