

# River Surfing!

**It started in New Zealand with hardcore surfers experimenting on standing waves in the big rapids. Now it offers thrill-seekers the ultimate contact with raging white water. Rob Greenaway takes you with the flow**

Surfers dream of a perpetual wave — a two or three metre-high wall of curving, cresting water. They imagine carving up that wave on a fast, lightweight board — a ride that goes on for hours. What a dream! Slash the lip, drop onto the face, turn — and find that lip still there, essentially unchanged! Take a break — then go out again an hour later and find that the wave is *still* there!

That's reality in New Zealand. A group of talented surfers have headed away from their normal salt-water habitat to explore some of the country's toughest white-water rivers. They've challenged rivers at flow volumes rafters avoid, survived, and experienced the perpetual wave.

"A peak experience," says Tony Skipage.

He came to New Zealand from South Africa in search of adventure, found it in Queenstown on a perpetual wave, and stayed. "That wave lasted for three weeks. We could have taken our lunch out with us. We just cut loose. Did it up for three

weeks on one wave."

During the floods that hit the South Island in January of 1994, the dream standing wave was born. The local surfers still talk about it, and will until the next flood hits the region. It occurred just before the point where the Kawarau River hits Lake Dunstan in the McKenzie Basin, a place called Sargoods Weir. The weir is about as far from the Pacific Ocean as it is possible to get in New Zealand. The surfers don't get as blond here as they do in the bleaching sun and salt water of the coast, but a



*Ripping on the river. A skilled river surfer can stay on a permanent standing wave for a long time, carving up and down the face and playing in the various forms of turbulence*

Tom Allan

surfing community is still at home in the bronze tussock-land in the foothills of the high country. And while they're waiting for the next perpetual wave, they've been refining river surfing. It's now a viable adventure tourism business — yet it still offers a hardcore element of danger that keeps these professional wave-addicts on a permanent high.

## Get down and boogie!

Surfboards have been replaced with body boards — short "boogie boards" made of a few layers of closed-cell foam — and the men and women of the Kawarau River are attempting to see how deep they can go. While kayakers are hitting folds in the river flow and getting airborne, these surfers are riding their boards to the bottom of the river, up to seven metres below the surface for periods of over 30 seconds. "It just depends on how long you can hold your breath," says Tony.

New Zealander John Imhoof is the man who brought the sport to the world. While



body-surfing in Hawaii he picked up an article that described white-water sledging — an activity that began in France in the early 1970s. As a surfer Imhoof decided that a boogie board would be more functional in a river than the heavier and larger plastic sledge developed by the French. He could also take the board underwater.

Suggesting that the board is more functional than the sledge bothered the French, especially the man who developed sledging, Alain Ventelou — now also based in New Zealand. Ventelou has developed an operation in Rotorua called White Water Sledging NZ, and takes up to 2000 people a year down the Rangitaiki and Tarawera rivers. He first sledged in 1971, and turned it into a business in 1985. Other sledging operations exist in Europe — but they've yet to start river surfing.

### Riding the sledge

A sledge is a hollow plastic pod with up to 70 litres of buoyancy. The river rider leans his or her elbows on it, hands covered by a cowling over the front. The whole pod extends for about half a metre in front of the rider's head.

Alain Ventelou pioneered sledging in Europe. Then he rode 500km down the Sun Kosi in Nepal — from the Chinese border to the Indian border — over 13 days on grade 5+ water. He made a feature for French television called *Whirlwind in the Himalaya*, and in so doing turned a fringe sport into a household word.

"Sledging is different from river surfing. Sledgers such as myself tend to have a background in swimming," says Ventelou. "The river surfers almost always have a surfing background. Their foam boards are more suited to riding big waves and high water volumes. The sledges are also ideal for high water volumes, but they give more protection from rocks and with the extra buoyancy can handle grade 5+ rapids."

"But sledging still scares me," warns Ventelou. "The problem is that I am not a fish — I cannot breathe underwater."

River surfers have the same problem. But they deliberately remove much of the buoyancy from their boards in order to spend more time below the surface — a practice they call "squirting".

### Serious Fun

Queenstown is the sort of place where the local council could run adrenalin through the water reticulation system and the residents wouldn't notice. This is where A J Hackett brought bungy-jumping to the Western world, and where the Shotover Jets first established the white-water jet boat





Spitting Image/Steve Coombes



*Over the top and into a dive! Novices need to exercise caution near hydraulic holes, but experienced surfers play in them, swirling around like a merry-go-round or using the force to take them surging under the water*

adventure business that is now expanding to Fiji and South America. In winter the hotels are choked with skiers, and a few hardcore snowboarders have been known to live in caves to get direct access to the best snow in the country. The high level of hype about this area — and the guarantee of delivery — attracted Tony Skipage while on his pilgrimage for excitement. He joined river surfing pioneer John Imhoof and 12 other fresh-water surfers in Imhoof's newly formed adventure company: Serious Fun. Since 1989 they've been helping bring this extreme white-water activity to anyone fit and fearless enough to try it.

While the hardcore version of the sport appears to offer no way out once the river surfer hits the water, the commercial ac-

tivity is more of a perceived risk than an actual threat. But when the guides take time out from that "work" the limits start to get pushed back.

"For the first-time river surfer it's a buzz just being in the river," say Imhoof. "Immediately he or she is being pushed and pulled by an alien, invisible force. Some people cope with all this better than others. For some it's enough of a rush to swim straight through a rapid. Others relax in their new environment and want to learn — and play — more."

#### **Kawarau magic**

The Kawarau, with a flow between 100 and 300 cumecs, is the perfect river for the neophyte. It's a good, high volume, but

the rapids all flush straight out, there are plenty of big waves and no keeper holes.

Serious Fun's guides put their clients into the water equipped with full-length 5mm wetsuits, buoyancy vests, gloves, fins and helmets, as much for protection from the cold as from the rocks.

After a brief education in river dynamics and steering the board, clients hit the river and take on the first rapid. Twin Bridges, at grade 2, is described by Imhoof and Skipage as easier to manage than average coastal surf.

"There are two main flows in any white-water river," explains Skipage. "The big main flow is down the centre of the river — which is like a conveyor belt heading fast downstream — but the stuff we like to play in is the eddy currents on the sides of the river and around the obstacles." These eddy currents give river surfers the chance to "ride whirlies".

"The effect is the same as pulling the plug in the bath. Water is pulled under by the intersection of two flows and the surfer can get sucked down an eddy line with it. The whirlie flows either clockwise or counter-clockwise, depending on which side of the river it's on, and by holding the board vertically you can latch onto that flow and spin with it," says Skipage. "All you see is blue sky above and a wall of circulating water all around you. It's awesome."

#### **The Chinese Dogleg**

Periods when you're drifting in a calm flow along the Kawarau can be spent admiring the towering peaks of the Carrick and Crown ranges. The river drains Lake Wakatipu, and during the past 150 years this area has developed a history based on the hardships of gold mining, much of it carried out by Chinese labourers. The landscape is rugged, and in summer a golden haze of high-country grasses surrounds the river. Just as you're getting accustomed to your board, the river heats up. The scenery disappears in a maelstrom of water as the rapids reach grades 3 and 4.

"Do Little, Do Nothing rapid is ideal at high flows," says Tony Skipage. "At low flows there's nothing there — hence the name — but as the water gets running a wicked pressure wave forms. We can surf it, slide into an eddy then repeat the performance. For anyone who hasn't been surfing before it's a real thrill."

But the section of rapids at Chinese Dogleg is the big one. With a full grade 4 rating, it takes on the soul of a washing machine. The rapid is divided into two sections, each 50m in length. Three huge pressure waves are formed by the rapid in



the first section. The third wave deflects off a rock wall.

According to Skipage, newcomers to river surfing get thrown about in this section, sometimes getting thrown upside down, vertically and sideways. "So we do it a few times. There's a five-metre cliff before the section, and with coaching surfers are able to jump off this into the river. It gives them a few seconds to get oriented before they hit the rapid."

The guides have developed a jumping style that keeps surfers in touch with their boards. First, a leash at the wrist is used to secure the board. When you jump, you hold the board as high as possible and vertically — one hand on the front rail and one on the lower end of the side. This way you only go about half a metre under, and are in the right position to take on the waves as soon as you reach the surface. The old adage, "What goes up, must come down" is reversed: with a buoyancy jacket, wetsuit and board, the river surfers float high.

The second stage of the Dogleg degenerates into a roller-coaster ride of cross waves and standing waves. Keeping a hold of the board is a challenge, and the thrill is powerful and immediate. The company's motto says it all: "Go with the flow!"

Serious Fun's clients tend to be fitter and younger than the people who generally take rafting trips. But having said this, it should be acknowledged that the oldest surfer the guides have taken down the river was legendary pioneer surfer Bud Brown, in his 84th year.

### Playing smart, playing dumb

Age is not an impediment. If the sport is going to kill anybody, it will be because of their lack of skill and ability to read white water. Unlike ocean surf, a river has things called "keeper holes": perpetual flows of water that take anything to the bottom, hold it captive and circulate it round and round till it gets spat out. Skilled white-water surfers use this to their advantage. Beginners on the other hand, should exercise extreme caution.

The Kaituna River in the North Island, 30km from Rotorua, boasts the highest commercially rafted waterfall in the world: a seven-metre drop that folds rafts in half to the extent that the stern paddler can kiss the bow of the boat without leaving his seat. It's a serious rafting experience and not for the faint-hearted. A group of four highly skilled river surfers ran this waterfall for a television commercial in 1992. Only their extreme skill got them through, but on TV the image was one of just casual excitement: the sort of thing that could



*Not as intimidating as it looks. The body boards and sledges are remarkably river-worthy, and even average surfers can take on rapids that rafters and kayakers avoid. The adrenalin rush of blasting through this kind of white water is exhilarating and addictive*

encourage any water bunny to have a go. In late 1994 that happened. Six surfers took their body boards to the Kaituna and headed for the falls. Without much background in reading white water, they were immediately chewed by the undertow. The first over the falls hit the bottom, and lost his fins and the tops of his feet in the effort to get back to the surface. Number two was pinned to the bottom by the force of water until the body of number three knocked him free. He suffered a grazed jaw and concussion in the process. Number four caught his leg on an underwater obstruction, and ripped the ligaments in one knee. All six were rescued by a waiting raft.

River surfers and sledgers like Imhoof, Skipage and Alain Ventelou are adamant

that the sport is open to anyone reasonably fit. And according to Ventelou all that's required is a lack of fear of water. Skipage agrees. "Although we go out in conditions suitable for only very skilled kayakers, and often unsuitable for rafts, the activity is more thrill than serious risk. All our guides are certified and have extensive experience in teaching newcomers to river surf. We choose rivers that do not have terminal water features, such as the Kaituna."

### Flying underwater

But when the professional teams are alone they really cut loose. In grade 5 water Imhoof, Skipage and rest of the surfing team remove the flotation vests, take the wrist leash off their boards and take them-





A favourite trick of experienced river surfers is "squirting": using the flow of the water and the hydrodynamics of the board to produce a suction effect — like an aircraft wing in reverse — which takes them soaring down under the water. Some of them can ride underwater for 60m and more. The only limit is how long you can breathe underwater

selves flying — underwater. "You don't want too much buoyancy when you're squirting," says Skipage. "Just good control. And we need to be able to ditch the board at any time and kick like mad for the surface."

Squirting is an exercise in hydrodynamics and hydrotopography. The secret is getting the interaction of the water flow and the angle of attack on the board combined in the right way to force the surfer to the bottom. Just as the wing of a plane generates lift, the surfer's board can generate "drop". If a wing stalls the plane quickly returns to earth. If the board stalls, the inherent buoyancy pops the surfer back to the surface.

A squirt begins in a "seam", an intersection where one current flows under another. The rider pushes the board under to get water flowing across this leading edge and along both sides of the "wing". The pressure differential creates "suck" under the board. Now comes the crucial part: as the board is quickly sucked to the bottom of the river, the surfer must maintain the angle of attack or the board will stall and it's game over. He's back on the top! A good squirt will begin with a quick

drop to the bottom, which has the surfer towed down head first above the board. As the squirt levels out, the surfer returns to a horizontal position in line with the board. At this point the board and rider are firmly in the grips of the deep current. It is dark, quiet and eerie.

As the forward momentum of the board slows to equal that of the current, the buoyancy of the board takes over. The surfer can control the rate of ascent: by keeping the board parallel with the surface, the greatest area of resistance is presented to

the water and the rise is slow. Conversely, pointing the nose of the board upwards minimizes resistance, and the board will shoot to the surface. Serious Fun's guides can travel over 60m underwater.

### Practicalities

Serious Fun's commercial trips take 3-4 hours, with about an hour in the water. They cost NZ\$89, including transport to and from Queenstown. Clients must be able to swim, and be of reasonable fitness. River surfing is an intense swimming activity. Ser-

ious Fun can be contacted at: PO Box 564, Queenstown, New Zealand. Tel: (64 3) 442 5262; fax: (64 3) 442 5265. They operate from September to April.

White Water Sledging New Zealand is based in Rotorua, and operates from October to May (the season is longer in the North Island). Sledging the Rangitaiki costs NZ\$90, and again all gear is provided. White Water Sledging can be contacted at: PO Box 408, Rotorua, New Zealand. Tel: (64 7) 349 6100; fax: (64 7) 349 6100. Sledging is also quite physical and you need a reasonable level of fitness and low fear of water.

*River surfing in New Zealand has an excellent safety record thanks to the care taken by organizations like Serious Fun. Still, make sure you're fit before you attempt it*



Spitting Image/Shawn Miller