

LIFE WHICH YOU LOOK FOR ...

Pack-rafting Tasmania's Jane River, 2016.

by Grant Dixon



Rivers need water to exist. Notwithstanding this obvious fact, it was difficult to view the teeming rain in this positive light. We struggled under our bulging overweight packs, stuffed with rafting gear, 12 days food and approaching 40 kilograms each, slipping and tripping in the mud and sodden vegetation of the overgrown Jane River Track, and sometimes reduced to crawling under fallen trees. This continued for well into our second day, until the first glimmers of sunshine appeared soon after we reached the banks of Erebus Rivulet. Resting amongst the steaming vegetation, we were pleased to note the strong flow and good water level in this stream, our planned access to the Jane River but renowned for log jams.

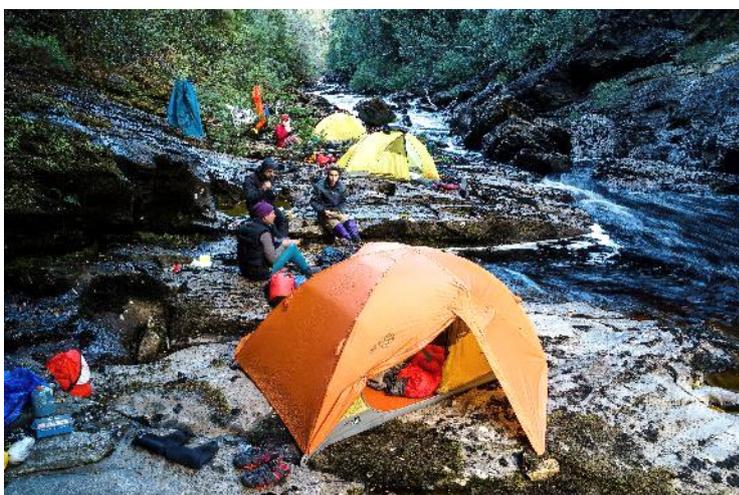
The Jane River is the major tributary of Tasmania's famous Franklin River. It rises about 12 kilometres south of the distinctive white dome of Frenchmans Cap and winds through wild and remote forest and gorge country. The river initially meanders through low scrubby terrain across Lightning Plains but becomes readily navigable by small raft below its confluence with the Erebus Rivulet, and this latter stream provides the best access to the Jane. In the subsequent 30 kilometre journey to the Franklin River it falls some 250 metres and passes through three lengthy and spectacular gorges. Here, portages are necessary and river levels are a major consideration for travellers.

While the Franklin River can be accessed directly from the Lyell Highway, the Jane requires a 23 kilometre slog down the remnants of an old mining access track, closed over 25 years ago. Alluvial gold was found at Reward Creek (south of the Erebus) in 1935 and mined on a small scale over the subsequent 20 years. The Jane River Track, including bridges of sorts over several major streams, was constructed in the late 1930s as a packing route to the goldfield. There was renewed active interest in the gold prospect by Hobart mining syndicates during the 1970s and 80s, which included upgrading of the track and the use of tractors and an excavator. Little gold was extracted and the mining operation was finally closed down after the area was included in an expanded Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area in 1989. The Jane River Track has become increasingly overgrown ever since. While this has resulted in a welcome increase in the remoteness of this wild country, on the Jane River itself there is virtually no evidence of human activity as has been the case for thousands of years.

The first recreational descent of the Jane River was by lilo in 1976. Trips are still rare and the river remains very remote and challenging with little evidence along its banks of those who have gone before.

There were plenty of blue gaps between the clouds as we set off down the Erebus Rivulet, and this turned out to be the start of a week of fine dry weather making our trip both generally pleasant and perhaps more carefree than those who might face rising river levels when tackling the Jane. With our first tentative paddle strokes we gained a feel for the stability of our small pack-rafts with a heavy load strapped onto the bow. Being on the water also provided assurance that we were really here, that the planning and access trials were over, and the challenges ahead would likely be of a different nature.

The Erebus Rivulet meandered through lush rainforest, still dripping from yesterday's rain, with the occasional shingle rapid and, despite relatively high water level, many logs. Sometimes merely jumping out was enough to float the raft over an obstacle before re-entering and continuing on, all



the time trying to keep the raft oriented to slide through gaps between logs and shingle banks. A technique evolved for crossing larger mid-stream logs whereby we would drift up to the log, clamber onto it, drag the laden raft's bow onto the log's crest and then quickly swivel the stern over and into the river downstream, before leaping in and continuing on. This was often awkward, balancing on a slippery log

while hauling a heavy weight in a far from ergonomic position, but thankfully no injuries were reported.

Our first river camp was on a mid-stream shingle bank not far down the Jane River, with a downstream view of hills closing in and the bulk of River Peak North beyond; the river was entering the gorge country. During next morning, the river's bends became progressively tighter, the ridges steeper, and the sliver of sky seen above narrower as we entered the long Enkidu Gorge.

The Jane River's three major gorges have been named Enkidu, Gilgamesh and Humbaba. These unusual names are characters in an epic poem from ancient Mesopotamia, written some 4000 years ago, the moral of which is, "life which you look for you will never find". This is perhaps an appropriate message to reflect on as one journeys down a river like the Jane.

One is always circumspect when tackling remote rivers where rescue would be difficult and the dark water, rocks and logs can hide many traps, but we still had plenty of adrenalin rushes shooting smaller rapids, and we all endured dunkings at some time. The first section of Enkidu Gorge provided a number of such experiences as well as many short portages around more intimidating small drops. At one point Chris distinguished himself by successfully completing the final very bouncy section of a long series of rapids backwards and actually looking like he had planned it.



Once in the long and winding gorge, immersed in the aforementioned experiences, time passed unnoticed. Late in the afternoon we had casually started what we thought was another straightforward walk past a rapid, usually involving one trip with the pack and another with raft and paddle (easier than manhandling both at once on awkward rocks) when it became clear the tiers of rapids continued around the next river bend and we'd have to climb over a bluff to bypass them. We had started the first of the two unavoidable long portages on the Jane River that required clambering high above the river. Retreating somewhat, we camped on a riverside pavement dotted with small rock pools and downstream-leaning shrubs. Dinner on the rocks on another clear and still evening preceded sleep lulled by the regular sound of a cascade just metres from our heads.

Next morning we packed with the imminent portage in mind, deflating rafts and breaking down paddles to more easily traverse the riverside scrub and subsequent bluffs. Launching into a pool below where the river burst from between quartzite bluffs, we then negotiated a series of pools and

paces for perhaps 30 minutes before Enkidu Gorge rapidly ended. A long straight section with some easy rapids, mostly just faster flowing sections of the river, followed before we entered the first of two broad transverse valleys between the major gorges.

Carbonate rocks are extensive along the Jane and Franklin Rivers, both limestone and dolomite in the former underlying the broad valleys between the quartzite ridges that the gorges cut through, and caves are hidden in the thick forested hinterland and along the lower Franklin River. Limestone forms extensive and fascinating undercut riverbank outcrops on the lower Jane River, but their sometimes very sharp and spiky surface demands a wary approach for those travelling in inflatable craft.

Tough as modern pack-rafts are, somewhere in Enkidu Gorge Stefan had torn the floor of his raft and, given manoeuvrability is somewhat compromised by paddling a mobile bathtub, he was keen to attempt a repair. During a sunny lunch break we applied some Tyvek tape to the raft's floor. This amazingly sticky tape provided a virtually instant repair and lasted the rest of the trip, a far cry from the old days of trying to apply and dry contact adhesive and patches.



Apart from the spectacular gorges, one of the other highlights of the Jane River country are the extensive riverside Huon Pine groves. The wood of this long-lived endemic tree has been prized for boat building and other craft uses from earliest colonial times. The Jane River was accessed by the tough west coast “piners” during the early and mid twentieth century, hauling their punts up rapids and even over a ridge above Gilgamesh Gorge. This was relatively late in the pining era and, combined with the rugged nature of the place and perhaps the difficulty of getting logs out, means there is little visible evidence of pining activities and most riverside forest appears pristine.

The lightweight pack-rafts make bypassing short rapids a relative breeze. Hefting my raft on one shoulder to bypass short rapids I sometimes paused to reflect on the effort involved in seeking this prized timber. Other observations provided fodder for many other musings on the place as we journeyed downstream. For example, we saw plenty of Huon Pine growing along the Erebus Rivulet but little along the Jane upstream of Enkidu Gorge. Huon Pine is very sensitive to fire and we knew there was plenty of pine further upstream so wondered whether this was evidence of some past extensive wildfire. We also saw extensive outcrops of limestone and other rock types not shown on the most recent geological maps of the area. So much of this country

is little known or documented, and such mystery is another of its attractions, providing any visitor with the opportunity to wonder without actually knowing. Long may it remain so.

Huon Pine foliage is a distinctive dark green colour and its arching branches and pendulous branchlets form avenues along many sections of the river. The reach before the Acheron River confluence is a particularly fine example. The Jane is wide and slow-flowing here and we drifted or slowly paddled without a need to concentrate on the nature of river flow or whereabouts of the next rapid.

Soon after, the Jane River's character again changes dramatically as it plunges into the Gilgamesh defile, but we had a pleasant rainforest camp and a day exploring the lower Acheron valley on foot before that challenge. Late that day we chose to wade back down the river to camp rather than revisit patches of tangled scrub, but it was still another interesting day of discovery. Acheron is one of a number of names associated with Hell applied through the area by surveyor Calder in 1841 and perhaps hint that his experiences of the time were less pleasant than ours.

We expected the traverse of Gilgamesh, the Jane River's deepest and steepest gorge, to be a serious undertaking and entered the initial docile rapids with care. Within 500 metres we had exited the water and were climbing from riverside slabs into tangled scrub, probing forward. This was the start of a complex portage, over large boulders and riverside bluffs, at one point almost 100 metres above the river, and



utilising both banks at different times (if the river level is low enough to permit crossing, as it was for us). It was another fine and sunny day, so the boulders and slabs over which we clambered were generally dry and so less slippery and risky to traverse. As for the Enkidu portage, we made things easier by doing a double-carry, so it took some six hours to get ourselves and all our gear through the portage.

We had lunch in sunshine on rocks within the inner sanctum of Gilgamesh Gorge. The river here is choked with huge boulders and logs jammed high above told of the maelstrom this place would be in flood. We looked up at steep scrub-cloaked slopes from which blade-like bluffs soared hundreds of metres; it would not be easy to walk out from here.

After a sweaty couple of hours after lunch completing the portage, we launched into a large pool at the end of what appeared to be Gilgamesh's major difficulties. A touch over-confident after being off

the river for most of the day, I paddled hard into a minor rapid but then slid sideways down the wrong side of a rock rib bisecting it and was swept into a fallen tree. The raft was briefly pinned before flooding and being upended, then squeezed underneath the tree. I followed, losing my paddle in the process, and was soon bobbing separately in the open river downstream. For a moment my paddle was nowhere to be seen, before drifting by a couple of strokes away. I soon got everything into the river bank and reorganised, but the outcome could have been nastier.

The afternoon was now well-advanced and the sun gone behind a ridge, so wet and cold after my dunking, I proposed camping as soon as I saw a good location. And a good spot it was; an overhang beneath a huge riverside boulder providing an ideal cooking site, several adjacent openings in the tangled scrub for tents, and with a view across a large pool to the tiered waterfalls that ended Gilgamesh. I recognised the scene from an old black and white image of a piner in his punt on the same pool with the distinctive falls behind and wondered if we were now using the piner's campsite.

A fast-flowing straight section of river, lined by beautiful rainforest and quite a few Huon Pine trees, preceded another broad, flat transverse valley, this time floored by the same limestone that outcrops extensively on the lower Franklin River. The river wound through a section of limestone bluffs, deeply undercut at river level and with many attractive notches and gulches where the rock has been differentially dissolved, before swinging south between two steep ridges. This was Humbaba, the last of the Jane River's gorges. The geology is different here, comprising bedded sandstone, and so the character of the gorge is also different to those upstream. Extensive stepped, often mossy slabs line the river in places, and make the short portage necessary to bypass a small waterfall straightforward.

A couple of minor shingle rapids downstream of Humbaba Gorge were soon behind us and then suddenly, we felt as if we had emerged into a large lake, such if the difference in scale of the lower Franklin River to the Jane.



Being a much larger river, falling relatively little over the 22 kilometres to its confluence with the still-larger Gordon, and lined with mostly mixed Eucalypt forest, the lower Franklin River has a completely different character to where we had been. It was also known country for several of us, but no less interesting for that. We spent a couple of days paddling the long slow-flowing

reaches, drifting beneath limestone bluffs, and with one grey and drizzly day providing a pleasant contrast to the sunshine we'd had so much of.

Entering the Gordon River I was struck, once again, at how dead it felt compared to the wild Franklin and Jane. Dammed some 40 kilometres upstream in 1974, the Gordon River's flow is controlled and mostly at a constant high level (rather than natural seasonal fluctuations), its banks are scoured as a result, and the water (from the bottom of a deep impoundment) is very cold.

We spent our last night near Sir John Falls, a site beside the Gordon River that now services tourists rather than construction workers on the proposed dam that was a real threat to the area in 1982. Early next morning we motored quietly downstream aboard the yacht we'd pre-arranged to pick us up. The six-hour journey to Strahan, with cold dawn mist on the river, the famous rainforest reflections, and a view back to Frenchmans Cap across Macquarie Harbour, eased our transition back to civilisation.

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