



**The Zanskar,
The Grand Canyon of Asia,
Himalayan Kayak Expedition,
August 2006**

Introduction

High in the Zaskar mountains in the Ladakh region of Northern India lies the Zaskar river. The river itself starts at a height higher than the peak of the Matterhorn. It then winds down the breathtaking Zaskar valley, described as the Grand Canyon of Asia, for 150km until it reaches the infamous Indus river. The largest of the tributaries is the Tsarap Chu which itself flows for 150km through a series of gorges before it joins the Zaskar. Combined the Tsarap Chu and the Zaskar make one of the greatest multiday, self supported kayaking expeditions in the world.

The aim of our expedition was to undertake the self supported multi day trip down the Tsarap Chu and Zaskar. It was also our aim to spend a month exploring the rivers of Ladakh.

The Team

One of the most important aspects of any expedition is to have the right team. A team was put together not only due to their kayaking ability and experience, but also their social side. The group bonded well which helped when things got a little more difficult.

Patrick Clissold Expedition Leader, Age 20yrs. 2nd Year MEng Mechanical Engineering. Has over 11 years kayaking experience. Grew up on the rivers of North Wales has paddled all over the UK and Europe (France, Austria, Germany, Arctic Sweden, Corsica, Pyrenees) and also a month kayaking in the Colorado. Confident on Grade IV/V.

Theo Petre Age 23yrs. Ex-Imperial, Life Member, MEng Electronic & Electrical Engineering. Very experienced paddler. Has paddled all over UK and Europe (France, Austria, Arctic Sweden, Norway, Pyrenees) and also went on an expedition in 2004 to British Columbia, Canada. Confident on Grade IV/V.

David Burne Age 19yrs. Experienced paddler. Kayaked all over UK and Europe. More exotic trips to British Columbia in 2004 and the Zambezi in 2005.

David Fairweather Age 23yrs. Studying Chemical & Process Engineering at the University of Surrey, Guilford. Very experienced paddler all over UK and Europe. Part of the Kyrgyzstan kayak expedition in 2005.

Graham Fairweather Age 20yrs. Studying Forensic and Analytical Chemistry at the University of Strathclyde. Experience in kayaking all over UK (especially Scotland) and Europe. Part of the Kyrgyzstan kayak expedition in 2005.

Day by Day Diary of Zaskar Expedition

Day 1 - Arrival in Delhi

The flight to Delhi was pretty painless. We managed to get 40kgs each on board on a 23kg limit with thanks to some confusion over the new BA baggage policy. I had arranged with an Indian friend of mine who lives in Delhi to meet at the airport when we arrived. His uncle is the managing director of the Indian Railway Company and so we were treated like VIPs and ushered through the diplomat's line at immigration. We didn't as much luck at customs as they had issues with our kayaks and we all had to make declarations that we would not sell them in India.

We were taken to a railway company hotel. It was air conditioned but that was about the only good thing about it.

Day 2 – Faff in Delhi

We were awoken at about nine by a knock at the door asking if we wanted tea. It took six men to serve us a cup of tea. We went down to breakfast and due to some confusion we ended up ordering the entire menu. We soon realised that we had an entourage following us thinking we were some kind of VIPs. This entourage grew by the hour as some people from the bus company came to measure our boats. Eventually the bus was sorted to take us to Manali that evening. In the mean time we were treated to a tour of Delhi.

The bus ride was 15 hours overnight. The rest of the group managed to get some sleep but I didn't sleep a wink. It was good however to get out of the crowds and heat of Delhi.

Day 3 – I turn 21!

We arrived in Manali at about 10 o'clock. We found a nice hotel on the banks of the Beas river with a balcony. After some recuperation from the bus journey we started to prepare for our goal, the Tsarap and Zaskar gorges. We bought all the supplies and equipment we would need. We also managed to get a good deal on a 4x4 to take us up Manali – Leh road to take in for the Tsarap and then take our surplus equipment onto Leh.

We then went for some birthday celebrations where we bumped into some Irish kayakers which we knew.

Day 4 – Our first river in India.

We decided to stay another day in Manali in order to acclimatise. We got our kit together and decided to paddle the Beas river from about 10km above Manali back to the hotel. We soon realised that there was a lot of water in the river for this time of year and that the upper Beas was far too hard to get on. Graham was already feeling ill however we decided not waste the entire day and get on a tributary of the upper Beas, confusingly also called the Beas. This turned out to be a lot more manageable with some nice rapids. However the monsoon started about mid afternoon and we were worried about a possible flash flood. This added to the fact that Graham was starting to vomit led to us taking out and getting a lift off a truck back to Manali



Figure 1 Patrick On the Upper Beas

Back in Manali we found out that the Tsarap and Zaskar were at really high levels and were probably not a good idea to attempt. We decided that we would go up to the get on anyway and if we decided that it was too high then we would carry on to Leh and revise our plans.

Day 5 – Journey to the Tsarap

Our jeep arrived early in the morning and after a quick stop to pick up some fuel for our stoves we headed up the mountain road towards Leh. About half an hour into the journey we met by our first obstacle. There had been a large landslide overnight and there was a huge queue of traffic stretching up the mountain road. Luckily this happens all the time and the army and local workmen had it cleared in a matter of hours, shifting huge car sized boulders by hand! As the day went on we climbed higher and higher up the mountain road and was starting to feel the altitude. The weather was pretty poor and visibility was not good but you could tell that we were entering a spectacular mountain desert. As it got dark we had to negotiate some switchbacks which now had a river running down them. One jeep was nearly washed over the edge and all the passenger had to leap out.

We eventually reached the small encampment of Sarchu where we slept in a tent that resembled a yurt. The altitude had really started to get to me and I struggled to sleep.

Day 6 – The Tsarap Chu

We drove another hour or so up the road from Sarchu to where the Tsarap met the road. The river looked grey but it wasn't brown and it was braided. It didn't look like a river in flood and we decided that we would get on. We packed our equipment into our boats and kitted up. The get on for the Tsarap was at around 5500m, even getting into my dry suit was a struggle at this altitude.

The get on was flat and it continued like this for a couple of hours. We eventually reached a cataract which need inspecting. It looked manageable but difficult. We decided to camp there and wait overnight to acclimatise a little more and give chance for the river level to drop.

Day 7

We woke to find that the river had dropped considerably and on further inspection the cataract rapid looked a lot easier. When we came to run the rapid the drops seemed a lot harder from the river. David F ended up capsizing but rolled easily. This was not the last challenge of the day.

A few hours of easier water brought us to a narrow gorge which was about 2km long. On a rather dodgy inspection along a scree slope David F told us that the rapids were not really that hard however there were lots of boils and the walls seemed undercut. It was decided that to portage would be more dangerous than paddling it so we got on. David had also made a slight tactical lie and it was quite a lot harder than he had said and turned out to be one of the test pieces of the entire river. Our energy was drained by this gorge however we carried on as the river seemed to calm down. We came to a few small portages which were quite difficult as the boats were heavy and the altitude was still taking its toll.



Figure 2 Dave Burne on the Tsarap

We eventually came to a horrible looking grade V+ which we had been expecting. The portage seemed far too difficult to undertake in our state so we decided to camp there and carry the portage in the morning.

Day 8

We felt a lot better in the morning and the portage wasn't as bad as we had anticipated. After getting back on we were a little worried that we were out of our depth and we wondered what was coming up. We soon entered an enormous gorge however the river remained flat. Every corner we passed we expected to find some horrible rapid however nothing ever materialised. The gorge carried on all day with very little camping options. At about 5 o'clock we decided to stop at the next possible camp site. An hour or so later a major tributary of the Tsarap Chu, the Zara Chu entered the river. On the confluence was a perfect sandy beach with some trees and undergrowth. We camped there and made a camp fire. Its surprising how much just a simple camp fire can boost moral.

Day 9

We got on the river a little concerned. This was our fourth day on the Tsarap Chu, and we had no idea how far we had come. We knew we had at least two more landmarks to come. The Phuktal monastery and the must portage Reru falls. It was really hard to judge how far we had come and how fast we were going.

Everything fell into place when a few hours into the day we unexpectedly arrived at the Phuktal monastery. We were greeted by a Tibetan horn blasting down the gorge. We could see the monks lining up along their cliff monastery, eager to see who we were. A single boy monk came tumbling down the scree to greet us. We followed him back up the slope to monastery. We noticed that there was a lot of trekkers at the monastery, the first people we had seen in days, which we were a little disappointed about. However they seemed to be ignored by the monks in favour of us. We gave them some postcards of the UK and took their photographs which they seemed most pleased about. We were given some refreshments which included this awful yaks butter tea.

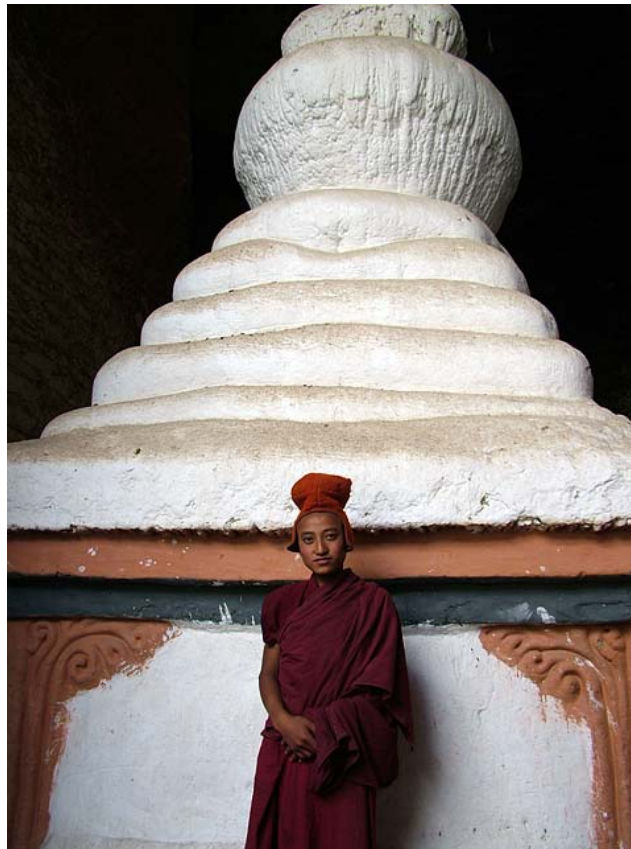


Figure 3 A boy monk

We were asked to join them for lunch which was a real privilege as the trekkers were merely allowed to sit outside. After lunch we decided we should get going. Every boy monk followed us down the to the river ignoring the elders hopeless cries to come back and go to lessons! They would not let us go until nearly every boy monk dressed in our kit and had a go sitting in our boats.

A few harder rapids were encountered until we eventually came to unmistakable Reru falls. This was monstrous as massive amounts of water thundered down an impossible boxed in rapid. It was terrifying just to look at it. Once there might have been an easy way to walk around it, however a most likely recent land slide had made the walk around an almost impossible scramble over loose boulders and scree. To carry all our kit around Reru falls took us about three hours, dodging falling rocks constantly. Once at the other end we found the flattest bit of ground and fell asleep where we lay.

Day 10

This was hopefully the last day on the Tsarap. Things picked up steeply straight away. The rapids turned out to be the hardest of the trip so far with some really large hole, boils and whirlpools. Luckily this was all fine, however our nerves were tested to the limit and we were praying for the end of the Tsarap. The end came as river eased off to reveal the town of Padum on the horizon. We managed to find a guest house in this very isolated Muslim town and collapsed into bed.

Day 11

We decided that after such an epic journey down the Tsarap we would have a rest day in Padum. Padum was not the most athletically pleasing of towns however it was nice to be off the river. We rested, ate and bought some more fuel and supplies for the next leg of our journey, the Zanskar.

Day 12

We got up early and got our equipment down to the river. We were now on the Zanskar and up ahead a very steep sided gorge loomed. The rapids were a lot easier than the Tsarap and as we got further into the gorge the scenery became more and more spectacular. After a full day of kayaking we encountered no portages and we were able to sit back and enjoy the scenery.

The river was still very high and there were no obvious river beaches. This started to become a problem as the day went on as it was possible we would have nowhere to sleep before dark. Luckily we eventually we came across some flat land with grass. This was already occupied by a group of American rafters, however there was plenty of room for us to join them.



Figure 4 The Grand Canyon of Asia

Day 13

We launched back on the next day and entered the largest part of the gorge. This was almost 50km of completely vertical sided gorge. It was truly spectacular. We arrived at a river beach with a waterfall coming out of the rock and forming a beautiful cascade down the rock to the river. We stopped here and cooked some lunch.



Figure 5 Waterfall Beach

The river wasn't without hazard. We encountered some very large rapids with some horrible boils and whirlpools. The lines however were easy to see and we passed by without incident. We exited the gorge and had a tedious 30km paddle of flat water to the confluence with the river Indus.

We eventually arrived at the Indus, surprised to see that the Indus was in fact smaller in volume than the Zaskar. We got out at a town called Nimu and hitched a ride on the back of a lorry the 50km back to Leh. After 7 long days we had finally completed what we came to do. We were all mentally and physically drained yet we were feeling on top of the world!

The Rest Of The Trip

Our original plan was to explore the rivers of Ladakh, however Ladakh was experiencing some of the worst rain in 30 years. This meant that most of the rivers in Ladakh were flooded and not feasible to kayak. A little disheartened we bumped into a German kayaker called Andy Sommer. He was going back to Nepal and invited us to join him. This was a stroke of luck and we jumped at the chance.

We travelled back down to Manali on our way to Nepal. We did some more paddling on the Beas river which was a lot manageable this time. Over the next week we travelled across Northern India via Rishikesh to Nepal. We stopped for a few days in Pokora where we explored sections of the river Seti. This was a full on steep white water river.

Sun Khosi

After spending a couple of days in Kathmandu we headed over to the Sun Khosi. This is one of the classic rivers in Nepal however hardly anyone kayaks it in August as this is monsoon season and the river is in full flood. We spent four days exploring different tributaries of the Sun Khosi near a town called Lamusangu near the Tibetan border.



Figure 6 High on the Sun Khosi

After this set off to do the entire Sun Khosi which is 300km. This was a very special trip. It took us about 16 hours of paddling over 3 days. It was 300km of Jungle lined white water with many untouched Nepalese villages. Our German friend Andy, spoke fluent Nepalese so we were able to converse with the local villagers and they invited us to stay with them over night. Most people in the villages had never seen white people before. The next morning at about six o'clock there was the most amazing scene as the sun rose over a fog covered river, and I was lucky enough to get a picture



Figure 7 Sunrise on the Sun Khosi

The white water itself was large volume Grade III – IV which included 10ft standing waves! One rapid of note was called the Jungle Corridor. This is an 8km long rapid which is in a jungle lined gorge. After another night in a local village we made the last leg of the Sun Khosi. We took off at the town of Chattra where we had to endure the 15 hour bus ride back to Kathmandu.

This brought us to the end of our trip, all that was left to do was to catch the 36 hour bus ride back to Delhi and fly home.

Notes for future reference

There were a few problems we encountered and information that we picked up that would be useful for future paddlers wanting to go to Ladakh.

Firstly the altitude. The get on for the Tsarap Chu is at ~5500m. We all suffered from altitude and trying to do anything is a real effort. The best way to get around this is to take your time getting there. We stopped in Manali for a few days and explored the local rivers, then made our way to the Tsarap. It would probably be also advisable to wait a day or two at the get on before getting on the river.

Secondly river levels need to be taken very seriously. We got on in high levels which made the trip a lot harder, but still manageable. However another group got on a month after we did it and they had a flash flood. They were forced to walk out which took them 4 days. The best way of getting accurate river levels is getting it from raft companies in Manali.

Another note to make is that the Beas river in Manali can be very dangerous. It is not really the best warm up river and putting on above Manali is not advisable at all as it is extremely difficult.

Finances

Personal Equipment

Dry Suit	£400
Spilt Paddles	£100
Throw Line	£30
River Shoes	£50
Thermarest	£44

Group Equipment

MSR Dragonfly Stove	£63
MSR Fuel Bottle	£6.50
MSR Water Purifier	£40
1 Month Satellite Phone Hire	£300

Travel

Indian Visa	£30
Nepalese Visa	£16
Ladakh Zaskar trekking maps (North & South)	£30
Indian Himalayas Travel Book	£13

Training & Health

Expedition First Aid Course	£126
3 x Hepatitis B Jabs	£78
Sterile Set	£16.14

Travel

Fights	£450
Total travel on expedition	~£350

Other Expenses

Food (at ~ £5 a day for 39 days)	£200
Accommodation (at ~£5 a day for 28 days)	£140
Misc	~£50

Total **£2532**

Finance Notes

It was almost impossible to get any receipts for expenses on the expedition. All the figures are the estimates that I jotted down along the way. All the figures are what I personally paid not what the group spent as a whole. As I was lucky enough to have the support of the Exploration Board and others in the group were using mostly personal money I paid the larger share of the group costs e.g the satellite phone and travel

Contacts

If there are any queries about the expedition please contact:

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