

Before I get too in depth into the story here are my post trip thoughts; First and foremost, an experience of a lifetime that could only be described as unique. As I sit on Sumner beach relaxing with my Soy Latte, which is very tasty (although I actually ordered a Soy Chai), I once again reflect on how lucky we are here in beautiful Aotearoa. If you are a traveled person and reading this you should know first hand just how lucky we are. If you are one of the Kiwi faithful who hasn't taken a step further than Australia, you probably still know how lucky we are and know there's no need to leave paradise. I mused this morning at the Australian Tourism Authority putting \$20m in to finding a new slogan to promote themselves to the world. I then laughed like a clucky Kookaburra in a Ponga tree when one of the media outlets had decided that the Tourism New Zealand slogan was "very successful, although it really was a no-brainer to come up with that campaign". Of course, in saying that, they are now turning to those same "no-brainer" New Zealanders to come up with their new slogan.

I digress and sometimes can't help myself with a little ramble and a bit of friendly banter with our cousins next door. But I do offer my sincerest apologies if I have offended my neighbors over the ditch, I don't mean to in fact I think you're great, honestly.

But as I said, New Zealand is a wonderful place, I knew this before I left and it seems every time I travel this only gets re-enforced. But I do have to state I think I've been to one of the most beautiful places on Earth. As we, the Destination Rotorua Tourism sponsored New Zealand Rafting team, flew from New Delhi to Jammu-Kashmir, we were given our first glimpse into an area which rivals even Aotearoa for sheer beauty. In fact we likened Sonamarg Glaciers in the Himalayas to something like Milford Sounds, and Aorangi (Mt Cook) but on an even grander scale. Camping at 10,000ft above sea level, surrounded by multiple glaciers, massive rock mountains stretching up to 16,000ft, wild untamed virgin rivers with white water blasting us from all directions, this really is a magnificent part of the world. In all honesty, we can't wait to go back next year to contend once again for what will be the Third Jammu-Kashmir Rafting Cup.

The racing was another story again. The Indian Rafting Foundation outdid itself with its choice of river sections. While there is always room for improvement, the sections they chose were in a word, awesome. The sprint and head to head races were on a great course with a few different line choices. That combined with the fact that lane choice at the start did not play a big part in the eventual outcome of the race made for some epic battles through consistent and high volume grade 3 water. With a lack of choice the slalom section was also held on a decent section again making for interesting racing and outcomes.

But the jewel in the crown for this event was most definitely the down river course. While we couldn't determine the distance of the race given the limited resources of the Indian organizers, our relatively mild training run down this section took only 45 minutes. We basically raced from one dam to another on consistent grade 3 - 4 rapids with enormous amount of flow heaving us down this amazing section of river. The combination of the curious locals lined up against barbed wire fences, standing next to assault rifle armed policemen with the backdrop of magnificent Himalayan mountains towering over us resulted in a simultaneous school girl like cheer by the whole team as we slithered our way down the marathon course on the first of our two training runs.

The previous winners of the competition the Czech Republic boys made the comment to us that maybe the section was a little to "extreme" for the race. Now not to sound arrogant but later that night more Kookaburra like laughs could be heard from the New

Zealand teams tents. Our most senior member of our team Wade Garmson remarked on how this sort of river racing is how the Camel Races used to be run. It would be fair to say that we were excited for the week ahead.

The drive from Srinagar to the Sonamarg township was definitely an experience. The 100km drive took almost three and a half hours as we wound our way up the mountains. For the first 20 or so kilometers there were armed policeman on either side of the road and then every now and then those policeman would be accompanied by a small military like force. It's amazing though how quickly you become de-sensitized to AK-7 or sub-machine gun armed people as they eventually start to blend in with the rest of the civilians who walk the streets. The other thing that made the drive up such an experience was the driving itself. I've made a conscious decision that I probably wouldn't survive on the road here behind the wheel. It appears as if there is no such thing as "Merge like a zip" or even common courtesy. I couldn't tell you whether these were the worst or best drivers in the world. It depends on how you look at it I guess...

Walking around the Sonamarg township, which was the closest bit of civilization to our campsite, saw locals gather, watch and stare as we meandered our way down looking at whatever the stores were trying to hock off. Traditional jewels and shawls were the order of the day as store keepers came out to the front of their shanty shops to tell you how quality their products are and from the get go, they were bartering. Local kids were probably the most entertaining but it was hard to not get over the fact that girls and grown woman alike would avoid you at all costs as if it was frowned upon to even say hello to a male. A cultural difference that was hard to come to terms with but that's all part of new experiences.

Race day was quickly approaching and the team was coming together nicely. The engines were pumping in time and even though we were at altitude the fuel tanks seemed to be well filled and ready to race. Communication was also a key factor for this team, being able to convey ideas, advice and strategic moves to each other in a very positive manner all helped in the preparation leading up to our first race which would be the Sprint.

The sprint race is very simple, take a 1 minute-ish long course, start a team down, take their time and the fastest run of the day wins. This time is also used to choose who gets pole position on the Head to Head race. In reality, of the 11 men's teams competing at these championships, there were four that were going to be very competitive; The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Indian Canoe team and of course us, the Kiwi team. Just to give you a perspective of the caliber of the teams, the Czech Republic has medaled in six of the last eight World Championship events while Slovakia have consistently made the top 5 in previous years, finishing second in 2000. The Indian Canoe team was an unknown but after an awesome run on the sprint race catapulting them up in to fourth spot, their power was something to be reckoned with.

After a powerful start in the sprint race, we showed our class and ability by making a very smooth run down this high volume course and gaining a much faster sprint time than all the other teams recording our first gold medal of the competition. The Czechs, Slovakia and Indian Canoe teams all finished in that order respectively behind us. What this meant was that all four of us teams would have an easy first round in the Head to Head race. Round two in this knockout competition though saw some brilliant racing and interesting results. We were stacked up against the Slovaks, and although they had much newer, bigger and lighter paddles than us our magnificent team work along with

our straight out raw power saw the New Zealand team power ahead of the Slovaks, dismissing them rather easily by the end, opening up a 10 second lead on this 1 minute 30 course. The Indians racing the Czech were another story though. Being a canoe team, the locals had a phenomenal amount of power, and due to a somewhat suspicious missed start for the Czechs, the Indian Canoe team took the lead from the start. With the Euros breathing down their necks they went toe to toe all the way down the course. Unfortunately for the Czechs they never managed to regain what they lost at the start and the surprising winners were the new local heroes.

The finals of the Head to Head competition were even more exciting. First up was the race for bronze which saw the two European teams match up against each other. The Slovakian boys took the initial lead as they broke out of the gates, but after a slight nudge from a surface rock the Czechs passed them and took the lead. Half way down it looked all lost for the Slovaks but coming into the most technical move of the course, they legally and ever so slightly made contact with the Czech raft which set off an unlikely chain of events forcing the six time medalists over a slow pour over wave and allowing the Slovaks to pass and take away a second bronze medal for themselves. The Indian Canoe team would prove to be our best opponent of the day as they managed to get side by side with us as we left the start blocks. But because of their lack of river skills we managed to easily pull away entering the first set of rapids and take another gold medal and put one hand on the coveted Kashmir Cup Trophy.

That night saw us get down and boogie (there are a lack of words to describe what the Kashmir Indian parties are like) to some local music. Being such a male dominated culture it seemed normal for them to have nothing but men at these parties. But suffice to say there was still (disturbingly) bumping and grinding on the dance floor as the Championship Doctor took centre stage and proceeded to have a dance off with every foreigner in site. Humping legs and pelvic thrusting other guys pelvises seemed to be the order of the day for the Doc. as participants and officials alike partied the night away...

Next race was the slalom which would admittedly have to be any New Zealand teams weakness, as this requires an immense amount of training as a team to master. With such intricate moves to make, until the New Zealand teams can receive funding to allow the teams to train together this will always be a weakness. However, as I said earlier we were gelling well as a team and it was no surprise when our first run had us in the top 3 running teams along with the Czechs and the Slovaks. But then after a comedic number of events and some trade mark "Indian" judging, somehow the Czechs got knocked out of all medal hopes and the Indian Police team chimed in to take the silver medal. This was due to their "flawless" run and with no penalties and "awesome" team performance. So the final placings for that race ended with the Slovaks deservedly finishing first, the Indian Police team in an interestingly placed second and us gaining another medal in third place taking home the bronze. Reality should probably have seen the Czech Republic in second but that is in the past now and is a lesson for us all on the interesting Indian culture.

The food in India is delicious, and while the curries were definitely a tasty treat along with the rice and naan, it did become difficult to get excited for the next meal when we found out that that was all we were going to be eating for seven days, twice a day. Breakfast was an even more difficult reality to stomach (pun totally intended). A healthy combination of stale bread, rotten eggs and baby bears helping of cornflakes saw the Kiwi boys hoe in to the delicious Chai tea every meal time. It really was very tasty. Also hygiene habits are exactly what you would think they were in India. On the last morning I

watched one of the cooks wash the tea cups in the dirty hand wash water catching bucket. Can anyone say fresh? What was the biggest surprise and delight to us though was that even with the odds stacked against us, we all came back with no abnormal bowel movements and remained solid throughout our time in India.

The last race of the competition was the downriver. 18 km-"ish" of awesome and consistent grade 3-4 white water as raved about earlier. We were confident for this race as we favored our chances with it being bigger water. Because the Slovaks had taken out the Slalom race, in the overall standings we were equal with them, this meant it came down to who ever won this last race. After a coin toss the Slovaks decided they would start ahead of us, with the Czechs behind us and the Indian Police team behind them. With 1 minute increments we knew we had to stay out of sight of the Czechs to guarantee we beat them, and we had to catch and pass the Slovaks. Our target was set and from the start we were off. Within 10 minutes we had already come to striking distance of the Euro boys and by the half way mark we saw our opportunity to pounce. As they went right on a rapid we saw where the faster water was on the left, powered into it and over took a now disheartened Slovakian team as we knew now that it would take a catastrophe to see us lose from here.

With arms drained of power we made one last big "up" and pushed through the finish line and watched the other teams one by one finish. We knew we had won the Indian Rafting Foundation Kashmir Cup. In a time of 36 minutes and 20 seconds, our closest rivals were a clear 40 seconds behind us in the Czech team, with the Slovaks finishing third a further 1 minute and 40 seconds behind their Euro mates. Against the odds and with only 3 trainings together as a team, we had done it. One of the sweetest things was now we could come home, and we could show our gratitude to all those who supported us with not only our appreciation, but with results. The Kashmir Cup Trophy now sits with our faithful sponsors at Destination Rotorua in the Tourism Rotorua Information Centre who we are grateful for their continued financial and moral support of our New Zealand Mens Rafting team.

Team members Nick Chater (Rotorua), Troy Dolman (Paengaroa), Wade Garmson (Rotorua), Bryce Irving (Tauranga), Takurua Mutu (Rotorua) and Tim Pickering (Rotorua) would also like to thank Goodyear, for their support of Waka Ama and supply of shirts, NZO clothing also for their support and shirts and the New Zealand Rafting Association for their continued support to teams by affiliation with the International Rafting Federation.

Next year; World Championships R4 Netherlands, Pre-world Championships R6 Costa Rica, Indian Rafting Foundation Kashmir Cup, Euro Cup Slovenia, Argentina Championships.....with support