



Adventure / India

River of Legends

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India's Ganga River plummets down Himalayan valleys on its way to the sea, with a mix of challenging rapids and the chance to not only immerse yourself in its water, but the rich culture that surrounds it.



Indian river legend Akshay Kumar celebrates another successful rafting adventure.

MY WEAK HEADTORCH beam barely picked out bike-swallowing potholes nor the edge of the road dropping to the river. 'How's the bike?' asked Akshay. 'Fine thanks' I replied, when in truth I was thinking 'What a total piece of shite'.

With no functioning gears, one barely working brake and no handlebar grips this was mountain biking in the raw.

An hour or so later we were down on that river – the Ganga – and ferry gliding in rafts across its waters under the stars, across to our camp for the night. After a three-day conference on adventure it was good to be doing one. With the swoosh of the river running past and the flickering of lights on houses high on the steep hillsides, we imbibed a glass or two and yarned around the fire; Tomas from Poland, Nikola from Serbia, Akshay and I.

Akshay Kumar, just shy of 50, was an old man of Indian rivers. Sent by his father, Indian mountaineering legend Colonel 'Bull' Kumar, to train as a rafting guide in Canada when he was 16, Akshay returned to bounce his way down many of India's rivers including first descents of the Brahmaputra and Narmada. The family business, Mercury Himalayan Explorations, was one of the first operators to run trips on the Ganga in the mid 1980s. Now, Akshay tells me, there are 300 or more running the river in a season that runs from September to May.

AFTER A FULL breakfast we hit its waters; our raft and a couple of safety kayaks. The Ganga here runs deep in a steep sided, forested valley; the snowy Himalaya of its source waters well hidden. 'Jai Ganga!' we all

called out, as we smashed our paddle blades onto the green water and headed into the rapids. This first day was one of long pools split by standing waves and bigger Grade 3/4 rapids: Daniel's Dip, Cashflow, Black Money, Three Blind Mice.

As we bounced downriver our safety kayakers regularly fished plastic bottles from the water. 'Twice a year the rafting companies spend a day cleaning up the river and its banks,' Akshay told me.

The rapids also reminded me of another Indian river I'd rafted over 30 years earlier. Finding myself in the Kulu valley as a young lad feeling my way in the adventure world, I eyed with enthusiasm borne of some experience but not enough, the fast flowing, rapid-infested Beas River. 'We've a raft in Delhi that I could bring up here' said Roopchand, a local travel operator I'd got to know. One thing led to another and some weeks later the raft was in the valley. Roopchand told me there was an Indian guy who'd paddled many rivers who was keen for a run down the Beas. We agreed to meet the next morning.

What he didn't tell me was he'd sold the trip as a commercial tour to four Americans. They were waiting enthusiastically ►

The Wall. What river around the world doesn't have a rapid with that name or a variation on it?

Perfect weather for the first morning of the Ganga adventure.



on the riverbank the following morning. I should have pulled out then and there of course; I might have done a bit of paddling but was no raft guide. But youthful enthusiasm and the yearning for life's experiences...

My heart was in my mouth all day as we ran the river; wondering what I'd do if we lost someone overboard.

High above the Ganga a new road was being blasted into the hillside, debris tumbling in an act of disrespect, toward the holy river. New roads creep inexorably and ever deeper into the Himalaya. The villagers want them, the government wants them, pilgrims looking for an easier way want them. Who are we as travellers to want to deny such connections?

The Wall. What river around the world doesn't have a rapid with that name or a variation on it? We filled ourselves with a lunch of fine curries served from an oversized tiffin tin, as we overlooked this wall. Our guides discussed this way and that with an occasional twinkle that made you wonder whether it was more to do with flipping us on purpose than getting through unscathed. Burping dhal, we ran it all to the good.

LATE IN THE DAY we arrived at Shivpuri and hauled the raft onto a beach before walking through the forest to Bulls Retreat, Mercury's accommodation place. We were honoured to be there for the 80th birthday celebrations of Colonel Kumar – Deputy Leader of the successful 1960 Indian Everest expedition (the third to climb the mountain), leader of expeditions making first Indian ascents of Kanchenjunga, Nanda Devi and many more exploits. Among family and friends celebrating with Col Kumar were a pair of retired generals far keener to dwell on the defeat of Australia by India in the test cricket that day than any battle they had led.

At Bulls Retreat, the good Colonel has curated a fascinating museum on Everest and the Himalaya that is well worth a visit for anyone with a Himalaya interest.



Contemplation on the Ganga takes many forms.

The following morning, after witnessing a puja ceremony to honour the Colonel, we were back on the river for the run down to Rishikesh. The rapids were more frequent and there were other operators; this section is the most popular. The government has now put some restrictions on the river; from clearing permanent rafting camps from the Ganga's banks to stopping rafting guides older than 50. The former makes sense, the latter less. It counts me out from another Beas moment of madness and Akshay from guiding this year after his birthday.

We jumped into the river below Golf Course rapid for a long, cool swim to take in the Ganga waters. Back in the raft a final paddle saw us go under the iconic Laxman Jhula bridge into Rishikesh, city of yoga, yogis and a million monkeys. Here the Ganga begins a more languorous journey to the sea.

With the sun setting we completed our river journey in the company of pilgrims, priests, yogis and fellow tourists heading for the Arti ceremony on the banks of a river that was our companion those past days but a part of life for millions. **A**

Huw would like to thank to Mercury Himalayan Exploration and the Adventure Travel Trade Association for hosting him on the Ganga.