

KAYAKING THE LECH GORGES

A Challenging Adventure on Austrian Whitewater

Article and images by Steve Brooks

Ex-pat UK kayaker Steve Brooks explores a European whitewater hidden gem as he takes on the formidable Lech Gorges of Austria...



The Lech River is known throughout the kayaking community as a picturesque class II river set in a backdrop of mountains and alpine meadows. However, above the standard section is a stretch of water only known to a handful of kayakers outside of the German speaking kayaking community. The Lech Gorges are some of the best pieces of whitewater in the world! If you are into running class V and above water in deep canyons with little access and escape routes then you have to come and pay them both a visit.

If you are not a class V kayaker, do not stress, since above the village of Lech there is a great little class III section, which is seldom run. You will see a lot of hikers as the path follows the river (sometimes from high up) and some 300m below the Zug chairlift is a great little bedrock slide (which you can easily scout from both sides of the river). On a bright sunny day you will have an audience to admire your descent, that's for sure!

Lech Village itself is the quintessential Austrian Alpine village. Famed more for its winter activities and high society status, in the summer it is a relaxing place. With green, grassy meadows, cows with their distinct bells and the balconies of houses full of flowers, Lech is a great place to set up base for a few days.

The gorges have two distinct sections to run. The Upper Lech Gorge requires more water than the Lower and the main piece of information is that you can scout, run or even portage all the major rapids on the Upper section. But just remember once you drop into the gorge you are committed and the next exit is the take-out! When driving from Warth (the take-out) to Lech you will catch glimpses from way above on the road but you never really see any of the rapids, this can lead you into a false sense of security!

The Upper Lech Gorge

I tend to put in at Lech Village by the Schlosskopf chairlift. This gives you 2.4km to warm up. You kayak under the road bridge, which goes to Stubenbach, some 1.2km from the put-in and then you will reach a wooden bridge. Here is your last chance to take-out if you are not feeling right. After the bridge, eddy out on river left and scout the first drop. After this you enter a tight box canyon and the river starts to get progressively harder. There are numerous rapids all requiring scouting, some you will have to portage depending on water levels and avalanche debris from the winter season. In low water the rapids become more difficult and you will find yourself portaging more than you would like!

The rocks in this section are not smooth, a lot of landslides, trees, and avalanches come into the Upper Lech Gorge and with it sharp pointy rocks! The Upper section continues in the same character, tight box canyons, opening out to technical rapids. It is not until you go through two box canyons close together (one of the last ones has wood stuck in it way above your head) that the river finally opens out. There will be gravel banks that you see and you are now getting close to the take-out. You will also see a couple of houses high

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above on river left and then the wooden bridge comes into sight to signal that you have completed the Upper Section. From the wooden bridge it is a ten-minute walk with your boat up to your vehicle. After that it's worth paying a visit to the bakeries of both Lech and Warth as they do some great cakes, just the job to put some sugar back into your body!

It's best to take a day to run the Upper Lech Gorge, if it is your first time do not put-in after midday, as it gets dark quickly in the gorge and so the more time you have in there the better. It is a very special place and you'll want to get some photos, plus it gives you plenty of time to scout rapids, set up safety and even portage a couple! Normally the season is from mid-June until the end of July although this can change depending on the weather, river levels and how much snow fell the winter season before. Try and get some local advice before you decide to drop in, the tourist office in Lech will have a contact number for you to ring.

The Lower Lech Gorge

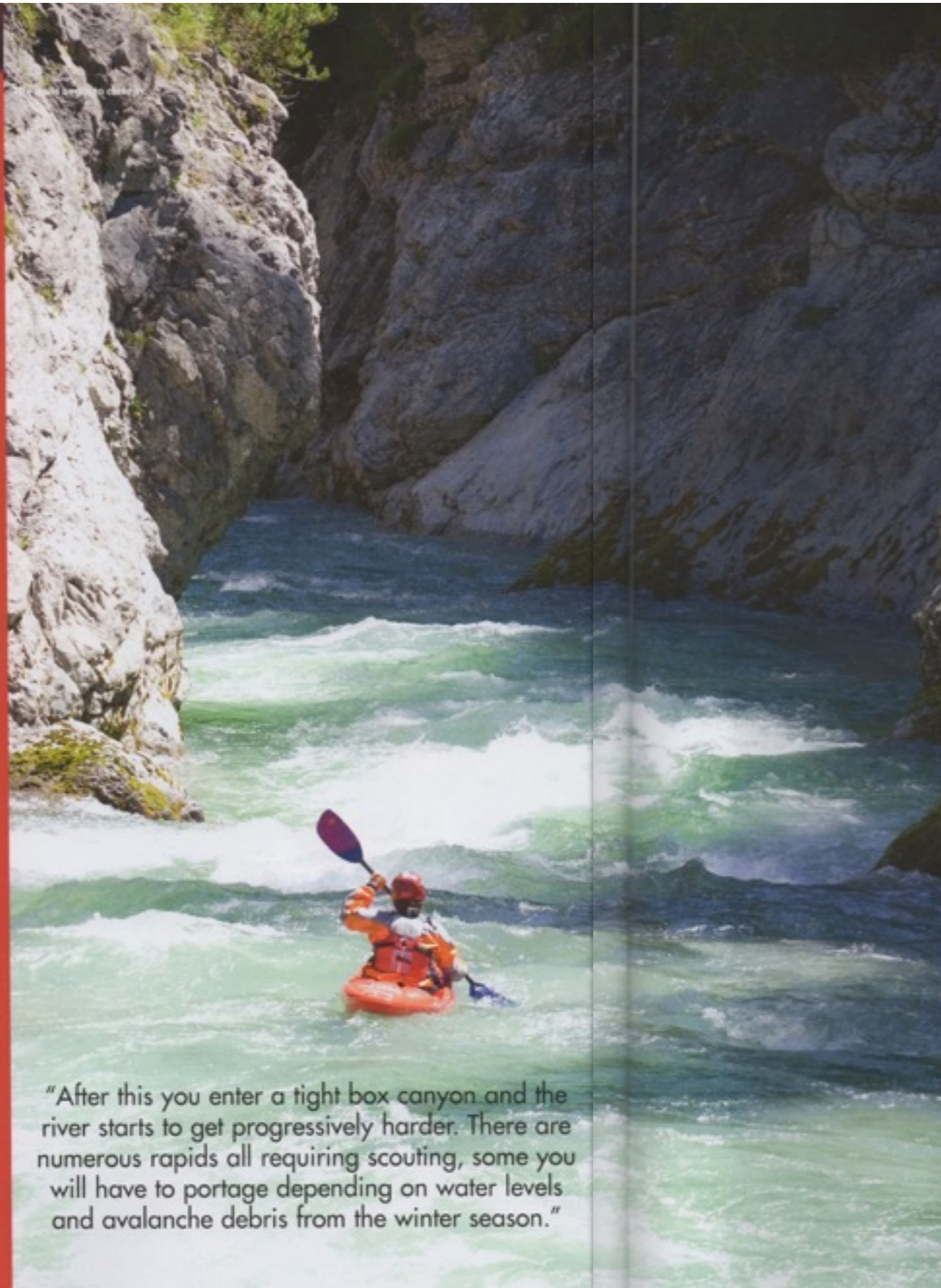
The beauty about the Lower Gorge is that it has a completely different character to the Upper. There are two options to put-in. The first is the take-out for the Upper in Warth and the second is quite difficult to find. If you are running the lower with a local kayaker (not as if there are many around!) or a guide then the second put-in will be most likely your point of access.

From Warth there are a couple of spicy rapids, one of which can take you by surprise. If you are hitting a steeper rapid where the gorge closes in, there is an eddy on river right at the start of the box canyon that you have to make! This is just metres before a three-metre drop where the water is trying to push you under a huge boulder. Run the upper rapid one at a time and let the first kayaker get out of their boat and safely onto the rocks. They can then provide safety and hold the next boat, so that everyone gets the chance to climb out and scout this rapid. If you want to portage it is just a quick hop past the undercut boulder and seal launch back into the river and the next piece of action.

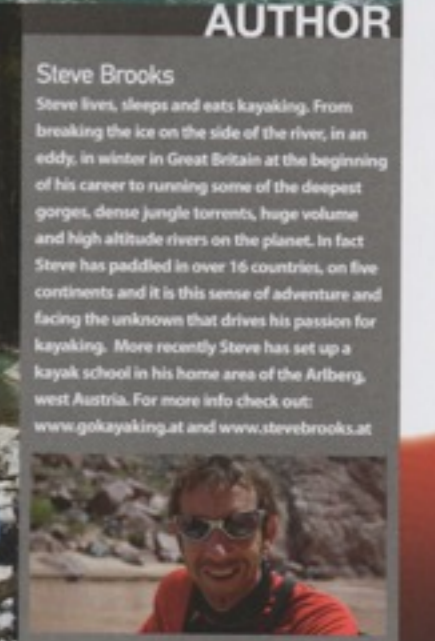
A few more rapids will follow, each needing scouting until you go under a sign hanging over the river. This is the second put-in and is also an opportunity to take-out if you are having a bad day! Just follow the small trail up to the forest track.

After passing the sign you drop into one of the best sections of class V I have kayaked anywhere in the world. From now on you will be running rapids, scouting if possible and feeling the canyon getting deeper and narrower. It is impossible to explain all the rapids as not only are there plenty but they can also change yearly!

Two rapids, however, must be mentioned as you cannot scout or portage them! The first is a class IV+. On river left the channel has been blocked by wood and debris for years, you start in the middle and then work far right timing your last paddle stroke to get you onto the boils extremely close to the right canyon wall! You can get an idea of where the rapid is when you look down into the gorge from where the road enters a



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AUTHOR

Steve Brooks

Steve lives, sleeps and eats kayaking. From breaking the ice on the side of the river, in an eddy, in winter in Great Britain at the beginning of his career to running some of the deepest gorges, dense jungle torrents, huge volume and high altitude rivers on the planet. In fact Steve has paddled in over 16 countries, on five continents and it is this sense of adventure and facing the unknown that drives his passion for kayaking. More recently Steve has set up a kayak school in his home area of the Arlberg, west Austria. For more info check out: www.gokayaking.at and www.stevebrooks.at

tunnel when driving upstream! It also gives you a marker to look up to, so when you are on the river you know that this rapid is approaching. After this the whitewater continues to keep you amused, boofing, sliding and just really great river running. You also have plenty of time in between most rapids to get your breath back and take in the amazing surroundings. The last rapid to mention is not too far away from the take-out, the Turmzimmer (meaning the Towers Room). This is the final rapid, which you cannot scout or portage. It is possible to catch the last eddy on river right and try to scramble across the slippery rocks to see the lead in but that is all you get to see! The Turmzimmer is a class V rapid and hides a river wide hole with a brutal tow back that if you get wrong could easily result in a nasty swim. The hole is extremely difficult to get out of and may require the use of a rope! The first kayaker to run will have no safety cover, so they must be confident and on the money! Just below the tow back is a piece of bedrock that you can climb out on to provide safety for the others, or just to take photos! The Turmzimmer is a rapid that has a notorious reputation, it is not impossible, but it is certainly good for the nerves and, if completed successfully, the soul.

There are still a few drops to run until you reach the take-out. Some kayakers take out at the bridge crossing the river however, below the bridge the river is closed due to debris from building work, not only are the rapids full of dangerous siphons, but there are abundant metal spikes and cables in the rapids. The best option to take-out is a few hundred metres before the bridge on river left. There is a gravel bank to get out on before a steep walk up the grassy slope and into the trees. You can just see a faint zigzag path going up to the road.

Summary

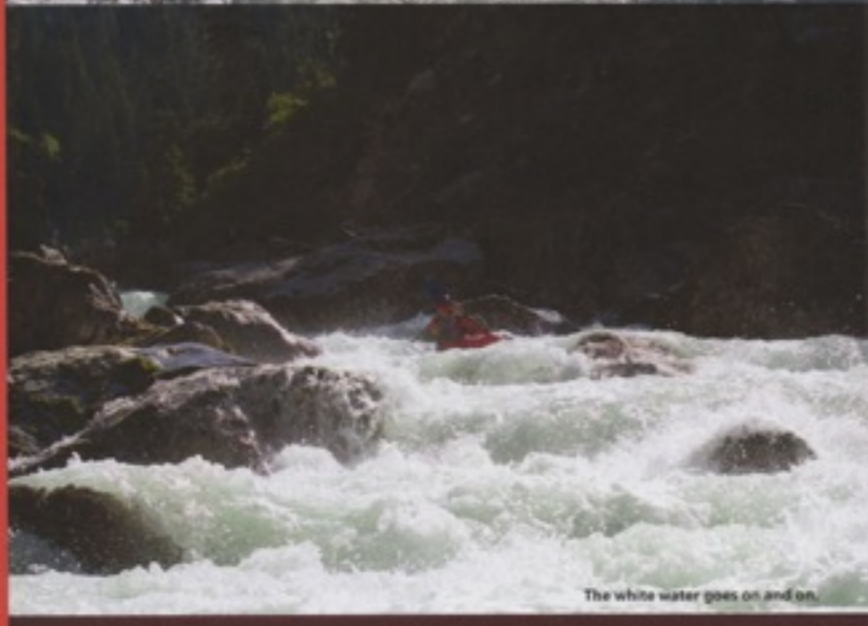
The Lech Gorges can be a fantastic adventure! Though there are restrictions on when you can run the Lower Section. This is heavily enforced, so if you are thinking of pirating the river, expect the Police to be waiting and a fine. The hunters who patrol the area seem to like catching kayakers running the river out of season!

The Upper Lech Gorge is possible to do first time with a strong group of experienced expedition paddlers.

The Lower Section is worth hiring a guide for the first time as this will take away the fear factor and dread of the two un-scoutable and un-portageable rapids, plus they will know the best put-ins and take-outs. You only need around four kayakers to run the lower and you will not be disappointed I promise, when the Lech is in condition you will not find me anywhere else in the world. 🇦🇹



Concentrating hard in the gorge.



The white water goes on and on.

Web

For more great whitewater features, gear and boat tests, how to videos and river guides eddy out at www.canoekayak.co.uk

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