A first-person perspective from inside a yellow kayak, looking down a river. The water is turbulent with white rapids. The banks are covered in snow and green grass. The sky is dark and overcast.

melt DOWN

Riding on the icy white shoulders of snowmelt rapids, two paddlers attempt an audacious alpine first descent of Victoria's Upper Big River

STORY + IMAGES David Matters




Rowen Privett's finger slowly traced a faint blue line on the map. As he looked up at me, I knew the seed of a paddling trip had been planted.

A year later I drove into Mt Beauty as the surrounding hills of the Victorian Alps were lit sporadically by a violent storm in the night sky. I was on my way to meet Rowen, who had spent the past year studying the possibility of paddling the Upper Big River, the headwaters of the Mitta Mitta River.

The Big River is fed by snowmelt from the summit of Mt Nelse at Falls Creek, and gradually gains more volume from the melt off the southern side of Victoria's highest mountain, Mt Bogong.

We planned to begin paddling only 5km from the river's source. With such a small catchment above our starting point we needed to stack a few odds in our favour, so aimed to catch the increased flow created by the melt in early spring.

Our mission had two stages. First a 12km hike along a 4WD track, dragging boats attached to golf carts and gear enough for four days of snow camping. Each load weighed around 50kg and the walk involved an ascent of over 600 vertical metres from Clover Dam to Timms Spur track, where we would get our first glimpse of the river.

Then we planned to climb into the kayaks and drop 700 vertical metres to the Mitta Mitta Bridge, eventually finishing at the Omeo Highway, 21km away. At this point Big River becomes the Mitta Mitta River proper.

Rowen's mates Geoff and Lawrie were joining us for the walk in, and would provide invaluable help by taking our empty carts out the next day and assisting with the shuttling of cars and gear.

UP A CREEK BY FOOT

By morning the rain had slowed to a drizzle and a lazy cloud shrouded the foothills. Despite the ferocity of the overnight storm, the weather looked promising for the walk. After a final gear check we piled into the bright yellow 'Bongo' troop carrier.

Rowen and I quietly contemplated the trip we'd spent a year planning. Instead of staying in bed on this icy cold morning, we'd chosen to paddle some of the most remote waterways in the state. The fact no one had ever completed this journey gave the trip an unknown factor that both excited and sickened me.

Geoff pulled in by Clover Dam gate and we unloaded the gear. After only five minutes of hauling I knew this was going to be a long day. My hands burned and I was cursing our lack of overland practice.

We stopped frequently to swap hands and reflect on the vanishing valley below. Mostly I kept my eyes focused on the track ahead of me. Looking up at the road was just too daunting.

The track zigzagged steeply. After the previous night's rainfall it often resembled a river as little creeks burst their





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GRAVITY CALLS

Excited by the next leg, I woke early. While the others slept I had the river to myself. As my eyes followed the fast flowing water, I thought about how I'd soon be travelling on the same current soon, around the bend and out of sight.

With occasional over-the-shoulder glances at the river, Rowen and I packed our gear into drybags and loaded the boats. At the water's edge we traded handshakes and reassuring words with Geoff and Lawrie. They seemed hyped too – I think if they'd found a bottle of champagne, they would have smashed it over our bows.

I felt like a boxer in his corner, being encouraged by his coach before a heavyweight bout. We had no idea what lay ahead, save the knowledge that with steep creeks come potential logjams and big rapids with few eddies to safely park our boats.

Last-minute adjustments complete, Geoff gave Rowen a shove and within seconds I too had pushed into the river. The speed we were travelling felt fantastic in comparison to the previous day's walk. The river was only three metres wide, and the banks were densely covered with alpine shrubs that grew in an arch over our heads.

About 200 metres later we hit our first snag, in the shape of a small branch growing out into the current. Rowen was 10 metres ahead of me, struggling to manoeuvre around. With no eddies I was back paddling desperately, trying to hold my ground and avoid crashing down on him, but the entire width of the river was full of current and it was a fruitless task.

Rowen made it through the strainer unscathed, but I drifted too close to the overhanging shrubs on the banks. Leaning downstream onto the horizontal branches,

banks and cascaded down the tyre ruts in ankle-deep rivulets. The tiny wheels of our carts rolled uneasily over the ground. It was tiring work.

Fastening my boat to a 1960s golf cart with one tie-down strap was proving tricky. The cord kept sliding on the smooth plastic flanks of the kayak, working itself loose as the cart bounced over rough ground. Eventually the boat would list sideways and topple. With a slice of pure bush ingenuity, Lawrie (an engineer) and Geoff (a builder) devised a solution to this with a cradle constructed from logs and bark.

Five hours of uphill hauling and three river crossings later, we finally glimpsed far-off peaks and landmarks such as Quartz Ridge, crowned with a layer of snow. We'd climbed to 800 metres and my energy was very quickly fading. It seemed I could only walk 10 paces before having to rest and swap hands, while Rowen doggedly pushed on, despite having torn knee cartilage just a few days before.

Dehydration was a factor. Earlier in the day my bottle had burst inside my kayak. Lawrie kindly offered me his water bottle and a hand to help steady and pull the cart.

We refused assistance at first, as they were carrying their own supplies, but eventually we consented and with the extra help and water my lethargy faded. As we approached the helipad at 1100 metres I began to feel that we could actually pull this little stunt off.

The sun rested on the horizon allowing us to steal a quick glance at the view we'd earned. Standing on an alpine helipad dusted with a thin layer of snow, with two kayaks attached to golf carts, we must have made a surreal sight. And then Rowen, ever the prankster, suddenly produced a golf club for a photo opportunity.

With the light fading, we towed the boats downwards over the snow for the last half a kilometre. That night we spent snow camping on the banks of the river, falling asleep to the low hiss of the Big as the snowy peaks of the surrounding mountains added to its flow.

their springy young growth pushed me away. Before I knew it, I was sliding underneath the branches, unable to roll. As water swirled around my torso, I prepared myself for a swim.

My pride was bruised as I dragged my boat onto the snow-laden banks but luckily that was all. Better still, the next 3km to Survey Hut was exceptionally clear and we only had to portage twice.

Rapids are graded from one (easy) through to six (you may die). According to the water level we were paddling in, this section would usually be graded as high two/low three. However, as the whole remote river was one long, skinny wave train, with very few eddies, and because we had no information about conditions, we agreed that every rapid should be treated like a grade four.

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Rowen was keen to take a look at Survey Hut. Very few hikers visit this lonely dwelling, which stands at the base of a valley at the end of a remote walking track, and I would not be surprised if we were the first people ever to arrive by boat. After a bite to eat we left the hut with an entry in its logbook and a quick glance at the map.

Over the next three and a half kilometres the river continued to drop 30 metres per kilometre. The water widened to five metres after the confluence with Cairn Creek and flowed notably faster.

The surrounding countryside and water quality was amazing, yet we couldn't allow ourselves to drop our guard and relax for a minute, as the steep gradient still created continuous rapids.

Swapping the lead between rare eddies, we paddled very defensively, utilising reverse ferry glides (moving sideways and paddling backwards) to slow us down and to enable us to grab the scrubby bank when nasty surprises popped up.

At times, we could barely see more than 10 metres ahead. Our policy was to keep a good distance between us, so the rear paddler could read off the front paddler and have more 'grace' time to abandon ship if necessary. It was heart-in-your-mouth paddling, especially when leading, which felt like charging to the frontline of a battle. We were both in a heightened state, utterly consumed by the moment, with fear being instantly translated into excitement. This was why we were here.

PRIDE BEFORE A WATER FALL

As we drew closer to Duane Spur the gradient eased off to 18 metres per kilometre and the river widened to at least 10 metres. Rowen reckons he heard my sigh of relief. We dropped out of the snowline and the banks became scattered with mountain ash trees.

Another party that had started their paddle from here had complained about logjams. Logs did start to feature more, but throughout the whole journey we only had to do a handful of portages, mostly near the end. Bush fires and floods had evidently cleared some of the obstacles encountered by others.

At Duane Spur we began to think that we might complete the trip in one day. The run was free and wide, we were cruising on mostly grade two and three water, and the sun was shining...ah, the complacency!

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“As the stopper reclaimed the bow of my boat I went straight into an airborne bow stand, and was thrown vertically out of the water.”



A horizonline loomed in the distance and Rowen yelled out: “Is that a drop Dave?”

I was leading and had the first glimpse at the possible hazard. Peering over the drop, formed by a fallen tree, I casually dismissed it as nothing more than a log drop of about two metres. I decided to launch the kayak (boof) off the lip and land clear from the recirculating water at the bottom.

That was the plan, but I landed way too short due to the extra weight of the camping gear in my boat. I was pulled back into the violent water of the stopper. My body was thrashed around as I tried to roll and, as I dragged my paddle across the aerated water, I felt my boat turn. I was upright, but only for

a second. As the stopper reclaimed the bow of my boat I went straight into an airborne bow stand, and was thrown vertically out of the water.

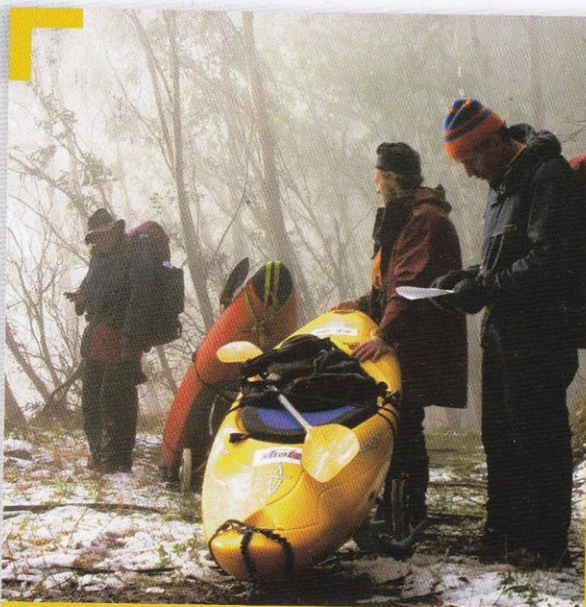
Rowen, who had an up-close view of me from above, says I went from being completely submerged and engulfed by the fold in the current, to becoming a ‘jack in the box’ staring him straight in the face, metres above the water, gasping for air. Needless to say, he thought twice about taking the same line as me.

The stopper’s grasp continued to thrash me and, scared that I’d never get free, I bailed and swam for the bank. I’d been punished for not treating the river with respect and my pride was bruised to a deep shade of crimson.

We were now about 5km from the end and I was starting to feel the pinch. We had to portage around some of the biggest logs I’ve ever seen straddle a river and I was glad to follow Rowen’s lines.

By the time we paddled towards the Mitta Mitta Bridge we had successfully descended 500 vertical metres in one day and our surrounds had changed dramatically from alpine scrub to dry woodland.

Finally able to relax, as we glided into an eddy underneath the bridge, I jokingly asked Rowen whether he had any plans for another trip. Without missing a beat he replied with a tired glint in his eye. “What about the Upper...?”



mitta mitta for mere mortals

If performing first descents along alpine waterways in the icy grip of a Victorian winter doesn’t appeal to you, then there are alternative ways to experience the whitewater rapids of the Mitta Mitta river.

Where the lads finished their epic, below the Mitta Mitta Bridge, is the point that most people’s Mitta Mitta adventures only just begin. A popular run for independent paddlers and commercial whitewater rafting companies alike, a jaunt down the rapids from here is considered a worldclass river experience.

Spring is generally the best time to raft the Mitta Mitta (taking advantage of the snow melt, just as Rowen and Dave did). Highlights include the Mitta Mitta Gorge (an 18km stretch of technical rapids that range from grade two to four, depending on flow) and the Mystery Gorge, a steep and technical grade four rapid that sees the river drop 74 metres in altitude over 4km in length.

Commercial rafting operators running trips in the area include Adventure Victoria (adventurevictoria.com.au, raftingaustralia.com), Adventurama (adventurama.com.au) and Adventure Canoeing (adventurecanoeing.com.au). Expect to pay around \$370 per person for a trip.