

Prahlad, Vikram, the writer and his 45lb mahseer and Surinder



Pilgrimage to marvel at Ganges mahseer

After a tortuous and lengthy journey nothing could be more rewarding than landing a monster mahseer from the waters of India's most famous river. Words and photographs by Adrian Dangar

VIKRAM AND Pavan, two Delhi businessmen with a shared passion for fishing, had warned me the previous evening that miles of dusty and overcrowded plains lay between India's capital and their secret mahseer fishing stretch on the sacred River Ganges. However, nothing could have prepared me for the tortuous journey that began before the sun rose to bake the interminable plains in a searing heat.

Driving through endless towns on the way to their Shangri-La in the Himalayan foothills was a unique experience. Each choking street was a battlefield where water buffalo, rickety bicycles and a seething mass of humanity competed fearlessly for space with convoys of horn-blasting lorries, ancient cars and motor

rickshaws – not to mention the feral pigs, stray dogs and sacred cows that miraculously thrive among the bedlam.

The distances between chaotic towns gradually increased until we reached the foot of a vast range of green hills that, I was told, concealed the Ganges somewhere deep inside its many folds.

We finally arrive at a small village surrounded by terraced fields cut into the hillside and overlooking a turquoise pool where the clearer waters of a spring-fed river mingle with the Ganges' greater flow, shimmering aquamarine under the bright, midday sun. The Ganges of the Himalayan foothills is a very different river to the broad, brown slick that



Clockwise from left: rain-fed spawning stream; first cast of the day for Vikram; guides Surinder and Prahlad prepare lunch; Pavan with his 40lb fish carried by Prahlad



curls languorously though the plains farther downstream, where her waters act as a magnet to thousands of bathing pilgrims. Here she cuts through steep, forested gorges and her currents foam white with anger as they crash down rocky rapids and glide with a hint of menace in long, blue-green ribbons through the deepest pools. These cold waters are home to the mighty mahseer, a legendary fighting fish now banished to the least accessible stretches of its habitat by the continuing onslaught from poachers, deforestation, dam-building and an expanding human population.

Unlike those of their relatives wallowing in the warmer waters of southern India or living a protected existence in rivers flowing through sacred temples, the golden flanks of the Himalayan mahseer are hard-muscled from a life in turbulent currents. The mahseer's aggressive nature belies its membership of the carp family, which conjures up an image of sweetcorn, umbrellas and canvas seats beside a lily-covered lake. Mahseer are not tempted by boilies but are goaded into attacking the type of treble-hooked lures used to outwit pike, bass and other predatory freshwater fish, although the smaller ones living among rapids can provide exhilarating sport on a fly rod.

Adult mahseer spend most of their lives in the deeper pools of big rivers, running up fast-flowing tributaries to spawn when the monsoon spate waters arrive in August or early September. They are famously elusive but most anglers agree that the best chance of capturing large mahseer comes when they drop back into their home river as the spawning waters recede. However, this is mid-November, and instead of targeting confluence waters full of fish recuperating from spawning we are after those that have taken up residence in the big pools downstream.

A fish of more than 40lb from this region is considered to be a trophy and qualifies the captor for automatic entry into Vikram's exclusive 40lb club. However, 70lb monsters used to be landed frequently in the days of the raj and were even presented to local villages to feast on. Nowadays all large fish are returned to the water, although I was told a small one tastes delicious when cooked fresh over a camp-fire.

By the time I wash off the dust from the long journey with a dip in the Ganges' icy waters three inflatable dinghies have been expertly bound together and loaded by Surinder and Prahlad, our two smiling guides whose features are less Indian than Nepalese. It is late

afternoon when we land at a sandy beach three miles downstream and the sun has already dipped behind the tall mountain in front of the camp-site, laying a cold blanket above the river and shrouding the gorge in an eerie, pale light that is neither night nor day.

As our guides put up the spacious dome tents that will be our home for the next 36 hours Vikram picks up a spinning rod and tests the drag on the reel until he is satisfied the setting is just right – too tight and a big mahseer will break the line, too loose and the angler will have little control over his quarry. He hands over the rod carefully as if it were a loaded gun and gestures across 80yd of river to where the waters ripple beguilingly around a protruding boulder. "Cast towards that rock at 90 degrees, then pick up the slack and retrieve slowly against the current – and don't move on until you have covered every inch of the run," he advises. "If a fish takes you, remember to set the hook but, whatever happens, don't be heavy-handed or he will snap your line like thread."

I fish without success for half an hour but soon after Pavan takes my place his lure is grabbed by an unseen leviathan and 20yd of line is stripped from his reel before the fish ►

comes off. Later, dinner cooked over an open fire, is eaten beneath the luminous light of a full moon. Although these are near-perfect conditions for night fishing, we are all too wearied from the long journey to persevere beyond midnight. I crawl into my sleeping-bag and contemplate the contrast between the crowded Rajasthan plains – which I had spent the previous 10 days crossing on a Marwari stallion – and the wild solitude of this pristine land. Before the whisky kicks in I am sure I hear the faint rasp of a leopard calling from the scrub somewhere far downstream.

The next morning I am surprised to find a river that has fallen 6in – snow-melt feeding the Ganges steadies by night when the temperature drops before the waters creep up again during daylight hours as the sun warms white slopes upstream. As the guides brew a pot of coffee Pavan casts optimistically into the awakening river. His efforts are ignored but several fish show as languid splashes against the far bank, where sunlight moving slowly down the mountain has not yet banished the shade. After breakfast, I wander downriver to speculate among faster waters, picking my way carefully between giant boulders and flicking my lure with a salmon fisherman's instinct into promising riffles and glides between rocks.

Around midday I hear excited shouts rolling down the gorge, and I hurry back upstream just in time to see Prahlad wading ashore with a monstrous fish cradled in his arms. This 40-pounder is Pavan's ticket to the club of his dreams, and it would be hard to say who was wearing the bigger grin – the successful angler or his beaming, soaking-wet guide. The fish is rapturously admired from the yellow tip of an exquisitely forked tail to the beady, intelligent eyes set in a head of polished silver, the flanks sparkling with bronze scales the size of lamb's hearts. Pavan, whose day job is something hi-tech with computers in Delhi, swoons like a drunken man – even our congratulatory back-slapping fails to rouse him from a state of dazed confusion. This is the effect mahseer have on grown men.

Later, as a grey mantle of dusk chills the gorge, I head upstream to explore a cove I spotted earlier. After picking my way through a maze of undergrowth, I find a foaming torrent pouring into the head of what resembles a classic salmon pool: the crumpled creases smoothing into a dimpled, pale sheet where the river-bed drops away beneath the surface. As the lure shivers through the water, my rod is wrenched into a bow and the line is torn from the reel by a gigantic hidden strength. Waves of helplessness wash over me as I cling to my rod, hardly daring to touch the reel as the fish careers wildly around. My pathetic shouts



Wild and Exotic organises mahseer fishing trips throughout India. A seven-day fishing expedition on the Saryu River or upper reaches of the Ganges in the Himalayan foothills costs from £1,250 per person. The price excludes international flights but includes all transfers, full board and one night's accommodation in a Delhi hotel on arrival. The international return flights cost from £475 plus taxes and are subject to availability. Wild and Exotic has availability on an expedition to fish the Saryu River (where mahseer can also be caught on the fly) during early November 2007. The price is £1,250 per person excluding flights. **For further details contact Wild and Exotic. Call 01439 748401, fax 01439 748387 or visit www.wildandexotic.co.uk.**



for help seem to be swallowed by the river's greater rumble.

After 10 spine-tingling minutes I sense the huge fish moving complacently towards me, only for the illusion of victory to be shattered when it whips round and accelerates into deeper water. I remember thinking, absurdly, "This is how it must feel when the brakes fail on a speeding car." Suddenly Prahlad is beside me, sliding down sheer rock to land as softly as a monkey. The grey bulk shows like a boulder in the failing light. When nearly beaten, the fish wallows in a sluggish roll and the scales on its huge flank glint in the last shreds of light. This is Prahlad's cue to plunge waist-deep into the water and haul the fish up like an Olympic weightlifter. "Fifty pounder," he jabbars hysterically while staggering towards Vikram and Pavan, who have just reached the beach. Their

Clockwise from top left: Pavan playing his 40-pounder; afterwards with his catch; loading donkeys for the journey home; approaching the village at the end of the trip

astonishment at an Englishman's outrageous good fortune in landing a 45lb fish is concealed behind broad smiles. "That's probably the biggest mahseer caught from the Ganges this year," Vikram proclaims without a trace of envy.

By nine o'clock the next morning we are treading the mountain path back to the village, catching tantalising glimpses through the trees of the Ganges beneath us like a blue enamelled band painted on the floor of the valley. It's the first stage of a long journey to England where, two

days later, I receive an email from Vikram. He describes his plans to develop an exclusive mahseer fishing camp on the Ganges, and finishes with, "We drank champagne to celebrate Pavan's 40lb fish last night. Your party is due next time around." That is one party I have no intention of missing. ■