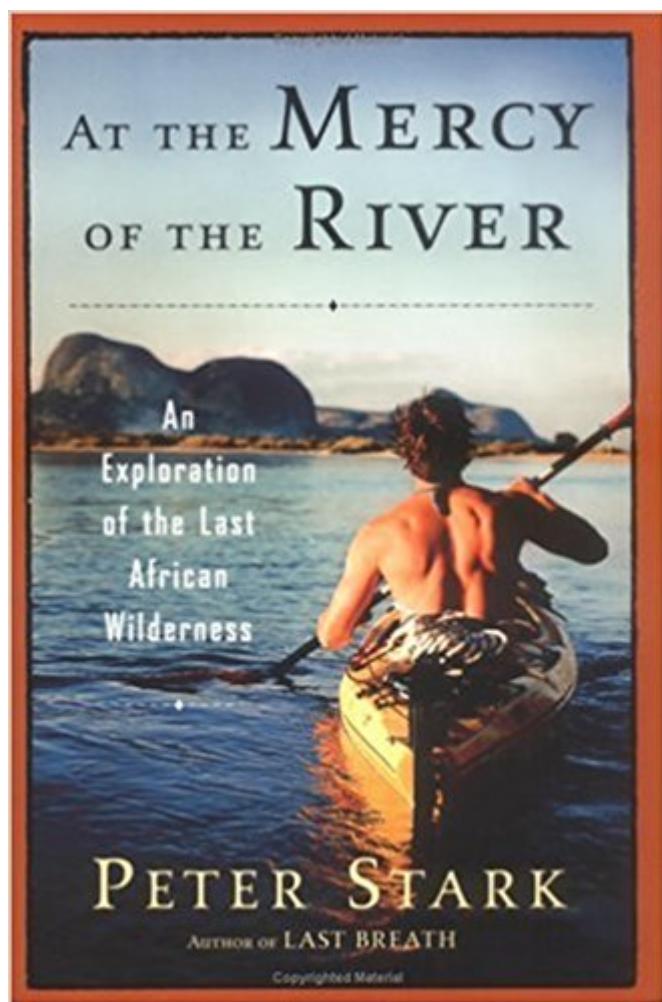


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At The Mercy Of The River: An Exploration Of The Last African Wilderness



Synopsis

Even in this age of extreme sports and made-for-TV survival games, there still exist places on earth where the most intrepid among us can plunge into truly unknown territory. The acclaimed adventure writer Peter Stark had waited all his life for just such an opportunity. But when he was invited to Africa to join a small expedition kayaking down Mozambique's Lugenda River, he balked. The 750-kilometer rivercourse was largely uncharted—dotted with rapids, waterfalls, and home to deadly crocodiles and hippos; two of his four travel companions were not skilled kayakers; and he had a family to think of, (not to mention that at forty-eight, he himself was feeling a bit old for the life untamed). Suppressing inner doubts and driven by that most human of urges—to see what lies beyond the next bend—Stark signed on for the adventure of a lifetime. At the Mercy of the River is Stark's harrowing, insightful account of this venture into the unknown. "Why, he muses between capsizes in the Lugenda's croc-infested waters, "are humans compelled to explore? The expedition's five distinct and sometimes clashing personalities provide individual answers to that question. Equipped with only the most rudimentary comforts and lacking the customary explorer's gun, the party encounters breathtaking natural splendor, rich wildlife, and villages little affected by modern life. Ever aware that they are following in the metaphorical footsteps of great explorers of the past—Vasco da Gama, Mungo Park, Ibn Battuta, David Livingstone, and other men of adventure who bridged Africa and the West—Stark shares these explorers' stories with us, finding a common thread linking his experience with theirs. Using their accounts, his travails on the Lugenda River, and the insights of wilderness philosophers such as Henry David Thoreau, Stark attempts to understand the very nature of "exploration" while pondering the question, Where will we go when our wilderness vanishes? At the Mercy of the River is at turns inspiring, heart-thumping, and even amusing. But most of all, it is a riveting adventure story for a time when adventure is in danger of losing its meaning.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Stark was a happily married, 48-year-old father of two when he answered a crew call for "the first descent" of northern Mozambique's Lugenda River. The hazards—man-eating crocodiles, unknown rapids—worried him, but the thought of being able to immerse himself in a true wilderness was just too tempting. As the group of five made their way down this obscure and unyielding river, they learned to depend one another's strengths and ignore irritating differences. Stark, an experienced kayaker and the expedition recorder (he contributes to *Outside*), would read aloud the occasional bedtime story from an anthology of memoirs of past African explorers, accounts that raised key questions: What is the meaning of wilderness places? What motivates explorers? What keeps diehards pushing ahead even when their expeditions are doomed? Stark's musings are often more diverting than his account of the group's daily progress through the whitewater. He's aware of the ironies of their own journey: cruising in their high-tech plastic kayaks, munching imported energy bars, how could they tell "these people in dugout canoes and with vine-woven nets not to hunt, not to cut trees, not to touch anything because we need that wilderness?" This report, a nice mix of thoughtful and sweaty, is perfect for history-minded armchair adventurers. Photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

[^]One of the last African wildernesses is the Lugenda River in Mozambique. Stark, along with four other Americans and two African guides, made a 15-day trip, in three kayaks, down the river's course. Relying on diaries, letters, and historical accounts, Stark intertwines the stories of early explorers with the record of his trip, telling of spotting crocodiles and hippos in the water, monkeys and baboons along the shore, and eagles, herons, skimmers, plovers, and vultures flying high above the river. The adventurers meet villagers, drink beer and whiskey, gaze at the Milky Way overhead, and eat peanut-butter energy bars, meat jerky, and sweet potatoes. An eight-page color photo insert, and a series of black-and-white photos throughout the text, augments the reading

experience. Less invented dialogue would have been advisable, but the wilderness journey nevertheless proves a fascinating one to realize secondhand. George Cohen
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Good reporting of an African adventure - learn some African Exploration history.

Well done..Surely enjoyed the book ...larry stern.tucson

Boring and repetitive. Not nearly as good as some of his other books.

I read this in preparation for my own trip to southern Africa. Peter Stark is a wonderful writer with humble authenticity and believable emotional descriptions. He captured the insecurities of the community he traveled with and was quite honest about his own fears. I plan to read more of his work.

Pilots say that any landing you can walk away from is a good landing. The same might be said of "wilderness adventure". Peter Stark walked away from a trip down an untraversed African river, but it was a close thing. Dumped in the river, beset by crocodiles, hippos, a black mamba and a dodgy stomach, Stark lived to relate his tale. He tells it well, with all the passion of a survivor. A map and photographs, and even a bibliography provide visual accents to the narrative. With no small research flavouring the account, the story is an exciting read. Stark was contacted by a lady in Botswana to be the "recorder" of a "first". Cherri Briggs, an "adventure company" owner, wanted to descend the Lugenda River in Mozambique. Briggs was assembling a kayaking team to make the first trip down an unknown tributary of the Rovumba which empties into the Indian Ocean. Having made a hasty survey flight, Briggs told Stark that there were rapids but their skill level was unknown. Although at forty-eight years old and with a family, Stark shed his misgivings to join the team. Four other men had been recruited for a journey that would prove the need for care in selecting exploration teams. Travelling by canoe or kayak, even in company, offers opportunity for introspection and reflection. In company, perhaps such travel demands it. Stark, no stranger to wilderness travel, had years of canoe experience. Clashes with leaders of the expedition were inevitable. Wilderness travel in case such as this can mean many have "leadership" roles. In this case, Cherri was the expedition leader, but Clinton took the lead in finding the best kayak path. "Following the leader" in one instance led Stark to the edge of a ten-metre waterfall. Truly, one false

move would have had him "at the mercy of the river". His experience got him and his partner out of difficulty, but it was a close thing. It eroded the relationship between Stark and Clinton. The breach was patched, however and the trip continued. Hardly, however, uneventfully. Stark was a newcomer to Africa, most of his wilderness trips taking place in North America. He had much to learn, and tried earnestly to do so. The book is spiced with personalities and accounts of African exploration. From the fabled trips of Ibn Battuta to Dr Livingstone, Stark explains how outsiders entered the African scene over the centuries. "Discovery", conquest, wealth and religion all played their various roles, sometimes intermingled. Stark's use of these stories is unusual. Most of them are presented as if he's suddenly driven to remember them while otherwise unoccupied. They make wonderful reading, but their contribution to the Lugenda journey is nil. That's not really a flaw, since the purpose of the book is as much Stark's personal discoveries as is the river passage. The one map and many photographs add further sparkle to this lively account. It's worth your time for its information, its glance into the mind of an adventure journalist, and for its snippets of exploration history. [stephen a. haines - Ottawa, Canada]

This book recounts the first documented descent of a river in South-western Mozambique by a group consisting of the author and several others. The writing is very good and weaves historical details of prior African travelers and explorers together with the narrative of the trip in a way that complements rather than detracts from the story. Very enjoyable read overall.

Loved this book - exceeded expectations. Expected story of river trip, but additional context (history lesson) of previous explorers was a pleasant and positive surprise. If you like adventure/travel books with a little food for thought, this is a good one.

Peter Stark was invited to join a small expedition kayaking the Lugenda River in Mozambique: a river no white man had ever kayaked, still largely unmapped and wild. At The Mercy Of The River: An Exploration Of The Last African Wilderness tells of his adventure down the river, providing high adventure for armchair travelers with 'you are there' action. From croc-infested waters to reflections on great explorers who also explored the region, At The Mercy Of The River will have you on the edge of your seat, sharing fellow explorers' journeys in a fine blend of history and modern adventure.

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