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(Not just a) TRAVELOGUE

Skylarking in Uttarakhand

Our all-women rafting team tackling challenging rapids of Grade III and IV+ on the 320 kms long Bhagirathi river - one of the main tributaries of Ganga - in Rishikesh was an unusual sight.

At first when a friend invited me to accompany her group on a five-day rafting expedition in the Indian Himalayas in the thick of November chill, I did not take her seriously. But the offer remained and so did the temptation. So I decided to sign up and became the group's fifth member.

I flew down to Delhi one Monday morning four days before Diwali. I was to meet the rest at New Delhi station from where we were to take the Indore Dehradun Express for Haridwar. We were received by A.D. - a petite, exotically tanned man - at the station that evening who was to later become our friend, companion and cameraman for the next six days.

Within a couple of hours we reached the 'Riverwilder' campsite located on a beautiful, sprawling sandy beach on the banks of Ganga. After a quite dinner we settled in the comfortable sleeping bags with the 16 degrees centigrade air sending shivers down our spine. But nothing really prepared us for the absolutely cold and hand-numbing water that we had to use every morning. And by the time we got used to it, it was time to leave the place.

We stayed at the campsite the first two days, rafting a little in the mornings to get some paddling exercise and get used to the cold water. We were introduced to our guide and

safety kayakers the first day who would accompany us on the expedition - a group of five expertly trained instructors. The rest of the day was spent on the pure white sands at the camp that had the perfect gradient for lounging alongside the shimmering, shiny water.

Normally, first-timers don't attempt this stretch of river run because it has certain rapids that are difficult and even dangerous. Funnily, every rapid has a name that somehow describes its nature. For instance, there's the much talked of 'Wall' that has the reputation of flipping every raft that tries to cross it. And then there's 'Return to Sender' that has a big 'hole', so called in rafting parlance, that does not let the raft go forward. And believe it or not but professional rafting guides memorise each and every rapid, its form, intensity and every rock and pebble that make it.

Rafting in that sense is a lot like climbing: your first attempt in both sports is with the eye. You study the current and the rock placements and then you sketch a possible route to take your raft safely through. And that is what our French rafting guide, Julien, taught us. He is easily the finest, most capable guide I have ever come across. And also the funniest. Of course, a mutual understanding between the guide and his team is absolutely necessary. Otherwise the team will lack synchronisation and rhythm - a vital ingredient for rafting. Any lack of it can make the raft go turtle spilling all aboard into the river.

We began our first day with an orientation, a brief introduction to the raft, rafting gear, safety precautions, possible accidents and safety drills in event of any mishap, which is very likely. We were also briefed on how rapids - also called whitewater because of the color the oxygen gives to spraying water - form and how dangerous they can be. This was important stuff and our lives depended on this.

Often, I felt that riding the waves on a raft was akin to horseriding where the rider must fall and rise with the rhythm of the horse to make the experience most enjoyable. But rafting is trickier, because the waves may be deceptive. They may appear to be harmless

but have the power to unseat you several feet away landing you directly on a fellow rafter's lap.

Julien, in his soft French accent, would shout, 'Paddle forward' and we would paddle forward with all our feminine might. The trick is to paddle together in complete harmony and we pushed as much water backward with our paddles as our underdeveloped biceps would allow. But towards the end of the expedition, we were looked upon as a 'dream team' since we managed to tackle every challenging rapid successfully without letting the raft flip. Sure, most of us gulped down plenty of river water trying to salvage our raft. But it was all for a good cause - it was, after all, holy water.

My own sacred dip took place at Devprayag where the Bhagirathi merges with the Alakhnanda to become the Ganga. The confluence has a long stretch of whitewater and some of the most violent ones too. And right after crossing one part of the rapid we were confronted with a big hole located exactly where the two rivers merged. And plop! one second I was there, and in another I was gone.

Until now, we were a bunch of amateur and even first-time rafters who looked like runaways. But now, as we listened to our guide spewing out instruction after instruction and putting a hypothetical raft through every imaginable danger, our hearts did acrobatic summersaults within. It was then that we realised the seriousness of our activity. Rafting was not just a water sport, it was a lesson in survival - raw and primal survival.

Our real expedition began from day three at 4.00 am. We drove to our put-in point from where we would begin rafting - a spot below the massive and controversial Tehri dam. The colossal structure, being built since 1977, appears to be like a mountain in itself wedged between two other mountains.

From here on, we would be completely on water without any road support. We had another raft with us that would carry our kitchen and tents. The rest of our gear like

clothes and sleeping bags would be tied to our own raft. Not without a lot of apprehension did we begin the first leg of our expedition - our first descent!

From then on, rafting became a challenge, a fight. We would raft four to five hours a day without going through, what Julien would call, the 'chicken line' - which was the easy line, the line with less danger.

We would stop for lunch breaks on the shore and set up camps at night on white secluded beaches and sleep under a million stars twinkling down at us. By the end, we had covered almost 140 kms. And although our hands were sore and bodies unevenly tanned, our spirits were flamboyant. This great river run had now become a part of us, a part of our consciousness that changed us in so many different ways. Sentimentality comes easily to adventurers but they cope with it because they know they might never walk through the same roads again. Or in this case, the same waters.

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