

Uttarakhand the QUIET side

We were now back in Rishikesh after a very successful trip with Harry on the Ganges and the Alaknanda Rivers. Harry was on his way to the airport and Europe and we were trying to make the most of the Western style meals in Rishikesh before we headed back to Manali.

Every year we make a 12-14 hour manic dash from the hill station town and our base in India Manali to Rishikesh, the yoga capital of the world and the gateway to some of the best white water India has to offer. Every year we say never again but this year we had to make the trip twice as we wanted to take our brand new Royal Enfield Bullet motorcycle on a tour looking for some secret little river gems in the state of Himachal Pradesh.

Photo: Ute Heppke kayaking on the Yamuna River in northern India

After an undercover order of a chicken sizzler - Rishikesh is a vegetarian town but there are a couple of restaurants run by a few entrepreneurs that hide a chicken menu inside the usual menu, we hatched a plan for our return journey to Manali. Rather than make another manic dash trying to race the sun and daylight (one of the most dangerous activities you can ever do is drive at night in India) to get to Manali, we would instead turn this trip into a kayak road trip and paddle the Yamuna and Tons Rivers on the way back.

Looking over the Yamuna River, in the distance snow clouds are forming

By Steve Brooks

Absolutely everything gets pushed to its limits in India, including this pick up truck!

We left Rishikesh

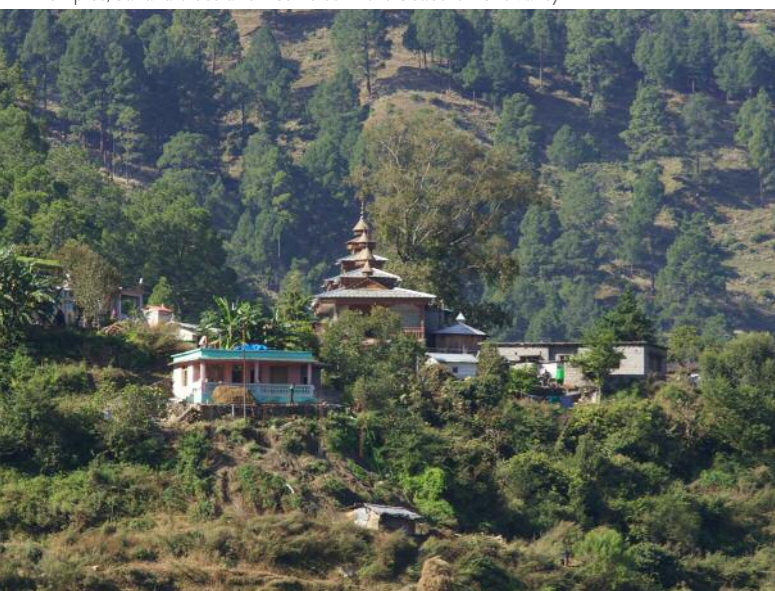
early hours to miss the traffic in the city of Dehradun and it was not long before we were winding our way up the mountains to the hill top town of Mussourie - now famed for its language schools and pleasant climate it became a very popular destination already during the time of the British Raj. By mid-morning we were finally in the Yamuna Valley and with the road hugging the mountainside it gave us some great vantage points to check out the Yamuna and its character.

The Lower Yamuna is a great multi-day paddle on mellow white water in a beautiful steep valley with very little access to the river. As we approached Barnigad we came across a huge landslide that formed a nasty long class VI rapid full of syphons. In fact it actually reminded me of a classic Peruvian rapid! We decided that Barnigad would be our take-out, thus avoiding the class VI monster and the Lower Yamuna.

A village cricket match taking place on the dry rice fields.



Temples, banana trees and rice fields in the beautiful Tons Valley



The weather had changed and the clouds were now covering the high Himalayan peaks and the temperature was dropping. By the time we reached Barkot - our put-in we decided it was way too cold to camp by the side of the river and instead we started to look for a room for the night. It was off-season and for a village that is full of hotels and guesthouses not one of them was open apart from the Government Rest House.

Sleet and snow

This is more of an emergency place to stay and the facilities were extremely basic. The temperature was plummeting and the rain was now turning into sleet and snow. The electricity was erratic but the kitchen kept on bringing us hot and very sweet Indian chai (tea).



The Yamuna is one of the most important and holiest rivers in India. A big pilgrimage takes place throughout the summer months to the headwaters of the Yamuna. It is entwined deeply in the Hindu Religion, where it is said that by taking a bath in the Yamuna River will liberate people and cleanse them of contamination of a very material world.

The Kumbh Mela

It also happens to be the Ganges biggest tributary. The Yamuna joins the Ganges at Allahabad where the Kumbh Mela festival - which attracts some 10 million pilgrims - takes place every 12 years. The Kumbh Mela is regarded as the biggest peaceful gathering in the world!

The next day we headed to our put-in. The clouds were slowly disappearing and the sun was trying

to make a come back! The river was very rocky at the start and though quite steep there was still enough water to take us all the way down to Naugan.

Our first gorge was tight and channelled with some pushy white water that would certainly be interesting in higher water. Then came bigger rapids with some nice moves to avoid a few holes using tongues and creases that really got you into the flow of things! The next gorge was somewhat more technical and harder in character. Again it was read and run and the drops were more constrained and were certainly deeper.

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Above and below: Ute Heppke paddling Tons Valley



Steve just above the town of Tiuni on the Tons River

As we came out of the second gorge

the clouds were coming off the mountain tops to reveal a blanket of snow. The gradient continued and we were kayaking some great white water in a fantastic valley with amazing views all around. It was not long until we reached a small village on the left hand bank, the road was high above and the only way to reach the village was on the small footpath from the road. The houses were very traditional and built from stone, wood and slate. However, for me what was interesting was one of the villager's dogs.

Huge metal spiked collar

Around his neck was a huge metal spiked collar that is used to protect dogs from leopard bites. I asked in my very basic Hindi if they had problems with leopards but the village elder said there were none around at the moment. Still I think the dog was happy to keep his leopard proof collar on! I have been coming back to the Indian Himalayas every year since 2008 and one of the most important questions I have learnt is to ask local villagers about the leopard threat.

It comes as a sobering thought when a villager says to be very careful as there is a man-eating leopard around and with the stories I have heard and events I have witnessed it can be quite intimidating to no longer be at the top of the food chain!

We kayaked for another hour on some nice read and run bouncy white water until we reached the Barnigad Bridge and our take-out for the Yamuna. SSR our driver was waiting and with a smile on our faces we packed up and headed to our next river, the Tons.

Ancient fields

The journey from the Yamuna Valley took us through some fantastic scenery, around the village of Purola with ancient fields cut into the surrounding mountains. It was autumn, the fields were empty and the ground hard. However, this did not stop the locals from having a game of cricket.

One of the fields was the batting wicket and with the right technique there were plenty of runs for offer around the surrounding fields. It looked as though it was a game between local villages as

there was a small crowd of spectators and they had even managed to bring in a local microphone and tannoy system. We sat up on the road watching a few overs pass by but unfortunately the game was not going to last long as the clouds were getting darker and again rain started to fall.

Tons Valley

As we arrived into the Tons Valley the rain had become a lot heavier and again we decided the stay in a Tourist Rest House. This time the manager was not keen on providing dinner but the rain continuing to pour, SSR persuaded them to get the cooks on and within no time we were again drinking hot, sweet chai sitting in our huge room looking out of the windows watching the river rise.

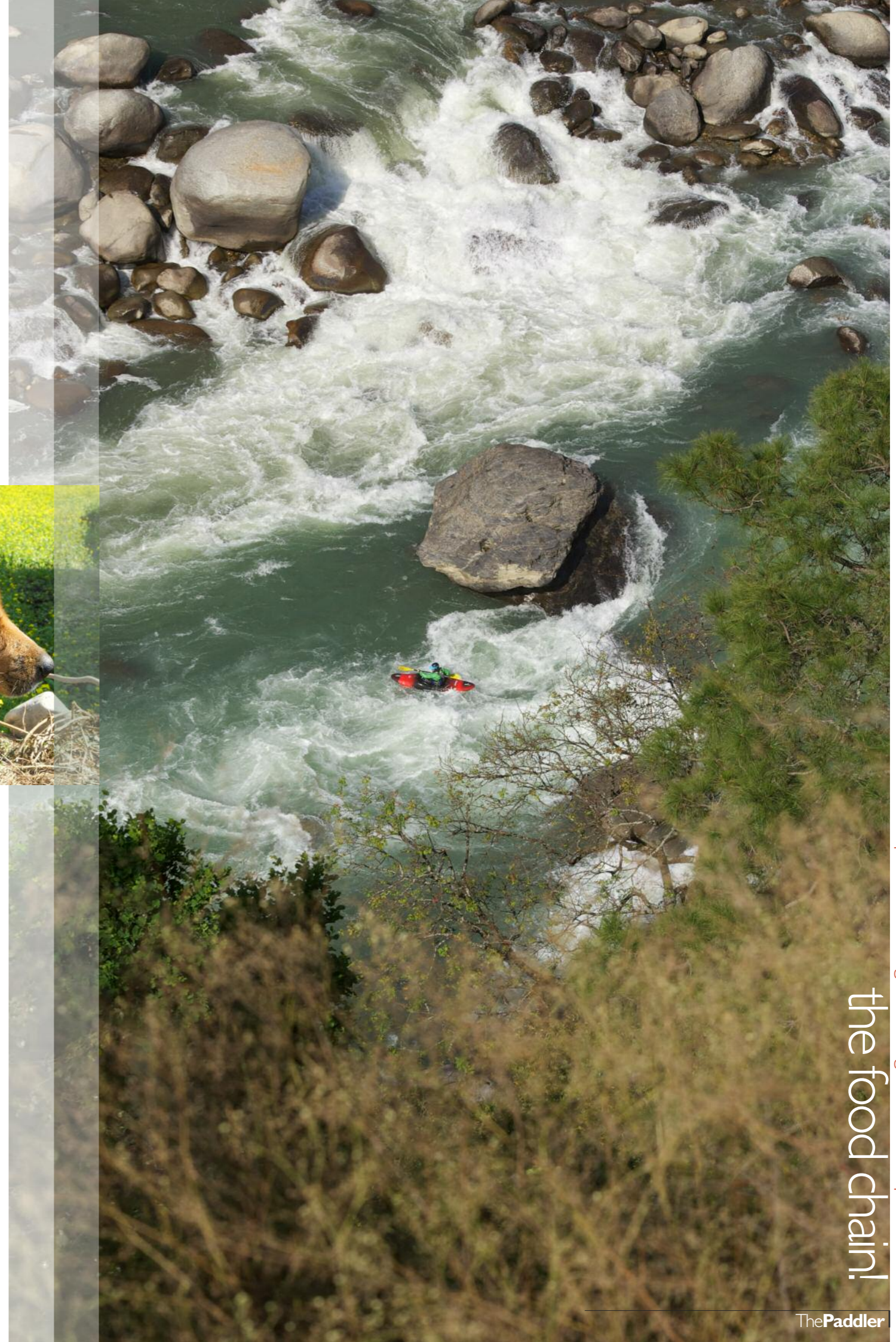


The next morning we decided that I would run the first section from Hanol down to Tiuni and then Ute would join me for the lower part. The river had kept its green/blue colour and again the high mountain peaks were blanketed in snow.

We drove down to a bridge, which had great access to the river. Again half the village was out to see the crazy tourist with his plastic kiste (the closest Hindi word for kayak) put-in on the Tons River.

A few mellow class III rapids gave a great warm up, then the gradient started to steepen and the pools became smaller and shorter. As the Pabbar River entered on the right the drops were getting bigger and I ended up scouting three rapids, all of which were class IV+ with some deep munchy holes to catch the unaware!

After the Pabbar confluence each rapid was getting longer and it was not long before I reached Tiuni. Ute was waiting and had her boat unloaded ready to go. I went on a mission to find some mineral water in Tiuni. This turned out to be quite a mission as not many foreign tourists head into the Tons Valley.



Steve passing the Pabbar confluence with plenty of whitewater action still to be had!

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the food chain!

After the fourth attempt a shop keeper told me to wait and after a couple of minutes he brought out a pack of mineral water covered in dust and dirt but the caps were still sealed and with no other option (filtering water by the river next to a small state border town is not one of the healthiest options in the Himalayas) we filled up our bottles and continued.

A couple of kilometres below Tiuni, the river started to lose its gradient but with a lot of side creeks coming in and from all the rain in the past three days the volume was getting bigger. We kayaked through a stunning gorge, took lunch and as our energy levels had taken a beating over

It is a known fact that you can spend a lifetime in India and not see everything,



Shimla in Himachal Pradesh

With just one choice of hotel, we booked in said out farewells to SSR who was heading back to Rishikesh and the next morning we started our brutal journey over a couple of passes and through the snow to finally reach the city of Shimla in Himachal Pradesh. The journey up was cold but we were blessed with amazing views of the Himalayas on the Shimla ridge road. It felt as if the chain of mountains was going on forever. From the view on our left all the way to the right the snow covered mountains just kept going on and on and on. We changed over jeeps in Shimla and headed back to Manali. It had been a great



On the ridge road heading towards Shimla with the Himalayas going on and on in the distance!



Ute Heppke kayaking on the Yamuna River



Ute kayaking through the Lower Gorge of the Tons River

the past few months we would kayak until 3pm and head back to Tiuni.

We had reached Anu Bridge and with just a 200m carry up a steep wall of rock, mud and gravel we waited for SSR to come. Miraculously he had seen us just after the gorge and had even managed to get a glimpse of us by the bridge. It took him 20 minutes to drive down to the bridge and by this time we had again a few spectators and head scratchers! We loaded the kayaks, and with a fair few passengers cramped into the back of the jeep and with people hanging off the side we headed up to the main road and finally reached Tiuni.



which also seems to be the case with its rivers!

road trip and a real eye opener. The Yamuna and its tributaries is certainly a great way of breaking up a journey from one amazing kayaking centre to another. Our plan now was to eat a lot of chicken, rest for a few days then head out on our Enfield Bullet to check out some rivers for next years mission to Himachal Pradesh.



A traditional farm house on the banks of the Yamuna River

INFORMATION



Drôme Valley

Steve Brooks

Steve is now running a successful kayak school in Austria. It is the perfect training ground and the ideal step into running bigger volume rivers such as in the Himalayas. When the rivers start to drop along with the temperature in Austria you can find Steve leading kayaking and exploring India's northern rivers. www.gokayaking.at

Uttarakhand, India



Info: To get to India from the UK then Virgin Airways are your best bet. They have a daily flight from London and take your kayak for free! The best way to kayak the Yamuna and Tons is to go from Rishikesh. The roads are in better condition and it is less distance to get there. You also have the problem that if a taxi from one Indian state goes to another then they have to pay a huge tax for the privilege and of course that will add a lot of Rupees to your trip!

Accommodation: There are plenty of options in Rishikesh to stay, or you can go and stay on the Ganges River at one of the rafting companies campsites. Aquaterra and Red Chilli Adventures have camps that can be highly recommended.

Food and restaurants: Again in Rishikesh and the suburbs you have plenty of options. Rishikesh is actually a vegetarian city but there are a few entrepreneurs that sell chicken dishes. You will know which restaurant this is as they will hide a separate chicken menu inside the standard menu just in case you have had enough of rice and dal or the usual veggie burger and other traveller style meals!

Off the river: In Rishikesh there is plenty to keep you occupied. There are some great treks further up the valley, you can hire an Enfield and go for a cruise, yoga is an obvious one being made so famous in Rishikesh by the Beatles and you can even go and become a healer of faith if that takes your fancy.

Getting around: For the seasoned Indian kayaker, they will get picked up at Delhi airport and it is up to 8 hours taxi ride to Rishikesh. In and around Rishikesh there are plenty of tuk-tuks and to head further afield you should look at a taxi, it gives you greater freedom and you can change your plans just in case a weather system comes in and surprises you!

Guiding: Kayak School Arlberg based in Austria run road trips in both Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Steve and Ute have been kayaking in these areas every year since 2008 and know the area extremely well. For a bespoke kayaking trip to the Indian Himalayas check out: www.gokayaking.at

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