



KRISTEN McDONALD

Pausing on the road to the river



Travis Winn, Kristen McDonald and Na Ming Hui



Prayer flags

Tibetan Rapids

The place where the rafters planned to put in on the river is a hard three days drive from Lhasa on narrow muddy roads over 16,000-foot mountain passes in Land Cruisers, stopping for the occasional yak. The area is so remote that many of the people there were seeing Westerners for the first time.

‘They thought we were crazy; a woman saw the boats and ran screaming away.’ — Kristen McDonald

The rafters planned their trip down the river using a declassified Russian topographic map from 1942 and satellite images from Google Earth. But the only way to get to know the river, its rapids and whirlpools, was to put the rafts and kayaks in and go.

After months of planning and thousands of miles of travel, the river trip seemed like it would end before it began. The river levels were dangerously high from the recent rains. While they waited in hopes the water would drop to a level safe for rafting, a Buddhist monastery in the town of Sadêng spontaneously decided to host the team.

The monks there welcomed the rafters and invited them in to prayer sessions and for games of tug-o-war. “While they were praying for rain, we were praying for sunshine,” laughs Winn. Winn, who’s getting ready to graduate UO’s Clark Honors College, had to make what he called, “the hardest decision of my life,” when it came time to decide whether to try the river. After a test run on one of the Salween’s tributaries and with blessings from the monks written on their rafting gear, the rafters decided to go for it.

They were rewarded right away with “three and half miles of nonstop Class III plus whitewater — you could just sit in the middle

and have fun,” says Winn.

“It was classic,” he says, “Grand Canyon rapids followed by fast water.” The rafts sped along at seven to eight miles per hour through narrow canyons and high granite peaks. The rafters experienced miles and miles of “roller-coaster rapids.” They saw “small villages, high up,” says Winn.

The villagers “had never seen a white person, let alone a crazy contraption called a raft,” says McDonald. The rafters wore bright colored dry suits, life jackets and helmets, which along with their safety orange and yellow crafts, made them look even stranger.

“Tibetans believe rivers are a sacred place, a place of spirits, not of humans,” says McDonald. “They thought we were crazy,” she says. “A woman saw the boats and ran screaming away.”

At one point the rafters met an elderly Tibetan man who had never left the Salween Canyon. He walks the banks of the river each day with his herd of yaks, carrying an umbrella to protect him from the sun. The Tibetan member of the team, Chongdak, an avid rafter since 2002, served as translator between the

team and the people they met. “It wasn’t a culture clash,” says McDonald, “we had wonderful interactions.”

The scenery was “amazing,” she says. The rafters, when they weren’t negotiating the whitewater, saw Tibetan eagles, hawks and the blue sheep that are the prey of the snow leopard,

according to McDonald. They saw the tracks of Tibetan black bears as well as their scat.

“What makes us driven to these really remote places is not conquering but feeling like we are doing something for the first time,” she says.

The rafters encountered huge, 20-foot ocean sized “Waimea waves” as they contin-

ued down the river, but got through safely. Sometimes the canyon walls were so high, the only way to scout the rapids was by sending the kayakers on ahead through the class IV rapids. Chongdak and Na Ming Hui flipped in their raft on the last day of the trip, but in the end, all the rafters emerged unscathed, and exhilarated, even if a little wet.

Dam Building

Having discovered a river that rivals America’s best rafting rivers in its rapids and its pristine wilderness, McDonald and Winn now want to stop that river from being dammed, inundating the flora and fauna as well as the homes of the people who love there.

“As foreigners, it’s not appropriate or

potential for bringing rural and urban Chinese together. I know it can happen — it’s just in the details.”

Many of China’s rivers are endangered by hydroelectric projects. Perhaps the best known is the Three Gorges Dam that forced the relocation of more than a million people, and the waters are covering unknown amounts of natural and cultural heritage and even causing earthquakes. Problems from the dam project such as toxic algae and landslides are making the news in China and abroad. It was recently revealed that while the U.S. largely stayed out of that project, Canada provided major support.

The hydroelectric project planned for the Salween involves 13 dams on the section of the river that flows through China’s Yunnan Province, says McDonald, who is researching and writing about this project for her doctoral dissertation. The Salween project is supposedly larger than the Three Gorges Dam.

The project is currently on hold, but the rafters floated by the construction of at least one hydroelectric project on the river during their trip. McDonald compares the “development at all costs” mentality that can be found in China to a charging elephant: “It’s really hard to slow it down.”

So even as Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao

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productive for us to go in and say, ‘Don’t build a dam,’” says Winn. “One thing we can do is bring people to see these places.”

He is excited not only about bringing Westerners in to experience these rivers, but more importantly showing the Chinese the wonders of their own country: “Rivers have

put the project on hold in 2004 until a better assessment of the impacts of the dams can be done, the International Rivers Network says that China Huadian Corporation and the Yunnan provincial government are still at work on a scaled back version of the project.

If the project is finished, it would move



ANTON GRIESSBACH

Tibetan monks check out the rafters



Prayer flags in the mountains of Tibet