



British Universities Kayaking Expedition 2009

Kayaknam

The Journey

So it begins. An unproblematic flight into Hong Kong, followed by some fantastically helpful locals found us a hotel within the city. After food and dessert we headed out to do what we do best, Karaoke!

The next morning we reached the Hong Kong/China border, and after some negotiations we secured a bus into "no-man's land". Passports and visa's at the ready, we headed to China. From the border there were suitably large coaches to take 4 boats at a time onwards to our next objective of Guangzhou. Unfortunately the bus stopped a good mile from the train station, so after some freight discussion we decided to "portage" with all our kit in the 38 degree heat.

After a considerable amount of confusion and lack of any of us speaking Chinese, we missed our train and had to stay a night in a cheap hotel. The next morning in less of a rush we collected our thoughts and waited out the day in a train station for the next train to Nanning.

Once in Nanning we managed to get train tickets direct to Hanoi but at the border crossing leaving China, it turned out our boats weren't on the same train as us and therefore wouldn't be allowed to cross the border! So we got off the train, late at night, in the rain, in a strange Chinese border town not knowing quite where to go or what to do next.

A couple of us headed into the town to find





some cheap accommodation whilst we waited for the boats to turn up the next day. Some good fortune lead us to a hotel charging under 10 pounds per room that only opened 2 days ago. Being the first tourist group staying there we were treated as honored guests and seemed to get some discount and superb hospitality.

That next day came along with our boats, however they arrived after the border post had already shut, which meant spending a second night in Pingxian. That morning we organised transport to the border and successfully crossed it with little issues.

After 6 days of traveling we had finally reached Vietnam, next to Hanoi! The only way we could get to Hanoi was to hire a coach and put our of our kayaks in the back, as transporting luggage on roofs of vehicles is illegal in Vietnam. Our coach driver was extremely helpful and took us to the door of the hotel despite it being a 52 seater bus

and a very small road. At about 4pm that day we finally arrived at the hotel in Hanoi.

Preparation in Hanoi

Once settled and rested we set about the task of negotiating adequate transport to some of the more remote parts of Northern Vietnam. This in itself was no mean task, trying to convey the concept of kayaking in general is hard enough without the added confusion of going to destinations which are very rarely visited. Meanwhile the planning of exactly which rivers to paddle commenced. With some of our more detailed maps having been confiscated in Hong Kong (Long story) this involved some serious speculation as to gradient and general topography.

With destinations decided, we headed for the market to stock up on supplies and generic tat. Stuart





It turned out to be a very useful haggler, his confident and purposeful technique fitted in well.

After all the work was done, we were set for the first couple of weeks. This left us a day or so to get the feel of Hanoi, a fantastically vibrant and busy city with some real character.

Ba-be lake

We decided that the best form of transport would be to hire a 52 seater bus for 10 days and take the rear seats out to make room for our kayaks and kit. It arrived early and we were surprised to find that it was the same bus and driver that brought us from the Vietnam/China border.

We arrived at Ba-be lake early afternoon and started to try to communicate to the locals what we were looking for by showing pictures of waterfalls and rapids. We were pointed in the direction of the other side of the lake about 10km away and only accessible by boat. We were told that the rapids here were extremely dangerous and totally unnavigable. Not disheartened by this as we decided to go and scout the rapids first as we were sure the locals would never have encountered white water kayaking previously.

As it turns out the locals were absolutely correct and the rapids were huge and it would be suicidal to attempt to run them. We got back on the boat with our tails between our



legs, reas-

suring ourselves that had the water been lower (as all of the photos we had seen suggested) we would have probably run the section.

After much more broken conversation, sign language and pointing at pictures and maps with the locals we decided there was less in this area than the maps suggested. So our next move was to head west to Sapa which we were confident had buckets of untapped potential.



Sapa

Despite Sapa only being a few hundred kilometers from Ba-be as the crow flies, the poor road network mean that we had to do a huge loop, almost all the way back down to Hanoi and drive up the Red river taking 2 full days driving.



While driving up the mountain road to Sapa we kept getting glimpses of what looked to be an absolute gem of a river the Ngoi Dum. Very excited we had breakfast and looked over our maps to asses the gradient of the river; things can look very different from the road compared to when your down at the bottom of the valley. Everything looked good to go so we got our stuff together, ready to finally get on our first river.

We battled our way down through the paddy fields to the river. With a fairly simple first couple of kilometers, we were pleased to find the river beginning to drop away in front of us. The smooth granite slabs were more reminiscent of the steep Italian creeks than the muddy valleys of South-East Asia. The river worked its way through and around large boulders giving it a lovely pool drop nature, steadily picking up in gradient with some fantastic technical rapids. One of the perks of running first descents is that you are able to name the rapids yourself, such as "Left in the Sun", "All in my Face", "Broken Dog Leg" and "Blind Leading the Blind".

After some amazing paddling, the heat and humidity started to catch up with the team. The decision was made to head out to the road before we were caught out by the light. This lead to an epic extraction through the jungle. We learnt that if the Vietnamese are able to grow maize on a valley side then it doesn't mean that it is shallow enough to walk up. Exhausted we finally reached the road only to find no sign of a bus, after much walking, hitching and taxi rides we eventually found it in a town at the bottom of the valley.

We arrived back in Sapa and the team celebrated with beers and local surprise-meat Hot Pot!





We spent the next couple of days scouting potential rivers in the area on mopeds' as the rain was torrential; we were in the monsoon season after all. A couple of the team were out of action unfortunately due to sever cases of food poisoning. The scouting in the torrential rain proved difficult with limited visibility but we still returned with a few promising options.

In the morning we started walking our kit down to the put on of the Suoi Cat. We soon realised that this was going to take a very long time, so one by one as scooters drove past we flagged them down and asked for a lift. After some exciting scooter rides and just one crash we all arrived at the put in. The river started off as a nice grade III/IV, before arriving at a horizon line, we got out to inspect and the drop looked good to go, Luke ran the drop first but got stuck at the bottom and ended up swimming. Myself and Eogaihn chase boated after Luke's boat to try and stop it before it traveled too far down stream. We recovered it quickly but found that we had just entered a vertical sided gorge. After looking at the drop bellow for a long long time we decided that it was too dangerous to run as it was not possible for any safety to be set up. As it was not possible to go



back up stream as the drop was too big the only option left was for us to climb out of the gorge. Once we climbed out we realised that we were running out of time so decided to head back up to the road, on reaching the road we found that after 4 hours on the water we had only travelled approximately 1 km down the river in all of that time.

The following day we decided to go and paddle another of the rivers we had looked at while scouting on mopeds, the river Song Ta Van a potential 2 day multiday trip. We reached the river and set off on the trip, the river wasn't too tough but due to a large amount of rain was running at a nice high level. We finished our day fairly and went to set up camp. In doing so we realised we were right next to a number of houses offering homestay and an evening meal so naturally we jumped at the chance to sleep under a proper roof with food cooked for us.



After a quick breakfast we set off to continue on down stream. The water level had dropped off a bit from the previous day however from this point on the gradient was a bit steeper, making it a nice grade III/IV run. It seems that we must have paddled further the day before than we

first thought as we reached our egress point before lunch. We met the bus at the road and spent the remainder of the day scouting out more rivers nearby but with limited success.



Unfortunately we had run out of time with our bus so unfortunately we had to head back to Hanoi as we knew there were lots more fantastic rivers around Sapa just waiting to be paddled.

Hanoi and going South

As soon as we could we booked our train tickets down south to Nha Trang however the soonest train available was in 3 days time.

In the evening our final team member Andy arrived to join us after finally finishing Uni coursework at home. We spent the day filling him in on all of our stories and what we had paddled so far.

After restocking on supplies and feeling sufficiently rested we headed to the train station to catch our 26 hour train down to Nha Trang. We were pleased to arrive in Nha Trang after spending so long in such a small cabin with 8 other big guys and also lots of smelly paddling kit. Straight off the train we sorted transport to Da Lat, a mountain town about 3 hours drive and famous for its surrounding waterfalls!



Da Lat

As previously, on the first day we hired scooters and went to scout the potential rivers and waterfalls in the area. Most the waterfalls looked either too rocky, too low or too shallow so we were somewhat disappointed.

Determined not to feel down we headed to Dray Sap national park a few hours away where we knew there were run-able waterfalls. We arrived late and camped not far from the falls, after an inspection of the falls in the morning the team got a lift up to the top of the river on a tractor like contraption.

The river was an excellent pool drop run with rapids and a few dramatic waterfalls. It came to a climax at the incredible Dray Sap falls, a huge 15 m high, 50 m wide fall. It was paddled by the team largely successfully with just a few exceptions, Luke broke his



nose by hitting his cockpit on landing, Eogiahn's spraydeck imploded on landing leading to a swim and Stuart Watson snapped his paddles on landing also leading to a swim.

Heading back up to Da Lat the following day we spent the next few days doing more river research in the area, however after a few potential leads they all turned out to be



impossible in one way or another, this lead us to think we had exhausted the area for paddling.

After writing out a simple time plan of our remaining days, we realised that we only had 4 days spare before we had to start heading back, and therefore didn't have sufficient time to do any more rivers.

The Journey Back

We headed back from Da Lat to Nha Trang to get a train back up north, but found that the next available train was in 4 days, so with this time to spare before heading back we decided to spend a few days enjoying the beaches, sights and night life of Nha Trang; after all Stuart Haywood's 21st birthday did fall in this time.

Once on the train back to Hanoi we decided that we would try to travel back towards Hong Kong as quickly as possible as we knew how hard it is to travel across China, this meant that we only spent an hour or so in Hanoi before heading off to the border crossing.

As it turns out being a bit more experience on the travel side of things, we crossed China in a fraction of the time, along the way the group was split in order to speed up the travel. With some going direct to Hong Kong and the others stopping in Shenzhen to collect some of the boats which were being freighted there. With time to kill in Shenzhen and Hong Kong before the flights, the sights were seen and a few interesting nights out had by both groups to try and make the most of the respective cities. And after a fantastic 6 weeks had by all we got on our flights back to the cold and wet UK.

Tom Haywood

tom.haywood07@ic.ac.uk

www.kayaknam.com

