APRIL 1, 199

AMERICAN WAY

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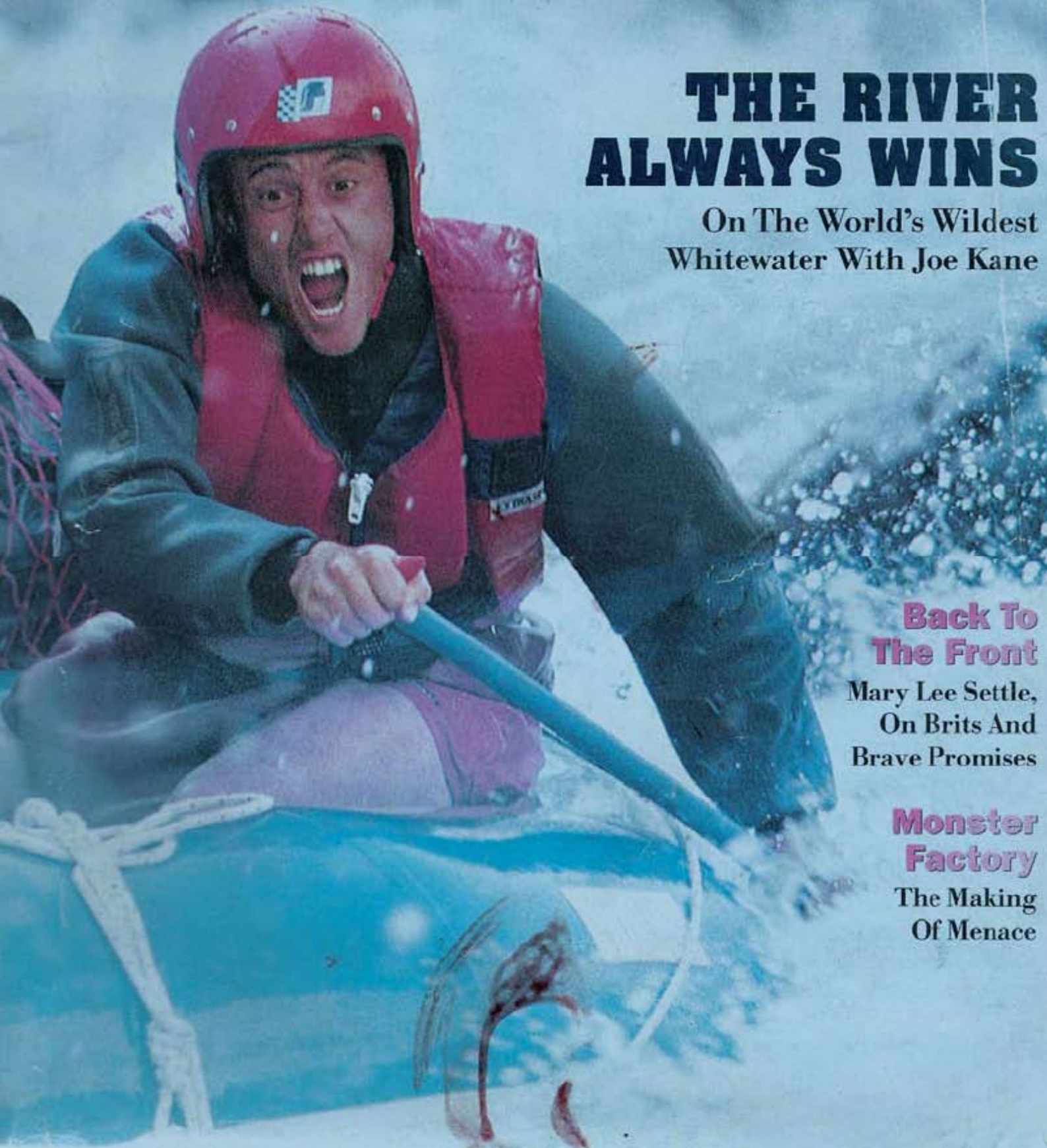

THE RIVER ALWAYS WINS

On The World's Wildest Whitewater With Joe Kane

Back To The Front

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THE RIVER ALWAYS WINS

BY JOE KANE

"I tell you about Reparaz?" asked my seatmate, Zbigniew Bzdak.

"Yes," I lied. You don't encourage Big News when he's in a mood to tell war stories. As the bus wheezed out of Lima I feigned sleep; when we pushed south into the coastal desert I pressed my face to the window. A toothless idiot shoveled sand off the road, into the wind, then raised his hands for bread. I pulled up my collar and hunched down in my seat.

This much I knew: Reparaz is the trickiest rapid in the deepest canyon on earth, the Colca. To be more precise, the Colca River starts at an altitude of 14,300 feet on the continental divide of the southern Peruvian Andes and spills southwest to the Pacific for 236 miles. Along the way, it carves a canyon 10,500 feet deep. That is more than twice as deep as the Grand Canyon. Through the heart of its gorge — a run of about fifty miles — the Colca drops up to 100 feet per mile. Depending on your point of view, that makes it either one of the best whitewater rivers on the planet, or one of the worst.

As far as anyone knows, the Colca has been navigated only six times. Five of those descents, including the first, were made by a team of Polish-born river rats that call themselves Canoandes. They are one of only two teams that have attempted the canyon by raft and lived to tell about it. They also happened to be the people with whom I was bound for the Colca. The occasion was the tenth anniversary of their first descent. I was to be a raftsman. I was afraid. Big News, who has fished me out

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZBIGNIEW BZDAK

The Colca's either the best or the worst whitewater on the planet. And once it gets in your blood, you can't get it out.

of rivers in Peru, Brazil, and Ecuador, smelled hay for the making.

"Thing about Reparaz—"

"Please."

"—thing is, really is three rapids, but you cannot see them. *Big* rapids." What lends Reparaz its charm, he said, is that you can neither scout it nor avoid running it. You enter through a jam of boulders the size of small houses, which block the view from the water, and beyond them all you can see is slick-smooth walls narrowing down to a tight V. You run Reparaz blind.

"But that is not so unusual on the Colca," Big News continued. He shoved his beard in my face and giggled in his peculiar way, which is high-pitched and, I thought, slightly demonic. "Thing is, walls are too steep to climb. Once you get in, you got to run the whole damn river! *You got no way out!*"

For two days, we pitched headlong on foot down the baking south wall of the Colca Canyon, gear strapped to burros, eagles and condors circling overhead. It was a descent through time: To this day, the tiny earth-and-rock villages that cling to the walls of the upper canyon like snails climbing a fence are inhabited by descendants of the Collaguas, a culture that predates even the Incas, who conquered almost every other part of the Andes from Colombia to Chile. But the Colca was too remote to be controlled by the Incas or, later, the Spanish, and the mood among the canyon-dwellers is one of utter isolation and self-sufficiency, the cool confidence of an indomitable people. Still, when we finally reached Hacienda Canco, a settlement of five Indian families that is the last inhabited part of the canyon before the great gorge begins, the Poles were welcomed like returning members of the clan. As I penciled my name into a lovingly preserved register, I saw that only four groups of outsiders have been through Canco in the seven years that records have been kept. All four were Canoandes.

If the culture of the Colca is ancient, its geology is not; in fact, as part of the young Andes, rising on the Ring of Fire, the Colca feels absolutely adolescent — tempestuous, willful, given to random violence. Earthquakes, floods, and volcanic eruption are common. Three weeks after our arrival, a quake would level one of the villages in the upper canyon, and even as we put our raft on the river, the volcano Sabancaya was going off on the south rim, yellowing the sky with ash.

The cold green river ran gently enough the first couple of days, coursing through desert-dry walls of sandstone and shale and limestone, but then she changed abruptly, as if throwing a hormonal fit. One after another, rapids of class four and five — the high end of what is considered technically runnable water — rose up to toss our tiny rubber island willy-nilly. Meanwhile, the canyon's ramparts suddenly appeared to be soaring straight up out of the river itself. They seemed to close overhead, and at their feet and all around us lay an anarchy of rock and scree — it looked like a bomb-test site. I heard boulders exploding as they bounced down the walls.

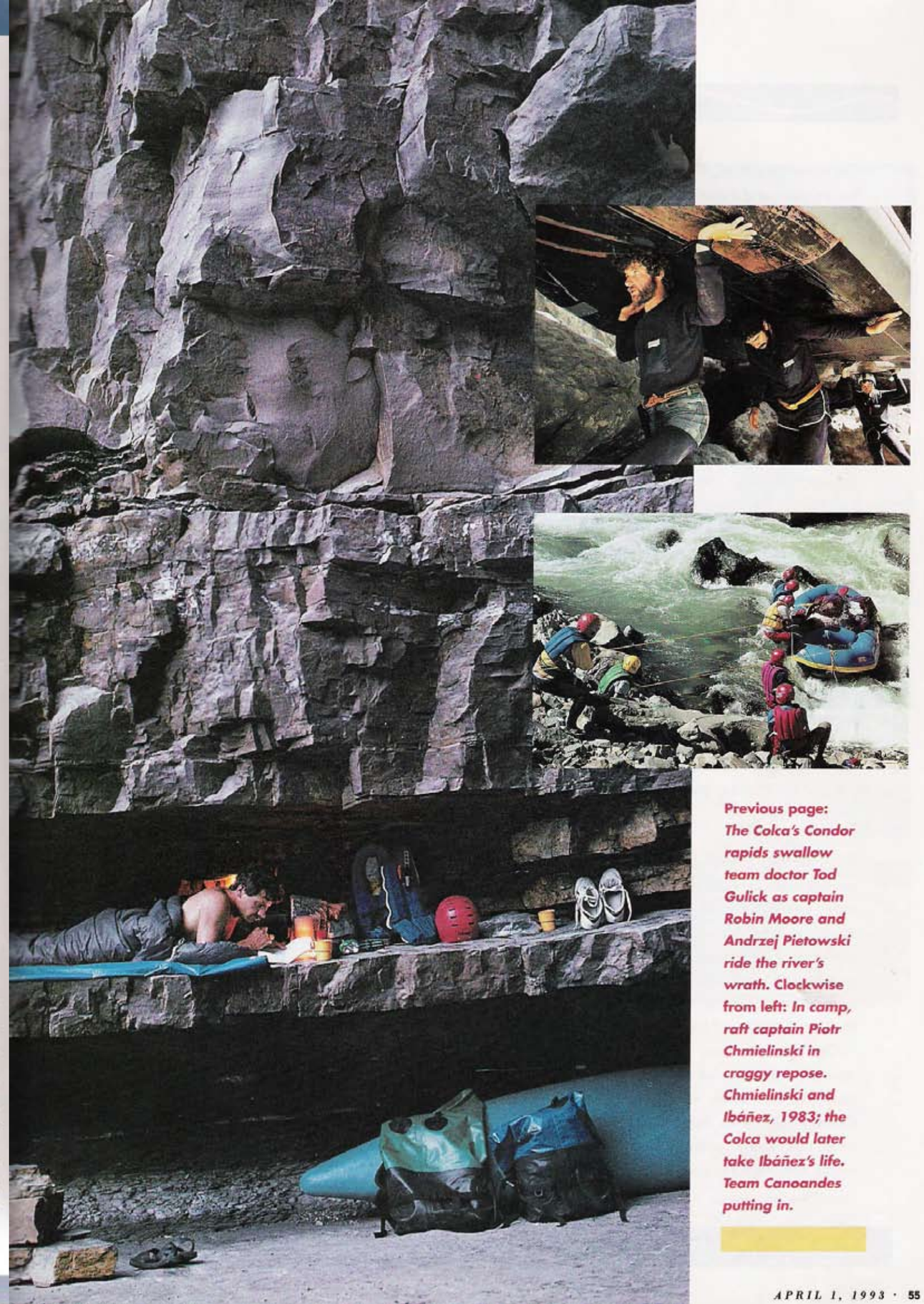
"When first we came here," recalled the raft captain, Piotr Chmielinski, "we were *scared.* Two times we tried to climb out, but we could not. We could see all these landslides around us, and we are thinking, we are *crazy* to be here."

When Piotr says something scared him, you tend to take it seriously. Where Big News is stocky and loose, Piotr is lean and wiry, with the ice-blue eyes of a wolf and a reserved-but-cordial Old World manner ("How going is everything?" he asked when we first met). He's an engineer and he exudes competence. In fact, when the U.S. government wanted to know whether the White House mansion was environmentally contaminated, they had Piotr do the investigating.

Two other members of the original Canoandes team were also with us, though you will not be able to pronounce their names, either. One was Andrzej Pietowski, our kayaker, who is tall, thin, fair, and, when on the water, given to bursting into song. The other, paddling next to me in the raft's bow, was Jacek Bogucki. He is short, dark, bearded, and strange. Once when I was sitting on his couch, two boa constrictors crawled out from under it — and this was in Wyoming.

Jacek surveyed the walls. "You never know what to expect," he said. "Every time I been here we flipped the raft at least once, gods knows."

"I took the worst swim of my life here," Big News offered. This was saying something. Fresh out of graduate school, the nine young men who called themselves Canoandes (after "canoe" and "Andes") arrived in the Americas in 1979, their wallets empty but their heads filled with dreams of whitewater. They couldn't afford plastic boats, and they'd never heard of dry bags or wet suits. Instead, they'd brought twenty-one hand-built, fiberglass kayaks and a trailer to carry them, and their own paddles and pitons. They waterproofed their gear



Previous page: The Colca's Condor rapids swallow team doctor Tod Gulick as captain Robin Moore and Andrzej Pietowski ride the river's wrath. Clockwise from left: In camp, raft captain Piotr Chmielinski in craggy repose. Chmielinski and Ibáñez, 1983; the Colca would later take Ibáñez's life. Team Canoandes putting in.

with plastic garbage bags. From the Polish government they finagled the loan of a six-ton military truck, freighter passage to Mexico, and permission to travel for six months.

Two years later, still in the New World, they'd succeeded in compiling an extraordinary whitewater record. They'd run twenty-three major rivers; thirteen were first descents. Their initial run, Mexico's Pescados, immediately destroyed seven of their boats. On the notorious Santa Maria, they lost all their food and lived on fish. Undaunted, they kept pushing. Within thirteen months, they'd also run the Amacuzac, the Balsas, the Mixteco, the Atoyac, and the Moctezuma. Traveling north to the States, they ran stretches of the Wind and the Colorado in the dead of winter.

Chronically broke, they camped by the roadside or stayed with other Poles or finessed their way into the lives of complete strangers. In Mexico City, they met the brother of the president. "He was the head of the national recreation program," said Big News, who doubles as Canoandes' official photographer, "and he like to drink to excess and party to excess, so we got along fine." He paid Canoandes $10,000 to navigate and chart four virgin rivers, and to promote whitewater rafting and tourism. Then four of them returned to Poland, and the Polish government reclaimed the truck. The five who remained went south in a Chevrolet pickup given to them in Las Vegas by a troupe of Polish acrobats. They hurtled down wild rivers in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, and Ecuador. They were in Peru when the money ran out.

Run a big river with a skilled American raft captain and he'll make the boat dance, parking it nimbly in mid-river eddies and deliberately bouncing it off boulders to execute 360-degree turns. Not so Piotr: The man's rafting style is as hardheaded as the man himself. Pick your line and run. If you get knocked off course, you muscle your way through, stroking for all your life to his urgent cries of "Left! Left! Hard, guys! *Pull hard!*" It's river-running by sheer will.

Canoandes has never lost a man, but theirs is a rough style, and I found myself bouncing wildly on the raft as we blasted through rapids with names such as Landslide and Gutter. Finally, on our fifth day, I was pitched violently into a brutal rapid called Condor Falls. Andrzej was ready with a rescue line, but hours later, sipping hot tea, I was still unnerved. "We really had to teach ourselves," he said, in a kind of apologia. "We would be stuck in some terrible place, and we would have to invent a way out of it. Our rafting style grew from that. You controlled what you could, and the rest — well ... ."

By the end of our sixth day on the river, we had run fourteen technical rapids and advanced a total of only twelve miles. I was hungry, bruised, and cold all the time, yet this pain paled beside a far more powerful feeling: I was falling in love with a place. "It is a strange thing, no?" Piotr said the next morning as we paddled beneath a wall that rose to the breathtaking Chinese-hat snow peak of Nevado Coropuna, nearly 20,000 feet above sea level. "When you know there is no escape, you have no choice but to see the river as she really is. There is no fantasy. You know her like she is alive."

I was beginning to understand, too, the hold the Colca had on the Poles. She was theirs, and they belonged to her, as surely as Hillary and Norkay did to Everest. They'd earned the privilege of naming every rapid on the river. Some of these names, of course, evoked geological terror, or worse ("Disaster Rapid"), but others were more sanguine: "Christine" for an old girlfriend, "Quiet Lake" for a cheerful campsite, "John Paul II Falls" in homage to a hero. Around the fire that night I read these names aloud from a map. Taken as a whole, they described a dance of tone and mood that wed man and river.

After dinner, Piotr and Andrzej and I sat on a boulder and watched the full moon rise over the south rim; it reflected so intensely off the canyon's slick walls that I could write by its light. That morning we had run Chocolate Canyon, named for the dark-brown swirls of its geology: named from hunger.

"In '81, we had two kayaks and a raft," Andrzej said. "We had seen an aerial map of the Colca, and we thought we could run it in five days. We brought food for seven. Right away we capsized and lost three paddles. Then one of the kayaks got destroyed in a rapid, smashed on the rocks." Piotr continued: "Those were the last of the boats we brought from Poland. The skins were so thin you could poke your fingers through. We were using a can of glue every night to repair them."

"On day three, a rapid ripped the raft floor in half," Andrzej said. "By day eight we were rationing food. Day nine, my wisdom tooth was so badly infected that the infection had

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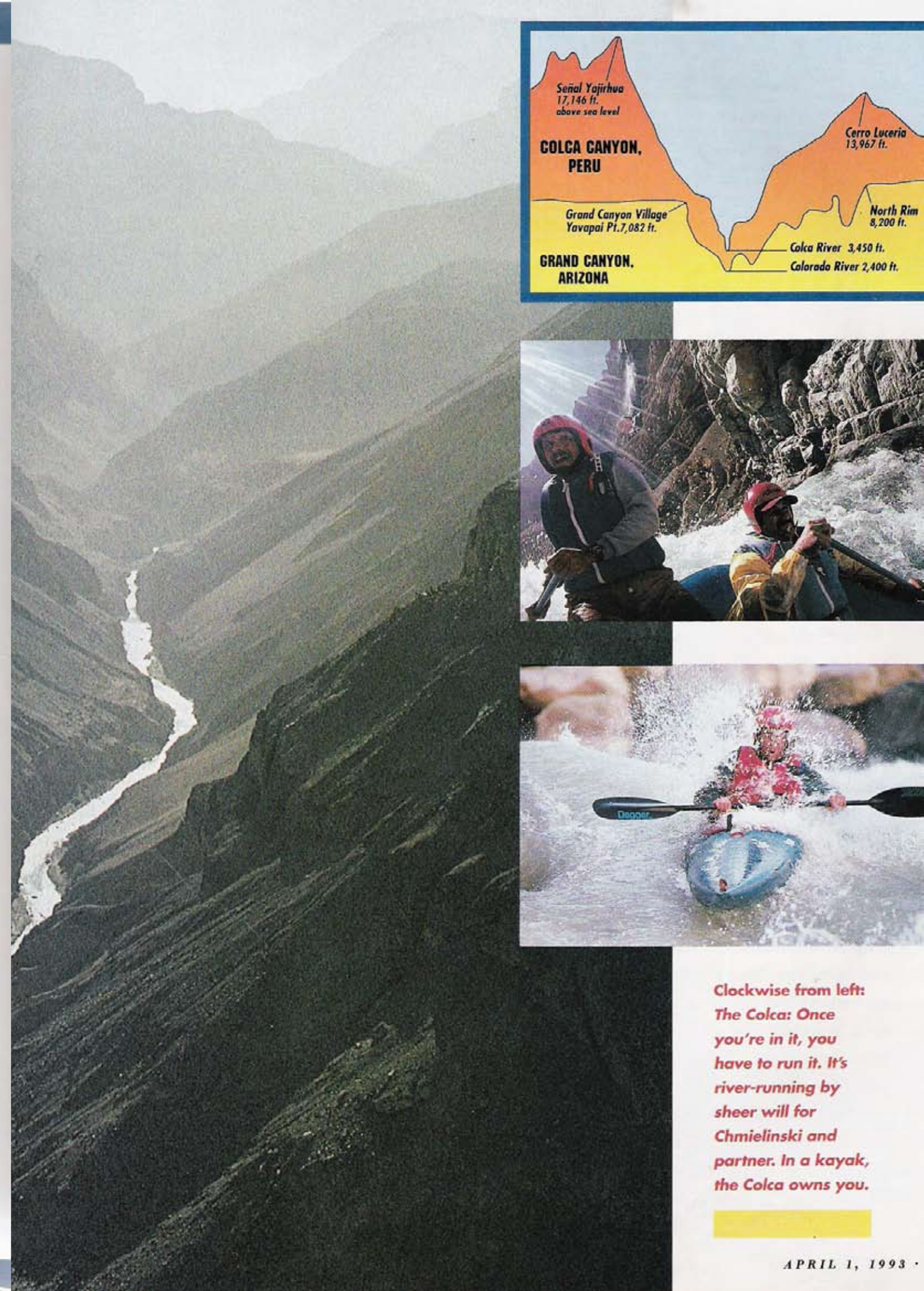

Clockwise from left: *The Colca: Once you're in it, you have to run it. It's river-running by sheer will for Chmielinski and partner. In a kayak, the Colca owns you.*

spread to my left eye. I was almost blind. We ate the last of our food on the tenth day. By then we had made twenty-one portages — one of them lasted a day and a half."

They had started far above where we'd put in, and they'd already been on the river eleven days when they finally arrived at Canco. They rested there, then got back on the water. They'd covered about thirty miles, and they had at least forty left.

"We go for a week, making maybe a mile a day," Piotr said. "We run out of food again. Then we come to this part of the river you will see tomorrow. It made us not know what to think. It is late in the day. The walls are so tall we can find nowhere to camp. Canyon is almost dark, we are drifting on slow water. Up ahead we see a blockage — big rocks with walls closing. We hope there will be smooth water in there, maybe a flat rock to sleep on."

They loaded the kayak on the raft and approached the bad water they would later name for the Peruvian geographer Gonzalo de Reparaz. Near the entry chute they pulled hard for the right-hand wall, and gaining it they held fast by their fingertips while one of the crew, Jerzy Majcherczyk, pounded home a piton and climbed up ten feet. He could see only a long rapid, and beyond it more rock. "Then he yells that he is stuck," Piotr recalled. "I throw him a rope and he puts it through his belt and jumps. When I pull in on the rope it is empty." Worn from months of river travel, the belt had snapped.

They drove themselves from the wall, and as they closed on the rapid, Jerzy bobbed up in front of the raft. "We reach down and grab him as we are going in," Piotr said. "We throw him on the boat."

He paused.

"And then?" I asked.

He shrugged. "And then we are *going*," he said. "Then we are *running*."

Then we are running. If you had to capture the spirit of Canoandes in a line, that's it. Running on reflex, intuition, a knowledge of natural hydraulics imprinted in blood and bone, they did make it through Reparaz, of course, and on down the great gorge and out. But what happened to them over the next few months is perhaps as telling; it's the sort of thing that happens when you forge your character on the ineluctable truths of rock and water — when you become so much a part of a river that it teaches you how to live, how to *see*.

When the Poles finally hauled out of the canyon, their collective purse stood at less than $2. "But we had a film camera," Andrzej said. "Jacek had shot about forty-five minutes of the Colca. We took that film to the national tourist board in Lima. We walked into this big fancy office in our bluejeans and walked out with a paper bag full of money."

As it happened, the paper bag held $10,000, and they stayed in Peru six months more, running the Apurímac, Urubamba, and Marañón — major rivers all. Meanwhile, as news of their Colca descent spread, they became national heroes. They were received by the Peruvian president; later, Jacques Cousteau would invite them to join the Andean leg of an Amazon project he was filming for Ted Turner, and the National Geographic Society would commission a return to the Colca.

Finally, in December, they bought plane tickets home to Poland. Two days before departure, the Polish government banned the Solidarity movement and declared martial law.

As Big News explained it, "The Polish embassy in Lima warned us to behave ourselves, so first thing we did was to call up every newspaper we could to make interviews, we were so [angry]." Backed by the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, they organized a march of 3,000 people on the Polish and Soviet embassies, one consequence of which was that it would be ten years before they would see their homes and families again. Flushed out of Peru by the secret police (Peru had excellent relations with the Eastern Bloc), they landed in Miami with three hours left on their old tourist visas. Big News had malaria, Jerzy typhoid, Piotr hepatitis. "Piotr's eyes were all yellow, Jerzy's all green, and Zbigniew kept breaking out in sweats," Andrzej said. "We just sat there and tried not to look

sick." At ten minutes to midnight, their visas were renewed.

They split up. Piotr had friends in North Carolina, Andrzej in Chicago. Broke, except for a bag of Peruvian coins he'd been told would work in the subways, Big News spent the winter riding trains in New York and cadging the odd meal in a Polish ghetto. At the height of the oil boom, the group drifted to Wyoming; with Piotr directing the crew, soon they had all the work they could handle rebuilding houses. They worked twelve-hour days and seven-day weeks and pooled their earnings, and when they'd saved $15,000 they went south again, stopping in Los Angeles just long enough to pick up the best raft money could buy.

Team Canoandes didn't know it then, but most of their exploring was behind them. Theirs would be a fruitless attempt to find the body of good friend Alvaro Ibáñez, who had drowned trying to become the first Peruvian to run the Colca on a raft (given him by Canoandes), and an equally fruitless attempt to launch commercial river-running on the Colca. ("People want thrills," a U.S. tour operator told me after she'd scouted the canyon. "Drowning is not a thrill.")

Still, one plum remained: In 1986, Piotr made the first recorded source-to-sea navigation of the world's longest river, the Amazon, a 4,200 mile, six-month journey by kayak and raft from the Peruvian Andes to the Atlantic coast of Brazil. His record received a lot of attention, but less well-known is the critical role his teammates played: Jacek and Andrzej coordinated financial support in the United States, and Big News went along for the entire ride, manning the raft through the deadly Apurimac River, holding his ground when the Sendero Luminoso put a gun to his head, and ferrying supplies all the way down the flat water.

Then we are running: It's the "we" that has always impressed me. I was on that Amazon trip, too, and I learned a lot from the Poles, about things like friendship and loyalty, and about competence, which I came to see is the real measure of

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courage. "It's different now — in Poland, of course, but maybe everywhere," Andrzej said one night on the Colca. "The younger kayakers, they can get in their boats, they can go right out on the best water. We had to build our own boats, organize ourselves, hustle everything through this immense communist bureaucracy. And always we had to look out for one another. It's something the river teaches you, and it's something you never lose. I wonder whether kayakers today have that."

Reparaz? I remember only this: hours preparing ourselves to run — carefully packing our equipment, checking rescue lines and helmets — then scant minutes blasting through the granite chicane. I heard only the great rush of the river and Piotr's "Hard guys, go *hard!*" and felt only the timeless rhythms of water, earth, and rock. Now hard up on a boulder, scrambling across Jacek's back to high-side the raft; now leaning far out over the water, paddling with every ounce of strength to rip free of a deadly subsurface current; now punching straight ahead through a wall of white and bursting into the calm, flat waters of peace and joy below; now sitting briefly in stunned silence; then bursting into wild insane laughter, because in those few eternal minutes the canyon had done what it does so well: It had come alive, forcing us to see that it had a will and being of its own.

"The river always wins," Piotr had once told me after a particularly exhilarating whitewater run. "It does not care. We try the river because we must try. Whitewater is, how do you say it, like you are bleeding ... ."

"It gets in your blood."

"Yes. It is in your blood. It is a thing you are never forgetting."

Months later, back home, it was a feeling I still couldn't forget, and it made me wonder about the Poles, who know that hidden canyon so much better than I do. These days they're all pushing forty, and they're all family men, and they all have steady jobs. Once again they're scattered across the United States: Piotr in Washington, D.C., Jacek in Casper, Andrzej in New York. Big News is in Chicago. I phoned him recently. "Piotr bought golf clubs!" he said, and laughed out loud.

The River Always Wins

I had a hard time envisioning Piotr finding happiness on something as tame as a golf course. "Business" was all he said when I called him. Instead, with his two-year-old son talking a blue streak in the background, he said, "I have been looking at some maps. Is this river, next to Colca, the Curahuasi. It's probably the same size, big canyon. But you know what? I believe no one has yet to run that river ... ."

About then I began to feel a faint tingling just under my skin — the sort of sensation you might have, say, if something had got into your blood.

Joe Kane, who lives in San Francisco, is the author of the national bestseller* Running the Amazon, *and is at work on* Savages, *a book about the Ecuadorian Amazon to be published by Alfred A. Knopf.