

नेपाल nepal

Words - George Fell

Pictures - Nick Smith

It's way back in the Autumn of 2006 and we're sitting in a bar in Kathmandu.

"So, where next?"

"I'd like to come back to Nepal, maybe do the Karnali"

"I might be able to take some time off in 2009"

Fast forward two and a half years and four older but not altogether wiser paddlers are happily contemplating the happy hour cocktail menu, and slowly coming round to some kind of plan.

Nick and Jenny are both doctors, Geoff's a lawyer, which leaves me, George, feeling a bit of a slacker, as I mostly play outside for a living.



Please can I have my helmet back now?

After a quick potter around Pokhara to see which boats are for hire (and whether or not they've had their outfitting destroyed by fat Americans' bottoms), we inevitably ended up sitting in the Ganesh kayak shop, chewing the cud with Charley. He's a French paddler, who has been living in Nepal for almost thirty years and is probably the mellowest person in the world.

The trip to Sauli at the put in to the Karnali is supposed to be a rumbling bus and jeep journey of around 18 hours. The 36 hour epic that ensued involved a road block, a riot, sleeping on the tarmac between two trucks in a traffic jam, a midnight trip to a bus graveyard for some spare parts to bodge our own bus back together and inadvertently walking through a medium sized town's main poo spot in my Texas. Around nightfall on our second day, we arrived, hungry, tired and dusty to a tiny village, where we hoped to find the path down to the river. This being Nepal it was party night, in fact not just any old party but a wedding party. Most of the adults had already discovered whole new levels of consciousness, which left us to entertain and be entertained by the youth of the village. One enterprising yet mildly irritating young guy called Norris, was very, very insistent that we used his brothers (and yet strangely not himself) to porter our boats down to the river. Repeated attempts to explain that we'd already arranged porters and agreed a price seemed to fall on deaf and fairly drunken ears. A memorable night followed, involving pat-a-cake, nepali words scratched into the sand and some proper Nepali dancing, replied to with our spirited yet inept rendition of the Whigfield classic "Saturday night". A dinner of spicy noodles were eventually followed by a deep sleep on the floor of the village storeroom/schoolroom.

Morning came, heralded by the sound of goats being herded past. Naturally Norris was there to meet us with his brothers names now written (by him) on a piece of paper to make it official, as were our original four porters. A few minutes into the “discussion” that ensued, I picked up my boat and followed another porter down to the river. About ten minutes, 500m and mildly sore shoulder later I started to regret that decision. After about an hour, 2km and two really sore shoulders I was really regretting that decision. Soon after, I cracked and gave some of the kit inside the boat to one of the porters, leaving me with a massively unbalanced boat that was even worse to carry. Anyway I eventually arrived at the river having learnt my lesson – next time I feel the need to man-up and carry my kit, I won’t. I’ll pay someone else to do it.



The view from the cable car

A fairly uneventful day followed, excepting one rather embarrassing swim on a piece of grade 2. I’d like to suggest that this was entirely due to portering induced heat exhaustion, but the rest of the team seemed to prefer the explanation utter incompetence.

Day two brought some top quality big volume white water. Most of it was of the “big wavetrains, occasional holes, mostly goes down the middle” variety, although several like “God’s house” rapid were a bit more involved than that and definitely warranted a wee look first. All in all a classic whitewater day.

Day three started with a good wave and a scary cable car to play on. After those, it degenerated into long flat stretches, with the occasional shingle rapid. It became increasingly populated from here on, with the usual fun and games avoiding being boarded by hordes of crazy Nepali kids. Extra respect to the small but intrepid child who had crafted a kind of buoyancy aid out of two inflated condoms and a piece of string.

Another day of mostly flat water followed, enlivened only by a final gorge. Flat but nonetheless impressive, with crazy anabatic winds rising up from the Indian plain, bringing spinning dust devils and sudden gusts of wind. One of these consigned my glasses to the depths.



Life under a tarp - a different design every night

Courtesy of the IMF, the take out is marked by a massive suspension bridge. We'd discussed whether or not to carry on down into the Bardia national park, but the considered opinion was that we'd get either;

- a.) arrested for entering the park without a permit or
 - b.) hopelessly lost as the river starts to braid,
- followed by
- c.) eaten by a crocodile or
 - d.) chewed by a tiger or
 - e.) both.

Cowardice being the better part of valour, we took out at the bridge.

All in all a fine river trip. Two of the team had to head home shortly afterwards to prop up the NHS. Geoff and George had another two and a bit weeks paddling together as a gruesome twosome, but that's another story.



Later on the Bhote Kosi

SO YOU WANT TO GO?

You don't need to be a Jedi paddle in Nepal (none of us are). There's loads of stuff at all grades.

If you expect everything to go to plan then Nepal probably isn't the place for you. If you're happy to go with the flow and treat logistical screw ups as part of the fun then it's a great place to have adventures, both in and out of a kayak.

There are lots of class multi-day trips. Lots of these will have great big volume rapids, but often lots of long flat sections too.

Read Pete Knowles' "white water Nepal". This tells you most things you need to know, but as the rivers get reamed every monsoon and new roads get built, don't treat it as gospel.

For most runs you can either get a rafting company to organise your transport and support (relatively expensive but efficient and you can paddle with light boats) or do your own thing, use local transport and camp out by the side of rivers (more things will go wrong, but mostly in funny ways and you get to go at your own pace).

It's fairly expensive to get out there (£450 with air india, featuring a 15 hour stay on the floor of Delhi airport at no extra charge), but once you're away from the main tourist areas the cost of living is next to nothing.

The main paddling seasons are Sept-Dec (starts of huge at the end of the monsoon and gradually drops off) and Mar-May (lower levels, fed by snow melt, occasionally topped up with rain).

If this sounds like your sort of thing then get yourself out there – it's an awesome place to be.

If you want more info then drop me a line on mail@georgefell.co.uk