

First Descent of the Salween Headwaters, Biru to Sadeng

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Most photos by Drew Kirk



The upper Salween is from Biru to Sadeng on this map. We tookout in 2000.
Travis ran the next 200 miles in September.

The Salween is the last major river draining the Tibetan Plateau which has not yet been fully explored. It flows from just north of Nagqu (elevation 15,000'). Tibet to the Andaman sea near Rangoon, Myanmar, a distance of about 1600 miles. Over half of this distance is in China. Two British explorers attempted to find the source of the Salween in the 1930's but were unable to travel past Biru (elevation 13,000') due to a war between monks in Biru and Nagqu. Nagqu is named after the river (in English, the Black River because it flows through a black rock canyon in Tibet). Biru, located about 200 miles downstream, is the birthplace of the Panchen Lama (the one picked by the Chinese and generally not recognized by Tibetans who had picked another reincarnation). It is also the birthplace of a former mayor of Lhasa.

Steve Currey first attempted to explore the headwaters by raft in 1995, but had to cancel his expedition due to filling of the reservoir behind the newly completed Chalong Dam, which was built to provide electricity for Nagqu. In 2000, Earth Science Expeditions completed a first descent from about 50 miles downstream from near Nagqu to Biru, but didn't return to explore the next 90 miles stretch, from the dam at Biru to Sadeng, until June 2007.



The whole team including drivers and a few monks.

This team consisted of Pete Winn and Travis Winn, co-leaders, Pete's wife Cindy Appel and daughter Carmen, Sarge Preston and his son James, Drew Kirk, Scott Sanderson, Ralf Buckley, Chong Dak and Na Ming Hui. Pete, Chong Dak (our Tibetan partner) and Na Ming Hui (Travis' Chinese partner) took turns rowing one of the three 16' catarafts, Cindy and Carmen shared one and Sarge rowed the third one. Travis, Drew, James and Ralf kayaked. Scott started off paddling an inflatable kayak but eventually decided to ride on one of the rafts. Pete, Travis, Carmen, Chong Dak, Na Ming Hui, Scott & Ralf had run many river expeditions in western China, but it was the first trip for the others.

The foreign team members assembled in Chengdu, Sichuan, traveled to Lhasa (elevation 12,000') where they met Chong Dak and Na Ming Hui, then bought food and packed the truck there. In 2000, the road to Nagqu was under construction so this team had taken an alternate route that took 12 hours. In 2007, they took the new paved road to Nagqu, which cut the driving time in half. The road east from Lhasa was still not paved, but there was a new paved road several hours to the west that went north to Nagqu then east and south to Biru, due to its recognition as the birthplace of the Panchen Lama and former mayor of Lhasa. The new road followed about 60 miles of the river north and west of Nagqu, through a region that had been wilderness in 2000.

Biru was a sleepy little town in 2000. In 2007, it was under major construction. It had also been overtaken by dogs and motorcycles. Tibetans have a hard time controlling the dog population, and demand for a caterpillar larvae by Asians has provided a large new source of income for the burgeoning population, allowing them to purchase motorcycles for use on old yak trails.

For years, ESE has used Russian 1:200,000 scale topos available in the US to determine average gradients, total distance, progress while floating to make sure the team reaches the take-out on time, and for marking the location of campsites, rapids, villages, monasteries, riverside trails, bridges, etc. In 2006, satellite photo coverage became available via Google

Earth, allowing visual scouting. However, the resolution is not always precise enough, and there are some errors in elevation. Also, some images were taken in the winter when some stretches of the river were frozen, or they were taken when the sun was low and deeper canyons are in shadow.



Old bridge in winter picture.

These limitations applied to the Salween below Biru. It was originally assumed that ice meant slow water - i.e. ice would not cover the river in rapids. However, the team found that ice could back up and bridge between exposed rocks in rapids, so scouting via winter satellite images is risky.

The ESE team had heard about the dam downstream from Biru in 2000 but didn't visit it until June 2007. They found a great gravel bar for a put-in about 1/2 mile below the dam and floated a few miles to a camp across from the road, which left the river a few miles downstream. The flow was about 5000 cfs and the river was clear and 60F.

The first day and half was relatively easy floating. Rapids became more frequent and challenging the next day and half. The third afternoon team stopped at a potential camp after the river entered a deep narrow canyon with a large landslide on river left and sent Travis and Ralf down to scout. It was a good decision - there was a Class 5 rapid at the slide and it was too late in the day to run it. The camp was tight and marginal but they had no choice.



Bone camp.

Tibetans have three main forms of burial - sky burial, where the deceased are cut up and fed to vultures (usually for monks), fire burial (for wealthy people), and river burial (for most people). In the latter case the deceased are placed in cloth bags full of sand. The eddy below the third camp had trapped a number of river burial bodies and the rocks were strewn with bones. Combined with the black, deep narrow canyon, a rain shower and the landslide with a Class 5 rapid, it made the campsite seem very ominous.

The next morning the team scouted the rapid and decided to walk the raft passengers around. It was spooky - the landslide was active, with small rocks falling periodically. Drew portaged his kayak as a safety boat for Travis, who then paddled Ralf's kayak through so there would be at least two safety kayaks for the rafts. Travis and Pete then rowed the rafts through without incident. After picking up Sarge and the passengers, they crossed the river to scout the next set of rapids - two Class 4's in a row. Again, most of the passengers walked these.



Into The OM, by Scott Sanderson

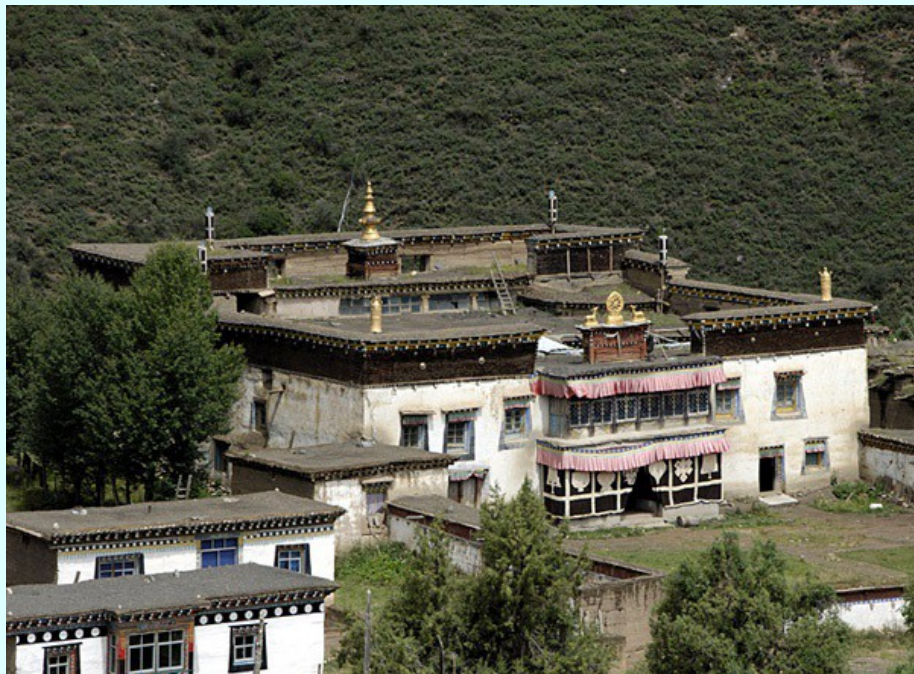
There was a small monastery on a break in the slope 500' above the river that overlooked the rapids with a trail to a bridge below the canyon. The monks saw the rafts land to scout and hiked down to watch. They even helped Cindy climb around the huge boulders strewn along the bank. It's easy to believe their presence helped the team pass through the gorge safely. The team called it "Om Gorge" and called the last major rapid in the canyon "Into the Om". Travis was the only one to kayak it; then he hiked back up and rowed Cindy and Carmen's raft through. It was a boiling 12' wide chute that made a C turn around a huge boulder on the right and into a dark shadow under a high overhanging cliff on the left. Om Gorge was marginally runnable at 5,000 cfs, and probably not runnable at much higher or lower flows.

The foot bridge to the monastery was full of monks, waving and yelling "Tashi Delay" (hello). Just as the gorge ended, a large tributary, the Soxian or Mercury River, joined the mainstream, nearly doubling the flow. From there on downstream, to Sadeng, a distance of about 60 miles, the team only encountered Class 2 or easy Class 3 rapids, mostly just fun wave trains that Sarge or James, Cindy or Carmen, and Chong Dak or Na Ming Hui rowed. Most of the camps were beautiful, large sandy beaches.



Cindy with Tibetan family.

A Tibetan family visited camp one morning, and another camp was near a village with a monastery. Dozens of villagers visited the camp, including the local police chief, who asked to see the permit. Chong Dak had obtained permits for Biru and Bemba counties (the put-in and take-out counties), but didn't realize that the river also passed through Sok county. The situation was bit tense at first, but Chong Dak resolved it by agreeing that the team would float out of the county the next day. As a result, it was not able to stop and visit the monastery at the village nor another one they passed the next afternoon.



Sadeng Monastery

Visits to remote monasteries are a highlight of exploratory river expeditions, so it was disappointing to pass these by. Fortunately, there was one near their take-out at Sadeng. Originally the team had planned to go another 40 miles to a large tributary that passed through Bemba (Palbar). This town had road access, but was about 6 miles from the river, so they were planning to hire villagers with yaks, donkeys or ponies to haul the river gear to the town. Due to the slow progress in Om Gorge, they decided to cut the distance and take-out at Sadeng, where the road to Bemba reached the river. The team learned later that the trail to Bemba was several hundred feet above the river and it wasn't really feasible to take-out there, so taking out at Sadeng was a good decision.

With few exceptions, it is safer to raft or kayak a river than it is to drive to or from it, particularly in remote parts of western China. The road from Sadeng to Biru was no exception. The drive up the Gyel Chu, the large tributary to the Salween at Sadeng, was fairly gradual, but the drive from the 16,700' pass down to Biru was terrifying. The one lane dirt road dropped nearly 3000' in three miles - a 20% grade - and the three land cruisers and the river equipment truck met a large truck coming up the pass at a point where it was nearly impossible to get by safely.



More terrifying than the river!

Om Gorge and this pass make it difficult to justify a rerun of this section. It might be possible to run the Sok river down to the Salween, a distance of about 40 miles, to avoid Om Gorge, but running past Sadeng to avoid the switchbacks to Biru adds another 180 miles to the 90 from Sok to Sadeng, and 270 miles makes for a very long trip, even with proper permits for Sok county. However, the stretch from Sadeng to the bridge at Marri was run in September 2007 by Travis and another group, and it only has one Class 5 rapid. The river is fast enough that it might be possible to float the entire stretch in 12-15 days. If so, this would be a great trip. You'd fly from Chengdu to Lhasa, drive two days from Lhasa to Sok and one and a half days from Marri to Qamdo, then fly back to Chengdu.



Family picnic.

After returning to Lhasa, the team ran a day trip on the Tulong river, an ice cold, fast flowing tributary to the Kyi Chu (Lhasa River). The purpose was to give Chong Dak and Na Ming Hui some practice rowing a more technical river than the Salween. They both did really well. The next day the team invited Chong Dak's wife Dawa and their two teenage sons and the drivers and their families on a one day raft trip on the Kyi Chu a couple of hours drive upstream from Lhasa. They let Chong Dak and Na Ming Hui row the fast Class 2 stretch, and CD and NMH let CD's boys and one of the driver's two teenage daughters row the rafts or paddle Scott's inflatable kayak. After the river trip, Chong Dak's and the driver's families treated everyone to a fabulous traditional Tibetan picnic.