

The Lhasa (Kyi Chi) River and the Renqingding Gorge of the Yarlung Tsangpo Rivers in Tibet

Pete Winn, June, 2002
Photos by Steve Swann



Summary

Dates: June 10 - 12, 2002 (3 full river days)

Nearest major airport: Lhasa, Tibet

Round trip driving time: 1 day

Put-in: near Poindo, elevation 13,233', flow about 5,000 cfs

Take-out: 10 miles SW of Zazoi (Zhigung), elevation 12,513', flow about 7,000 cfs

Total distance: about 45 miles (15 miles per day)

Average gradient: 16 feet/mile

Participants: 9 total using two 16' catarafts, two hardshell kayaks and one inflatable kayak

Grade: Class 2.5



Liu Lee, Steve and Tawni Swann, Pete Winn, Chong Dak, Leslie Goodrum,

Scott Sanderson, Travis Winn and Collin Poczatec at the putin.

Participants included Steve and Tawni Swann from Meridian ID, Scott Sanderson from Oaklyn NJ, Leslie Goodrum from Phoenix, AZ, Collin Poczatek from Boulder CO, Travis Winn from Grand Junction, CO, Liu Li from Chengdu, Sichuan, China and Chong Dak from Lhasa. Steve and I rowed the two cats, Travis and Collin kayaked, Scott and Leslie paddled an inflatable kayak, and Tawni, Li and Chong Dak helped Steve and I row the cats.

This was the first trip to Tibet for Steve, Tawni, Leslie and Collin. Steve and Tawni's son, Ryon, was the youngest member our expedition on the Yongbao Gorge of the Mekong in Yunnan in 1995. The trip was a high school graduation present - pretty gutsy parents. Steve's father, Gordon Swann, was an alternate astronaut and helped plan the first moon landing. As chief of the US Geological Survey office in Flagstaff, he was one of the first geologists to examine rocks from the moon. Scott, a film maker, photographer, writer and computer expert, joined our 1999 expedition to the Mekong headwaters, a wild trip worth reading about. Collin, a student at the University of Chicago, had studied the Tibetan language. Leslie, an occupational therapist, had been on a Grand Canyon trip in 2001 with a group of physically challenged kids and fallen in love with rafting. Travis and Li were on the 2000 Salween Headwaters Expedition, and it was the first river trip for Chong Dak, our Tibetan-English interpreter.

Why the Lhasa River?

In 2000, we ran the headwaters of the Salween River, crossing the Lhasa River on our way to north eastern Tibet. The Lhasa, a major tributary to the Yarlung Tsangpo (which becomes the Brahmaputra in India) disappeared into an enticing canyon, and this image stuck in my mind as we began plans for our 2002 expeditions. After our Salween expedition, it occurred to me that if I could find a river closer to Lhasa that could be safely run at most water levels, it might be possible to train Tibetans to run their own river trips in conjunction with a trek to one of the

famous monasteries in the area. The upper Lhasa had this potential.



In terms of whitewater, it's not difficult, but the spectacular canyon it passes through has a wide bottom filled with glacial gravels, so the river continuously braids through shifting gravel bars and requires a surprising amount of water reading experience to run. Many times we would need to stand high on the raft rowing seat and have a quick discussion about which channel to take. Fortunately, we made it through without having to drag the rafts, though we scraped bottom many times.

The other drawback, though not a serious one, is that there is a graded dirt road along river left, usually so far from the river bank that the sparse traffic, maybe two or three vehicles a day, was not noticeable. However, the result is a relatively high population density on that side of the river, so we camped on river right to avoid being inundated with visitors.



Chong Dak and Scott Sanderson

Getting to know Chong Dak was one of the highlights of the trip. He had been taking English speaking tourists on bus, land cruiser and trekking tours for seven years and had a lot of really funny experiences to relate. His English was so good that all of us thought he could get a job in the US as a one man stand up comedian. He's a natural oarsman and could easily become a river guide.

One of his favorite stories is about the first motor vehicle seen by Tibetans. A truck got stuck in a pasture one evening and made a lot of noise. The Tibetans thought it was an angry giant yak and avoided it. For hours it made a big racket, rocking back and forth and belching smoke. Two jeeps arrived during the night, and in the morning the Tibetans concluded the giant yak had been making so much noise because it was painful to give birth to twins.

In the April 2002 issue of National Geographic Magazine (page 2), Lewis Simons confirms my experiences in Tibet regarding Chinese control. The Tibetans are very resourceful, and most are adapting to the rapid changes brought by Chinese immigrants and investment. Chong Dak is a good example of this. The only part of Simons' story that is untenable is the implication that the Buddhist monks have the same problems the media has recently portrayed Catholic priests as having: a tendency to sexually abuse their patrons. Tibetan culture has almost no sexuality to it. Women wear full length dresses and the few advertisements seen in the streets of Lhasa that portray women looking sexy in short skirts with makeup are strictly Chinese (and many of the models are Caucasian). To Chong Dak, sex is for babies, and families rarely have more than three children. He only has two kids.

There are several monasteries along the road, but we decided they had probably been visited by foreigners so we looked for one on river right. We stopped at the Rapten Nunnery, but the nuns were out working in a far away field and so we were unable to visit. The last night, it rained quite hard and was still cool and rainy when we began floating - so much so that when we passed a large monastery on a spectacular ridge across from the confluence with the Drigung River, no one wanted to stop - we just wanted to get to the take-out.

After the confluence, the flow increased by nearly 50% and river entered a shallow (100' deep) canyon in bedrock - no more gravel bars. We ran several rapids with 3' waves, straight shots that Tibetans could easily learn to run, but the stretch is so short it would be difficult to commercialize even though it's only a two hour drive from Lhasa and a half hour drive from Medro Gonkar, the location of Katsel, one of the famous monasteries often visited by tour groups. The river then enters another braided stretch, which extends all the way to the confluence with the Yarlung Tsangpo.

On the second day we had the opportunity to row a ferry boat made of yak skin and tree limbs. The ferryman claimed he could take as many as ten people on the boat, which was maybe eight feet long. Small people, maybe.



Steve and Tawni Swann in a corca. White cloth is a prayer scarf – Tibetans

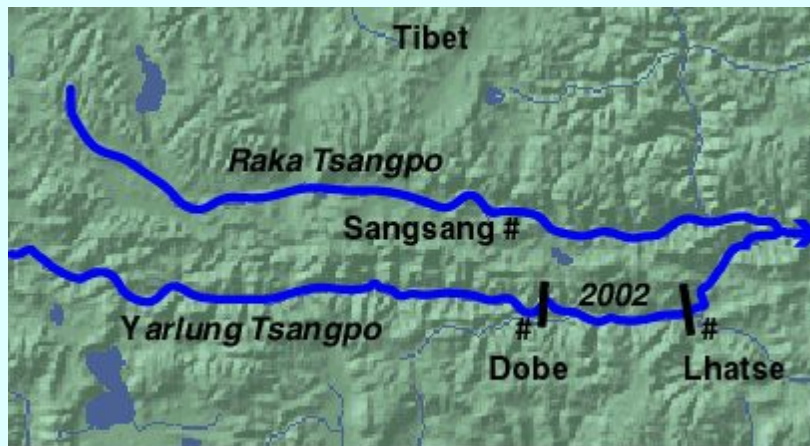
rarely know how to swim. Photo by Pete Winn (with Steve's camera).

We passed under a couple of foot bridges with goat carcasses in all stages of decay hanging from them - a weird sight. Chong Dak explained that they were placed there as sacrifices by people who still practiced Bon, the animist religion that predominated before most Tibetans converted to Buddhism. Buddhism was first brought to Tibet in the 8th century AD but didn't become the official state religion until the 16th century. Even today Tibetan Buddhism incorporates some Bon concepts.

One of the challenges of running rivers in Tibet is the elevation, and it's a good idea to start on easy water such as the Lhasa River. Even taking Diamox (acetazolamide), which accelerates acclimatization, it takes a week or so to get used to rowing a raft or kayaking. Ginkgo Biloba is being tested as natural alternative, but doesn't work for everyone. The group adapted to the elevation quite well, though it was nice to have enough time to relax the morning and to get to camp early early because the river flowed so fast.

The other adaptation everyone has to make is to restaurant food. Chinese share their meals, so every one gets the same food borne bacteria, and our group was no exception. Most folks adjusted after a few days, but we brought several varieties of "corks," including Tylenol with codeine (T-3) to reduce dehydration problems and Cipro for those whose systems didn't adjust.

The Renqingding Gorge of the Yarlung Tsangpo River



Summary:

Dates: June 17- 21, 2002 (4 river days plus one layover day)

Nearest major airport: Lhasa, Tibet

Round trip driving time: 5 days (could be reduced to 4)

Put-in: near Dobe, elevation 13,550', flow about 5,000 cfs

Take-out: near Lhatze (not Lhasa), elevation 13,170', flow about 5,000 cfs

Total distance: about 55 miles (14 miles per day)

Average gradient: 7 feet/mile

Participants: 9 total using two 16' catarafts, two hardshell kayaks and one inflatable kayak

Grade: Class 2.5

We had originally planned to raft the Raka Tsangpo, a major tributary to the Yarlung Tsangpo about 300 miles west of Lhasa (see map above). However, as we drove west out of Lhasa, most drainages were nearly dry. When we arrived at the put-in for the Raka Tsangpo, it was clearly too low to run - maybe 300 cfs, flowing through shallow gravel bar riffles. Further downstream, there were sections with gradients as high as 50 ft/mile, and the resulting higher velocities would make the river even shallower.

We camped at the put-in and discussed our options. Li had arranged the logistics for our expedition, getting visas and permits and air tickets for travel to and from Lhasa. He thought there was a good chance we could change our permits by phone and instead raft the Renqingding Gorge of the Yarlung Tsangpo, a half day's drive to the south. We had crossed the river near Lhatze and it looked like it was running about 5,000 cfs, more than sufficient for the catarafts.



Pass between Raka and Yarlung rivers.

The next morning in Sang Sang we called Chong Dak's boss in Lhasa (he's a friend of Li's), and made arrangements to float the Yarlung Tsangpo from Dobe to Lhatze. It took us about half the day to drive to Kaika, near Nagring, then up over a 16,000 ft pass and down a precipitous road to the Yarlung Tsangpo. It was scary enough in the Land Cruisers, but Travis, riding with Chong Dak in the truck, could reach out and touch the cliff, knowing the driver's spit was falling several hundred feet before landing in the creek. This road is definitely impassable during the July - September monsoon season.



Stupa

At Dobe, we walked up to a one room monastery, but the monk was working in the fields. The topography was strange - the monastery was built on lake bed sediments perched on river gravels that were over 100 feet above the current river level. Over the course of the next 5 days, this terrace became as high 300 feet above the river and in places was several miles long and a half mile wide, large enough for a village with extensive fields of barley. Most likely it was deposited by the river at the end of the last ice age, 10,000 years ago, and since then the river has been eroding the gravels to reach its old bed.

From the vehicle bridge over the river between Kaika and Dobe, there are roads going upstream on both sides of the river. We crossed the river and went to Dobe to look for a put-in, but on river left (the north side), the road goes about 25 km to one of the largest stupas in Tibet. Foreigners rarely visit this stupa - it would make a nice side trip. However, it would be best to put-in where we did, about 86 52 E longitude, because above Dobe there is a long stretch of really nasty braided river.

We knew we weren't making first descent of Renqingding Gorge, but because we hadn't planned to run it we didn't have any maps. It was evident from the road maps that Dobe was about the same longitude as Sang Sang, the put-in for the Raka Tsangpo, and the two take-out towns were also at about the same longitude. Both rivers flow nearly due east, and since we'd planned a 5 day trip on the Raka Tsangpo, we figured it would be no problem to run the Renqingding Gorge in 5 days. Fortunately, we had an extra day in the schedule to accommodate the extra day driving from Sang Sang to Dobe. However, without maps, the only way to judge distance (besides floating time and estimated speed) was to pick camps about every 10 to 12 minutes of longitude (about a mile per minute) using our GPS unit. The river flow was consistently fast enough and we were able to scout rapids on the fly, so it was easy to float about 15 miles a day and enjoy a layover day.

I manage a website on the history of first descents in China, and had listed Arlene Burns as

having kayaked the river from its source east of Lake Manasarova to Lhatze, where she left because she was sick. Her kayaking partner had continued to the confluence with the Lhasa River. In 1999, Li ran the upper Yangtze in Qinghai with a group of Chinese students from Chengdu, some of whom had been on the first Chinese descent of the Yarlung Tsangpo in 1998. They had portaged Kanglai (Gantuo) Gorge, 10 miles of Class 6 about 30 miles upstream from Dobe. The Kanglai villagers told the Chinese rafting team that two kayakers in the mid 1980's had also left the river here, so it may be that the Chinese completed the first descent below Kanglai Gorge. Arlene believes they inflated the difficulty - it's really only Class 3 and they just didn't have the skills for it. Some day I'll resolve the discrepancy, but for now I've listed Arlene as having completed a first descent above Kanglai Gorge and the Chinese as having completed the first descent below it. See the link to First Descents in Tibet at the end of this journal for details. Villagers told us a British rafting team had floated Renqingding Gorge in 2000 or 2001, but they didn't know where they put-in. If you know how to contact this team, please let me know. They may have seen or boated Kanglai Gorge.

The Yarlung Tsangpo flows through broad valleys for most of its length, with the exception of a few short gorges like Renqingding. It's most famous for cutting the deepest gorge on earth through the Great Bend, where the river is at an elevation of about 9,000 feet and surrounding mountains are three miles higher. In 1998 kayaker Doug Gordon drowned while attempting to run this gorge at 40,000 cfs, and a team of kayakers ran the upper portion of it in the winter of 2002 at about 10,000 cfs before having to hike out upon reaching the 200 foot high Hidden Falls (only 17 miles further than the 1998 team went after Gordon drowned). After scouting the lower canyon below the confluence with the Po Tsangpo (where the highest gradient stretch ends, near the north end of the Great Bend), the 2002 team decided it was probably not safe to run. See the April 2002 issue of Outdoor Magazine and the links at the end of this journal for details and some incredible photos.



Note the river fill.

In contrast, Renqingding Gorge in June is a warm, easy, fun run, perfect for inflatable kayaks. It has great beaches for camping, friendly villagers and some beautiful scenery. The highlight of the trip for Chong Dak was paddling the inflatable kayak with Scott through some of the bigger riffles - one with a foamy 3 foot wave that drenched both of them. The biggest hazard was razor sharp blades of schist exposed in some of the shallower channels - boat shredders for sure.

The highlight of this trip for the group was a hike to Tashi Monastery, about 14,500'. The thousand foot climb from the river was a challenge, but we forgot this when we crested the ridge. We were treated to an incredible view of Gongar Putin (Son of Snowy Mountain), a 20,700' peak with a large glacier draining into the deep gorge below the monastery.



Photo by Travis Winn.

The only monk, Gongar Tashi, shared yak butter tea and lunch with us and chanted a prayer, really a special time for everyone. We were his first non-local visitors - the two or three kayak/raft groups before us hadn't stopped.



Woman weaving.

We visited a nearby village, watched them weave and learned a little about their lifestyle. The kids hike two days to a boarding school in Kaika for two months of the year. They came to visit us in camp that evening. We gave them rides on the rafts in the eddy, which was taking a big risk for them. They don't know how to swim and are terrified of the river, which to them is a graveyard. However, they loved to watch Travis and Collin do Eskimo rolls and other kayak tricks, and we convinced some of them to play a tug of war game, one against one, balancing on ammo boxes. The first person to pull the other off the box or pull the rope out of the other hand won. Some of them beat us at this game, which requires some strategy and quick reflexes in addition to good balance.



Gonga Tashi (yellow shirt) and Tibetan farmers cheer while their friends play ammo box tug-of-war using a raft bowline. Photo by Scott Sanderson.

The village had nine families, with 7 to 12 people per family (grandparents, parents, kids). The average family had 120 goats or sheep. Due to the sparse vegetation, they had few yaks. During the dry season (while we were there), it was evident that the canyon slopes were seriously overgrazed, and we saw mud slides resulting from this. Villages were built on the river gravel terrace a couple of hundred feet above the river near perennial creeks. The creeks were diverted to irrigate barley fields surrounding the village. At one creek we saw three water mills for making barley flour, but most of the tools they use are human or animal powered.

Other than road access near Dobe, we really didn't see much evidence of modern civilization. People lived here as they had for centuries, and seemed healthy, happy and industrious. They were building new homes and new monasteries, and we even met one fellow who had just returned from a year in Darmsala, India, the headquarters of the Dalai Lama in exile, and spoke a few English words. Not having a passport, he had followed remote trails over the Himalayas. According to Chong Dak, this is pretty risky and if caught you go to jail.

We faced our biggest challenge at the take-out. After derigging everything and setting up camp, Chong Dak, Li and Travis hitched a ride into Lhatze to find the drivers. They planned to return the next morning to load the truck and head for Shigatze. The rest of us planned to wait for sunset to cook dinner, a nice relaxing afternoon. Then the wind began to blow. Not a hurricane, but it sure felt like it in the tents. Everyone had pitched their tents on a grassy patch about 20 feet above the river, but I had pitched mine in the sand. Even with my weight and some big rocks in it to hold it down, my tent was so close to being blown into the river that the others were placing bets on when it would happen. It was such a miserable night that we didn't even try to cook dinner.

Shigatze is the second largest city in Tibet, after Lhasa, but most of this growth is due to a large influx of Chinese during the past 10 years. It is the site of the Tashilunpo Monastery, which has the largest statue of Buddha in Tibet. On our way to the Raka Tsangpo, we had stayed in a nearly new ten story hotel with an incredible view of the monastery, but had been unable to tour it because the Panchen Lama was visiting. He's 16 years old and spends most of his time at a Tibetan monastery in Beijing where he is being trained to take on his duties as the most important lama in Tibet, second only to the Dalai Lama.

On our return, we lucked out - the Panchen Lama had left, and it was the beginning of Summer Lunar Celebration. The roads coming into town and the town itself were full of Tibetans in their holiday clothing. Chong Dak arranged for us to be one of the first tour groups the next morning, so it wasn't too crowded. Most Tibetans, including Chong Dak, are devout Buddhists. He has an unusual ability to translate concepts and history into English in an entertaining fashion.

Tashilunpo was mostly destroyed during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960's and early 1970's (along with much of Chinese and Tibetan cultural heritage), and many of the buildings had only been rebuilt in the past 10 years. On a nearby hillside, we could still see some stone walls of the old monastery, quite a contrast to the newly painted buildings we toured. The Tibetans had preserved many of the religious objects from the old monastery, and had put them into the new buildings - a strange mix of centuries. As we exited the monastery, the monks lowered a huge, brightly colored hand woven silk thangka. How lucky could we get!



This thangka is about 100 feet wide and 65 feet high. It is displayed for a few hours during each major ceremony. Photo by Scott Sanderson.

Between Shigatze and Lhasa, the Yarlung Tsangpo is a braided stream that flows through a broad valley with the exception of a 20 mile long gorge. The upper section has a series of Class 3 rapids that look really fun, but near the end there are several Class 4s and a couple of Class 5s. The Chinese portaged this canyon in 1998, so I don't believe it has been run. From a couple of hundred feet up on the road, we could see possible routes, but I'm sure if you were down at river level you'd be blown away by the size of the hydraulics.

We spent our final day in Lhasa, unloading the truck, cleaning up, buying a few more gifts for friends and family and repacking for the trip home. Before the Lhasa River expedition, Chong Dak had taken us on a tour of the Potala, formerly the headquarters of the Dalai Lama, now a museum, but we didn't have time to visit the Jokhang, one of the largest active monasteries in Tibet. Again we lucked out, and had the opportunity to listen to over 100 monks began their evening chant, surrounded by hundreds of yak butter candles. The intensity of Tibetan devotion to their style of Buddhism is mindboggling.

The next day, Steve, Tawni, Collin, Travis, Li and I departed for Chengdu, Scott departed for Katmandu and a round the world trip, and Leslie stayed another week to join another group on a trek to the Everest Base Camp. It was really hard to say goodbye to Chong Dak, who has a wife and two boys and a life in Lhasa.

The Min and Wulong Rivers

In Chengdu, Steve and Tawni boarded another flight for Beijing and home, but Li had other plans for Travis, Collin and I. As we walked out of the airport, we noticed a TV crew shooting video of the crowd. They seemed to zoom in on us, then we realized they were there because we were. We boarded a bus, including Travis' and Collin's kayaks and the TV crew, and headed out of town. Three hours later we found ourselves driving along the Min River north of Chengdu, a large (15,000 - 20,000 cfs) and very fast river that would be ideal for half day trips for a local river outfitter.

As we discussed this with Li, it became apparent that that's why he brought us here - to give him some feedback on the potential for commercial rafting. Then we turned up a tributary, the Wulong (Sleeping Dragon), and headed up to the Great Panda Reserve. Within minutes we

were gawking at Class IV, V and VI falls - probably 20 miles of it. The Lhasa and Yarlung had been pretty tame for Travis and Collin and Li guessed that a couple of hours boating part of this stretch would make them very happy.

We visited the panda reserve the next morning. There are about 55 of them, another 500 estimated in the wild. They've had some success with their breeding program, but still have a long way to go to preserve the species.



Travis on the Wulong.

On our way back to Chengdu, we stopped to let Travis and Collin kayak the last two Class 5 rapids and a two mile stretch of nearly continuous Class 4. The river was running about 1000 cfs and was surprisingly pushy. The TV crew got great shots of Travis doing rodeo tricks in some of the smaller holes and Collin rolling up in some pretty nasty spots. Li's hoping the video footage will help him and his business, Sichuan Scientific Exploration Association, promote river touring in China.

As we left the Wulong and Min, we thought we were headed back to Chengdu, but Li still had another stop planned. We pulled into a resort with a stack of 12 ft rafts next to a big swimming pool and a large canal with a fast flow (1000 cfs). The resort manager, a friend of Li's, takes his clients down the canal on the rafts, but the run is limited to about 3 miles because of some ledges that make canal wide reversals that are big enough to flip his rafts. The canal is dry twice a year, and he wanted some ideas on how to change the ledges to make them safe for rafting. Then he could more than double the trip length. One of the ledges produced a good rodeo wave, and before long Travis was doing tricks for the TV crew and local residents. It was a great ending to our adventure in Tibet and China.