

# Into the Unknown International team of boaters, including four Big Sky residents completes first descent of remote Salween River in Tibet

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There are those experiences in life that define the people we are and those experiences that change the people we become. For an international team of 16 river explorers, including four Big Sky residents who recently returned from the first descent of a 180-mile stretch of Tibet's Salween River, this was their moment.

Eric Ladd, his wife Brandy Ladd, Brock Disanti and Chris Shelly of Big Sky boarded airline flights out of the U.S. on Aug. 30. Their destination was Lhasa, Tibet, and ultimately the unknown waters of the Salween River.

The Salween, at 2,815 kilometers in length, is one of Southeast Asia's great rivers. Its flows rise from the Tibetan Plateau, surging south into China's Yunnan Province before meandering through Myanmar and Thailand to its mouth at the Andaman Sea.

Aside from shaping the mystical landscape through which it flows, the Salween has shaped a way of life for millions of people who rely on its waters. The Salween watershed is the home of over 7,000 species of plants and 80 species of rare or endangered animals and fish. In 2003, UNESCO recognized the Salween as a World Heritage Site saying the region, "may be the most biologically diverse temperate ecosystem in the world."

The Salween is also a river threatened by the rapid development currently surging like its waters across Southeast Asia. Dams on the Salween, Yangtze and Mekong, could forever alter the flows of these great rivers.

Assembling in Lhasa on Sept. 2, the team gathered gear — rafts, kayaks and food purchased from local markets — in preparation for the trip. On Sept. 4, the team departed — their gear packed into a caravan of Land Cruisers — for a trip into the unknown.

Dirt roads carried them over 17,000-foot mountain passes dotted with prayer flags, alongside Buddhists prostrating on their spiritual pilgrimage to Lhasa, through the Tibetan countryside, and finally to the village of Sadeng and the waters of the Salween.

"Take the Beartooth Pass, drop it to a single-lane road, put potholes in it with dirt and no guard rails and that is what we were driving on," Eric said. "It was definitely a journey and one of the scariest parts of the trip."

On arrival, the Salween was even more impressive than the team had imagined. And the river's flows were alarmingly high.

Expedition leader Travis Winn, 23, whose father, Peter Winn, began exploring the Tibetan Plateau as a geologist in the 1980s, said the flows on the Salween were likely the highest the river had seen in 2 / 2 years. Due to an exceptionally active monsoon season and recent heavy rain, the river, which the team had expected to be running between 15,000-20,000 cubic feet per second, was flowing at a frightening 30,000-40,000 c.f.s.

The decision was made to wait out the high water in Sadeng, hoping river levels would drop dramatically and allow a chance to run the proposed stretch of the Salween. While waiting for the weather to clear, the team was invited to stay in Sadeng with a group of monks at the second-oldest Buddhist monastery in Tibet.

"Being at the monastery seemed like good karma for the whole trip," Winn said Thursday from Eugene, Ore. "It got everyone's head right. It is that positive attitude that makes or breaks a trip." "After four days, the river still hadn't let go," Eric said. We made the decision to drive miles up a tributary called Gyel Qu, which had never been run. We decided to do a two-day trip on the Gyel Qu and when we got back, if the Salween had dropped, we were going to go." The Gyel Qu turned out to be a phenomenal river in its own right, featuring Class III and IV rapids. "It had a road running along it, so there were people riding along the road on motorcycles just terrified for us," Eric said. "We'd pull out in eddies and these little old ladies would come down with staffs and sticks and try to pull us out of the river. They begged to get out and we tried to explain that we were river peo- and they just couldn't understand that." When the team reached the confluence with the Salween, river levels had dropped significantly and the group decided to take a run at the unexplored section downstream.

"At that point the journey really began," Eric said. "We had 180 miles to go and it turned out to be just an enormous river of Grand Canyon plus-plus scale with amazing gorges and 5,000-foot cliff walls. It was a once in a life time journey."

Winn, who has been exploring rivers in China and Tibet for several years — and who started a commercial raft company with a Chinese partner — remained concerned for the safety of the team, but decided the river was runnable.

"Chinese rivers are really alive," Winn said. "From a whitewater perspective, a lot of the rivers along the Tibetan Plateau have a constant gradient that is different from rivers in the West. The river canyons are much younger so everything about the river is a lot more dynamic."

"I was probably more scared on this trip than any other because of the high water," Winn said. "We put in five days late and got out one day early because the water was so high."

Each member of the team dealt differently with the fears and dangers they faced by entering an unknown stretch of a powerful river during a period of high water.

"It was the biggest whitewater I have ever seen," Disanti said. "It was definitely stressful. We had a Tibetan interpreter with us and in every village we went to they would ask him, 'Why are you doing this? This is crazy.'"

"But once you make that decision, you don't have any choice in the matter. It was stressful, but you were so focused and that helped."

"We compared it to the decision to get married," Eric said. "You really don't know what you are in for or what is around the next corner, and you are in it for the long haul. There really is no way out. But the group really pulled together and we just hoped for the best."

The team tackled the largest rapid of the trip on the first day of the Salween float, naming it "Waimea." A complicated wave train with waves cresting to heights of 15 feet, the rapid was an immediate obstacle for the team.

Luckily, the expedition had experienced climbers who were able to rope up and aid passengers across a landslide to the downstream side of "Waimea." The most experienced of the raft guides paddled through the rapid and met up with the rest of the team at the end of the rapid.

Winn and Shelly, who were leading the group in kayaks and relaying information back to the rafts via high-powered radio, were relieved to see the rafts upstream.

"Everyone appeared around the corner right side up," Winn said. "It was the highlight of the trip for me. I slapped my paddle on the water so hard I almost broke it."

For the next several days, the team navigated the remaining stretch of the Salween. They emerged from the 5,000-foot canyon walls, surging whitewater and pristine scenery on Sept. 17, having become the first people to float this stretch of

the Salween River.

Winn, who has a passionate connection with the waters in China and Tibet, said he hopes to elevate awareness of the unbelievable resource Southeast Asia's great rivers possess.

"I don't feel I have the right to say whether they can build dams or not, but from what I have seen in the U.S., I wonder if people can go out and make a connection with the land, find a personal sanctuary," he said. "I think people will recognize that and changes will be made in the ideas here."

"It is a whole different kind of exploration now. It is not about first descents. We have this unique opportunity to go out and learn about these rivers and let people know about these resources. We want to bring Chinese and their American counterparts to these pristine rivers that are going to be dammed, and to get them to think in new ways about water management. "Our hope is that if we do everything right and get lucky, maybe these rivers will remain as they are."