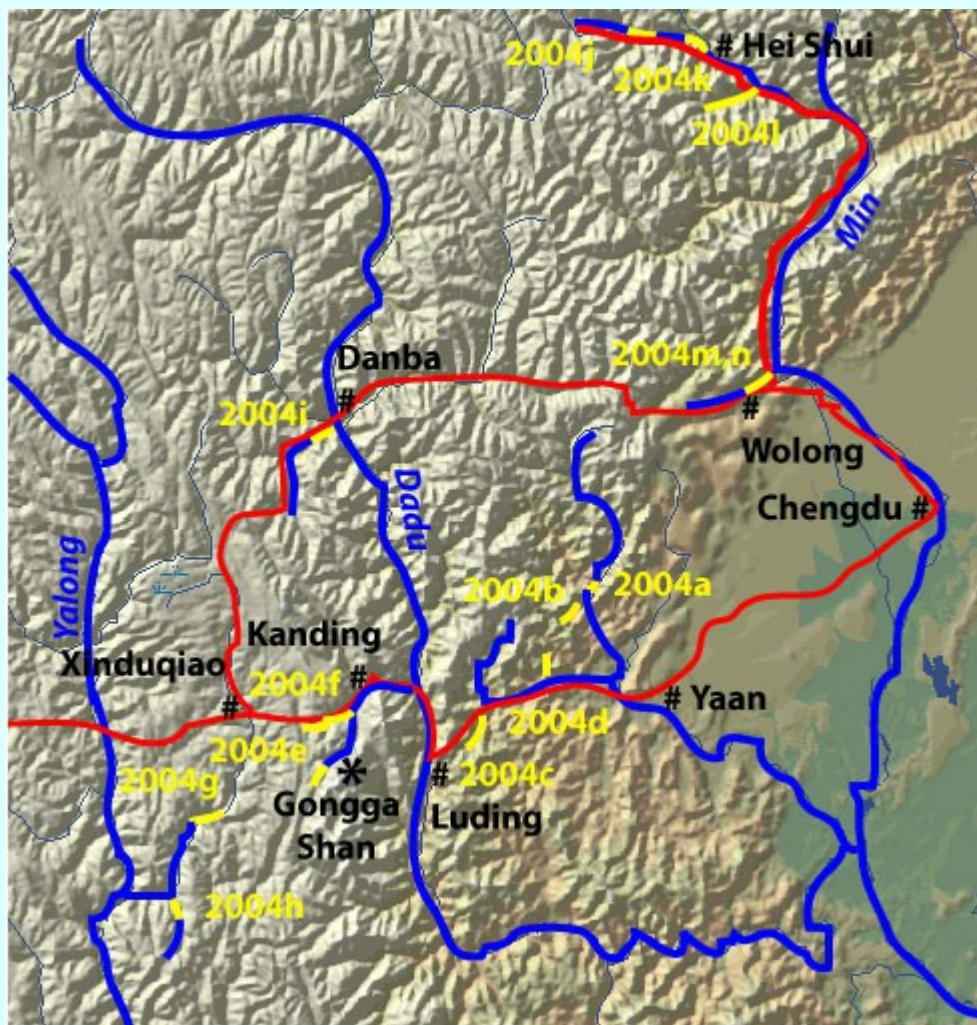


Wild Boating on Tributaries to the Yangtze River in Sichuan, China

Internet posts on Mountain Buzz by Roy Hovland



So, I'm posting from an internet cafe next to Tiannamen Square in Beijing. Just landed and met Tony from Germany. We had to find an internet cafe to figure out some logistical stuff, and I thought I'd start a thread to post updates on this trip as we go...

We're meeting two more paddlers in Chengdu tomorrow and paddling in Sichuan and Tibet for a few weeks. Travis Winn of Grand Junction set up the trip. No paddling yet, but I can say that United is a kayak friendly airline, as they got my boat loaded with gear here for \$80.

The beer's cold, the Square's big and the browser's incomprehensible! The adventure starts tomorrow, so more to come, provided I can find a computer out in the sticks...

OK, so first time back on the net since Beijing. Posting from Tianquan...

Everybody met up in Chengdu as planned and we're off and running. Everybody consists of:

Travis Winn from the Junction, who's the main hookup as he's studying Chinese over here on leave from the U of Oregon, Anton (Tony) Griessbach of Germany, Dan Muskie of Minnesota and myself, Roy Hovland from Denver paddling. Also, Feng Chun, who doesn't speak a word of English, but is apparently a local legend around here for rafting (ran the Grand in July w/

Travis) and Chen Hao, who is thankfully bilingual--sales rep for river gear and interested in river-eco tourism. And off we went in a stylin bus loaded w/ boats and gear!

Day 1

First, you must learn humility, grasshopper! We started off with the 3rd decent of a silty, glaciated and thoroughly stompin' big water class V--the Ching i jiong--a silty . Travis has been on all 3 descents, and Dan on one, but it was a LOT higher this time! Tony (wisely) opted out. We drew a lot of attention by showing up and had a good crowd at the put in. Not long after the put in, I got my ass handed to me in a ricebowl. Shoulda clued in when the first hole in the "warm up" section flipped me. When we got to the first of the main rapids, the side of the first hole caught me, pulled me back, gave me a good thumping and spit me out. Rolled up, off line and just in time to see that I was heading straight into the next. Rinse and repeat. One more time. The fourth beating was too much and I swam out. An ugly swim, with more water than air, visions of flush drowning and one episode of darkness. Made it to shore before the next major one and Travis somehow managed to corral my boat, but the paddle was history. Enough for me--I took the Embudo and started scrambling along the steep hillside back up to the footbridge at the put in to cross the foot bridge. Along the way a lady on the trail gave me a lecture in Chinese for quite a while as I stood there catching my breath from the climb. I think it was something along the lines of "what the hell did you think you were doing, anyway?!?".



Photo by Tony Griessbach.

Travis and Dan decided to go on as a duo. I didn't see what happened to Dan, but he sounded like he saw God during his swim that happened immediately after I got out. When I got back to the road (about 200 ft over the rio, from which these monster rapids looked "manageable") and downstream to them Dan was clinging to the downstream side of a boulder and Tony was getting a rope to him. He got out safe, but neither the boat or paddle did. Travis headed up the same route I had taken earlier.

When Dan gets up the hill, the two of us take off downriver in the bus looking for gear. Below the entire run, we see a crowd gathered by a 20 foot tall catch all wier and there's Feng Chun with some locals and a grappling hook pulling out Dan's Micro, as well as his video camera dry

bag, which had been torn loose from him during his swim. Paddles are history, but we're still good to go with the boats and spare paddles.

Day 2

No luck searching the reservoir further down for the paddles in the morning, so we head back up the same drainage to scout a steep little tributary that looked good the day before. Da Yuxi creek is a crystal clear blue water with a class 4 intro for a few miles and a nice V- quarter mile finale with several sweet drops in in. Looks like a good place to get our mojo back. Not to mention that this is a first and likely last descent, since they're already starting construction on a dam at the base. (toooo many damn dams going in all over the place here!) After the scout, we head up to the next village--Baoxing--to hire a shuttle rig to take us up the road that our bus won't make and to grab some lunch. We hire a little dump truck to haul our boats up the creek and a cameraman from the local TV station tagged along. He had been looking for us, since the whole valley had heard of our incident the previous day by now and he figured those wacky westerners would probably come back for more. The run went off without a hitch and judging by our own footage and the response of the gathered crowd. In the post-run interview, we tried to explain what they will be missing if they keep building these dams, but who knows if that will air. I can't tell you which channel you can pick that up on either, cuz I don't know. Feeling much better, we head back to town for yet another smokin' hot meal and massages--\$5 for a 1 hr, full body massage!

Day 3

Hit the road first thing in the morning to follow the Tianqunn rio heading west. At the village of Jiao La Ji (means footprint), we saw an awesome looking tributary and hiked up a ways to take a look. It's fantastic! Smooth, round, pink granite boulders ranging from car to house sized with maybe 3-400 cfs of clear green water tumbling down between and over them and waterfalls coming in from the lush green cliffs on either side. It gets steeper as you go and seemed like about 300 ft per mile by the bottom. We went up about 4 miles (in another little dump truck) to put in for another first descent. More paddle trouble at the top--I went deep off a drop and have no idea what happed, but when I went to roll, I had a single blade in each hand. Fortunately, we had a spare with bank support, so were able to continue on. We had to scout every 100 yards or so all the way down (probably every 30 for the last mile), since the whole thing was nothing but horizon lines and slots and twisty rapids between the boulders. But it was almost completely good to go with only one drop that everyone portaged. By the time we finished, it had taken 6.5 hours to run it. If this thing was in CO, it would be a classic must-do run for every class V creek boater in the state!

Tomorrow it's further up the Tianqunn, and we'll likely venture back into bigger water (gotta hang onto those paddles, since we only have two left) We're getting higher and higher (saw the sun for the first time today) out of the Sechuan jungle towards Tibet!

Still at it...testing slightly larger water again with mixed results.

Day 4

We headed up the right fork of the Tianquan, which Travis had wanted to look at and scouted a pretty big rapid that had the wierdest pale gray water color. It looked OK, but we wanted to see what was going on further up. Then we got to another fork and saw that one of them was practically black! Turns out there's a coal mine up that way. The other side was clear blue, so we went thataway. Turned out to be a nature preserve. Feng Chun worked his magic and we got

in for free, so up we went. We picked a section between something we couldn't see from up above (except for one huge drop) and a lower section with a mile of awesome V+ that looks like it all goes, but you better bring your boating shoes! (Thought we'd save something for you guys) This was about 6km of fast class IV in a lush, twisting gorge. Measured 75 ft/mile and guessing just shy of 1000 cfs. You'd be surprised how stressfull class IV can be when you have no idea what's around the next corner or over that horizon line! It all went good, and we saw the coolest snake on one of the scouts.



Photo by Roy Hovland.

Afterward, the bus climbed over Erlang Shan pass, which never broke treeline (10,000 ft?), but had just super-steep and super-lush mountains all the way up. Huge deciduous trees on 60 degree slopes! The river that way was pretty low. After the summit, the weather/environment

changed from socked in/lush to partly cloudy/less vegetation (still more than CO). We dropped to the Dadu, which is like a 50,000 cfs monster with 20 ft crashing waves everywhere! Fortunately, it was getting dark and we didn't even have to think about it.

Day 5

Another pass first thing in the morning. This one was over 12,000 ft, and socked in tundra at the top. On the way down to Kanding, after the last switchback, we're looking at the river for the day--Zhe Duo He--thinking it looks like no problem. Looks like more fast class IV, but without the twisty gorge. Steeper gradient, but less flow--maybe 5 or 600 cfs. Travis had run a lower section of this last year and was looking to do the upper stretch as the lower one was a handful. After lunch, we drove back up and hemmed and hawed over the scout. Tony opted out again (maybe we should listen to Tony more). Dan, Travis and I decided to go for it, but only lasted 1km or so before pulling the plug. No major incidents, just the opportunity for one. I'm not sure how to rate this one, as it didn't really have major drops in it, but it was cold and just fast, fast, fast, with no eddys and breaking waves and holes every 10 yards or so. GPS said the section was 250 ft/mile. Very exciting! Fortunately, there were some hot springs within a couple hundred yards of where we decided discretion was the better part of valor, so we went for a soak!

Side note: Kanding's a pretty cool town, even if it is a little more touristy. We're getting closer to Tibet, so there are a couple monasteries and the monks are all over. All the signs are written in Chinese and Tibetan. It's surrounded by steep mountains and river runs through the center of town--like between the two directions of traffic on main street. Last year, these guys paddled through town and caused such a ruckus that there were 5 major traffic accidents! The local constable has declared that we shall not repeat the town run this year...so I guess it's just more creeking tomorrow!



p.s. Ran into a couple Boulderites in Kanding--Brian and Lisa Mullis on their honeymoon. They're going to ride with us tomorrow and stay at the same Tibetan guest house.

So lemme see here, since last post...

Day 6

Dan was out sick and we got Brian in the water on the Zhe Duo He on the way to the guest house, which is near Xineuqiao. It's a IV intro to a short V finale, and it was overcast and coooooold! As usual, turned out bigger than it looked--Brian got some perspective, since the IV part looked like a meandering class III stream from the road. He and Tony got out shortly after the intro to the V section, which meant I had to go for a hole ride down below, but managed to stick it out and escape unscathed. On to the guest house and some really nasty yak cheese, cold meat and tsampa (barley flour, yak butter, tea and sugar kneaded into a dough by hand--sorta like homemade powerbars). It was the real deal, staying in a Tibetan farmhouse. Actually, the Tibetan portion of Sechuan, but definitely ethnic Tibetan.

Day 7

Took the bus down a really nice valley past a bunch of Tibetan villages along the way. Seems like these guys have really taken to billiards, as these little villages of 100 or so all have several pool tables outside with the locals all playing?!? We went to a tributary of the Luchu, the Lichu, that Dan and Travis had done last year. It was way up, so Travis and I put in below the meat and ran a nice, fast IV section, then on the way back to the guesthouse, we put the Chinese in a ducky and ran a II-III section with them to give them a taste. Wanting a taste for ourselves, we

opted out on the yak and stopped in town for more Sechuan food on the way back to the guesthouse, and caught a glimpse of the summit of Gongga Shan, a ~25,000 ft peak we've been circling.

Day 8

Travel day. With an 8 hr bus ride ahead of us, Travis and I got up before dawn and climbed ~2000 ft to catch the Gongga Shan ridge at sunrise. It was spectacular! Starry skies at the start, but by the time we got up, mist had filled the valley below, but still crystal clear up top. Very lucky, as I guess the ridge is usually obscured by clouds. It was still socked in by the time we got back to the guesthouse below. Cleared up for the drive, which took us across a bit of the Tibetan plateau--high, hilly, tundra-like landscape, where we stopped in some villages, viewed some more 20,000+ ft peaks and visited a monastery. Then we drove into this crack in the earth which holds the river for tomorrow--the Maoniu He, the "yak river". Where we met the river, there was an incredible view up a glacial valley of Yala Shan, yet another +20K peak. We have 2 options for tomorrow (both 1st descents) on th Maoniu He. The upper one looks like SSV on steroids. The lower one is bigger water class IV interspersed with several V drops and one V+ that will likely be walked. Both are followed by terminal drops that will NEVER be run!

Tonight, we're in Danba, which is built along the confluence of the Yak River and the Dajing Chuan, which forms the Dadu. Think of a small city built in the middle of the Royal Gorge! Well, maybe half the Gorge. The city is built on a steep slope, with a 50 ft wall falling from either the main street or the first row of buildings into the river. On the other side is a sheer cliff. The Yak is Arkish is size here, then and the Dajing Chuan is at least 5 times bigger. That's for the day after tomorrow, and we stay at another guest house tomorrow night.

Dan's all better and we've still got paddles, so I'll let you know how we do!

Sorry for the blackout--didn't see a computer for a while there...Anyways, I landed back in CO today and we didn't even have any more paddle mishaps!

After that last post, it was my turn for the nasty Asian stomach bug. Travis too. We took the next day off to film, whilst Tony and Dan ran a nice IV section with a few Vs on the Maoniu He. Afterwards stayed at an awesome Tibetan guest house on the side of a gorge. A Chinese group (not staying there, but just for dinner) had hired a group of traditional dancing girls, so we got a show with the stay. After the show, Dan decided to teach one of the girls to swing dance and when he starts spinning her around, she goes flying across the concrete porch and would have smashed into a rock wall if Tony hadn't been standing there to stop her. She was a little shook up-- I guess they're not used to spinning around. Travis translated what she was saying as "it made her sick--like being in a car", which is apparently a novel experience?!? Did I mention that Danbar is an awesome river town? I may have understated it--it's at the confluence of FOUR major rivers, not two!

The next day we headed into new ground that Travis had not yet explored for a few days--up the Dajing Chuan. And we got skunked! Well, not really. More like victims of our own success thus far. We drove past a really nice looking 10K section of big water class IV, thinking that the tributary we'd go along on the way to Maerkang would have something sweet that would be better suited to our creekboats (which are NOT the ideal craft for 10,000 cfs, IMHO!), since we'd seen nothing but quality so far. But the tributary ended up being softer rock and lower gradient without much for drops, and it was too far to go back, so we went and explored some Tibetan towers instead.

Drove over the last 13,000 ft pass the next day with a gorgeous pine/aspen forest on the way up. The leaves were just starting to change. We dropped into Heishui, examining the creek on the way down. Steep, low water mank up high and III-IV lower down. According to Chung Hao, only two groups of Westerners had been in this valley before us--groups of Korean and Swiss climbers. I don't know if that's 100% true, but the reaction when we rolled through town couldn't have been much different if we'd landed on a UFO! We drew attention almost everywhere we went, but this was freaky! After the whole restaurant staff sang a song for the first Westerners to ever have lunch in their establishment, we went up to run the III-IV into town, putting the Chun and Feng in the ducky just before town. They had a much needed swim along the way!



Photo by Roy Hovland.

Driving downstream the following day, we were looking at an ever increasing volume of silty water, and opted for a clear tributary of III-IV called the Chibusu. Yet another dump truck shuttle. This thing may have gotten better if we had kept going up the road (or not), but we wanted to get all the way to Wolong that night (which still almost didn't happen, due to some absurd limitations on bus driver distances that our driver thankfully chose to ignore after being warned at one checkpoint--200km for a single driver in a day?!?)

Wolong is near the world's largest Panda reserve, and that's where we spent our last two days. Cute little buggers--we heard some guy got mauled a week earlier getting his picture taken with one, and nearly had his leg amputated! So when we took pictures, we stood behind him and the keeper made sure he had sweet bamboo in BOTH paws! Of course, these are in captivity. I guess people can wander the open preserve for months trying to see one in the wild, they're so elusive. We put in just below the panda park and ran to the confluence of something else at 1000-1200. Time to put the boating shoe back on! Fast class IV interspersed with V's--some really big! I'd compare the two that were walked by all to Supermax and Meatgrinder. Travis ran pretty much everything else, and there were various walks by the the rest of the crew.



Photo by Roy Hovland.

After the run, Travis and I went and looked downstream at a steeper section that had a low volume (due to a dam) spilling between car to house sized boulders for a quick, early morning run, as I had a plane to catch out of Chengdu in the evening and the drive time is highly variable. Tony and Dan opted out, as they had had enough boating. It looked like a good, safe section to get out of quickly. Then it rained all night and tripled the flow! Early morning adventure boating in the rain! It still worked out though, since all the drops had slower sections between them, which was nice, since they all seemed to end in big holes! A swim out of one (yours truly) and a couple ports were involved, but we got on the road and got back to town in time!

Some notes on boating in China for the curious:

--We did a whole bunch of 1st and 2nd descents of awesome roadside rivers and creeks, and I'm sure just scratched the surface of what's available, let alone "off-piste". There's an astounding combination of gradient and water! Still, damns are going in all over the place and some areas--especially lower down--are horribly polluted. The rape and pillage of the environment that's going on is really incredible. I don't mean to gloss that over, but there's still a lot of great stuff that hasn't been ruined.

--If you go, bring your boating shoes! It's big and continuous like we don't get in CO. Not in recent memory, at least. And deceptively so from the road. You might just get deceptively worked! The language and logistical obstacles to just showing up with a boat and doing this area are HUGE. You definitely need a guide like Travis!