



ANTON GRIESSBACH

Eric Ladd gives monks from Sadêng a river ride



KRISTEN McDONALD

Tibetan shrine

Keeping An Angry River Happy

Rafting a river to save it in China

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

Armed with the blessings of a group of Tibetan monks, the rafters launched their crafts into the rain-swollen Salween River in remote eastern Tibet. The team of 16 rafters — from the U.S., Tibet, China and Germany — led by 23-year-old UO student Travis Winn and his 18-year-old sister Carmen, was the first group of whitewater rafters to plunge into this remote river and experience its Grand Canyon style rapids. If these adventurers have their way, they won't be the last.

The Salween River, also known as the Nujiang (Angry River) in Chinese and the Gyalmo Ngulchu in Tibetan, originates in the mountains of Tibet and flows southeast through steep and narrow gorges through China and into Thailand and Burma (also called Myanmar) until it finally empties out into the Andaman Sea in the Indian Ocean. NASA says the Salween is almost completely non-navigable for all but the last 75 of its

1,750 miles. Winn and his companions, including former Eugenean Kristen McDonald, discovered the river can be navigated, but only if you're willing to shoot 15 to 20 foot rapids. Rafting the Salween, according to Winn, is "totally out of this world."

It's hard to believe that in this day and age, you can still be the first to explore a river or wild area. Tibetans have been living along the banks of the Salween River for thousands of years, but Winn and McDonald and their team were the first to raft its waves. Their rafting company — Last Descents River Expeditions — is the first to be licensed for multi-day rafting trips in China. It is also often the first to explore many of China's and Tibet's wild rivers in what rafters call a "first descent."

Unfortunately because of dam building in China, many first descents are also last descents in Asia. A last descent is the last time a river can be rafted before the natural waterway and its landscape are destroyed, in this case by hydroelectric projects. The Salween, says Winn, is the longest free-flowing river in the mainland of Southeast Asia. Winn and McDonald hope to bring the sport of whitewater rafting to China and help the people there save their rivers from destruction.

Red Tape in China

To raft a river in Tibet is to go through Chinese red tape. Tibet, known in China as the Tibetan autonomous prefecture, is populated by 6.5 million Tibetans and 7 million Chinese,

and it has been occupied by China for 50 years. Winn, who speaks fluent Chinese and a little Tibetan, teamed up with Chinese businessman Na Ming Hui to bring whitewater sports to China and Tibet.

The Tibetan name for the Salween, Gyalmo Ngulchu, reflects some of the long and turbulent history between China and Tibet. The words translate to "River of the Princess' Tears" says McDonald, and reflect the story of a Chinese princess who was brought to Tibet to be the bride of the king, crying on her difficult journey. The river was formed of her tears, according to legend.

It's hard to get a permit to raft a river in China, says Winn. Since rafting isn't really a sport there yet, "there are no permits." Difficulties with the red tape led Winn, McDonald (who also speaks Chinese), and Na Ming Hui to co-found Last Descents to facilitate getting permission for their rafting trips. Their concern for the rivers also led McDonald, who is getting her Ph.D. at UC-Berkeley in Environmental Science, and Winn to found a non-profit companion organization in the U.S. called the China Rivers Project (CRP). The CRP seeks to use river recreation to solve social and environmental problems.

To get to the Salween in the first place, once the government cleared the trip, there were other problems to solve: How do you get 16 people and their rafting gear to a river in Tibet and raft an unexplored river safely? Looking at the steep gorges and fast water, "once we put in, could we stop?" wondered Winn.

The rafters planned their trip down the river using a declassified Russian topographic map from 1942 and satellite images from Google Earth.



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Full rafting gear



Monks and rafters pose before the first descent of the Salween



Western rafters on an Eastern river