Bigger than the Grand Canyon

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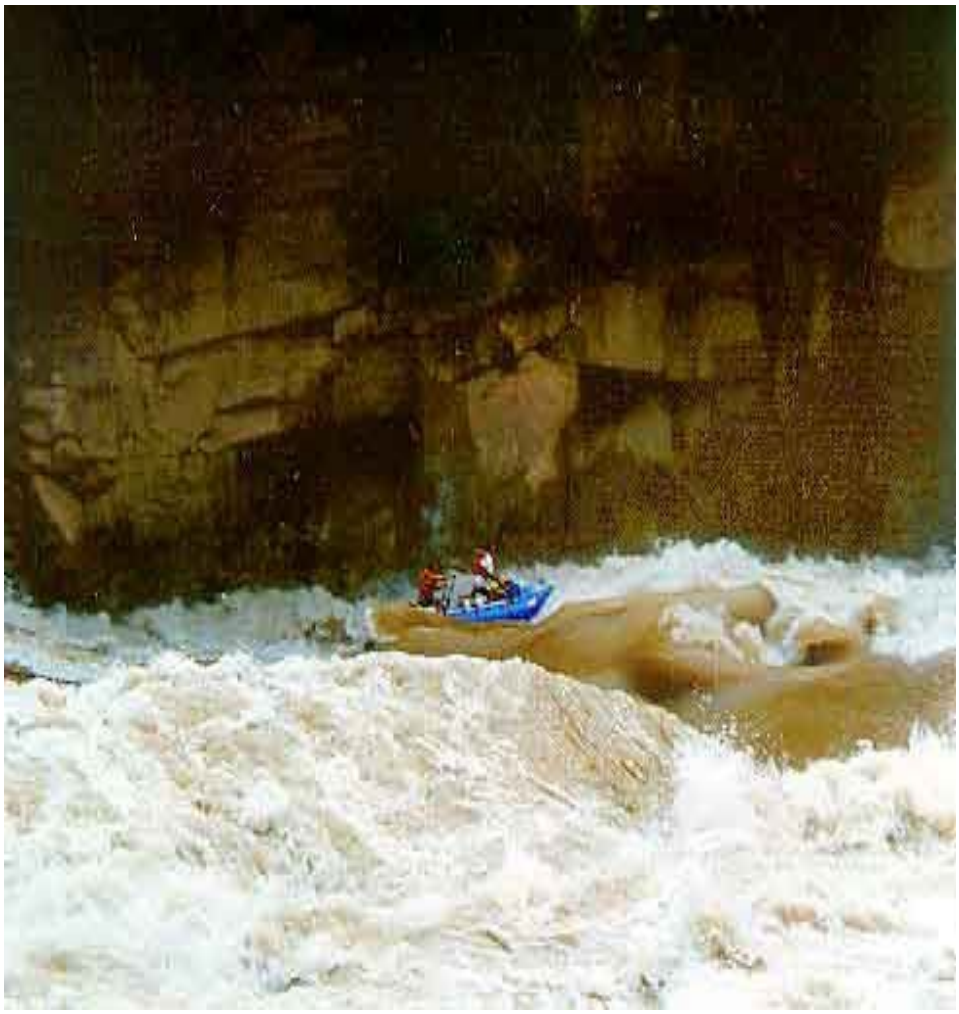

David Hettig and Kym Gentry of Menlo Park descend rapids bigger than those in the Grand Canyon in first descents on the Mekong River in China's rugged west. Photo by Lori Golze.

The river slowed ominously as the group of eight Americans and a Chinese scientist floated toward the gorge where half a mountain had slid into the Mekong River in the wilds of Yunnan Province in western China. "We thought, 'Uh-oh,'" says Menlo Park attorney David Hettig, one of the Americans on the first descent of a 100-mile stretch of the Grand Canyon-scale river that descends 2,500 miles from the Tibetan plateau to the storied delta in Vietnam.

The rafters pulled out to scout the rapid. Uh-oh indeed. "These were the biggest rapids any of us had ever seen. They were like two of the largest Grand Canyon rapids put together -- and then some," Mr. Hettig recalls, adding half jokingly, "We spent the night on the bank above the rapids, and everyone sat down and wrote their wills."

The first to go through the rapids the next morning was Dr. Fred St. Goar, a Menlo Park cardiologist and "superb kayaker." Pictures show a very small dot among frothing waves. "He had the ride of his life," says Mr. Hettig. Mr. Hettig rowed the rapids with Han Chunyo, a paleogeographer from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, as passenger. He describes the next harrowing moments: "I went into the hole, and the oar ripped right out of my hand. I had to get the knife out and cut the spare oar free -- and not stab the raft -- and get the oar into the oarlock, while being bounced by six-foot waves." Another 16-foot raft flipped, and Dr. Robert Rabkin of Sausalito did the rapids under water -- but somehow alive.

They named the rapids "Dragon's Teeth" for the dragon that the locals think lives underground. Sometimes he moves, causing the earthquakes that regularly shake the seismically active area. One such earthquake triggered the landslide that created the rapids.

The pioneering trip down 100 never-rafted miles of the Mekong River was more than just an adventure. It was a geological reconnaissance sponsored by the Chinese Academy of Sciences and led by geologist Peter Winn of the non-profit Earth Science Expeditions to check maps and identify geologic features in remote areas of western China away from roads and trails. The Mekong River, the 11th longest in the world, originates on the Tibetan plateau near the Yangtze. It flows south through 5,000-foot canyons, formed, like wrinkles on a tablecloth, as India relentlessly shoves under Asia to raise the Himalayas and Tibet. Then -- larger, wider and slower -- the river passes through Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam on its way to the South China Sea. This is also earthquake country, where the dragon under the earth is often restless.

Through the gorges of western Yunnan Province, the Mekong River is much like the Colorado through the Grand Canyon, Mr. Hettig says. Over their 200-mile exploration, it drops 9 feet per mile -- slightly less than the Colorado in the Grand Canyon. This drop makes for big rapids, which are graded on the Colorado River scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is basically unrunnable. The trip was also an amazing opportunity for the rafters -- all of whom had Grand Canyon experience -- to see an area of China so remote that many natives didn't even speak Chinese and had never before seen foreign "round eyes."

"Many of the people had never been more than two days' walk from their home," says Mr. Hettig. "They are still plowing with bare feet and wooden plows." Nevertheless, for Mr. Hettig the people, not the thrills and spills, were the high point of his trips. "They are just delightful," he says.

Mr. Hettig has actually been on two trips on the Mekong River. In November 1995, they spent 10 days scouting the 100 miles above the Man Wan Dam, a day-and-a-half bumpy ride west of the provincial capital of Kunming. In April 1997, Mr. Hettig and a somewhat different group spent another 10 days floating and bouncing down the hundred miles downstream from the Man Wan Dam. This dam, completed in 1992, is the first of 10 planned for the Mekong River. On the second trip the flotilla drifted through the construction project for the next dam. Next September Mr. Hettig hopes to join a third exploratory trip, this time to the Litang River, closer to Tibet.

A woman on board Mr. Hettig's second trip featured a new wrinkle -- and not in the land. Kym Gentry, of Menlo Park, brought, not heavy river experience, but knowledge of China and Chinese, fearless energy, and a gift with people. Ms. Gentry has been to China four times and speaks Chinese. A graduate of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, with an MBA in international management, she has worked in Beijing with Hewlett-Packard. She has also traveled the fabled Silk Road alone, riding trains, trucks, buses and planes -- "any way I could. It was great," she says.

Later this summer, Ms. Gentry will leave her high-pressure, high-tech job as sales and marketing director for Creative Network, a small consulting firm based in Palo Alto, for Pakistan. There she will apply her business ability to helping a women's cooperative develop a handicrafts business and personal skills. "I'll help them develop independence and keep their culture alive," she says. "I want to

go into non-governmental international work with women and children."

Mr. Hettig has another life locally that is not involved with his passion for white water. An attorney specializing in wills and trusts, he has been working for years with the YMCA of the Mid-Peninsula on building a new branch in East Palo Alto. He also helped human rights activist Ginetta Sagan of Atherton found the Aurora Foundation to supplement the work of Amnesty International in helping prisoners of conscience around the world.

Mr. Hettig first discovered the urge to challenge big rivers by reading the late Wallace Stegner's "Beyond the 100th Meridian," which chronicles John Wesley Powell's historic first descent of the Grand Canyon. He's been rafting every since. "It's in my blood somehow," he says.

Trip 2

Again the participants in the 1997 expedition -- seven Americans, an Australian professor of ecotourism, and Ma Da from the Chinese Academy of Sciences -- met in Kunming to assemble their commissary and pack for the jolting ride along the old Burma Road past 10,000-foot mountain ranges to the Mekong River. In Kunming they got a view of the new China. Besides supermarkets, Mr. Hettig was impressed with street corner groups of young women, in snappy short skirts and makeup, holding cell phones. "That was the image we have," he says. "The only people in Mao caps and jackets were elderly. Politics was not obvious, but economic activity was thriving." Ms. Gentry adds, "This was the first time in China I could use my credit card."

For Ms. Gentry, the low point of her trip came after the first three days of lots of rain -- with inadequate rain gear -- and no rapids. She was scrambling up a muddy slope and fell and rolled down the hill in the mud. Fortunately she was OK. "If anybody in the group got hurt, it put the whole group at risk," she says.

Her high point for the trip was also the people, especially the children. And at every stop people would come down from their fields and villages to see the strangers. One teacher brought his whole school of 50 children to see the round eyes. Many were minorities and could not even understand Chinese. "In a place like this, it's always the children you talk to. The kids are being taught standard Chinese," Ms. Gentry says.

The people were friendly and curious. And their radius was what they could walk. Ms. Gentry remembers giving a woman a ride across the river. Normally she would have walked 10 hours up stream to a ferry and then walked back on the other side for another 10 hours. "Most of these people had never been more than two days walk from their home," says Mr. Hettig. "They had no idea why we were there or where we came from."

Ms. Gentry adds, "Of most interest to these people was our technology -- other than me." Indeed she must have been a surprise; she's slender, very blonde, and speaks Chinese. The villagers respected the river, but they couldn't swim. "The river is to be feared and respected," says Ms. Gentry. "This is their life. It can give life and it can take it away." Between starlit nights on pristine beaches with fireflies flashing, the rafters plunged through dramatic rapids with names like Red Button, Big Dynasty, Horse and Pig, Chinese Lunch ("after it eats you, it's hungry again"), Ganbai (a Chinese toast meaning bottoms up), and No Exit. No Exit earned its name. It flipped one boat and scared off a couple of the men who had families. "It was by far the worst rapid any of us had ever seen -- basically unrunnable. On a scale of 10, it was an 11," Mr. Hettig says. "It has five big waves 15 feet high; any one would flip a raft. Waves were exploding into spray 20 feet in the air."

While several team members portaged around the rapid, Mr. Hettig let his raft go downstream unloaded on a line, but that took so long, he finally ran the last half of the rapid alone, without load and without passengers -- and managed to avoid, just barely, the big "keeper hole" waiting to trap and keep him. That was the only time on the trip Ms. Gentry was afraid. "When I saw David trying to get that raft out of the eddy, then I was afraid for him," she says.

Between the rapids and camps, some of the scientists recorded geologic features and tried to take measurements with their Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment that precisely records locations by checking with a satellite. The idea was to check and correct older maps, many of which were inaccurate. The only trouble was they had trouble with the GPS. "The canyons were too deep to get good readings," says Mr. Hettig. The miracle was that during the two trips over surging mountains of water in deep, remote canyons, no one was hurt. That's a tribute to teamwork, Mr. Hettig says. "It has to be a team working through problems. It has to be a team where everybody looks out for each other and for themselves."