

RIVER CROSSINGS

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The negotiation of water obstacles will offer both unique and undesirable challenges to the expeditioner; an alien and often-unpredictable medium, the unplanned crossing of water should ALWAYS be considered an emergency measure and avoided at ALL cost. Fortunately, with careful planning, the majority of river crossing scenarios can be avoided.



It is a wise precaution when planning an expedition to research any water crossing points thoroughly. In the UK this is a simple matter, as OSGB maps are clearly marked with bridges (and types) or with 'Ford'. The depth of water can also often be accurately gauged by considering the local geographic and meteorological conditions. In the rest of the world however, you may not be so fortunate to be supported by such accurate mapping or engineering; take advice, speak to the locals and always err on the side of caution.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WATERWAYS

Upper reaches

Young rivers can be variable and unpredictable being reactive to local conditions.

Valley or middle sector

Erosion in established riverine areas will have created bends and

islands as the river erodes the softer materials in its path. In the lower sections, multiple channelling may occur. Flash floods can bring dangerous volumes of water and flotsam for up to 24hrs after significant rainfall.

Delta

The widest part of the river; the delta will have slower currents but deeper silted water. The delta may be subject to tidal influence.

DRY CROSSINGS

In many of the world's mountain zones, simple log bridges created by deadfall or machete suffice as crossing points in the river's upper reaches. The well-practised locals will surely make light work of them despite them being narrow, slippery from rain or mud and with serious consequences for anybody falling into the difficult ground below.

When crossing makeshift bridges consider the following:

- Use a walking pole to provide

stability (be sure not to trap the hand in the wrist strap as this will hamper your recovery should the worst happen).

- Wear helmets if available.
- Consider the use of the rope either as:

- i. A tension line to provide balance.
- ii. A means of ferrying bags and equipment across.
- iii. A means of readily deployable recovery (throw-line).

- Discuss and brief on the actions the party will take should the worst happen (see comments below).

WET CROSSINGS

Lower down in the valley the river will be wider and deeper, presenting a formidable natural obstacle. Crossed by bridges and fords, these can be destroyed or denied due to flooding. You should take all possible actions to circumvent the new obstacle in your path – are there other crossing points further upstream? An extra hour or two's

walk will ultimately be preferable to a cold and dangerous crossing.

The delta is an unjustifiable place to cross and it will not be discussed here. It is sufficient to reiterate the advice in the previous paragraph.

CROSSING CONSIDERATIONS

Before committing, consider:

State of the river

Rivers are affected by meteorological conditions both at their point of origin and discharge. Unseasonable precipitation upstream (rain or melting of snow/ice) may be the cause of flash floods. The water level may subside when conditions upstream improve (Dryer/colder).

Tidal effects

Beware crossing in areas affected by tide, especially at times of full moon when large tidal movement can exacerbate flooding. Even at 'shallow water' strong currents will be created as a large body of water is displaced.

Riverbed

What is the nature of the riverbed? With soft sand or gravel you may get away with keeping your boots dry, but be cautious; stubbed toes or sharp stones have a great knack at putting you off your balance! Tree routes can hinder entrance and exit.

Obstacles

Avoid even the smallest fishing nets like the plague and beware debris brought down by floods, much of which will be just below the surface.

Weather

The time required for a wet crossing is considerable - What is the weather doing? Is it still raining hard upstream? Will the water rise half way through resulting in a split team?