

with village visits. I like to think we made a difference.

At one of our later campsites Slava gave a fishing demonstration. That's all it was as he had little hope of success until the silt settled out of the Katun's milky, glacier-fed waters. Though we passed a number of fishermen trying their luck with immense wooden poles, I suspect they were just enjoying an excuse to get out of the house. Slava's technique was to launch a foot-long model catamaran angled for the opposite shore. Line was played out as hydraulic pressure moved the little craft to mid-river. Secondary lines, baited with hand-tied flies, dangled every ten feet in trotline fashion. Too bad we couldn't have seen some action with this ingenious system.

It was a crystal-clear morning as we shoved off for our last day on the river. Confident of our skills with the Russian boats, I asked Misha about the Akkem Gorge ahead where the Katun breaks through the Terektinskiy Range to begin its northerly course to form the mighty Ob. "Fifty-fifty chance a catamaran will flip," he replied. Misha then related the chilling tale of his up-ending in the Gorge that spring. An exhausting swim through pounding whitewater left him ever respectful of the Katun's power.

The Gorge's entrance rapid gave us a general sloshing, then things got serious. At the second set everyone got out to scout. The route etched in our minds, we experienced a privilege of travelling with the senior guide: our cat would run first. Americans and Soviets lined the banks, their safety line throw bags at the ready. With a big craft in big water anticipation or set-up is everything. Last-second moves are useless.

After a hard ferry to mid-river, Misha's orders came in rapid fire: "Sharp right . . . paddle ahead . . . now dig, dig!" We dove into a yawning five-foot hole. Our two bow engines disappeared through a wall of gray-green water. Astern, the rubber hull bucked like an Army mule and lashings flexed

as the cat felt stress. I drew a hard breath — getting ready for swim time — but Misha looked serene.

Blasting out of the hole, we rode through another curler, then made a mandatory eddy on river right just above the next white froth. "Whoa — what a run!" exulted Ron. I let my breath out. This last lunge for the bank, between two major rapids, was possible because a cat cannot take on water. Apart from an inner tube, it is the ultimate self-bailing boat. Only after Misha collected each of his charges in the eddy did he let us tackle the next set. Almost a rerun of the last, but now we powered through with Soviet-like aplomb. I felt as if connected to a well-balanced tool. Some of their boaters were also in the Gorge. All of us rallied a few miles downstream on a broad, sandy beach at the inflow of the Argut River.

Our camaraderie with these paddlers was broken off when they pushed on downstream, while we were told to wait. Though most felt we could have doubled our 180 miles on the Katun, time was up. A helicopter lifted us back to Camp Altay so we could participate in its closing. Speeches that had a tentative, uncertain tone at Camp opening were now given with understanding, genuine warmth, and a commitment to perpetuate new friendships.

Over the months as these matured, I searched for the real meaning of our days in the Altay. Not quite the Katun, that princess of a river, nor those many exceptional experiences. Our early travel in this stunning country was a resoundingly unique adventure, but its essence was the Siberians themselves — an elegant, vibrant people forever welcome in my home.

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