

Nepal : On the tracks of the Miristi Khola

Appeal and mystery of an Himalayan canyon

Upon a brilliant idea by Henri Sigayret, a famous himalayist and writer in love with the Annapurna and with discovery, three students (Antoine Quido, Julien Ragueneau and myself, Nicolas Savelli) have built up a sportive and academic project that will lead us on the path of Himalayan history, in this inhospitable and dangerous but magical place: the Miristi Khola.

It's an **academical adventure**, since it's part of our degree! Our goal is to create a trekking itinerary that will follow the 1950 Maurice Herzog expedition path. We must not forget that the French alpinists walked a long time back and forth in this area, before they chose the Annapurna area, found its access up and eventually climbed to the summit the third of June 1950.

Administrative machinery

As for the administrative side, we could never thank enough Fabien Hobléa (expert speleologist and practice head master) and Serge Fudral (geologist and our promotion director) for their attentive hear and support. With a background of growing judicial hindrances and of society's strong refusal to commitments, a director's signature is a real act of courage that overcomes, from far away, the eventual sportive accomplishment.

Sportive because, beyond our academic plan, we also added the first canyon descent: 18kms long and 3000 meters difference in height ; we also want to explore what Maurice Herzog had called in his book the 'Miristi Khola Caves'.

At last, to finish with the team's composition, I must add Maurice Duchêne (Himalpyramis' president and expedition leader) Yann Ozoux (member of several canyoning expeditions in Nepal), as well as Friends Adventure Team trekking agency who organized this expedition (here Kabindra and Rajesk Lama, the two first nepalese guide who passed the Federal French Canyoning Teaching degree).

3 days trekking

The access to Miristi Khola is identical to the one to the Annapurna north base camp (8091m): a 3 days long trek on a beautiful but narrow path (falling down would be into the river 1500 m further down) leads us to the river (where we'll set up our 3500m high camp) ; One fourth day is necessary to reach the himalayists'base camp. The departure for the canyon starts precisely here, 4190m, in this historical place.

As soon as we approach, it becomes obvious that the canyon's difficulty won't be technical but logistical. The average 18% slope shows a major horizontal part. From our camp, there is a 12kms long distance before the first way out. The canyon is over 200m deep, at its deepest point at the 'elbow level', or the famous april 27th base, or Tholobugin pass (4310m). But this is nonetheless the easiest side; the other side culminating 5kms above our head is the ridge leading from the 7647m Fang (Also called Bahara Shikhar) to the 8091m Annapurna.

The main threat for us would be the outburst of a natural hazard: a landslide or an avalanche could create an obstacle which might break suddenly and provoke a wave which would submerge us. Also, and with identical consequences, the rupture of the frontal moraine would cause a sub or pro-glacier pocket to empty out. Whichever the scenario, it would be impossible for us to escape from the violent outburst of water.

The bottom of the canyon is a trap; the risks are hard to evaluate because of the

immensity of the sideslopes as well as the basin 's surface area on the hydrologic side.

The conditions are good and we start exploring the cave. The progression is very easy, and allows us to remain out of the water, which represents a considerable gain of time considering we have a long way to go. Spirits are good and technical difficulties close to none. Nonetheless we are aware of our vulnerability: facing the mountain we are extremely small. When we see the deepest point, we decide to climb back up to the camp; we explored the whole half superior part of the itinerary.

A bunch of surprises

However, an expedition always brings its surprises; one of them will be very bad, when we find out we have a major gear problem: only one of the neoprene suits was taken! Big mistake of logistic. It means that, in order to keep going, we should have the absolute certainty that the whole path could be walked out of the water. With a 2 or 3°C water temperature, we can't imagine spending 20 minutes in the river without risks of hypothermia. It is also out of the question to send a single man on such risky grounds, without any way to communicate!

Disappointment and renouncement

We are, of course, very, very disappointed. To renounce. This word, hard to hear, is even harder to pronounce, but it is here, like an evidence. We are so confused. Of course, to take up new challenges during explorations never goes without any risks, even if we reach so the plenitude of being. Actually, we still have, in these situations, the ability to make a choice.

But in these remote areas, life hangs by a thread, which shouldn't be pulled too hard. It reminds me of what Mike Horn wrote once: "I believe in the deep generosity of human nature", he adds further, "simply choked by social life" usually, concluding that "the masquerade stops during the adventure".

To face things without turning away from the truth, to take the right decision at the right time, to go not too far, to be careful. To accept and thus to renounce. It's not easy when such an objective is in sight and its goal so close. We also know that coming back won't be as easy as if we were in Europe.

One of the characteristics of our sport is commitment; not a vain word; not for the times beings. To love the adventure and to accept risks doesn't mean to play with death. The first goal of the adventurer is to come back alive; let's it be clear. We are not Mike Horn, our bodies don't possess the same resistance and abilities of adaptation. We turn back.

Give up the game ?

Within two days, we're back in the Kali Gandaki valley. Of course, we don't want to give up so easily! If we can make the junction with the descent's point we reached from the top, we'd finally do it thoroughly. One never knows. We decide to proceed this way. Unconsciously wishing to come upon the dreaded passage? Not so! Like a revenge? Neither. We have too much respect for the mountain to be disconsiderate; we are not at war! No It's just a matter of going all the way, for pleasure, and of keeping this extraordinary human adventure alive as long as possible. And of never leaving regrets behind, never.

Successive bowls

We settle in the small village located at the way out of the canyon. Curious kids are all around us. Being totally disconnected from touristic tracks, the village is short of visitors.

The following morning, we leave early in order to reach the known part of the canyon. The canyon is very deep and the more we progress the more we realize we took a good decision by turning back at the top. Around 1750m we face the dreaded passage: successive bowls mark the river bed in between two cliffs, both several hundreds meters high. A formality with neoprene suits. The game is over; we have no regrets; safety rules.

The logistic

Finally we will discover the 3/5th of the canyon and 2/3d of its difference in height. The key of this descent is certainly not a matter of technical challenges. On the contrary, it's all about being able to place several members of a team at different strategical points along the canyon, and enabling the groups to communicate, so that there's a constant watch for environmental hazards, and a possibility to warn the groups who are deep inside the canyon. Another alternative consists of a very fast and light expedition, if the mountains allows you to pass...

Spaces of freedom

We'll remember our adventure in the Himalayas as an extraordinary human adventure; there, more than somewhere else, because it's longer, higher, more beautiful, the term of adventure recovers its first meaning : solidarity amongst men. The Himalayas is not famous for its canyons yet, but let's bet that it'll become so, so that Himalayan litterature can increase. Please allow me to make a last parenthesis to mention again an exceptionnal alpinist, whose path we followed during one month before we attempted to discover the Miristi Khola, and who, better than anybody else, expressed how one can feel in these moments:

"Mountains are made for our happiness only. Because men don't get fed by wheat, petrole or steel only. He must feed his heart."

The mountains, as spaces of freedom, still exist: one just have to spill over a little of sweat. But this means that, here more than anywhere else, spirits have to rule over bodies. Miristi Khola, see you soon!