

Yukon-Blog: Interview with Quentin and Louis

Why did you choose the Yukon and no other River? Mississippi and Amazonas are also very long rivers? ;-)

Quentin: Three years ago, when we were 18 and just started university, we both had the desire to fulfil an adventure of a lifetime before getting jobs and starting a family life. But we didn't know what or where or how. We didn't know that we would decide to embark on this adventure together. We have both always been fascinated by the North American wilderness, a mysterious and beautiful place, where nature is overwhelming, and the population is sparse.

How did things develop from this point onwards?

Quentin: Louis was the first to act and make his dreams become reality. After a lot of research and exchanging with various adventurers, he found out that kayaking was the best way for long term travel. It is more comfortable and less wearing than long term hiking or cycling, with less technical difficulties than motor sports or horseback, and rivers are often cut from the world, creating a very wild environment with a clear objective (the sea!).

Although we had very little experience, kayaking became the obvious way to travel, with enough space on board for camping equipment, and far from roads and paths. The Yukon also became the natural choice: it is an ambitious project because it is very long and crosses Alaska entirely, but without extreme technical difficulties such as rapids.

Most Yukon adventurers paddle alone. What is your motivation to stand up to this extraordinary challenge as a team? (From our personal experiences in 2015, we can highly recommend team play. ;))

Quentin: The main idea came from Louis' imagination and research, and he had planned to go alone. I also had plans to live a crazy adventure, but very vague. When we shared our dreams, it seemed obvious to leave together. We got along well and had experience scouting together and had similar ideas about the adventures we wanted to live. I took one month to figure out if I could fit it in my university career. And when I confirmed, we were both 100% implicated.

Such a project alone seemed unreasonable for a 21-year-old alone without any kayaking experience. The risks of injury, getting lonely, getting tired are significantly bigger when you're isolated. The fact of being two, as a team, makes us help each other out, give ourselves motivation, have deep discussions and fun moments, and overall strengthen our friendship. Furthermore, most of the tasks are divided by two: paddling, camping, and filming our trip are easier if we are two.

Being a duo, what different roles do you plan for each of you onboard? Where do you see your strengths and weaknesses?

Quentin: The division of roles has been natural, depending on our personalities and talents. On board, with now two years' experience in the kayak, and camping have given us habits. In the kayak, Louis likes to sit in front and I sit in the back. We have only switched once, on the first day ever, and have never changed back.

I am bit taller, so I don't mind being in the back, which means I have the pedals to our rudder, because I love to steer and be in control in general, so I take care of the immediate navigation. Louis is a bit smaller and prefers the place in front because he loves taking pictures, and the views are

better in front. Louis also takes care of the long-distance navigation in front, using the maps and deciding the distances each day, and he has a complete trust in my immediate navigation skills like avoiding obstacles and waves.

Happy to hear you have a well-functioning teamwork onboard. What are your plans when being on the ground?

Quentin: When camping, most of the roles are the same. And each of us does the tasks when the other is tired without negotiation. Most jobs are done together, and when one of us is doing something, the other will do something useful. However, we both have our preferences: I love to start fires with everything revolving around it like cooking. Louis loves to explore around, taking pictures, looking for firewood or for a stream with fresh water.

Amazingly, we have complementary strengths and weaknesses, which is great. Let me explain: Louis is great at organising, carrying out plans, doing regular tasks and anything meticulous, important for everyday life. Whereas I'm maybe a bit less careful with unimportant these tasks, get side-tracked, and am not very meticulous. I can get groggy and have a bad temper when I am hungry or not happy about the food, and I don't enjoy doing annoying and repetitive things like washing dishes or take videos for sponsors.

However, I would say I am good with things that happen less often: unexpected events, anything out of the plan, storms, cold, and taking care of important things when in trouble. Whereas Louis is much more bothered by the cold and rain, especially when he is tired, probably needs more warmth and rest.

How would you sum up your roles on the Yukon project?

Quentin: To give an idea of the way the team works: when/if we finish the adventure, we will probably say: Without Louis, the expedition would never have happened, and without Quentin, it would probably not have been completed.

A river expedition without a boat would obviously be difficult. Can you give our readers some information and data about the boat which shall bring you safely to Emmonak and the Bering Sea?

Quentin: We took time to compare the different kayaks we could take, it had to be foldable or inflatable to fit in a plane. We didn't want to buy it upon arrival, in order to take time to get used to its space, and practice paddling with it. We decided on a Nautiraid Grand Raid II of 540cm. It is a foldable kayak with a wooden structure and is repairable in expeditions. And a Hypalon hull consisting of natural rubber which is extremely solid. The model is very large and stable when fully charged.

Nautiraid is a well renowned French kayak manufacturer, the kayaks are made in France, with good quality material, and incredible craftsmanship. They equip the French "Commando Marine" military and most expedition kayakers.

You stayed a month in Arctic Norway for your preparation. Can you tell us more about this trip?

Quentin: In order to prepare for the Yukon, we wanted to paddle a month in the same conditions, we were looking for similar weather, somewhat isolated, but close to Europe, by train or a cheap flight.

We looked for different rivers, approximately 1000 kilometres and cold enough. After recommendations, and because of the stunning views, we decided to paddle in the sea, around the

Lofoten Islands, in northern Norway, above the Arctic Circle. We left for 26 days in July and August, we landed in Narvik airport (Evenes) and paddled around the archipelago starting from the south, and we tried to have enough food on board and avoid the villages.

We discovered a lot, and had several surprises: Firstly, in the sea, we realized that we can paddle much less, because of the tides, the currents, and the waves. Our biggest day was just over 35km and our shortest day was 5km, but mostly around 25km, we paddled much faster on the Loire River. Secondly, the weather was perfect for our preparation. We had good sunny weather for the first 10 days. These were followed by terrible windy, rainy and cold weather, then beautiful weather in the most impressive part of the trip, at the point of the archipelago. then a hellish week of rain and cold. Perfect to experience difficulty, but not too much to spoil our holiday.

Finally, we learnt a lot about space on board the kayak, how to manage our time in a day, how to dress for bad weather. And most importantly about nutrition on a long-term camping trip. And the value of chocolate as a mood booster, just one square a day was the best moment in the day!

What do friends and family and beloved ones think about your three-month trip on the Yukon River?

Quentin: Overall, they are very proud and respectful of such an ambitious and adventurous project for our age! Indeed, because we are still quite young and still university students, our parents have the right to an opinion about the trip.

Their first reactions - following respect and pride - were to worry on different issues like isolation, getting injured, attacked by bears and so on. But these reactions softened up since our expedition in Norway. It is reassuring for family and friends whenever we talk about it and realise how much preparation and knowledge we have about different issues. Our professional attitude since 3 years has been reassuring. People know it isn't a remake of "Into the Wild" and that we have a return ticket!

Most friends and family have supported us however they could, which is why it'll be important to give news during the 3 months on the Yukon.

Do you plan to take a special mascot or equipment piece with you?

Quentin: In two years we have had time to become deeply attached to our kayak. We have given it a name: Emmonak, the name of the village nearest to the Bering Sea and our goal. It sounds good for a kayak and reminds us of our objective! Apart from that, we haven't got any particular mascot... We might pack one, like a teddy bear for example or something French.

We are still quite young and have a lifetime ahead of us. So, we will also use the journey to build a personality and think about life, to make the expedition a sort of a spiritual journey. Which is why we will leave with several booklets, full of texts and inspirational reflections, as well as booklets to write about the trip, our experience, thoughts, troubles and discussions.

On a more personal note, we each have a special object that we will be happy to pack, for Louis it is probably his camera to capture the moment and gather precious souvenirs. For me, it is my harmonica, on which I want to make progress, useful to break the routine, change a mood or lighten up a camp.

You are planning a trip of a lifetime. Any chances to follow you, your route and your wellbeing in the three months on the river?

Indeed, it is a necessity for us to share our experience and wellbeing! However, we have also decided to live a thorough experience and disconnect the most possible from our lives. We think that the best option is a satellite telephone, with several texts and calls once in a while to family, coupled with a GPS tracker online like you had.

Most of our news during the trip will be posted by family on our Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/ATDR.a.toi.de.ramer>) which has just more than 1200 followers. We might add a picture or two if we find electricity and internet on the way. We have decided not to bring an internet device as it doesn't fit in our budget. Plus, we will depend on a solar panel for energy, and we believe it is more important to charge cameras to film our expedition than charge internet communication devices.

Four months ahead of your trip: How excited are you on a scale from 1 to 10? And what's next on your preparation to do list?

Quentin: We are definitely 10! As it's getting closer we are more excited; we've been talking about it since a long time. However, we are also getting anxious about the preparation, we want to leave with the most preparation possible. But I think that once we'll be in the plane, all the anxiety will be gone.

Our to-do list is still huge and getting bigger every day.

Our main issue is money, as we have student budgets and the expedition is very costly. We still need to buy a lot of equipment: dry suits and better clothes, a satellite phone, better paddles, many small things, and keep enough money for food along the way, and the plane from Emmonak to Anchorage, and maybe to repair the drone we sunk. We have applied for different Adventure scholarships, and we are likely to win around 3000 euros, but the answers are in May, and will have to be a reimbursement of expenses or loans.

Then we still have to finish the administrative formalities to import and export a gun in Canada and Alaska. We need to get a special medical training for isolated areas (already planned). And figure out the nutrition aspect for three months. How to pack varied and nutritious food on a kayak?

What hopes, dreams and fears are in general connected with your 2018 trip on the Yukon?

Hopes:

- Finish the preparation in time to be comfortable on the river with the best equipment possible.
- We hope for good weather, at least in the beginning, to get a good start on the river and a good rhythm and mood settled in.

Dreams:

- We're excited to discover the incredible wilderness, it's been too long that we have only seen pictures.
- We're excited to finally meet bears and wild animals for the first time
- We dream about any unexpected positive event: meet nice people on the river, manage to fish and eat well...

Fears:

- We dread anything that could ruin the adventure, before or on the river (hurt ourselves, or destroy the equipment and kayak, fall sick)
- We dread an unlucky bear encounter, or extremely bad weather all along.

Louis, 21, is a Business School student living in Lyon. He loves rugby and any trekking, walking. He built an experience in river sports with Quentin from scratch (2 weeks on the Loire, and a small month in Arctic Norway).

Quentin, 21, is a Franco American student, finishing a dual Franco-American law degree near Paris, after having studied in Glasgow. He also loves sports, mountaineering, skiing, rugby, and he has the same kayaking experience with Louis.

Louis and Quentin have a Facebook page where they plan to publish updates (in French) of their Yukon trip. They also plan to work on a web series and maybe a short film after their expedition.