

WORDS & PHOTOS NEIL IRWIN

# Source to Sea

The Ganges had never crossed my mind as somewhere I particularly wanted to head to. It wasn't on my bucket list, or any other list for that matter, but when the chance to join an international team who were attempting a world's first paddle board of the river fell into my lap, I was all ears.



Humanity tumbles down to the banks of the river of life

**“ WE’D PUSH OFF AND WITHIN A FEW MINUTES BE ON OUR OWN WITH NOTHING BUT THE RIVER AND THE SPLASHING OF OUR PADDLE STROKES AND MANY HOURS OF THINKING TIME, OR MUSIC FOR THOSE THAT HAD IT, AHEAD OF US. ”**

**I** was after some excitement and adventure, and as a photographer an opportunity to take some amazing photos and it seemed as though this expedition had come along at the right time. Life is all about living, and I wanted a real challenge compared to what I’m normally do.

I had no idea what I would be letting myself in for: paddling for eight hours a day, living off dahl and rice, being awoken by prayer songs from nearby villages and wild dogs at varying times of the morning; all part and parcel of travelling and living on the riverbanks of the Ganges. But it was all for a bigger purpose; to raise awareness for cleaner waters by the means of adventure.

This notion was brought to life through Shilpika Gautam, a native Indian who moved to the UK at an early age and in adult life worked her way up into the hustle and bustle of the investment banking world in London. However, she wanted more out of life. She wanted to be proactive and make a difference. And so Ganges SUP was born – the world’s first source to sea descent of the river Ganges by stand up paddle board. Spike Reid, Kumaran Mahalingam and Pascal Dubois were the other team members that made up Ganges SUP – an Englishman, Indian and German (with a French name) respectively, all of which had an interest in spreading the word and promoting the cleaner water message as well as undertaking such a mammoth journey.

I too wanted to help spread the message, but how do I fit in? I’m the odd one out. Stardboard generously supported the team in terms of some of their equipment; I however, had no equipment of my own as I was not one of the core team members. The only way I was able to join the team was by sourcing my own gear which in my case being a fairly novice paddler, was in the way of a pack raft – something that I had tried before and grew a fondness for. It’s a small inflatable raft approximately 8ft long by 3ft wide that packs down into a 40l bag including my PFD, paddle and other rafting essentials, and would become my platform from which I could take my photos. It was an ingenious way in which I could join the team, except that unlike a SUP, going in a straight line was nigh on impossible.



## THE GANGES

India will soon be the most populated country on our planet (estimated 2022), and this could be seen whilst paddling. Some parts seemed so remote and deathly silent, yet I could hear the occasional rustle from the sugar cane fields or the distant chug of the water pumps sending precious water to farmers' crops. Civilization was always nearby and it was never long before locals headed over to the sides of the river wondering what was passing them. Curiosity would get the better of them and we would be surrounded by puzzled faced wanting to see what these long floating contraptions were, what we were doing and why. It was thanks to Shilpika, who spoke fluent Hindi, that we were able to communicate so that they could understand what we were up to, but also so that we could find out more about their lives and how the river affects them.

Some scenes however were hard to digest. The Ganges is also known as 'The River of Life' and is seen by the Hindus as having great spiritual significance to their culture. It was not uncommon to see open cremations conducted on the banks of the river with many onlookers gathering for the

ceremony. It was hard to take in at first, but I soon became accustomed to the ritual as more and more would take place as we paddled further down the river. It was interesting then to see that people were bathing not too far away from these cremation sites. For us coming from a westernized society the close proximity would be frowned upon yet here, it was everyday life.

**“ THE EXPEDITION WAS BROUGHT TO LIFE BY SHILPIKA GAUTAM. SHE HAD WORKED HER WAY UP INTO THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF THE INVESTMENT BANKING WORLD IN LONDON, HOWEVER, SHE WANTED MORE OUT OF LIFE. ”**

Life for the team soon became routine. The support vehicle that facilitated water and food resupply would find us at a pre-designated location where we would make camp, although sometimes camp wouldn't always be as close as we would have liked and we would incur a walk with all our gear. We would carry all of our own equipment so that we could be self sufficient for at least one night if needed. Tents would be erected and sweet chai tea would be

made which was always a welcome taste after a long day of paddling. Dinner would generally consist of rice and dahl although this changed from time to time with the leftovers becoming our lunch the following day.

Shilpika was the spark that set the trip off.



## THE GANGES



It wouldn't be long after that the sun would set and we would head to our sleeping bags to recoup ready for the next day. Our existence soon began to revolve around the sun and what hours of daylight we had.

Morning would come soon enough with varying options for breakfast – sometimes rice porridge, parathas or poha. The tasks of purifying water from nearby hand pumps and packing up were dealt with and it wouldn't be long before all the equipment was stowed away the boards and we would be ready to set off for another day of paddling; occasionally on our own but more often than not surrounded by the well-wishers who had watched us come in the night before. We'd push off and within a few minutes be on our own with nothing but the river and the splashing of our paddle strokes and many hours of thinking time, or music for those that had it, ahead of us. That was unless the fantastic sight of the Ganges River dolphins making an appearance distracted us. After 101 days and nearly 3,000km paddled, the guys arrived at the mouth of the Ganges at GangarSagar. Shilpika had broken the female record for the longest single journey by sup on the river that supports over 500 million people. The team continue to share their tales and

findings to highlight the positive stories of this river-of-life, of the challenges that the least connected and underprivileged living along its banks face on a daily basis, and how public/private efforts are transforming their quality of life, one village at a time. [SUP](http://www.gangessup.org)

Find out more at [www.gangessup.org](http://www.gangessup.org). Neil Irwin is an outdoor and adventure photographer. See more of his work at [www.nirwin.co.uk](http://www.nirwin.co.uk)

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