

White Water Rafting:
Fann/Pamir Mountains (Tajikistan)

Kayaking and White Water Rafting: Fann and Pamir Mountains



Tajikistan's land area is 93% mountains and the country is rich in water resources. Two of Central Asia's mighty rivers, the Amu Darya (Oxus) and Zerafshan, have their sources in the glaciers of the Pamir. The country can be viewed as a series of river valleys, with tons of water flowing every second, west to east, into the plains and deserts of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. This terrain is a kayaker's dream, with rafting possibilities for every level of experience.

At present the Great Game Travel company does not have kayaking or rafting equipment for hire, so trips are only possible for those who can bring their own kayaks or rafts. What we can do is provide logistical support for your trip: visa support and permits, vehicle transport, guest house accommodation in Dushanbe at the beginning and end of the trip, and if required camp support along the way (tent hire, cook and full board). Please contact us with your requirements for a quotation.

Tajikistan's main rivers suitable for kayaking and rafting are detailed below:

I. Fann Mountains

Upper Zerafshan River

Start point	Near glacier (source of Zerafshan river)
End point	Aini
Distance	150-200 Km
River days	1-3 (upper part) 1-3 (lower part)
Season	April-May and September-October
Difficulty	Class 2-3 (3-4 in high water) with one class 5 rapid

The Zerafshan river is mainly glacier-fed and therefore has significant volume rise during the summer (200-250 m³/sec comparing to usual 30-60 m³/sec during spring and autumn). The upper Zerafshan consists of two parts: the upper section from the glacier to Revomugk village and so-called "Grand Canyon" from Revomugk to Aini.

Most of the upper section of the river is a wide flat meandering river of class I with only a few short gorges. One is 500 m long, with several class 3-4 drops in an impressive wall canyon. There is another class 3-4 rapid few hundred metres after the canyon opens. A second gorge, some 5-6 Km downstream, is 1,500 m long and also contains several class 3-4 drops.

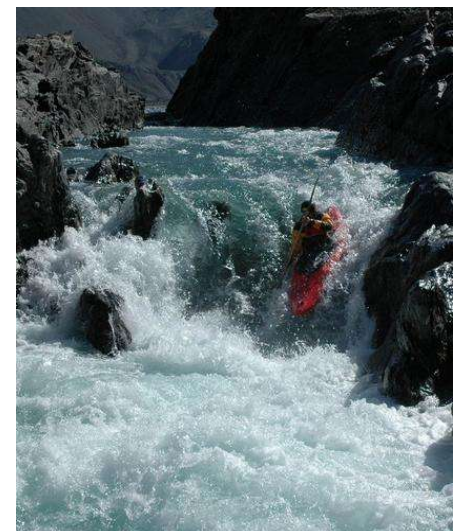
The best point to start paddling lower part of the river is near to Revomugk village. From here almost all the way down to Aini the river is inside a deep gorge, but the water is not too difficult (mainly class 2-3). The section from Revomugk to Pastigav has some impressive walls and narrow canyons.

After Pastigav a quite recent landslide has formed a nasty class 5 rapid (the only one on this river), and portage is almost impossible even for kayaks, so it is not recommended to raft this section (Pastigav to Oburdon).

At Oburdon village, it is possible to rejoin the river at the bridge. There is one quite difficult section: in high water this can be class 4+ paddling and may require long scouting from the top of the canyon, as there is no escape once you're inside it. In low water it can be run without bank scouting.

After this section river eases and continues as series of class 2-3 canyons and open flat sections all the way down to the confluence with the Fann river at Aini. For easy rafting it is recommended to start somewhere on this section.

After the Fann confluence, the river enters the "Aini landslide", a 2 Km-long gorge. In high water this can be a very powerful, big volume class 4 section. Another similar landslide is located some 10-12 km further downstream, near Dardar village, but further downstream the river eases to class 1-2 and gradually exits the mountains.



Yaghnob River

Start point	Anzob Village
End point	Zerafshan II Village
Distance	20-25 Km
River days	1-2
Season	April-May and September-October
Difficulty	Class 4-5 (6)

The upper Yaghnob river has been reported as a brilliant grade 4-5 expedition, paddling through awesome gorges, but without much portage. (This is really a self-support expedition as there are no roads in the upper Yaghnob valley).

The lower Yaghnob is not a particularly nice river to run, because it consists of several short stretches separated by unrunnable (sometimes underground) sections. The first such section is the giant Tolok landslide, said to have happened almost 300 years ago. The river goes underground here, emerging about 1 Km downstream. It is possible to climb down to the place where the Yaghnob comes out of the landslide and from here a good 4 Km-long class 4-5 section starts.

Iskandar River

Start point	Iskandarkul Lake
End point	Zerafshan II Village
Distance	20-25 Km
River days	1-2
Season	April-May and September-October
Difficulty	Class 4-5

The Iskandar river is very good for technical kayaking, not too extreme, starting from the famous Iskandarkul Lake (named after Alexander the Great whose armies passed this way on their way to conquer Samarkand). The Iskandar river rises significantly during the summer snow and ice melting (from 10-20 m³/sec in the spring/autumn to some 40-60 m³/sec in summer). Rafting is not recommended, as the river is too tight and technical.

Put-in is possible directly at the lake, but there is a 30 m waterfall some 2 Km downstream followed by a 200-300 m section which is not runnable. However, it is possible to carry rafts around this section. The rest of the gorge is full of solid class 4 and 5 rapids.

Further downstream, the road rejoins the river, and the same level of whitewater continues for 2-3 more Km. This is the natural starting point if you do not want to run the gorge. This class 4-5 section finishes near Narvad village and then the river eases to mainly class 3-4.

The last two class 4 rapids are located within Zerafshan II village. Take-out is possible after the confluence with the Yaghnob river, or you may continue down the Fann river, which is formed by the Iskandar and Yaghnob confluence.



Fann River

Start point	Zerafshan-II village
End point	Aini
Distance	30 Km
River days	1
Season	April-May and September-October
Difficulty	Class 4-5

The Fann river (Fann Darya) is formed by the confluence of the Yaghnob and Iskandar rivers and breaks north through the Zerafshan range in a very narrow and impressive gorge, to join the Zerafshan river near the village of Aini. Almost all the river can be rafted, with the exception of two rapids in the middle. We would recommend the lower part of it for very good "adrenaline" style rafting. The upper part is less impressive in terms of landscape and white-water.

Normal flow during spring and fall is usually some 30-60 m³/sec but as for all rivers here summer flow is much higher (up to 200 m³/sec in July).

The first 7-8 Km to the village of Pete are quite easy class 2-3, as the river gradually enters the gorge. From Pete, the rapids become more solid, and by the time Yafch creek comes from the right 3 Km later, it is full-on class 4 paddling. A particularly nasty rapid is found just after the Yafch entrance, where the remains of an old bridge obstruct part of the river.

Some 2 Km downstream is the first class 5 rapid. In high water it may require portage, which can be quite easily done by the road on the river left. After a further 2 Km there is a 200 m canyon which cannot be entered due to a drop plugged by a rock. On the other side of this canyon, for the next 10 Km down to the Zerafshan confluence, the Fann river becomes a class 4 "Fun" river. It is slightly less continuous than before, so there are pools to catch your breath and plenty of rapids of all sorts.

The river becomes quite flat 2-3 Km before the Zerafshan confluence. Take-out can be at the bridge in Aini or elsewhere where the road is close enough to the river.



Varzob River

Varzob Gorge has the advantage that it is very close to Dushanbe, so is suitable for acclimatisation and practice before heading further afield. The upper section of the river (30-70 Km from Dushanbe) is good fun, with not much scouting required and some good drops. Most of the runs on this section of the river are class 4.

2. Pamir Mountains

The Pamir region is bounded by two major river valleys – the Surkhob to the north and the Panj to the west and south. The Panj river forms the border with Afghanistan. The eastern Pamir is an arid high-altitude plateau, with only a few flat and meandering rivers. In contrast, the west Pamir is deeply cut by narrow valleys and almost all the rivers here are class 4 to 6.

All the rivers in the Pamir are tributaries of either the Panj (Vanj, Yazgulem, Bartang, Gunt and Shakhdara) or Surkhob (Muksu and Obizhingou). The biggest river in the inner Pamir is the Bartang, but this is mainly class 2-3, and is not described below. The Panj and Surkhob themselves are also relatively flat, mainly class 2-3 rivers, and in any case the Panj is off-limits due to border security. All the remaining rivers are described below.

Apart from the Yazgulem and Muksu, all these rivers have roads going up the valleys, so it is possible to provide vehicle support. On the Yazgulem and Muksu rivers, all equipment must be carried in the kayaks.

Rivers in the Pamirs are almost completely glacier-fed, with extremely high flows during the summer (up to 10-20 times the May/September volume). Therefore the most suitable paddling season is September and early October. The first half of May is also possible, but the spring weather is less predictable and road access may be difficult due to snow on the passes.

These rivers were all run in catamaran rafts during the Soviet era, although there are some sections which have never been attempted. Some parts of Yazgulem and Shakhdara (and possibly Muksu) were also kayaked. The Great Game Travel Company has provided logistical support to two teams who kayaked these rivers in September 2003 and September/October 2004. As far as we know these were the first teams to attempt these rivers since the early 1990s.

Vanj River

Elevation: 2,000-2,500 m

This river is the first major tributary of the Panj when travelling from Dushanbe to Khorog along the Pamir Highway. The valley is quite populated and a road exists all the way up. The upper section of the river, near the glacier, is suitable for rafting. Expected volume in September is 40-80 cms (1400-2800 cfs).

Yazgulem River

Elevation: 2,000-2,500 m

The next valley to the south, the Yazgulem has only a few villages in its lower stretch. The road goes up the valley only for some 20-30 Km to the last village of Djamak. From here it is possible to hike up another 20-25 km to Yais, with donkey support for part of the way. From Yais the river starts as a quite continuous class 4, and then there is a difficult (class 5 ?) section upstream of Djamak and another such section few Km downstream. Average river gradient is 20 m/Km. Expected volume in September is 30-60 cms (1000-2000 cfs).

Yazgulem was run at least twice in the 1980s and once in 2004 (see photo).



Shakhdara River

Elevation: 2,500-3,200 m

One of the two rivers (the one is Gunt, see below) that join each other just before the Panj confluence at Khorog. There is a side road going all the way up the Shakhdara valley. There is a section suitable for paddling some 60-80 Km up from Khorog, which includes at least one unrun gorge (class 5 ?) near Serdj village, containing some 5-10 m waterfalls (?). Overall difficulty is estimated probably at 4+/5- level. Average river gradient is 20-30 m/Km. Expected volume in September is 20-40 cms (700-1500 cfs).

Gunt River

Elevation: 2,500-3,200 m

One of the major rivers of the inner Pamir, the Gunt enters the Panj right at the town of Khorog, soon after it joins the Shakh dara River. The Pamir Highway follows most of the Gunt valley, so it is easily accessible. Whitewater interest is concentrated at the lower 30-40 Km of the river, where it drops from the Pamir plateau to the east. Overall difficulty is probably at 4/5 level, with some local rapids that may be 5/5+. Average gradient is 15-20 m/km. Expected volume in the second half of September is 60-90 cms (2100-3100 cfs).

Further up the river flattens out at the Pamir Plateau and has only one potential whitewater spot, called Chartym landslide, a 500 m section of river dropping some 50 m, definitely never run before, possibly class 5-6 or unrunnable.

Muksu River

Elevation: 3,000-4,300 m

Estimated river time: 6-8 days

The Muksu has been known as the most inaccessible and difficult river of the former USSR. It is sourced by the glaciers running down from the highest peaks in the Pamirs (Peak Communism and Peak Lenin), and is located in a completely isolated region of the northern Pamirs. The Muksu sources directly from Fedchenko Glacier, at 80 Km one of the longest mountain glaciers in the world.

The Muksu can only be run as a completely self-supported expedition. From a side road from the Pamir Highway, it is possible to drive over Takhtakorun pass (4,555 m), which leads to the Belandkiik River, a tributary of the Muksu. From the road head it is possible to trek 15-20 Km to the put-in point on Belandkiik at an altitude of 4,300 m. Belandkiik has a length of some 60-70 Km and an average gradient of 25 m/Km. It drops from 4,300 m to approx 2,800 m at the Muksu confluence.

Belandkiik itself is class 4 (?) and expected volume in September is 10-15 cms (350-600 cfs). After it joins Muksu the flow increases significantly, but average gradient is not so steep; some 10-12 m/Km. It is recommended to run this river at low level which is late September. Expected volume in late September is 80-120 cms or 2800-4200 cfs After a quite flat section the river enters a series of nasty class 5/5+ (?) gorges before it joins the Kyzyl-su river to form the mighty Surkhob and exit the Pamirs.

The Muksu River has been run using large catarafts a number of times in the 1980s.

Obizhingou River

Elevation: 1,300-2,000 m

The Obizhingou does not truly belong to the Pamirs. This river flows out of north-west edge of the region, halfway from the Muksu take-out to Dushanbe. The river is at a low elevation and is very powerful, so it is recommended to run this river in late September or early October. Expected volume in early October is 150-200 cms (5,000-7,000 cfs). Obizhingou should be warm even in October.

There are several class 4-5 gorges on the river, separated by long easy sections. Even inside gorges average gradient is low (approx 10 m/Km) so rapids should not be continuous. The lower part of the river is followed by the Dushanbe-Khorog route and there is a road further up the valley. In the 1980s Obizhingou was quite a popular whitewater trip due to easy access from Dushanbe, although the most difficult sections were rarely run. One of our groups ran this river in 2003.

Contact details

To request a quotation or discuss your requirements, please contact:

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