

10 YEARS, 80 FLIGHTS

A decade of kayaking the world

By Josh Neilson



Nepal -10 day expedition 2008

I remember being on a river trip while studying Outdoor Education in Christchurch and hearing a guy say he had just finished his 20th consecutive summer kayaking all over the world! I was 20 at the time, so that was half of my life, living what I could only imagine as a dream.

This was a key moment for me, and although the number of years was irrelevant, I knew I wanted to follow this path. With the support of a bunch of key people and companies, I set off on my first northern hemisphere summer and the start of my own 10-year run.

Having been busy working on photography projects and a lack of kayaking trips for me over the past few months, I scoured the hard drives to find a kayaking story to tell. I soon found my first file dating back to 2006 where it all began. The inspiration the guy on the river gave me came to mind. I thought I would have a recap of my own. From past issues of the NZ Kayak Magazine, you will no doubt remember a lot of these moments because New Zealand Kayak Magazine and Canoe & Kayak have been 100% behind me the whole time!

After a short holiday away it's pretty easy to remember your favourite place, but it becomes difficult when you're constantly on the road seeing amazing new sights!

2006 started with a season in California, then Canadian big water and on to Uganda and Zambia. It's fair to say; that combination is enough to hook anyone into the kayaking travel lifestyle. From kayaking expeditions in Nepal to seasons running big waterfalls in Norway, there is enough adventure out there to fill many more than 10 years. Everywhere I went and every friend I made along the way, opened up new opportunities and places to go to.

At first I spent my NZ summers working on my neighbours' orchard and farm to fund the trips but I soon developed a portfolio of photos from my travels and that soon turned into a full time job. While I'd love to say I could just shoot kayaking and extreme sports for a job, that is sadly not that easy, so weddings and commercial work filled in my days while I dreamed of the next mission.

A few classic spots were too hard not to return to but I always tried to add one new country per year to keep things interesting! Choosing only one favourite place is impossible, but I can break them down into a couple of categories.

Classics – To me, these provide the best quality of white water for your money. California is known for its long seasons of hot weather and spectacular granite riverbeds.

Norway has its amazing white water and 24 hours of daylight.

Uganda and Zambia for their warm water and big volume crashing waves.

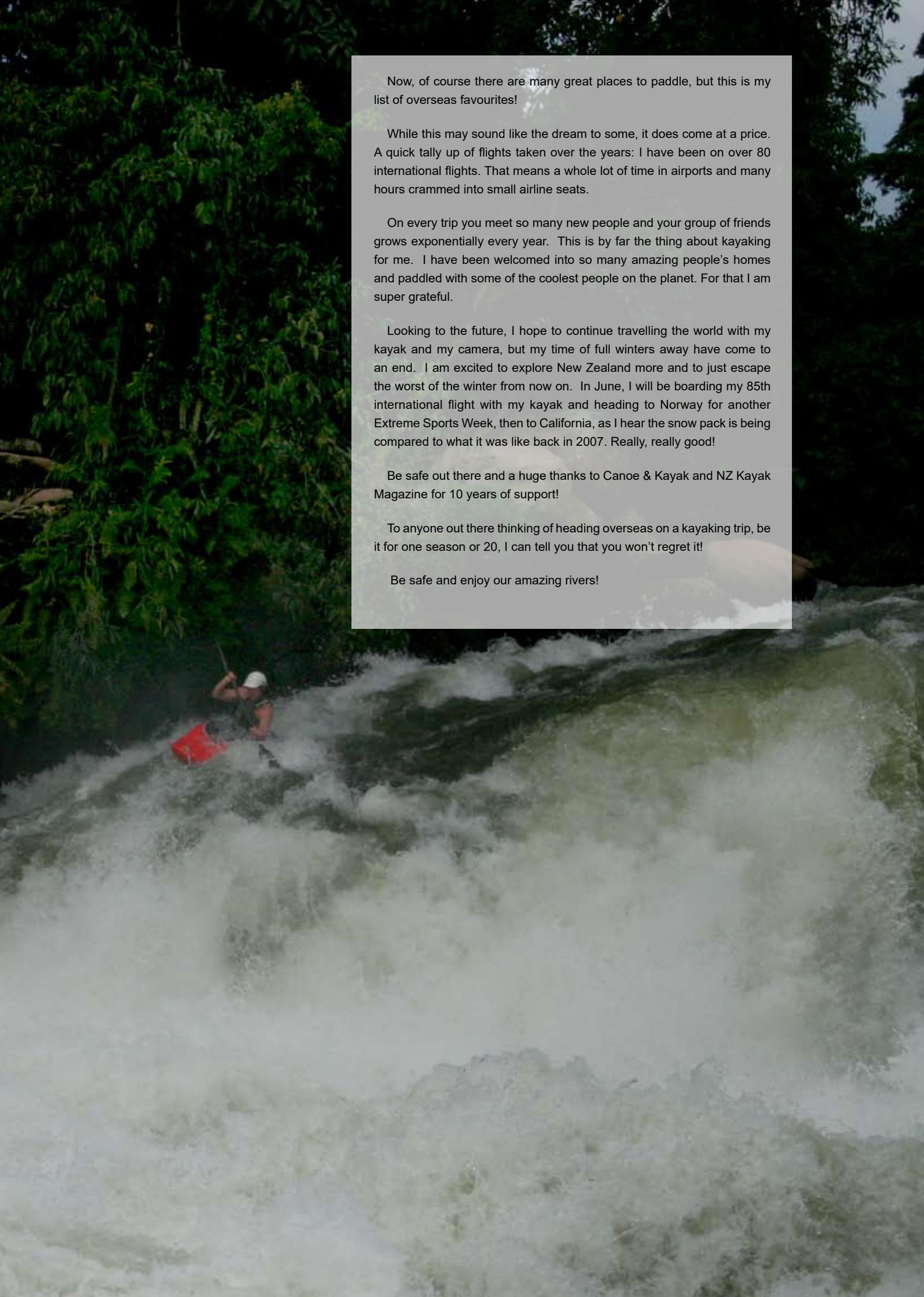
Adventures – Quebec, only the brave can handle the cold and remoteness when Quebec is on! It has the largest range of amazing creeking and big water but snow and ice are a common sight here!

Thailand - I had to return. It is full of potential but you have to work for it. There is a lot of sneaking around park security and jungle bashing, but so worth the effort!

Nepal is just quality all round. Not many roadside runs, but if you're up for an adventure, this is the place!

Ben Jackson - Uganda 2012
Photo by Josh Neilson





Now, of course there are many great places to paddle, but this is my list of overseas favourites!

While this may sound like the dream to some, it does come at a price. A quick tally up of flights taken over the years: I have been on over 80 international flights. That means a whole lot of time in airports and many hours crammed into small airline seats.

On every trip you meet so many new people and your group of friends grows exponentially every year. This is by far the thing about kayaking for me. I have been welcomed into so many amazing people's homes and paddled with some of the coolest people on the planet. For that I am super grateful.

Looking to the future, I hope to continue travelling the world with my kayak and my camera, but my time of full winters away have come to an end. I am excited to explore New Zealand more and to just escape the worst of the winter from now on. In June, I will be boarding my 85th international flight with my kayak and heading to Norway for another Extreme Sports Week, then to California, as I hear the snow pack is being compared to what it was like back in 2007. Really, really good!

Be safe out there and a huge thanks to Canoe & Kayak and NZ Kayak Magazine for 10 years of support!

To anyone out there thinking of heading overseas on a kayaking trip, be it for one season or 20, I can tell you that you won't regret it!

Be safe and enjoy our amazing rivers!



Josh Neilson - Thailand 2010