

Get me to the Alps 2 - White water rescue

Contributed by Inhouse writer
Wednesday, 15 November 2006

In a previous Outsider we ran through some key skills that need to be addressed in order to gain independence on grade 3-4 Alpine rivers. The emphasis was on boat control, fitness and training approaches. Now we shift our focus onto safety. How can we minimise our risk on the river, and how can we ensure that when things do go wrong, our rescues are swift and effective?

Prevention is better than cure…

This is the over-riding principle of white water safety. It is astonishing how many complicated rescue situations could have been avoided by people abiding by some simple precautions. Allowing for the fact that every situation is different, there are some basic safety rules that are common to all river trips:

1. Organisation and Communication

It is essential that your team develop an organised structure when descending a white water river and that information is communicated clearly between team members. With the noise of white water often overwhelming, effective visual signalling is a must.

Giving off the right signals…

While tight teams of paddlers can design highly complex signalling systems if they wish, the principles behind any visual signal are simple - the signal should be easy to recognise from a distance, signals should not bear too close a resemblance to each other and there should be consistency in their use across the whole team.

Take some time at the start of every river trip to agree on what signals will be used and run through any possible scenarios with the team. Confusion between similar signals can lead to some dangerous situations.

More than once I have received a signal that the crew understood as “paddle on”, but which actually meant

“nasty stopper”! On my very first trip away I was sure the leader was telling me to go left, when he was actually saying portage left. The waterfall was completely unrunnable! Confusion like that can have serious consequences, so agree a system and stick with it.

Controlling your descent…

It is vital that the team are in agreement on how best to organise the descent. Often the river running style of the group is dependent upon the difficulty of the water.

On easier stretches, the whole group may be on the move together. As the gradient picks up they may move to an eddy hopping system where each paddler moves to the eddy the paddler in front is vacating. As the difficulty increases further, the team may move to a one by one descent, with pre-placement of rescue cover for specific hazards.

Take me to your leader…

It may be appropriate to allocate a definite lead paddler, or it may work better to allow experienced paddlers to rotate the lead. Having an experienced sweep paddler (whose job is to be the last boat down every rapid) is also useful. Some groups use a buddy system where boaters are paired up for the descent, a system that is particularly effective in larger groups.

Safety in numbers?

Group size is a key consideration. I prefer a group of 4 kayakers that are looking out for each other to a group of 14 boaters paddling as individuals. I remember once meeting a lone paddler on the Guardian Angel Gorge (a committing section of class 4) who had simply been forgotten by his crew. Incidents like that should never be allowed happen. If your group is large then consider splitting into small crews and leaving some time between teams.

Although I admit to paddling many rivers with just one partner, it is not ideal - a single person will always struggle in a rescue situation. The old adage “less than 3 should never be” is a good one. For advanced water, my ideal team has between 4 and 6 paddlers who know each other well, take a cautious but confident approach to the river, paddle intelligently with skill and style and communicate well with a range of straightforward signals.

2. Line of Sight

Open your eyes…

The basic rule is “never run anything blind”. We must learn to use the whole width of the river to position ourselves in the place that will maximise our field of vision. This means developing the skills to catch the tightest of eddies and reverse ferry glide above drops to gather as much visual information as possible.

It also means that we cannot run rapids on memory. A drop that was clean last week may have a tree lodged in it this week. Landslides can drastically change a river’s character and hazards appear and disappear at different water levels.

Keep your options open…

The progression is logical – gather as much information as you can and decide on a line based on that information. If you cannot get enough information from your boat, then you need to scout from the bank. This leads us onto another key rule: “if you don’t know what is coming up, then make sure you always have the option to scout and/or portage”.

It is tragic to read stories about the lead paddler who went that extra eddy to get a better view, only to find themselves committed to a nasty rapid with no place to get out of their boat. Always ensure there is an eddy that allows you escape from the hectic river onto the relative safety of the bank.

While bank scouting is time consuming, it is a lifesaver. By walking the length of the rapid you can build a more complete picture of what the river is doing and make an appropriate plan. It enables you to identify specific targets in the rapid and break down how you will drive your boat to achieve them. In this way, a constructive scout from the bank not only keeps you and your crew safe, it also improves your paddling skills.

3. Apply your skills

It is important to remember that when you run a rapid it is just you and the river. Nobody else can send you on the right line. You must learn to make mature decisions about whether or not you want to paddle. This involves weighing up your experience, relating your skills to the rapid and adopting the right psychological approach.

Avoid the hype…

There are often distractions at the river's edge – competition, peer pressure, people talking up or playing down specific hazards. You need to separate yourself from all the hype and bring everything down to 2 simple questions:

1. Do I have the skills to run this rapid? 2. Do I want to run this rapid?

Answering yes to question 1 means you can read the water, break down what needs to be done in your boat and execute that plan. Answering yes to question 2 means you have identified the dangers, assessed the likelihood and consequence of mishap and are comfortable with the level of risk the rapid poses to you.

The walk of shame?

The risk of a rapid depends on many things and varies from paddler to paddler. In addition, certain people are more comfortable with risk-taking than others. Senseless psyching up in a macho sense will not decrease the risk of a rapid, but an intelligent and thorough assessment from the bank may do. At the end of the day, you must make your own call – to run the rapid or walk the bank.

There is never any shame in walking, providing you have arrived at that decision after a calm, objective evaluation of the rapid. It is this type of independent decision making, right at the cold face, that builds people into experienced and safe river paddlers.

4. Be a step ahead.

Good white water paddling is all about being a step ahead of the game, anticipating what is coming up and taking pre-emptive action. Every move you make on the river should line you up for the next move. Just like the good footballer that never stops to admire a good pass, you must stay pro-active and look to the next manoeuvre.

What if…

It is amazing how many paddlers have rocks or holes come out of nowhere, while they were staring at the nose of their boat or waving to the camera! By always keeping an eye on our future water, we can minimise the chance of that happening. Think about the “what ifs”. “If they swim on this rapid, should I tow them river left or river right? If I want to be in that eddy, at what angle should I hit that wave… and so on”

Be a sharp shooter…

It is this kind of switched on approach that helps keep your group safe on the river. It’s not paranoia, just an ability to turn on the river brain, stay sharp and enjoy the river for all it’s worth.

When prevention fails:

Unfortunately not all incidents are avoidable all of the time. Occasionally, someone takes a swim. This is fine – a natural side effect of pushing your paddling limits. We’re all between swims after all. What matters is how we react when it does happen.

Look after number 1…

The first rule of rescue is the same whether we are a fire fighter or a lifeguard – our first responsibility is to ourselves. If we neglect our own safety for the sake of a rescue, we are likely to compound the problem and produce an extra casualty. With this principle in mind there are a number of hard skills to be learnt that cannot be covered from the armchair.

Rescue training…

Since these are physical skills, I won’t even attempt to talk you through them. Like paddling itself, rescue skills need to be learnt and practiced outdoors. I could fill this magazine with pictures of throw bags and complex rope systems and do nothing but confuse you. Instead I’ll refer you to an excellent book by Franco Ferrero - White Water Safety and Rescue, published by Pesda Press, ISBN 0-9531956-0-0.

The ICU River Safety and Rescue courses are an excellent way to bring yourself up to speed on rescue technique. RSR

1 takes 1 day and RSR 2 takes 2 days to complete. If you are at the paddling standard then an ICU level 4 or level 5 training course is also extremely useful. The Swiftwater Rescue Technician courses are also worthwhile. They were designed in the United States and are used in emergency services training worldwide.

Keeping it simple…

Aside from emphasising the need to protect your own safety, these courses will equip you with some core skills to assist swimmers and retrieve lost equipment. The cornerstone principle is that rescue systems should be as simple and clean as possible, and always allow to rescuer to release from the set up.

Simulated rescue scenarios are used to practice the skills of incident assessment and decision making. You start with simple boat to swimmer rescue techniques, progress through basic throwbag skills and end up with highly complex rope arrangements that maximise mechanical advantage to access a casualty or pinned equipment.

Practice makes perfect…

Once these important skills have been learnt and mastered it is vital to keep practising. If you regularly paddle with the same people then get out and practice with them and build a solid crew that are well prepared for the rigours of advanced rivers.

In conclusion…

By following some basic safety principles we can minimise the chance of mishap on river trips. However, incidents will happen – it’s just part and parcel of the sport. By getting the right training and continuing to practice the essential skills, we can make sure that our response is swift and effective, and have longer, safer, more enjoyable kayaking careers. Enjoy the river!

