

RIVERS OF SURPRISE

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—John Yost

Rakaposhi. Hunza. Karakoram. Nanga Parbat. Gilgit. Indus. Ultar. Hopar, Hispar and Batura . . .

These are magic names for trekkers and climbers, magnets that year after year draw the best from around the world to meet their challenges. For river runners though, northern Pakistan remained untested. The challenges had not been met.

I first felt the pull of the Indus and its tributaries several years ago, but not until the fall of 1979 was the last barrier hurdled and the Indus River reached. I was a participant on an expedition organized by Sobek Expeditions [now Mountain Travel Sobek]. We had decided to meet the Indus head-on, to attempt to navigate the toughest section of the river that we knew of. The effort was noble, but the river was king. The Indus whipped us, intimidating and overwhelming us into portages, lining, cap-sizes, general defeat. And it whetted our appetites for more.

In our travels around Pakistan after the

first Indus attempt, several other rivers proposed themselves as candidates for exploration. Their names did not have the awesome ring of the Indus though. A return bout was what we really wanted, so our attentions focused on using the Hunza and Gilgit rivers as avenues to the main event. One year later I was back as leader of another Sobek-sponsored exploratory, tackling a 250-mile stretch of whitewater from Baltit on the Hunza River to Thakot on the Indus.

With the benefit of experience and plenty of stateside prep time, the last-minute details in Rawalpindi fell neatly into place. Permits, food, equipment, road transport, flights, passport registration, and schedules presented few problems. Then I was on board a flight to Gilgit with the group, glad to be on the way, and wondering why I should be happy to return after the intimidation of the previous year.

My boarding card said 7B, but 7A was the window, so I slid over one seat. A flight through the Himalayas and Karakorams deserves that.



From the air, the Hunza looked eminently runnable, but the group quickly learned to reevaluate size and distance on the strong, cold, glacial river in the vastness of this ancient land.

We skimmed north from Rawalpindi over farm-checked plains and into the mountains. As we rose, the vanguard of the lowland monsoon clouds pinched us down into the peaks. Freshly powdered jagged rock promontories stretched toward our small plane. I began to regret the window: cloud-obscured vistas clearing suddenly to reveal rock walls a few feet from the wings tend to make me nervous.

The plane vibrated and twisted, seeking a clear path through the clouds. The talk on the plane was of accidents in similar conditions, and of the possibility of having to turn around if the weather became worse. And I had

thought that the dangers I would face in Pakistan would be from the river! I cursed to myself and questioned both my destination and the frightening vehicle taking me there. Some ironic god chose that moment to answer both queries. The plane crested a high ridge and dropped into a valley, and a tormented white-striped snake held captive by steep rock walls appeared far below. The Indus was breaking free of the montane plateau, unleashing its full fury, raging and boiling for a hundred miles through a deep canyon. The river's call was clear in my ears.

Fortunately the section of river I glimpsed

from my window was not to be our adversary. We had tried it the year before, and knew that it was beyond the pale. Our brief scouting of the stretches of the Hunza, Gilgit, and Indus that we were planning to raft this time was comparatively reassuring, revealing a difficult but sane river run. This time we expected to handle the rivers instead of being manipulated by them.

The Hunza was first on the agenda. We expected a small, fast-dropping river, rocky but runnable. First views of the river on the way to our put-in confirmed this, and even as we unloaded our equipment and began organizing and rigging, the river next to us looked small. The scale of the landscape held some surprises though, and when a 70-foot safety line I was testing went only a quarter of the way across the river, some quick reevaluation followed. Crystal-clear air and 20,000-foot peaks had tricked our senses into a scaling-down of everything we saw. It required effort to put the river in its proper perspective. After we made the effort, holes, waves, and current grew. The Hunza looked a whole lot more exciting.

The focus on the river grew even clearer when we launched our three Avon Professionals and headed downstream. The current was swift, the rapids difficult, and the penalties high. Potential wrap rocks, flip holes, and tight maneuvers were everywhere. The Hunza was a time-consuming river, the rapids demanding more scouting than actual river time. Although for the oarsmen the rowing was exciting, for everyone else in the boats things were a bit dull. For two days we cheated everything, skimming along the shore, catching little bridges between holes, ducking behind rocks, and generally

avoiding the river's pratfalls. Mistakes could have led to severe problems, but because we were proceeding with caution and rowing well, the trip was uneventful.

Waking to the sight of Rakaposhi's 25,500 feet glistening in the early morning sun just miles away can make the uneventful special. To be working our way downstream, dealing with another river not so different from so many others, and to round a bend and stare into the throat of a glacier or up a peak some four vertical miles overhead, or to startle an idling local, or to float by a mountain hamlet— Surprise! This is Pakistan! We had not come thousands of miles just for whitewater.

The third day brought a portage and some excitement. The time on the river was a little tougher, with boats filling with water and a near flip. We portaged to avoid a double rapid, which was conceivably runnable in two separate sections, but which held enormous, permanent penalties that dissuaded us from the water route. We covered all of three kilometers that day. Things were bogging down.

The Hunza itself is cold and glacial, dingy gray and deceptively strong. The landscapes are stark earth tones, brown, gray, black, streaked with ocher and alabaster. Looming snow-dappled peaks and refreshing oases of green save the views from grandiose sameness. The banks are embellished with fruit trees, willows, poplars, maize, and vegetable fields wherever water seeps down from the snowfields. The area is a high-altitude desert, receiving only four inches of rain a year, so the land is dry and bleak where there is no seepage. Chilly mornings give way to warm days. In the afternoon the high peaks of-

ten gather a cloud cover, the winds come up and it is shiveringly cold on the river.

Short river days, monotonous scenery, and careful river running were beginning to lull us. The runs got a little sloppier, a little more daring. The Hunza lay back and waited to surprise us. Instead we surprised ourselves. The miles began to flow by. By the end of the fifth day we were camped at the confluence of the Gilgit and the Hunza, ready to tackle leg two of the journey.



The turquoise Gilgit was enfolded by the gray swirls of the Hunza, the sun sank behind distant peaks in a fiery display of its glory, alpenglow turned the mountain snows phosphorescent, and the sand cushioned and warmed us. A perfect evening. When a glowing, undulating caterpillar of enormous dimensions appeared in the darkening a mile back up the Hunza, it hardly seemed out of place. When the caterpillar metamorphosed into a vast torchlight procession winding its way into the hills, we began to wonder. And when, well after dark, the pinpoint lights showered down the hillsides in a meteoric display, our surprise and enjoyment gave way to curiosity. The explanation of the pyrotechnic fantasy was worthy of the awe it had evoked in us: this was a celebration of the Aga Khan's birthday!

The Aga Khan? Yes, the people of the Hunza Valley regard the Aga Khan as their spiritual leader, maintaining their own separate sect of Islam. October 20 is one of their principal festival days, with a traditional torchlight procession.

On the Gilgit, a tributary to the Indus and milder than the Hunza, we sight-ran, did some short scouts, and had fun. There was big stuff out there, but we handled it with no more than some minor problems hardly worth counting. After lunch we scouted a one-obstacle rapid with a turbulent entry, a huge pour-over rock covering virtually all of the river. We tried to sneak left around the rock, a delicate move down a five-foot-wide channel and in behind a rock by the shore. I volunteered to go first, and as I drifted into the rapid I realized that my scouting had been a bit perfunctory. The approach moves down the far left did not look so simple now. After taking a couple of small drops I was forced to make a quick decision, whether to run through a hole just above the pour-over or to take its right corner then cut back to the left of the rock. I settled on the latter, mistakenly. Unable to get back left, I caught the edge of the pour-over, dropped five feet into a keeper hydraulic, and stayed there.

The boat had not flipped, but was being sucked down, thrashed and roundly abused. We high-sided, shifted our weight, pulled at the oars. On shore a safety throw line was hurled toward us, but missed. Then, as we appeared to pull free, the water decided to finish with us. The upstream tube sank from sight, and we were over. The usual postflip adrenaline was increased by the sight of the upside-down boat still sloshing around in the hydraulic. We began to formulate wild ideas on how we could attach something to the boat to pull it out. Fortunately, the river saved us that trouble by deciding to spit the poor Pro back out. These Pakistani rivers never seemed to do the expected.



Arriving at the confluence of the Gilgit and Indus rivers marks a rite of passage for this expedition and for all paddlers who have witnessed the majestic panorama.

The Gilgit did not molest us any further, and soon we were on the Indus itself. A couple of hours of easy river led up to our first taste of the Indus's power. This river is in scale with the huge landscape around it; it is proportioned to accommodate 4-mile differences in elevation. When its power is demonstrated by a drop, it is intimidating. Ten-foot-deep waves and holes are the rule, and much larger and totally unforgiving drops are not unusual. Our boats were completely dwarfed, and any hints of casualness vanished.

We had seen this stretch of river the previous year when we had ended our trip a couple

of days below the Gilgit-Indus confluence. We knew enough to lend us some assurance, but too much to allow for confidence. Just below the point at which we had taken out the previous year was the Raikhot Gorge, a fearsome narrowing of the 40,000 cubic feet per second of the Indus into a 50-foot-wide space with a drop of many feet over a distance of only a couple of hundred yards. Awesome! We camped at the old take-out and walked down to the gorge to get a glimpse of the water before inalterably committing ourselves to running it.

What we saw was as expected, except for one important detail. It looked runnable! We

used a bridge spanning the gorge to scout the mess from both sides, and what was there looked surprisingly possible.

Three drops, the first sweeping right to left in a long series of gargantuan waves, the second just a set of mammoth wave-holes which no boat we knew of could survive, and the third a V-wave on the left of the river leading to a madhouse of turbulence which we all preferred to avoid. The possible run involved making a messy, fast, dangerous sneak through some rocks on the left of the first drop, negotiating some small holes on the left side of the second thrasher, then using a downstream ferry right to bust through the side of the V-wave just before its apex and pull away from the maelstrom. The penalties were nightmarish. Number Three was not so bad, but if on flushing out of the rocks on the left of Number One we were unable to make the very dicey move to the far left, it was goodbye and off to the middle of Number Two, a sure and surely unpleasant flip.

After a not-so-sound night's sleep, we did a quick scout of a large rapid down by our camp and headed off to our chosen pull-in above the gorge, a half mile away. Thirty seconds later I was upside-down underneath my boat, my leg caught between two rather unyielding objects. I wrenched it loose, leaving my shoe behind, pulled myself from under the boat, and managed to get myself and it to shore. The passengers also got quickly ashore. Once again, surprise! Having cut behind a hole a split-second sooner than the boat in front of me, I had been swept right into a rock wall. I couldn't recover from the rebound before the next set of holes, and I was over before even getting to the gorge.

Once out of the cold water, my leg looked bad and felt worse. A murky bruise was already appearing all along the shin, and my calf muscle was charley-horsing violently and painfully. As soon as I was ready to get back on the boat, someone else rowed me across to our pre-gorge pull-in. In the clear light of day, with the reality of rowing the gorge imminent, the run through Number One looked tougher, the penalties less thinkable. We looked and thought, thought and looked, finally deciding to portage my boat since I was in no kind of rowing shape anyway. The other two could then think about the Raikhot Gorge with a safety boat in mind—not much consolation since the recovery times between One, Two, and Three were minimal. Eventually we all portaged Number One. Enough time and activity had allowed my leg to return to life, so I rowed.

There was no way to portage Two and Three. Sheer gorge walls pinched down to river level. I started left, and the horrible sensation of being pushed out into the central disaster area was overwhelming. My boat and both of the others were able to fight the force of the holes pushing us off the side of the maw and stay out of trouble. Trying to bail between Two and Three was an experience unmatched in my then-ten years of worldwide boating. The force of currents underneath the boat was immense, and swells, boils, eddies, current lines, and basic crazy water bobbed the boat like the proverbial cork. I fought to keep off the wall, sure that the boat would be driven up against it and flipped (again). This power in the gentlest water of the gorge put the turmoil down the middle on a level beyond comprehension.

Number Three went smoothly, as planned. The Indus was not going to get us with the obvious. We kept on downriver, managing at least to foul off whatever curves the river threw us, staying out of trouble. The river was magnificent, everything we had hoped. The whitewater was huge, heart-stoppingly so, but manageable. Nanga Parbat (at 26,660 feet, the world's ninth-highest mountain) stayed in view for a day and a half, its summit four and a half vertical miles above us.

Beautiful basalt gorges, dripping green moss waterfalls, serene stretches of relaxing water, hot springs, and lots of fascinating people made real the visions of Shangri-la that had brought earlier explorers to this region. Along the way, we met everyone from the local children to village administrators. We shared food, communicated in English and in sign language, and generally appreciated the absurdity of our presence on this river in the middle of Pakistan.

Although we had thought that we would be the first to attempt this stretch of the Indus, just before the trip we had met a gentleman in Gilgit, a Mr. Baig, who claimed to have been with a Czechoslovak expedition a few years previously. He described to us something resembling a huge 37-foot pontoon raft with wooden decking, powered by both motor and oars, which would dwarf our puny 15-footers. His story was laced with potential problems that we could face, including a flip and a wrap, and possibly needing a month to do a section for which we had allotted ten days. There was enough in it to make us believe, and enough strange loose connections to make us doubt.

One thing he told us did stick however, and that was his specific warning about three trouble spots. We jokingly labeled his warnings Baig's Book of Biggies, or BBB, our waterproof guide to the Indus. BBB One was the Raikhot Gorge, thankfully behind us. BBB Two and Three were somewhere ahead, and the thought of them capsizing and wrapping a pontoon schooner like the one he described was discomfiting.

At least it gave us something to talk about. The Book, that is, Mr. Baig's comments as translated from his native Urdu into a mixture of French, German, and English, was a good source of creative inspiration. Doubts about or belief in the previous expedition, and speculation about BBB Two and Three provided us with a focus other than the Indus itself. When we ran a particularly sticky spot down the left of an island, requiring hours of scouting and a few tricky moves, it seemed as though we had found BBB Two and conquered it. Yay, team! The location seemed about right from the BBB description. The problem was trying to look at the rapid from the perspective of a different water level and a 37-foot boat to decide whether there could really have been a flip there. We concluded that the big boat could not have made the same tight cuts we did, would have been forced to the center of the island drop, and might have flipped. QED., this rapid must be BBB Two.

So the real BBB Two caught us by surprise. It was ridiculous, impossible, the whole river plunging steeply through a series of boat-destroying holes before shooting over and around Hotel Rock, an obstruction the size of a two-story townhouse. We portaged, and regained

a measure of humility. After the portage, the river calmed down, and we drifted and enjoyed ourselves. We encountered a ferryboat made of sticks lashed to tied-and-inflated cow skins, and spent some time rowing these rickety crafts while the local oarsmen experienced the pleasure of paddling with our modern, well-designed equipment. A couple of pleasant days went by before BBB Three.

This obstacle had been given a place name. With that information we could talk to the men along the shore to narrow down exactly where this rapid might appear. It was widely compared to Raikhot and other such horrors, so we expected the worse. What we got was a fairly easy cheat down the left, complete with a choice of possible routes. The middle looked messy, but temptingly runnable. With our take-out only a mile below in flat-water, the big stuff in the center—our last shot at the power of the Indus—drew more interest than it normally would have. I snuck my boat safely down the left to allow another boatman in our party to try the middle with me below to pick up the pieces in case he got into trouble.

He pulled on his full wetsuit, double-tied everything on his boat, cautioned his passengers and pushed off. The spot at which he wanted to enter was center-left, a bridge between two long, steep holes. Once on the water he could not find it. A good ten feet right of the slot, he hit the first wave and tipped right over. The benevolent river swept him left around the rather frightening large waves at the bottom right of the rapid. We recovered the boat and the people cast from the boat, rowed a few minutes downstream, and our Indus encounter was over.

The fight was a fairer one this time, and we might even have scored enough to win a round or two, but the judges unanimously agreed that the Indus had won the match, but on points rather than in a knockout. If I can get a rematch, I'd be glad to accept it. Not so much for the *action* on the water, but for the magic of the Pakistani panorama: the Karakoram, Rakaposhi, and Nanga Parbat mountains; the Hopar and Hispar glaciers; and, of course, the rivers themselves—the Hunza, the Gilgit, the Indus—now magnets for river runners after all. .

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

John Yost cofounded Sobek Expeditions (now Mountain Travel Sobek), the company that pioneered rafting outside the United States. He has spent almost 40 years exploring rivers around the world, and has led or participated in more than 30 first descents of major international rivers, including a first descent in Panama in 2008. Continuing his search for firsts, he is currently planning a six-continent round-the-world whitewater extravaganza.