

# Kayakers conquer remote rapids



**B**elieve it or not, parts of the upper McKenzie River resemble the quieter portions of a remote river in Nepal, according to an organizer of a recent river expedition.

But there, at the smooth-flowing river sections, the resemblance stops, says Bruce Mason, who initiated plans for an expedition down the unexplored Karnali River in Nepal two years ago.

Mason, who has worked with the University Outdoor Program for 10 years, left with nine other rafters Oct. 12 and returned shortly before Christmas. The Outdoor Program plans a slide show of the trip during the spring term.

After a two-week delay waiting for their air freight to arrive, the troop embarked from central Nepal — with 25 Tibetan refugees carrying the two tons of supplies — over three mountain passes 12,000 feet high to the source of the Karnali River near the Tibetan border.

Arriving at the river, the group found it "looked very much like the upper McKenzie," Mason said.

But after an easy, first-day trek of four miles, those initial impressions proved misleading. The group only traveled 25 miles in the next eight days.

"It was eight days of continuous rapids. At the end of that time we were considering packing up and hiking down the river," Mason said.

But they persevered, making the 300-mile trip in about 55 days.

Numerous minor accidents, such as overturned rafts, a sprained ankle, a torn ligament and two near drownings caused lay-overs and worries. "I really thought that one fellow was gone," Mason said of a rafter who flipped over and remained under his kayak and the water for more than a minute.

Mason also suffered a small but deep leg wound that almost cut his trip short. Mason said had he chosen to return to Eugene, it could've taken up to three weeks for a helicopter to airlift him out of that "extremely remote" part of Nepal.

Mason said he took antibiotics for 25 days before the infection came under control. And when he returned, "the doctor said I came real close to losing my leg," he said.

Mason and the others all lost something — weight.

"I've got it all back now," he said of the 14 pounds he shed during the more than two-months-long trip.

The group brought along what they figured was enough food for the 55-day trip based on their Eugene eating habits. But the rafters worked so much harder, they doubled their caloric needs and resorted to bartering with the natives for about 50 percent of their food.

Bartering was a "lengthy process," he said, because the area is "not only isolated but a very poor part of Nepal."

"Money didn't mean much to them," Mason said of the natives. Containers, "everything from tin cans to plastic water bottles," were successful trading tools.

Rice became the main staple of the rafters' Nepalese diet, but freeze-dried food supplemented that menu. "None of us wanted to eat rice when we got back."

**A**lthough Mason said their Nepalese encounters were "wonderful," they were "fatiguing" as well. As many as 75 natives would descend on the small party's camp each night.

"Everything you did was witnessed by 75 people. Brushing your teeth became a real experience, and changing your clothes was nearly impossible," he said.

The natives were fascinated by the rafters' wet suits and helmets, which they tried on "100's of times," he said.

They scrutinized the four original kayaks, which resembled their dugout logs used to ferry natives across the river, but paid little attention to the three larger rafts, he said.

Mason said the natives could understand where the rafters were from and what they were doing, but "they could never understand why we were there."

"We were wondering there for a while ourselves," he added.

This trip brings Mason's total Nepal trip tally to three, but he said the last one is the "most primitive I've seen yet."

The Nepalese they observed used metal only for harvest sickles and cooking pots. Piles of rocks against an overhang served as their huts, he said.

"It was fascinating to see how little it takes to stay alive." Especially when you're packing professional expedition gear, he said.

Eventually, after encountering several minor setbacks, the travelers came out of the steep mountain into the jungles and plains drawing them closer to civilization.

But getting home from the trip also proved difficult.

For instance, the road that was supposed to lead them to a small town airport had since disappeared. That forced them to cross the border into India illegally in order to double back into Nepal. Unluckily, the Indian army caught them, and they had to pay them \$16 to for an "escort" back into Nepal.

The trip did not end on a sour note. In fact, the rafters took it easy. They traveled by horsecarts to the airport. There, they caught a plane to Katmandu, Mason said.

"It was a great way to re-enter civilization."



*According to the rafters, the area they visited was among the poorest and most isolated in the country. Mason found the natives living a primitive existence, where metal was used only for harvest sickles and cooking pots, and rocks piled against an overhang served as a hut.*

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