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Whitewater From Bhutan

The American Himalayan
Kayak Descent

Solo Canoes On The Steel River



In The Land Of Thunder Dragon

The American Himalayan Kayak Descent returns from Bhutan with lessons in Eastern Patience and a river-runner's dream list.

by Eric Evans

AT NOON THE THIN, white Buddhist prayer flags rippled in the breeze on the main-road bridge spanning the Upper Wong Chu River in the city of Thimpu, high in the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. A crowd of 200 Bhutanese, the men dressed in the traditional one-piece khos complemented by knee socks and calf-high boots and the women attired in full-length karis, had gathered to watch six American whitewater paddlers run the rapids directly beneath the bridge. It was a hushed, disbelieving group of onlookers. For centuries their river had defined the bottom of the 8,000-foot Thimpu Valley while providing a small degree of irrigation; but never had it borne watercraft.

Never, that is, until that moment in Thimpu when canoeing and kayaking were introduced to Bhutan by the members of the American Himalayan Kayak Descent (AHKD). The boaters that day, after six years of first hoping and then planning for the expedition, were finally in their element. The townspeople of Thimpu, however, judging from their stares, were clearly being taken out of theirs.

Three days later at the Wangdiphodrang Dzong, a huge stone religious fortress guarding the Sankosh River in the Punakha Valley to the east of Thimpu, the tables were turned and it was the American boaters who silently pondered the mysteries of Bhutan, or Druk Yul, Land of the Thunder Dragon. A tour of the dark, medieval Dzong revealed a center for the training of Buddhist lamas (monks) and a sanctuary for their cloistered lives of prayer and meditation. Scores of barefoot young lads with shaved heads and wearing red robes, the youngest only six or seven years of age, scampered through the dark alleyways, open courtyards, and chilly

rooms. The unlit, drafty stone castle was permeated by the mingled odors of urine, offal, and incense. Some of the boys practiced religious dances or blew cacophonous blasts on long, ornate metal horns. Others squatted on the damp floor in meditation or quiet discussion. A few stared quite unabashedly at the Western visitors. Older lamas, most of their physical lives centered within the walls of the Dzong or the feral hills nearby, drifted slowly from room to room as if in a trance.

Perhaps a trance is necessary for survival for the 2,000 lamas of Bhutan, members of whose order have lived in such a manner for centuries. They receive support in part from the government and in part from contributions by the local community. It's a lifestyle which must be chosen before the age of 15 — more than a little parental direction or pressure must be involved.

The eerie, monotonous sound of the horns, the pervasive odor, and the gloomy atmosphere all oppressed the Americans. The thought of having one's life path selected by others, of spending an entire lifetime in such a restricted manner within a milieu straight out of the *Count of Monte Cristo*, was repellent. Here was an Eastern concept of devotion, indeed servitude, which was disturbingly alien to the Westerners. As with the Bhutanese on the Thimpu Bridge, the result was hushed silence.

The reserve and disbelief of the Bhutanese toward the Western sport of river running and of the naive Americans to the feudal, even Byzantine, ways of the Bhutanese crumbled in one spontaneous, joyful demonstration as dusk descended the next day.

Following a 15-kilometer hike upriver accompanied by porters carrying boats and gear, the paddlers made another first

descent, this time of the Pho Chu River. The scenery was magnificent, a blend of Alpine Europe and the California Sierras. Superb rapids were broken by flat respites, and the bright sun of the 9,000-foot altitude shone down upon a truly delightful day on the water.

Immediately below the forbidding, centuries-old Punakha Dzong where the Pho Chu meets the Mo Chu, the new river, the Sankosh, flows by a new schoolhouse. It was past this schoolhouse that the tired, sated boaters drifted as the sun set behind 15,000-foot hills. Quite unexpectedly, wave upon wave of schoolchildren emerged from the building and rushed to the bluff above the river to catch a glimpse of the aquatic Pied Pipers below. Hundreds of girls and boys, all with Dutch-boy haircuts, shouted, waved, and jabbered excitedly among themselves. This was no reserved silence, no disbelieving countenance. This was an unorchestrated mixture of curiosity and acceptance.

The reception ignited the tired paddlers, who responded in kind to the waves and cheers coming from the swarming hillside. Each yell from the paddlers was met by one even louder in return. Five simultaneous Eskimo rolls set the children off cheering anew. No Rose Bowl cheerleader had such a responsive audience.

It was smile meeting smile, fun recognizing fun, the sporty congratulating sport. It was the end of cautious, tentative probings and ponderings. A songfest that night at the paddlers' campfire, the locals on one side performing traditional songs and dances, the paddlers on the other trying mightily to match them with renditions of songs from America, completed the breaking down of reserve and uncertainty. Bhutan was taking to its heart the first group of boaters to paddle its rivers.

Please turn the page

one of three forms. The state can own the land outright (what lawyers would call a "fee simple ownership"), in which case the paddler's right of access is limited only by the state's power to regulate use of the land for the public benefit. For example, the state has the right to prohibit parking near the bridge if parked cars and pedestrian traffic in the vicinity of the bridge create a hazard for passing motorists.

In other cases, the state's interest can be classified as a "right-of-way (or easement) for public transportation." The land under and around the bridge still belongs to the adjacent landowners. The state, however (and thus the public), retains the right to use the property for the purpose of transportation. Thus, there is public right of access to the stream at this point so long as that access can be obtained without damaging the landowner's property (e.g., from bank erosion caused by putting in and taking out boats).

Finally, the state's interest can be classified as a "limited access easement" (most common on, though not exclusive to, divided highways). Such an easement allows access only at designated points, such as on-ramps, and does not provide a right of access for paddlers.

Assuming that you find a conveniently located bridge, you are faced with the problem of determining what sort of interest the state has in the adjacent property in order to determine what sort of stream access the bridge affords. Unfortunately, short of a title search by a lawyer in the appropriate recorder's office, you have no way of knowing for certain just which form the state's interest takes. You can, though, be fairly safe with certain assumptions.

If the bridge is part of a divided highway with limited access, you can assume that the easement is a limited access easement and that you have no right of access to the stream there. You can also assume no right of access where guardrails extending from either side of the bridge make it impossible to safely park a shuttle vehicle, or where the physical characteristics of the streamside topography make it impossible to get down to the water. Above all, do not under any circumstances cross a fence to gain access to a stream. In such a case you are clearly trespassing and are subject to both criminal and civil prosecution.

On a more positive note, *if the roadway approaching the bridge or the nearby terrain affords a place to park, if the stream is physically accessible, and if there are no fences to cross, you are probably safe in assuming you have the right of access at that point.*

Should you pick such a location to get on or off a stream and be confronted by an angry landowner, be courteous. Explain the situation, and apologize for any transgression (real or imagined) that you may have committed. Chances are that you are within your legal rights, but it could be one of those situations where you're on a limited access easement that doesn't look like a limited access easement. Or it could be that you have stumbled onto an easement where less careful paddlers and/or heavy use have created erosion problems.

Whatever the case, this is no time to stand up for your rights. Remember, you could be wrong. And even if you're right, belligerent tactics will only result in further damage to an already fragile relationship between landowners and paddlers.

By far the best tactic is one characterized by diplomacy, compromise, and conciliation. If you are outside your legal rights, such an approach may save you a giant legal headache. And if you are within your legal rights, such a tactic will serve both you and other paddlers much more favorably than the costly and inconvenient litigation that makes uncooperative landowners even more uncooperative.

If attempts at compromise or conciliation are unsuccessful, the best policy is one of retreat. In most states a landowner has the right to detain you or make a "citizen's arrest" for trespassing. However, a landowner has no right to use force to apprehend you for a misdemeanor. If a landowner should attempt to "arrest" you, remain calm and avoid escalating the confrontation. Draw the landowner away from the group and explain the situation, apologizing again for any transgression already committed. If you feel imperiled at the hands of the property owner, avoid detainment. If the landowner threatens you verbally and moves toward you with apparent will to do harm, you have all the rights of self-defense and self-protection in accordance with the danger you perceive. Conversely, the landowner has the right to protect himself if you are the aggressor.

If you elect (for whatever reasons) to accompany the landowner, do so with all precautions having been taken. Insist on proper identification by some documentary source and find out what local law enforcement jurisdiction you are being taken to. If some of your party is allowed to continue, arrange for them to notify the same authority of the incident. Contact legal counsel as soon as you can.

In any event, confrontations between belligerent paddlers and cantankerous

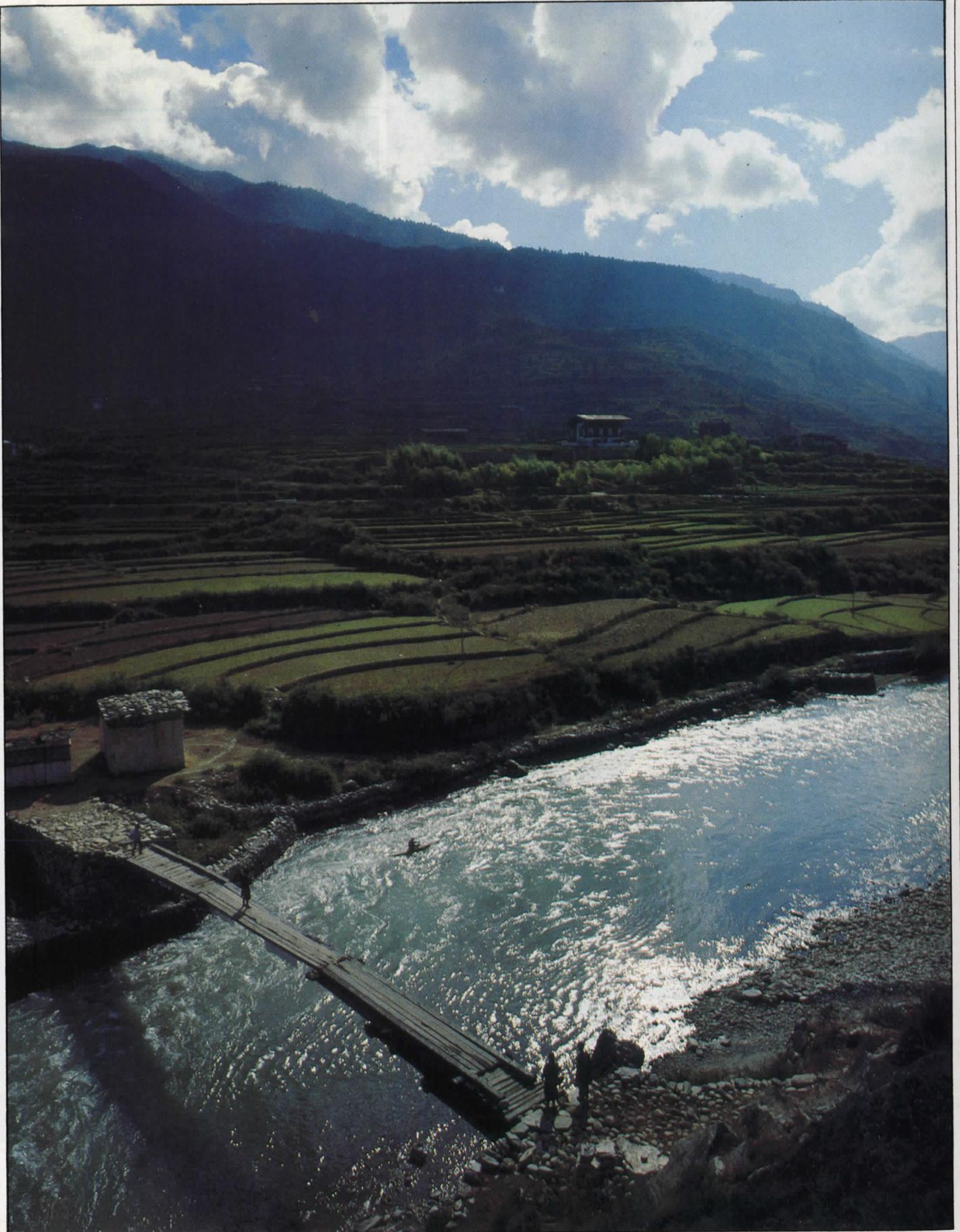
landowners should be avoided. Although the chance of such a meeting may be rare, paddlers nonetheless should know their rights, and the rights of the landowners.

REGARDLESS OF THE questions of navigability or public access, the right of landowners to prohibit trespassing on their property along streams (if they so desire) is unquestioned. Again, paddlers are trespassing when they portage, camp, or even stop for a lunch break if they disembark without permission.

In granting permission to cross or stop on private land, landowners are extending a privilege that should be appreciated and respected. Do not betray a landowner's trust if granted the privilege of camping, putting in, or taking out on private property. Do not litter, drive on grass or planted fields, or forget to close gates. In some cases, property owners may resent people driving for hundreds of miles to float through what the landowner may consider private domain. Indeed, it is not unusual for landowners to firmly believe that they "own" the stream that flows through their land. Keep in mind that one hostile landowner with property at a strategic location — adjoining a mandatory portage, for instance — can effectively "shut down" that stream or section of stream for use by paddlers.

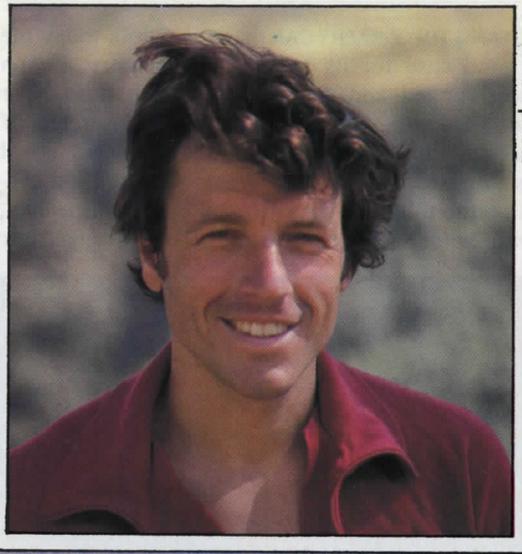
This is not an unusual occurrence. For instance, a scenic, 10-mile stretch of a favorite stream in southern Ohio, flowing through narrow ravines and steep, wooded hills, has been effectively closed to paddling by one hostile landowner. An elderly man owns the turf adjacent to a frustratingly intact old mill dam. Access to the stream can be gained five miles above the dam, at the tailwaters of a state reservoir, and five miles below the dam, at a bridge easement. Since the dam is a mandatory portage, and the landowner has posted "no trespassing" signs on every tree in the vicinity (not to mention threatening paddlers with a shotgun), this entire section of the stream, flowing through some of the most rugged, beautiful country remaining in Ohio, has been lost to paddlers.

On the other hand, courtesy, appreciation, and consideration go a long way when you are approaching a landowner for permission to camp or launch. The property owner may be interested in paddling and flattered that the paddler is interested in the countryside, and thus might be quite friendly and approachable. Cultivate and value such friendships, and avoid giving cause to deny paddlers access to the river at some time in the future.

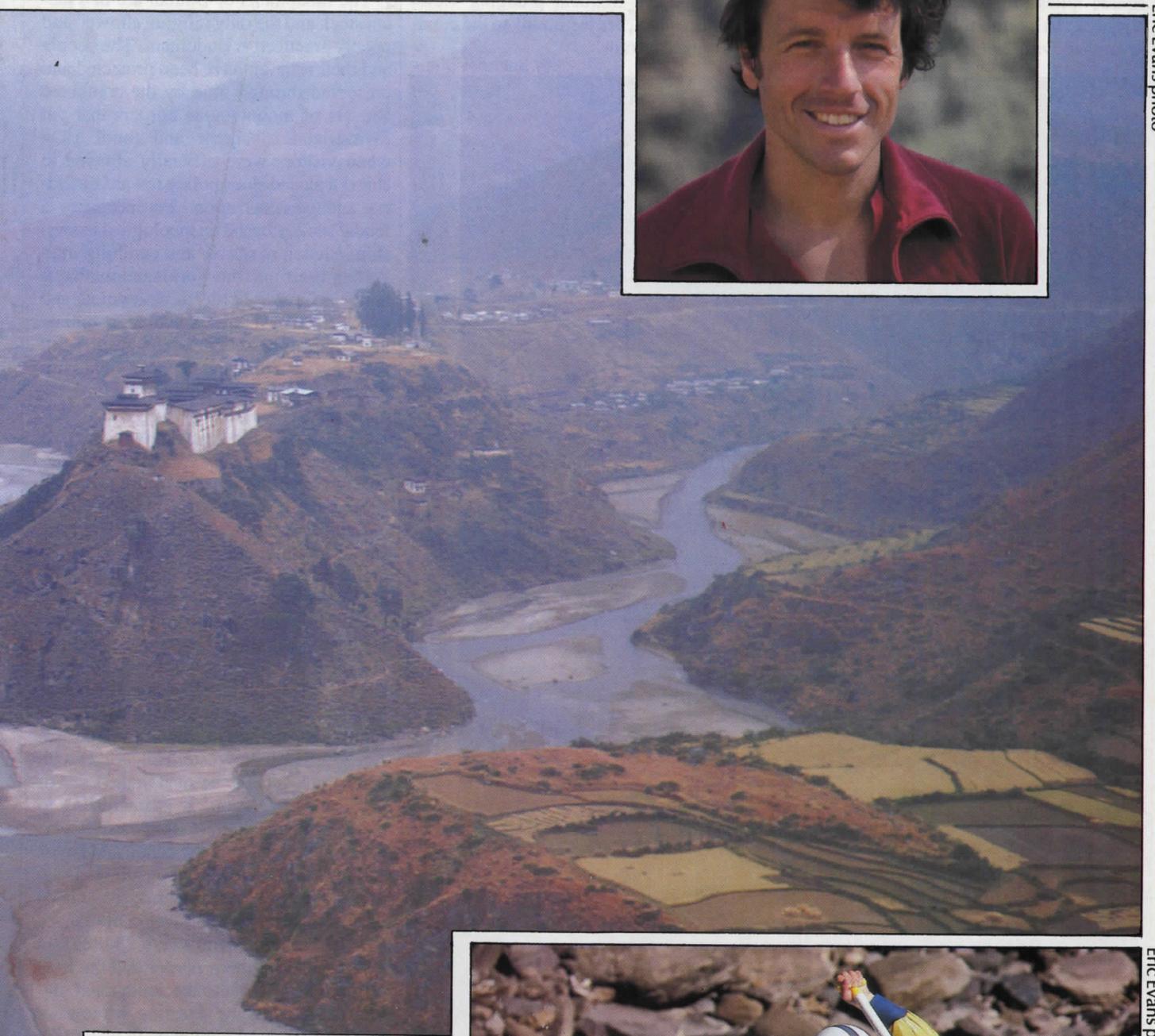


Bhutanese villagers watch as the first kayak paddler floats down the Paro Chu. Himalayan Mountains provide a backdrop.

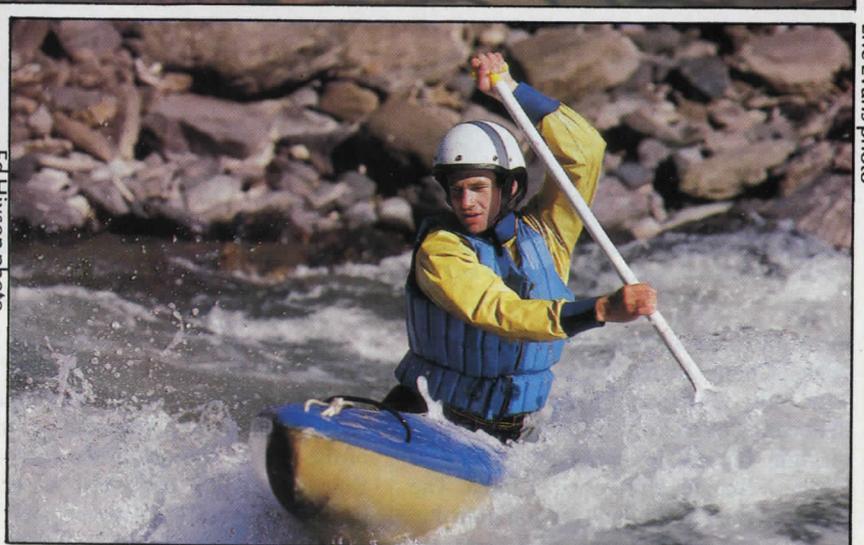
Ed Hixson photo



Eric Evans photo



Eric Evans photo



Ed Hixson photo



BHUTAN'S TOPOGRAPHY CAN make a good case for its being the most rugged and travel-resistant on earth. Its mountains, valleys, and "foothills" span 18,000 square miles, an area smaller than West Virginia. Its northern border with Tibet's is toothed with 25,000-foot peaks, one of

1960; today the two paved roads into the country are no wider than the average American driveway and there isn't a 200-yard stretch of straight highway in the country. The bends and curves in the roads, and the frequent plunging views below tire level, are testimony to the country's rugged terrain.

Les Bechdel photo



The author finds the pulse of Bhutan's Pho Chu (River).

them the "sacred Goddess of the mountains," Chomo Lhari. The southern border with India is marked by a steep, sudden delineation as sharply rising foothills about the hot, humid, tea-producing plains of northern Bengal, a province of India. The first jeep road in Bhutan was completed in

One-and-a-half million people live in Bhutan, most of them involved in the growing of wheat, barley, or rice, and the herding of animals. Accepted as a member of the United Nations in the early 1970s, Bhutan currently ranks last in per capita income among UN nations. But a rural

populace living close to the land, while poor, does not see starvation, and Bhutan seems immune to that malaise which often afflicts urban dwellers in India to the south.

The inhabitants of Bhutan are of Tibetan stock and the only religion allowed and openly practiced is Buddhism. The people and their religion have been protected and preserved through time by the combined barriers of mountainous borders that put Switzerland to shame and (until 1974 when visitors were officially allowed to enter) a closed-door policy toward outsiders and westernization. For centuries a feudal society based on theological leadership, Bhutan is slowly and carefully integrating itself into the world community of nations. Certain border access points and interior valleys now welcome a limited number of tourists under the auspices of the Bhutan Tourism Agency. Other regions of Bhutan, especially to the East, remain closed to tourists.

Seeking to avoid the negative aspects of westernization that have afflicted neighboring Nepal in the form of drug use and trafficking, crime, and a rapid dissolution of traditional culture, Bhutan's leaders are slowly introducing what they see as the better parts of Western culture. The government's price of \$130 per person per day for tourists visiting Bhutan is one screening device. Another is that tourists in Bhutan travel together in groups, in Bhutanese buses, carefully escorted by Bhutanese liaisons. These groups eat and sleep at spots predetermined by the Tourism Agency. The lone Western hitchhiker with a knapsack is yet to be seen in the Land of the Thunder Dragon. It is interesting to note, however, that the Bhutanese liaison had trouble escorting the canoe and kayak paddlers while they were paddling. Deep in the river canyons, they may have been the freest group ever to travel in Bhutan.

A Himalayan country with 25,000-foot peaks on its northern border and the lowland plains of India to the south must, obviously, have some dazzling whitewater rivers — the kind with enough water volume and gradient to arouse the interest of any hard-core paddling buff. Combine this aquatic attraction with the lure of witnessing the last country on earth enter the twentieth century, and you'll recognize the seeds of Wickcliffe "Wick" Walker's courtship with Bhutan. Currently a major in the U.S. Army, Walker is a 35-year-old whitewater veteran who began river running in Washington, D.C., in the early 1960s and then went on to a brilliant C-1 (decked single canoe) racing career at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H. Fol-

lowing his graduation in 1968, Walker's competitive career was crowned by his selection for the 1972 U.S. Olympic Whitewater Team.

Logic dictates that the best rivers in the world pour from the flanks of the world's greatest mountains. So reasoned Wick Walker and, shortly after the Olympics, he began to dream of Himalayan river descents. By early 1975 he had narrowed his choice to Bhutan, whose leaders had indicated an interest in an expedition. Its rivers and the country itself attracted him, but so did the fact that his group would be the first paddlers to enter the country. Nepal, India, and Pakistan already had hosted paddlers; Bhutan had not. By the summer of '75 Walker had elicited and/or selected a nine-man team and planned a self-sustained 30-day exploratory trip of the Wong Chu River in the Thimpu Valley from its headwaters down to the Indian border; from 15,000 feet to the humid lowlands; from yetis to snakes and bamboo.

The group had a fourfold purpose:

- To navigate successfully, and safely, by canoe and kayak the Wong Chu River in Bhutan.

- To continue the dramatic extension of limits achieved in whitewater sport within recent years.

- To gain a foundation of experience in Himalayan exploration among veteran whitewater paddlers and to open additional rivers to future exploration by providing firsthand information on river conditions in Southern Asia.

- To document all aspects of the descent and share the experience with the sports community. Toward this end, pre-trip newsletters on Bhutan and the expedition's preparations were mailed to supporters at regular intervals. A postcard would be mailed from Bhutan and a final Trip Report would be sent to contributors.

The American Canoe Association gave the expedition its official blessing, thus clearing the way for tax-exempt status. Contributions from the paddling community were solicited. With *canoe* as an official sponsor, equipment was requested from outdoor and boating manufacturers in return for photos of it in use in Bhutan, and assessments of its performance in the field. Stationery with the official expedition logo was ordered, AHKD T-shirts were sold ...a wave of momentum was rolling toward the planned departure on March 15, 1976.

Over \$6,000 in contributions from paddlers and clubs and \$8,000 in equipment were raised. A letter in support of the expedition, signed by eight U.S. Senators, was sent to the King of Bhutan. Every-

Buzz-Sawed Boats And Springy Paddles

THE SIX BOATS used by the expedition included two Hyperform Alpin kayaks, an Easy Rider Augsburg kayak, a Phoenix Ocoee kayak, and two Nittany Valley Boats blunted Hahn decked canoes or C-1s. Transporting these boats to Bhutan proved to be a problem as the airlines balked at taking 13-foot-plus boats. The dictum that was handed down from the airlines: the boats must fit within a width-plus-height-plus-length limit of 104 inches.

Out came the hacksaws, and the boats were cut into thirds. The bow third went into the stern third, which then was jammed into the middle, seat-bearing third. The interior was filled with gear and the package roped and taped shut. Everyone made it under the 104-inch limit.

There's a dearth of marine supply stores in northern India, so we carried our own resin and fiberglass for reseaming the boats upon arrival.

After an exhausting flight from New York's J.F.K. Airport to New Delhi, India, and then two shorter flights to get to Bagdogra, India, we met Mukesh Gupta and Sukesh Pradhan, 26-year-old Indians who run the trekking company, Himalventure, in Darjeeling, India. They met the tuckered group in Bagdogra with a bus and transported us to the welcome, cooler heights of 7,000-foot Darjeeling.

We worked on our boats for two days while staying at the Tea Planters Club, a stately boarding house-lodge soaked with English tradition. Couriers served tea in the morning while we sat back and gazed at Kanchenjunga, third-highest mountain in the world. The Club even kept a list of those members who had been

delinquent in paying their bills. Posted in the main hall, five names appeared on the list, which dated back to 1910.

We roughened the areas on our boats to be glassed with sandpaper and then taped the three parts of each boat together. We reseamed the boats using three layers of glass on the inside and two layers on the outside. Although uglier and slightly heavier than when they left their respective factories, the boats were as strong as new. No one had a problem with the seams during the expedition.

The paddles were taped and tied together in a large bundle for the flight. I used a Mitchell wooden kayak paddle and Bechdel used a Silver Creek wooden kayak paddle. Ed Hixson used a Norse fiberglass kayak paddle and we had two other Norse as backups, along with two take-apart fiberglass paddles from Hurka. Tom McEwan used a Mohawk kayak paddle, which usually is scorned by the whitewater elite as being too flexible in the blade for power and too round in the shaft for control. Tom liked the rubbery plastic blades because they "gave" on impact, thereby saving his sore shoulder from a sharp jab. The paddle survived the trip, as did Tom's shoulder.

Wick used an Iliad canoe paddle with the blades cut down slightly smaller than a Kober's. Backup was a custom wooden canoe paddle from Jim Snyder. Jamie alternated between a Mitchell and a Norse.

We had three criteria for boats and paddles: control for technical boating, durability, and light weight for the portages. During our trip we realized we had chosen well.

—E. Evans

Eric Evans photo



The AHKD had to cut their boats into thirds to meet airline regulations; two days were spent glassing everything back together in Bhutan's streets.

thing possible on this side of the world was done to prepare and pave the way for the historic paddling expedition.

But that's as far as it went, and March 15, 1976 came and passed with no details forthcoming from the Bhutanese, who had initially "agreed in principle" to the concept of an expedition. Walker delayed the trip two weeks in the hope of unraveling the net of bureaucracy, but to no avail. He postponed the trip again until the fall and then put it on hold indefinitely.

For Walker it was a period of great frustration and even embarrassment. He had staked time, his name, and thousands of dollars on the trip, and now it looked more tenuous than it did when he first dreamed of it in 1972. Contributors were calling to find out about the trip, canoe wanted the gear that it had helped raise returned for another expedition to the Canadian Northwest, and the equipment manufacturers were becoming miffed that their donations were not being used.

But Walker was determined to proceed with a Himalayan canoe-kayak trip in some form. Letters of explanation were sent to contributors. Equipment donors were asked what they wished done with their equipment while the expedition was on hold. Although some said to sell it and send them the money, and others said to return it, most told Walker to hold onto it for the indefinite future. The funds were held in a bank account.

While the other eight team members went on with their careers, Walker pursued the hope of paddling in Bhutan. He was to persist in that effort for the next five years. His energy and enthusiasm had created the original trip concept and the machinery to set it in motion; without his continued determination in the following years, the trip would never have been launched in 1981. Perhaps he was the only one who really came to understand that things move slowly in Asia and that quick decisions are rarely reached. For if he didn't have it before 1975, he certainly developed it in the years that followed: Eastern Patience.

In the next three years two developments occurred that had important ramifications for the canoe-kayak expedition. One, **Bhutan established a New York City tourism office under the direction of Marie Brown. This greatly facilitated direct and timely contact with the proper authorities in Bhutan.** Two, under Bhutan Tourism Agency Manager Mr. Sangey's initiative, a trekking tourist program was started in 1977. This was the crack in the door for the expedition. Bhutan was beginning to

recognize its incredible possibilities for outdoor experience.

Walker continued to apply pressure with letters and phone calls. Finally, in February 1981, he received a letter from Bhutan officials stating that they were now, six years later, ready to accept a kayak tour on a limited scale. The trip length would be reduced from 30 to 10 days, six team members rather than nine would be admitted, and the party would only be able to go two-thirds of the way down the Wong Chu River (take-out point to be the Chukka Hydroelectric Project).

But hallelujah! It was a breakthrough and the first concrete sign that Walker had received in six years. His incredible perseverance had reaped dividends at last.

A POOR WAY TO describe Tom McEwan would be to call him the director of a summer day camp, which he is. A better way would be to call him a man of pure water, part Spartan, part Stoic, a flinty individual who carries high expectations for himself and his responses to life's situations.

From a paddling viewpoint, a man of pure water uses second-hand, patched equipment, for to him the virtues of utility and spending a minimum of money outrank cosmetics and waterproofness. Such a man wraps himself in a thin blanket to sleep on the floor of a van that has seen two engine lifetimes. He awakens to a breakfast of cold gruel left from the previous evening's dinner as he dons wet, cold paddling gear before the sun rises. And he loves every second of it because that's the way whitewater paddling is meant to be practiced. Such a man runs Great Falls of the Potomac River in the wee hours of daylight because fewer people would see him do it then. Fame is eschewed by a man of pure water.

A man of pure water has certain ideas about what a kayak expedition should entail. Ideally, it should test one's physical and mental limits, a *mano-a-mano* contest with long rapids, back-breaking portages, cold bivouacs in wet paddling clothes, dangerous encounters with wildlife...everything but beheading the Hydra or cleaning the Aegean stables.

By late morning of the third day in Bhutan, Tom was seeing scarlet. Here we had planned this trip for six years; spent 40 hours on planes to travel halfway around the world; seen three days consumed in fiddling with equipment in India; spent two days and two nights in Bhutan traveling by bus on the winding roads and eating

restaurant food; and we had yet to put a paddle in the water. That morning we had suffered the bureaucrats at the Indian Embassy in Thimbu and now we were watching Bhutanese dancers in exotic costumes perform on the lawn of a hotel above Thimbu, an event planned for us by our hosts and one we couldn't duck. To make matters worse, we were seated with a group of pale, obese German tourists. The veins in McEwan's forehead pulsated in frustration. He wanted some roots to gnaw, some boulders to drag his kayak across, some purifying discomfort to endure... anything but this facile interlude.

We hit the water less than two hours later and no one was happier than Tom. The ceremonial trappings were nice, and they had their place, but this was what we had come 12,000 miles for. With the first splash of cold water from the Upper Wong Chu River, Tom's spirits lifted as we headed downstream to the Thimpu Bridge.

ED HIXSON IS 40 years old and practices general surgery in Saranac Lake, New York. That is, when he's not exploring remote areas of North America and the world, or traveling in his official capacity as Director of the Medical Supervisory Team of the U.S. Nordic Ski Teams. He served as co-chairman of the Medical Committee at the 1980 Winter Olympics, and is expedition doctor for the 1982 American Everest Expedition.

Despite his exemplary record in sports medicine, Ed was one of the unknown elements of the Bhutan trip. His canoeing background included annual Canadian wilderness open-canoe trips, open-canoe racing during his years at Middlebury College in Vermont, and even a top-10 finish in North America's most prestigious marathon canoe race — the *Classique* in Shawinigan, Quebec. But he lacked river-running experience in kayaks or decked canoes. Secondly, most of the team members had not met him. Would he be an albatross around the group's neck, demanding to paddle everything the group did? Would he run whitewater that was above his capabilities, thus endangering himself and the others who would be forced to rescue him? Above all, would he blend in with the group for 10 days?

Our second day of paddling saw us on the Paro River, which helped form the valley west of Thimbu. The river in the town of Paro was gentle—a few mild riffles but predominantly briskly-moving flatwater. Above town the road grew steeper as the river ducked from view. Was it flat or was

it white? No one knew and there were no access points for observation.

We put our boats in the river below the abandoned Drugyel Dzong where, according to legend, the thunder originally spoke to Bhutan's founder and gave the Kingdom its name. Ed, however, deferred, feeling that it would be more propitious to photograph — where possible — our descent, as the unseen river might prove too much for him to handle. He'd meet us where the road rejoined the river and paddle the final easy section through town.

Smart man, that Hixson. About a half-mile below the Dzong we encountered some of the most technical boating we would see in Bhutan. The river volume couldn't have exceeded 600 cubic feet per second (c.f.s.) but it drained through a rock-choked gorge, requiring nimble maneuvering from the five boaters.

A few hours later we met up with Ed. He had come down the road with the van and the Bhutanese driver, and our liaison for the expedition, 25-year-old Khe San.

Ed jumped in his kayak; I jumped out of mine to take photos. Khe San and I followed the party as it paddled down to Paro in the soft afternoon light. In Paro the paddlers attracted a sizable audience as

they drifted beneath the sheer rock-wall face of the Rirupong Dzong, the Queen Mother's Palace overlooking the river. From cockpit level the building was stunning, almost overbearing. High in the hills, small houses, aeries constructed in seemingly inaccessible locations, gazed down upon the valley and the boaters below. Darting around the boats were brown dippers — water ouzels which dive into swiftly moving streams and feed along the bottom. Farmers in the midst of cutting and gathering wheat stopped their work and stared at the helmeted aliens on the river. It was a day replete with all that Bhutan and a river could offer.

The five-man group pulled out of the river a few miles below Paro amidst a growing cluster of excited children who, after overcoming their shyness, tugged at wetsuits and touched helmets and lifejackets. Four paddlers reminisced about the river and its charms. Ed was all smiles, too, but the river was just part of the reason.

"Isn't it inconceivable that we're actually in this country?" he exclaimed. "What a place! It's great just being here."

Smart man, that Hixson. He was right, and throughout the trip he kept our think-

ing in perspective: Look up, fellas, there's more to be seen here than just rivers.

WITHIN AMERICAN white-water racing circles there are outstanding champions, those with impressive strings of national titles won and, lately, even a few world champions. But there's only one person with an Olympic medal: Jamie McEwan of Lakeville, Connecticut. He won a bronze in C-1 (decked canoe) at Munich during the whitewater slalom competition in 1972, the first and only time whitewater slalom has been an Olympic event.

Surprisingly, Jamie, the youngest of the group at 29, was the most nervous, even though he was in the best paddling shape after a full season of racing. Would he be able, and maybe more importantly *willing*, he wondered, to run the tremendously turbulent rapids that were bound to occur on any river dropping an average of more than 100 feet per mile, never mind one cascading from the roof of the world? He realized he was in the company of charter members of the whitewater lunatic fringe. His older brother, Tom, made the first run not only of Great Falls on the Potomac in Washington, D.C. but also of

Access

"**B**HUTAN?" THE OLD VERMONTNER asked his neighbor. "Isn't that where they make cigarette lighters?"

"Don't know 'bout that," said the neighbor. "Do know you can't get theah from heah."

And after six years of trying to "get theah," the American Himalayan Kayak Descent was ready to believe anything about Bhutan. But you can get there; it won't come easy and it won't come cheap, but you can indeed get there.

A limited number of visitors are granted permission to enter Bhutan each year. Permission and visas are arranged through the Bhutan Travel Service, 120 East 56th St., New York, NY 10022; Telephone: (212) 838-6382.

We flew Pan Am from New York to New Delhi, whereupon we changed to Air India and traveled to Calcutta. Our last flight took us from Calcutta to the small border town in northern India, Bogdogra, gateway to Darjeeling.

Round-trip air fare was \$1,400 apiece. In Bagdogra we were met by Mukesh Gupta of Himalventure, a trekking outfitter who had made arrangements for our three-day respite in Darjeeling prior to entering Bhutan. After

40-plus hours of flying/airport time, Mukesh's organizing and hospitality were most welcome. His employees were extremely cordial and we can't recommend them more highly. Address: Himalventure, Indreni Lodge, 7, Chowrastra Rd., Darjeeling, 734101, India.

Equipment

We were charged \$90 per person per day

while in Bhutan, a reduction from the normal fee of \$130. For that fee, the Bhutanese provided all transportation, a driver, meals, and lodging. Some nights we stayed in hotels while others were spent in tents along the river. The Bhutanese provided the tents, sleeping bags, cooking gear (and cook), and food. It was whitewater paddling in classic style. Thus, the only gear we needed to bring was boating equipment, medical supplies, safety paraphernalia, and warm clothes.

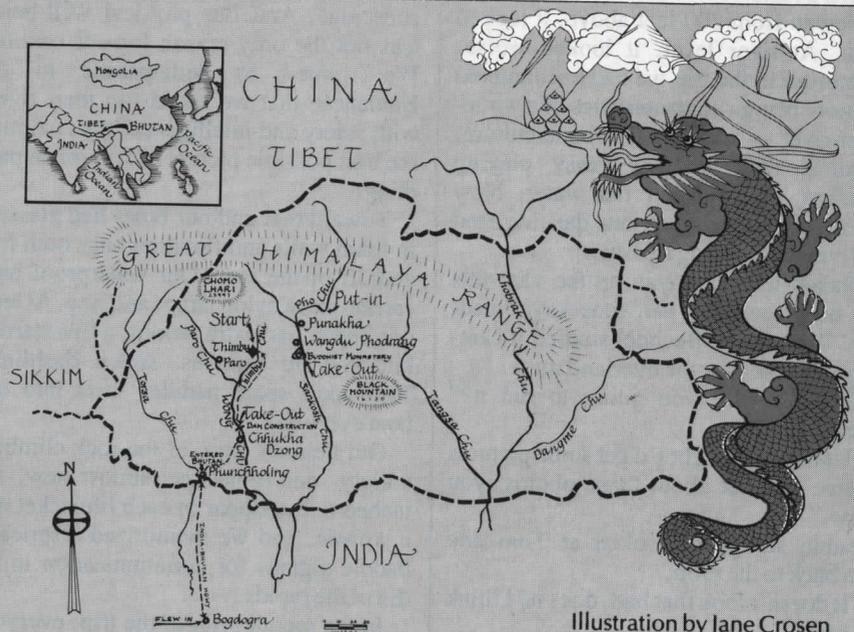


Illustration by Jane Crosen

Ohiopyle Falls on the Youghiogheny River in western Pennsylvania. Les Bechdel was one of the country's first big-water kayak paddlers. Walker's pulse rate never gets above 60 per minute unless he's had a smoke, three cups of coffee, or is faced with a Class V rapid. And as for the author, aim a camera at him, massage his ego a bit, and he'd run anything for you or ABC-TV or NBC-TV or whoever was paying the bills. In the back of Jamie's mind there was doubt that he could keep up with the group when push came to shove, when the landing strips dropped clean out of sight.

Twenty-two kilometers south of Thimbu, the Paro and Upper Wong Chu rivers join at the confluence to form the Wong Chu. It's there that seatbelts were fastened and tray tables and seats set in their full, upright positions, for the river started plummeting ... as in 200 feet per mile or more.

Six hundred yards below the confluence, the riverbanks pinched together and the river funneled over a 15-foot drop. Halfway over the drop the main chute changed direction and angled sharply left. The bottom consisted of pulsating white froth which 10 yards later slammed against an undercut rock ledge.

Viewed from 200 feet above, it looked mean. At river level, it looked worse. Heretofore in the trip we had encountered the more benign characteristics of a white-water river — scenery, riverbank culture, technical rock dodging, easy playing stretches, and outright flat water. Now was the time for one-on-one dancing, and the river was seeking a partner.

Hixson left his kayak on the van; this was no place for a part-time kayak paddler. Walker and Bechdel studied it carefully and opted for the overland route.

"Eric, how're you going to run it?" asked Jamie.

"Uuhhh, I thought I'd get some pictures ... have to think about those photos, you know."

Jamie shrugged, looked at Tom and then back to the drop.

"It doesn't look that bad, does it? I think I'll run it."

Whereupon Jamie and Tom headed for their boats upstream — for what older brother was going to let a kid brother have all the fun?

With a boat in the water below the drop and three throw lines in position for safety, Jamie shoved off. A few quick powerful strokes and he flew over the brink. He went out of sight upon landing, did a brief tailstand and then capsized. He rolled back up as he washed downstream, a huge grin

splitting his face. The attentive spectators whistled their approval. In a span of 10 seconds, Jamie had been accepted, not by the others, who never doubted his ability in the first place, but by himself.

AT FIRST GLANCE, an exploratory whitewater paddling trip in the Himalayas on a river that drops over 100 feet per mile would seem to demand the extreme upper limits of whitewater expertise and daring, "pushing the outer edge of the envelope," in Tom Wolfe's words in *The Right Stuff*.

In reality, quite the opposite is true. Caution and safety considerations are first and foremost in people's minds and it's easy to see why. The seriousness of an accident takes on new proportions on a river where the nearest help may be hours away up a steep embankment, to say nothing of a cliff, and hospital facilities are at least a day's drive, if not a day's flight, away. At best it puts a damper on the trip; at worst it is life-threatening.

Thus, rapids which at home or near help are marginally runnable or which invite a "what-the-hell" plunge are most often portaged on wilderness trips.

In Bhutan we were particularly safety conscious. And our physical well-being was not the only reason for our caution. We wanted to demonstrate to the Bhutanese that we could run their rivers with safety and intelligence, thus painting the best possible picture of American paddling.

Toward that end our boats had glassed-in foam walls and flotation bags both fore and aft of the seat. Our waterproof bags carried extra nylon straps and line. At least one boater had extra rations, a fire-starting kit, first-aid supplies, and a flashlight. Take-apart spare paddles went into one boat every day.

Our helmets were of the rock climbing variety, our lifejackets almost new. Attached to the zipper of each lifejacket was a whistle, and we memorized a series of paddle signals for communication in the din of the rapids.

In the month prior to the trip, everyone but Ed Hixson (who was in China) spent a week on the Gauley and Russell Fork rivers in West Virginia and Virginia, respectively, shaking down gear, rescue techniques, and communication methods on the water. Safety paraphernalia and forethought? Hell, we put American Canoe Association Safety Chairman Charles Walbridge to shame.

But even more important than our safety gear and preparations was our attitude. We

wanted to err on the side of conservatism, and we pledged to support any team member who wanted to portage a rapid.

If Wick Walker was our leader, then Les Bechdel was our Mother Hen. As Director of Rafting Operations at the Nantahala Outdoor Center in Bryson City, North Carolina, Bechdel brought with him not only valuable safety techniques which the Center practices, but also an attitude of *safety first*. If we started to become separated while on the river, Les pulled us together so that we could react quickly if someone ran into trouble. He stressed the importance of scouting difficult rapids from shore when our natural, lazier instincts were to wave a *Hail Mary* and run it blind. Due in large part to his concern and admonishment, all boats and paddlers finished the expedition in fine shape. This did not go unnoticed by the Bhutanese.

TOM MCEWAN HAS a kitten's curiosity trapped within a former Yale wrestling captain's body which has been slammed to the mat once too often. Tom runs difficult rapids and/or chooses bizarre routes through well-known rapids because he, quite simply, wants to see what will happen. With a troublesome shoulder and more often than not a boat half-filled with water, he doesn't always land on his feet. This adds a measure of piquancy to any river trip with Tom.

Our last day on the water saw us start paddling at 7:45 a.m., long before the sun would reach over the high cliffs on either side of the campsite. The air was cold, our paddling gear had frost on it, and we hadn't a clue about the final 10 to 12 miles of river which lay between us and our final take-out at the Chukka Hydroelectric Project. The road, having climbed thousands of feet above the river, disappeared entirely. Would we encounter rapids so turbulent that we'd be forced to walk out? Even spend a night in the gorge along the river? Now this truly was a McEwan morning with both physical and mental discomfort to address.

We paddled about three miles of Class II and III rapids with frozen fingers, choosing routes which offered the least water splash.

Suddenly the riverbanks almost merged and the Wong Chu began to drop alarmingly. We pulled to shore to scout the first rapid. It was very technical, with sharp rocks, criss-crossing currents, and an undercut ledge at the bottom. Nasty, but runnable. Anxious to keep moving in order to stay warm, Tom and I went first.

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Bhutanese porters rest on a ridge overlooking the Wong Chu valley.