

Paddler plans to kayak to Arctic Ocean

The Irtysh River flows from Hou Zhili's hometown and leads to the Arctic Ocean – a journey Huo plans to make alone in a kayak.



The Irtysh River in the northern Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region is the only river in China that leads to the Arctic Ocean. [Photo by Hu Huhu/Xinhua]

From where he lives in Fuyun county, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, the 41-year-old has completed what many see as epic feats – kayaking unpowered for 2,020 kilometers on the China and Kazakhstan sections of the Irtysh in 2014 and 2016.

The paddler is preparing for the final and most challenging stage of the 2,200-km Russia section, plus the last 1,160-km of the Ob River, which the Irtysh flows into before its waters reach the northern sea.

From its source in the Altay Mountains in Fuyun, the 4,248-km Irtysh River flows northwest through Kazakhstan before merging with the Ob River in Russia. It is the only river in China that leads to the Arctic Ocean.

Huo's love for kayaking began when he was a teenager. In the 1980s, several white-water adventurers on China's two largest rivers, the Yangtze and the Yellow River, had become famous and started a craze among bold Chinese who took to rafting on streams across the country.

Some youngsters from Hou's hometown even drifted for hundreds of kilometers along the Irtysh on rafts made of old tires.

In 2012, he decided to close his graphic design company and turned his hobby

into a full-time occupation.

After arduous training, on Aug 28, 2014, Hou set out alone in his yellow and orange boat from Koktokay, a town near the source of the Irtysh.

He paddled for 50 km a day, and took 23 days to arrive at Kaba county, where the 520-km China section of the river ends.

The river begins to freeze in November and does not thaw until April, so Huo planned to complete the Kazakhstan section the following year. When the time came, however, he was refused a visa.

His chance finally arrived as tourism cooperation between China and Kazakhstan improved with the Belt and Road Initiative.

Kazakhstan relaxed its visa procedures for Chinese tourists last year.

In August 2016, with the help of travel agencies from both sides of the border, Hou set out from Jeminay, a Chinese county bordering Kazakhstan. It took him 33 days to paddle the 1,500-km section.

The journey was longer and tougher than he expected.

The river width and current varied constantly. He fought hard to meet his target of 50 km a day. Camping on the riverbank when dusk fell was risky.

"I was lucky to return from the dangerous journey unharmed," he said.

Along the way, Hou was deeply moved by the friendly Kazakh people who gave him fresh produce and invited him to stay at their homes.

It has not been cheap. The challenge has cost a good portion of his savings.

To finish the task, he has to kayak further than the total of his two previous trips.

He also has to cross the vast and frigid Siberian landscape. The adventure in Russia will be much more demanding – physically and financially.

Hou went to Russia in September to assess his travel route and to coordinate with local tourism authorities.

He said the preparation is going well. The prospect of navigating a watercourse that is frozen solid for much of the year has not dampened his ambition.

Hou plans to start from the Russian city of Omsk next summer and to paddle all the way to Labytnangi, the last town on the Irtysh. From there he will approach the great northern ocean.

"I want to be a true hero in the eyes of my daughter," said Huo, who has a 12-year-old girl. Hou's wife, who at first did not understand his drive to complete such a dangerous journey now accepts his ambition and backs him.

“That support inspires me to hold on to my dream, no matter how many challenges I encounter,” he said.