

On the Tons

One could never have imagined that beyond the placid blue river lay a tumultuous garboil of water and foam. We took on the rapids in a state of shock but conquered them in a manner that one would definitely write home about!

*Text and photographs
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I am sitting at the bow of the raft on the port side (left) and taking in the scenic Himalayan ambience, as the raft merrily bobs down the blue-hued Tons.

The raft is inflated to a pressure that it skims the rivers surface, rather than floating in it. Rana, the river guide, is making us practice snappy commands. He yells "left down" and the people rowing on the left are supposed to couch down behind the short walls of the raft. "Right back" is meant to make the paddlers on the right reverse strokes. These are the commands, he says, the proper execution of which will decide whether we make it across the roaring rapids confined within raft or scattered across the river.

I'm wondering what the fuss is all about because, as far as I can see, the Tons looks as smooth as a baby's bottom. Where are the rapids, the drops, the twists and the thrills? All we seem to be doing right now is rowing gently down a stream in tune to a nursery rhyme.

Rumble, fumble and tumble

The rapids are up ahead, an angry, cold, chaos of water just waiting to pull that bright blue raft amidst their raging fury and batter it with some hydraulic muscle.

“Laws of physics have taken a momentary lapse of reason because the raft goes vertical like the Titanic's last sigh and yet manages to fall back in the right direction, with all the souls in it wet and cold but still within.”

▲ Dummy



▲ Above:
Right:

I hear while we are still a distance away and first think that it's the sound of a bus with a damaged exhaust on the road alongside. But the road is deserted and the roar is rising to a crescendo. Now the rapid appears on the periphery of my vision appearing as a foamy irregularity. The raft gets closer and the roar gets angrier. We are poised on the last stretch of unbroken water, ridding huge ripples, the last of which will hurl the raft into the frothy chaos of a million cubits of water in confusion. It is then that I realise there is no way this little buttressed carpet of air and rubber is ever going to handle all the liquid fury that it is going to be hurled into.

My mind desperately starts revising Rana's instructions. What was that?

Left down?

Right reverse?

Hard front?

Easy back?

But before my brain could process all this information, we are at the centre of it. Suddenly I find a huge wall of water crashing down on me. There is no coordination between my co-paddlers, the raft or me. Suddenly, we are sliding into a watery hole that has suddenly opened like the toothless maw of a liquid giant. Laws of physics have taken a momentary lapse of reason because the raft goes vertical like the Titanic's last sigh and yet manages to fall back in the right direction, with all the souls in it wet and cold but still within. Rana's snappy commands that rang of authority have by now become heartfelt pleas for mercy. He desperately needs paddle power so that he can regain some semblance of control and get us out to tranquillity again. Somehow or the other we manage to ride that rapid and get out intact.

Praise the Lord.





▲ Above:
Right:
Facing page:

The second lap

That afternoon we'd arrived at Camp Lunagad, by the banks of the Tons, after a twisty 5-hour drive from Mussourie, just in time for lunch.

Some tasty *rajma* (red kidney bean curry) and rice later, we'd headed down to the river, where Rana gave us the mandatory safety talk and river running brief.

We'd worn our life jackets like lounge suits, easy and comfortable, and Rana promptly gave all loose straps forceful yanks so that the lounge suits began to feel like corsets. The idea behind this is that a life jacket shouldn't budge an inch once it has been strapped on; otherwise, its effectiveness is greatly reduced.

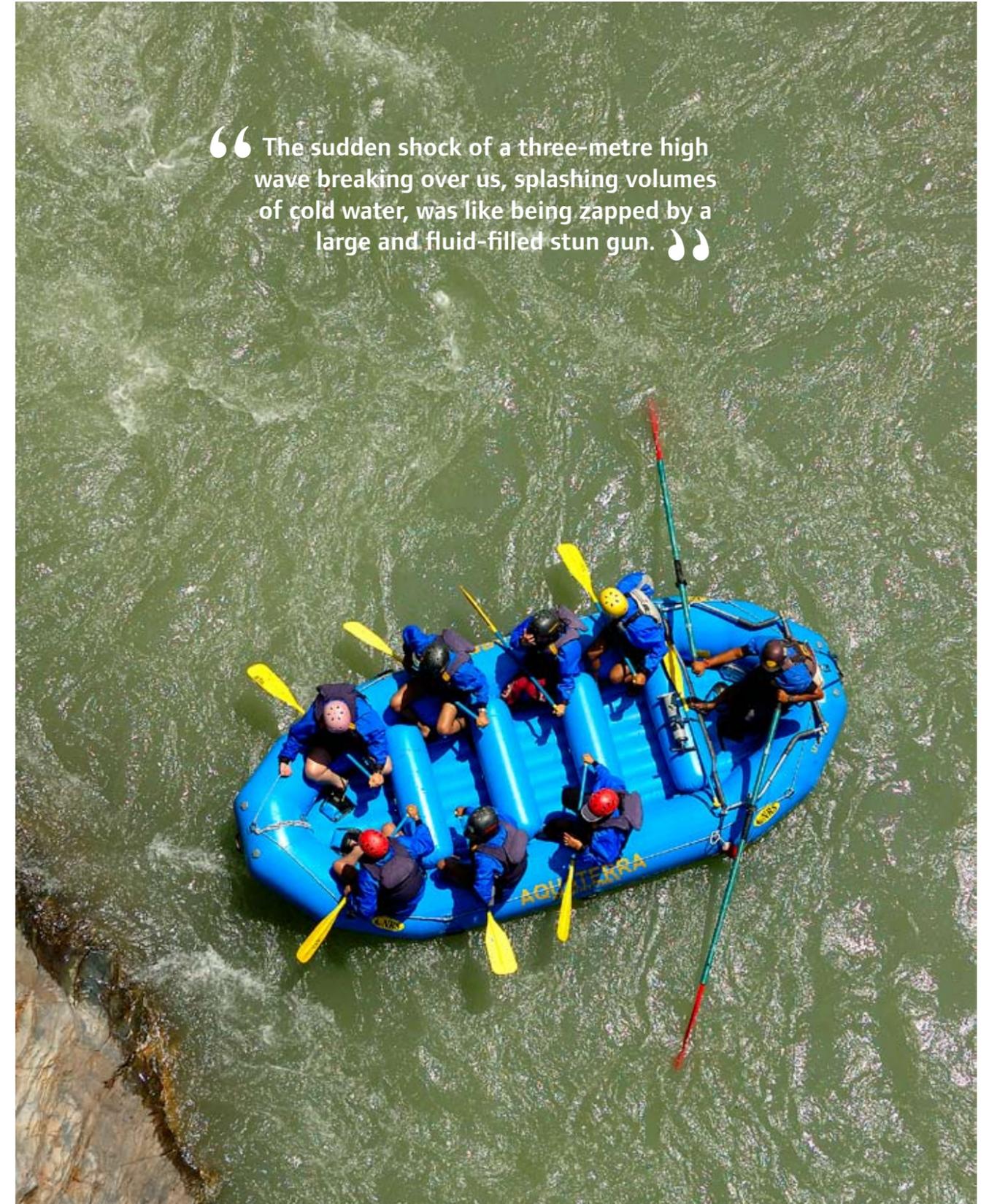
Setting out, we hit the first rapid raw and unprepared as described above. That first rapid was called 'Let's Go'. The sudden shock of a three-metre high wave breaking over us, splashing volumes of cold water, was like being zapped by a large and fluid-filled stun gun, and although I could hear Rana's heartfelt yells to give him a forceful forward paddle, my



limbs refused to comply. It seemed as if the chain of command that flows from the brain had been iced over. By the time it had thawed out, 'Let's Go' was behind us.

Riding the rapids is much like tumbling over a constantly churning mass of water. The waves would lift the raft into the air and then throw it down into the hole created in its wake. The next wave would then crash onto the raft; but we would soldier on, responding to Rana's command and drawing sharp involuntary gasps, as the water made inroads into hitherto dry areas.

Other rapids that followed were 'Give Me Mori', 'Horns of the Tons' and 'The Long Horn'. The last was another rough one, with half the raft disappearing into the water. When Rana deposited us on the bank near the camp, I was blue, thrilled and exhilarated; but most of all—blue. The water was just too cold.



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◀Left:

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They lived to tell the tale

That evening, Rana and his merry band of river runners got a roaring bonfire going, around which we sat and recounted our day’s heroics. Rana gallantly managed to keep a straight face but, sometimes, when we really stretched the truth about how we’d tamed a particular rapid, he’d give an involuntary chuckle, knowing who really tamed whom.

Narrating yarns around the bonfire was the perfect end to an exciting day. The conversation ranged from rapids to rum to constellations in the heavens above.

The next morning, the river level was higher, the rapids fiercer and by the time we staggered into camp, we were so battle weary that the culinary chief at the big cooking pot quickened the pace of his stirring, terrified that we may collapse from weakness.

I would have liked to spend some more time in Mori, but work beckoned and soon we were driving back to Delhi.

But fighting fierce rapids together forges friendships and sometimes I meet my fellow paddlers in cyberspace and we raise a virtual toast to the Tons, which afforded us such a wet and wild weekend.

Whereabouts

How to go:

Mori is around 420 km from Delhi. Jet Lite and Jet Airways both have daily flights to New Delhi from major cities across the country. One can hire a car from Delhi itself. It is advisable to break journey at Dehradun or Mussourie. Else, take a train to Dehradun and, then hire a cab to get to Mori. It’s 6 hours from Dehradun.

Where to stay:

Aqua Terra runs the camps at Mori on the Tons River as well as Rishikesh on the Ganges River. The accommodation is in twin-bedded tents, with camp beds and comfortable quilts. There are no attached bathrooms and the dry toilet tents are at a discreet distance from the rest of the tents.

For bookings, contact:

Aquaterra Adventures (I) Pvt. Ltd.,
S-507, Ground Floor, Greater Kailash - II,
New Delhi - 110048
Ph: 011 -29212760/2641, 09811103831

Keep in mind:

Carry a pair of shorts for rafting and take your camera along at your own risk.

For more information:

www.ua.nic.in