

# The Grand Canyon of Asia

## Running the Tsarap Chu & Zaskar Rivers

Canoe & Kayak UK Adventure Paddler of the Year Steve Brooks leads a journey in to adventure on the finest kayaking expedition journey in the Himalaya!

ARTICLE & IMAGES BY STEVE BROOKS



**F**EW PLACES on earth can match the grandeur and sheer magnitude of the Zaskar Gorge. Sandwiched between two mountain systems, the Karakoram to the north and the Himalayas to the south, the whole region is full of amazing sights and strange, ethereal gompas perched on soaring hilltops dwarfed by majestic snow capped sentinels.

I was in Leh, in Ladakh, high in the Himalaya, to lead a trip for two friends that I had stayed in touch with ever since we shared a trip down Nepal's Karnali River. We spent a couple of days acclimatizing and sorting out our food and equipment for the expedition between a kayaking trip down a nice chilled out section of the Indus.

### A Cold Start

It was 4am, still dark and pretty chilly! Simon and Bob were ready to go and it was time to meet our driver for a pretty spectacular ride to our intended put-in, just below Sarchu. We headed off trying to make the most of the quiet streets. We were doing well, avoiding the odd cow and dog, watching Ladakh start to wake up. A quick checkpoint and passport check before heading up the long valley from Upshi all the way

to the Tanglang Pass. We were now heading in to coldest part of the drive; still no sunshine and we were driving up to the world's second highest motor-able pass! The Border Roads Organization has had its work cut out trying to repair the damage that huge floods had made in 2010, topped off with trying to tarmac all the way up to the Tanglang Pass!

It was bitterly cold at 5328m and with a biting wind we had enough time to stretch the legs, get a few shots in our cameras and then continued onwards and, thankfully, downwards! Bob somehow managed to sleep through all of this, probably due to him being very used to Nepal's roads and buses!

It was a bone-shaking couple of hours to finally get off of the Tanglang La and onto the Mori Plains, a high altitude desert with the occasional lake, with a stunning mountainous backdrop. For us it meant tarmac, well mostly tarmac, and time to make up some distance! Chai and lunch was in Pang, then we had some great views driving on hanging roads cut into the mountains and over bridges, some of which were certainly on their last legs. At last the Tsarap Chu came into sight and with just one more hour of driving we were finally at our put-in. It had taken just over seven-and-a-half-hours... our driver was good!

### Boxing Clever

We packed our kayaks, said farewell to the driver and headed off downstream. The sun was shining on our backs and the colours of the mountains seemed to change with every paddle stroke. We arrived at camp with the last few minutes of sunshine beginning to fade, we had managed to paddle a way past the Gata Loops, which meant we now found ourselves totally alone.

It was a good night's sleep and nowhere near as cold as I thought it would be, that certainly made me happy! The last time I camped close to here it had snowed on me! The water had dropped slightly and we were heading off for a day that would be full of box canyons. Though the Tsarap Chu runs through a relatively open valley, from time to time the canyon gorges up to form some of the river's hardest rapids and boils through tight 50m deep box canyons.

The first of these is a nice paddle through a couple of boils and a gap further below where the river opens out a little, it was nice and fun and so maybe the other canyons would be the same? Not really! We portaged the start of the next two box canyons and that was no mean feat as we were still well over 4000m. The last half of each box canyon gave us some reaction training and boil running practice. Another box canyon followed, which had a real tight move due a rock situated right in the entrance. I drifted up to the rock saw the move, gave the signal and then went hard right. A roll later saw me watching Simon and Bob both get caught out by the water and both ended up rolling, though Simon swears his was a deep water brace, I think I will start using that on our rolling clinics from now on! After the excitement camp was just downstream and it was time for a nice cup of tea!

### A Big Day

A few more box canyons came the following day, one with a notable hole, but otherwise everything went nice and smoothly. The Zara Chu River had now joined us and it was a long paddle through an amazing canyon all the way to Phugtal Monastery. Perched high on the cliffs and built in and around a cave, Phugtal Monastery, must have one of the best locations in Ladakh. A short hike up to visit the Monastery is well worth the effort, though for me the best views were from camp that evening as the white washed walls glistened and shimmered with the setting sun.

The next day was a big day, just around the corner from the Phugtal was a couple of pushy class IV rapids then things calmed down slightly and we cruised on down to Purne where the Tsarap Chu again gained volume. Suddenly I got this really eerie feeling and I soon discovered why. A big

plume of dust started to come floating upstream, it could only mean that there was a landslide further down the river. There is a road being built between the Indus Valley and Darcha going not just up the Tsarap Chu, but also through the Zanskar Canyon itself. We edge cautiously downstream. A lone figure could be seen high above on river right and after finally making contact he waved us through. Another plume of dust came and we edged along slowly, losing what little sight we had remaining. I knew there would be a few new holes appearing, made by the huge rocks that they were pushing into the river to make the new road, but where they would be we just could not tell. Finally the sun started to break through the murk, just as we were heading in to a new and rather large hole, with just enough time to make a move to the left to avoid it we continued. They have certainly made inroads with the plan of a new road into Ladakh but at what cost?

### A Long Haul

It was not long until we reached Reru, the infamous rapid that is so intimidating and gnarly that you would not want to run the meat but rather the class V+ chicken line down the left for as long as possible before scrambling to the side to portage the final drop. We decided to portage and it was time to go to work. A 60m scramble up the loose sharp rocks made from when they were blasting through the canyon wall, hauling three kayaks up to the road, at just under 4000m and with the sun beating down, was no fun at all. We had finally got the kayaks to the road when a group of young Czech guys came bouncing down telling us that it looks like we were having a lot of fun. Between gasping for air and letting the sweat finally run out my eyes I just acknowledged them and smiled. I also managed to persuade their driver to take our boats a couple of hundred metres further down, so that we could

lower everything back down to the river. After just over three hours of hauling and a spot of lunch we were back on the river. Some sweet wave trains appeared and there were smiles all around. We were in another canyon and with the light fading we came to yet another great campsite... in a cave!

### Save The Best 'til Last

Our fifth and final day on the Tsarap Chu gave us the best whitewater of the expedition. There were long rapids, with some really big holes to tread a line through. Huge wave trains crashed around us, and again here were some big moves to make either through the diagonals or, when they let you, just busting over them! The gradient picked up and so did the power of the river. There was plenty of scouting and we enjoyed by far the best day of whitewater. Bob was working hard trying to stay on my line, but occasionally he would go off track, but would somehow manage

[Below] The scenery and grandeur of the location can take the breath away



[Far left] Packing the boats ready to launch

[Left] It was a high altitude start to our journey



"Suddenly I got this really eerie feeling and I soon discovered why!"



**"I hit my line, saw my exit point from the wave-hole and paddled hard.**

**I hit my spot but my boat was pointing slightly too far to the**

**right and so my body ended up just clipping the roaring monster."**

to get himself down to the bottom of the rapid with a few combat rolls and a bit of luck. Simon on the other hand was just cruising down watching my line or where I was heading to and just enjoying running some of the best whitewater he has paddled in a long time!

We got to Padum and with a possible chance to re-supply Simon and I headed into the dusty old village to see what we could get. Lunch was a spring roll dripping with oil and fat that was still hot by the time we got back to the river. Dinner that night was Momos!

### An Unexpected Beast

We had managed to push out a few kilometres after Padum and were now on the Zanskar itself. It was just over an hour until we were finally in the gorge, the trekking path had disappeared and the walls were closing in. We were running some nice mellow class III wave trains and with just the obvious holes to avoid we spent our time gazing at the beautiful colours of the rocks and the surrounding canyon walls. Way above us on river right was the road and with rumours of more new rapids being made from the road building blasting we were cautiously making our way downstream.

The weather began to close in, the sky was getting really dark and there was a chill in the air. Did this have something to do with what was around the corner, or were we due a snow shower? Our answer came a few metres further when one of the bank-side locals made a few hand gestures that were not really the norm! We eddied out on river right to find a new rapid full of razor sharp stones made by the road builders. During the scout I slit my finger open on one of the rocks, then as we got to the viewpoint we finally saw what the road builders had made. A huge hole had formed on the left, boils the size of my house were not only behind the hole but pushing all the way into a huge, hideous wave-hole in the middle. River right was no good either, as a big lateral wave was pushing hard down in to the central wave-hole. After a few discussions and explaining to Bob how to operate my camera Simon and I dropped in!

Starting slightly left of middle, behind a lateral wave, I hit my line, saw my exit point from the wave-hole and paddled hard. I hit my spot but my boat was pointing slightly too far to the right and so my body ended up just clipping the roaring monster. While plunging my head and paddle into the

[Above] The river held some powerful and challenging whitewater

foaming mess, I got held surfed over to the left and then spat out exactly at my exit point on the right. The feeling of relief was good. I turned around to see that Simon hit the hole straight on and he started a five-point cartwheel sequence, complete with a full boat! All credit to Simon though, he held on, got tight and then waited for the storm to disperse and the calmness to descend before rolling up with big eyes

### [ABOUT THE AUTHOR]



**Steve Brooks is the current recipient of the Chris Wheeler Memorial Canoe & Kayak UK Adventure Paddler of the Year Award and, when he's not exploring wild rivers around the world, he runs a successful kayak school in Austria. It's the perfect training ground and the ideal step into running bigger volume rivers such as can be found in the Himalayas. check out [www.gokayaking.at](http://www.gokayaking.at) or [comingdowngently.blogspot.com](http://comingdowngently.blogspot.com)**

and a cheesy grin on his face. I did ask him whether this was a deep-water high brace technique or actually a roll? Simon replied with a few choice phrases that I don't think you'll find in the caching manual! We later found out that just a week before we got to the new rapid there was a nice chilled out tongue down it that you took with no real stress. We decided to line Bob's kayak down the right after not wanting to tempt fate and get a real working!

The river calmed down again and we were running big fun waves all the way to our camp deep in the Zanskar Gorge. This camp really has to be one of the best on the expedition, a side creek coming in gives clear water to filter and cook with, and we were surrounded by high walls that you don't really expect in the Himalayas and to top it all off it is only accessible to a river runner (well except in the winter when they walk up the frozen river to reach the village of Padum). The ever-changing light on the canyon walls kept us entertained for the last hour of the sunset.

### Catching the Wave Train Express

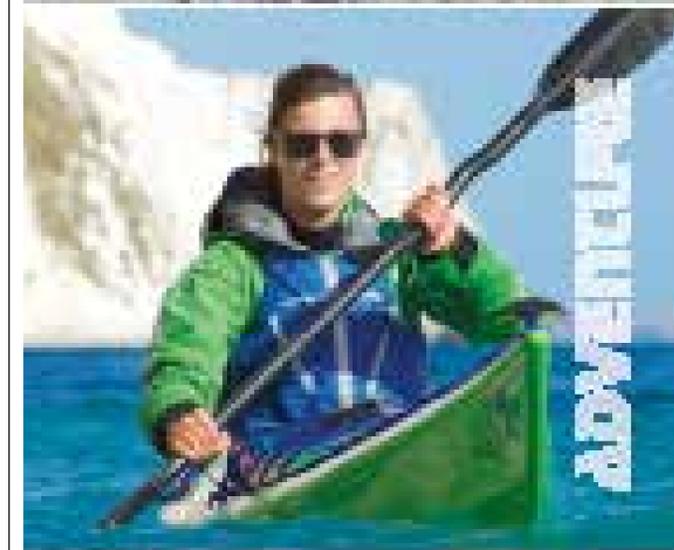
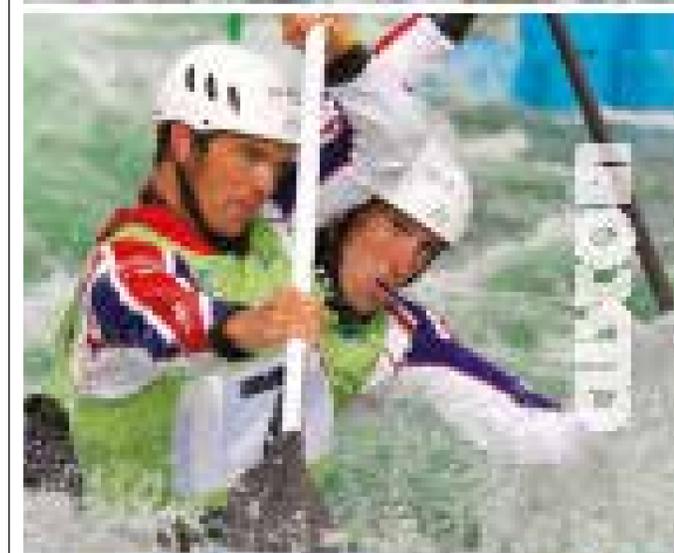
The next morning had us running pretty much the same kind of water, wave trains a' plenty and avoiding the occasional munchy hole. We ran a gap where the canyon gorges up and the river goes through a four-metre slot full of boils and swirly eddies. Next was a natural spring that comes gushing out of the gorge walls, purity at its best. Then came a red canyon and we once again met up with the road builders. They had now arrived at the Kurna Confluence and were blasting their way further into the gorge. Camp was close

to Chilling, and we savoured a nice mellow afternoon preparing for the final stretch of whitewater of the expedition.

With a couple of rapids to note, 'Chilling 1' was just a move to the left when the river was pushing you right into a big hole. 'Chilling 2' had some of the biggest waves I have run in a long, long time. They were coming at us fast and from all directions, you had to run into the meat of the waves, as not only was it the best line it also kept you away from some brutal boils on either side! Bob's face was a gem after those waves, he had spent a couple of weeks in Nepal during the monsoon trying to get some kayaking fitness but found the waves on the last day of the Zanskar to have been bigger than anything he'd paddled before! Simon just disappeared into the mess and with the odd glimpse of his paddle blade when he was coming to the peak of the wave I am sure he was just loving it! After the rush of the Chilling rapids the whitewater calmed down and it was an hour of flat water paddling to the new take-out in Nimmu.

The expedition had been a great success, an eight-day self-supported kayak expedition, not only through the Grand Canyon of Asia, but what is arguably the finest kayaking expedition in the Himalaya!

As I mentioned at the start I'd met Bob and Simon a couple of years back on the Karnali River in Nepal and told them the stories and the mystical tales of the Tsarap Chu and Zanskar around the campfire over a glass of rum or two. I think they decided there and then to come and kayak it for themselves, and they were not disappointed! **cluk**



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