

american whitewater

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PADDLING THE INCA TRAIL

by John Foss

EXPLORING THE WHITEWATER TREASURES OF PERU

"Going to Peru, huh? Sounds pretty crazy to me," my friend muttered. "Oh no, I've got friends there, no hay problema, si?" I replied. Of course it's safe.

So what if there was an attempted bombing of the US embassy two days before our arrival. So what if our taxi cab driver in Lima said the Sendero Luminoso was everywhere? So what if we happened to find a dead guy, naked below the waist, hands bound behind his back, washed up on the banks of the Rio Apurimac?

Such is life in Peru.

In case you haven't heard, the Sendero Luminoso (ie. Shining Path'), a Maoist guerrilla movement, have been hell bent on overthrowing the Peruvian government during their thirteen year reign of terror. Over twenty thousand Peruvians have died at the hands of these thugs, who have maintained a maniacal grip on the country. Fortunately for the locals and gringo tourists, the situation has mellowed considerably. Although one always has to remain alert to the ubiquitous ripoffs, Peru is relatively safe, especially when your friends are there to greet you at the airport.

Such was the case on our paddling adventure. We were invited for the First International 1993 Rio Colca Festival. The hospitality bestowed upon us by our friends, the Vellutinos, alleviated any of our latent anxieties upon arrival. We were joined by thirteen adventurers from all over the world: Massimo, the Embok-sponsored Brazilian slalom racer; Eyal, an ex-Israeli artillery officer turned hippie; Juanfe and Gian Carlo, our paddling buddies from Santiago, Chile; Mike, the head honcho of the New Zealand kayak club; the Peruvians: Pepe, paddle raft captain extraordinaire from Cuzco; Fredy, our trip doctor and videographer from Lima; Duilio and Gian Marco, sons of our wonderful hosts in Arequipa, Ani and Antonio Vellutino; and four gringos from the States along for some fun: Kurt Casey, Franz, Dave, and myself.

The world renowned Colca is one of the deepest canyons on the planet, first explored by the Poles in 1981. It is the definitive "Big Ditch", three times as deep as the Grand Canyon. Located at the northern terminus of the Tacama Desert of southern Peru and northern Chile, this parched canyon is



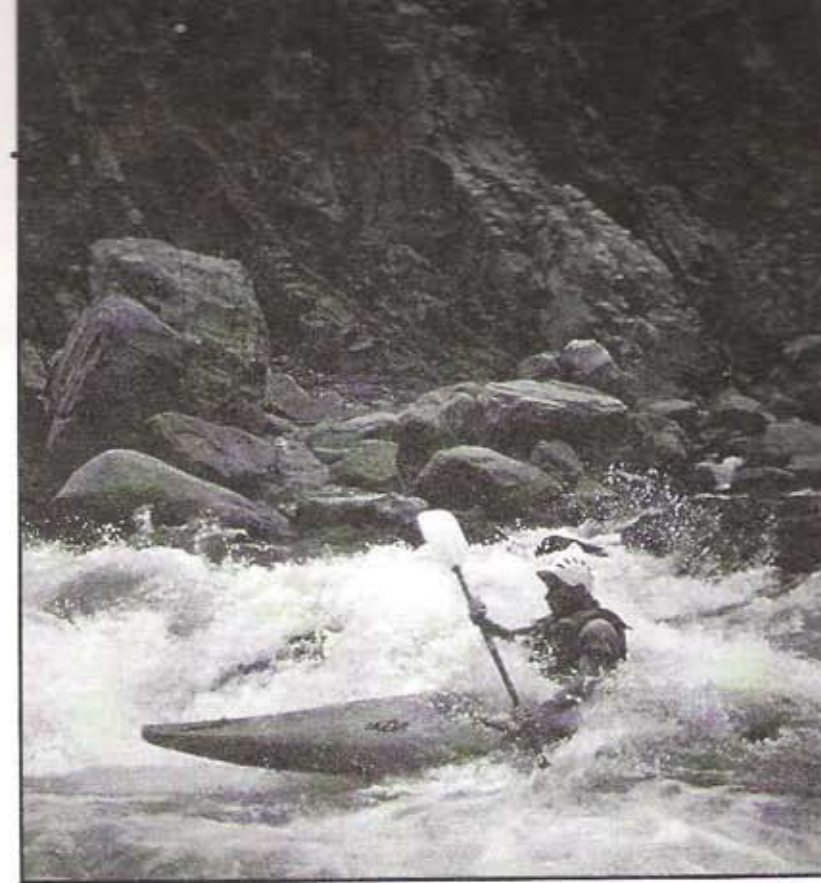
Kurt Casey coaxing his mule down trail

located in one of the most arid regions on earth. The lack of water is due to the watershed's position on the dry side of the Andean Cordillera, with the bleak, high altitude Altiplano separating it from the verdant Amazon basin to the east.

After three days of preparation and pre-trip training (ie. imbibing too many pisco sours and eating our fill of ceviche at the Vellutino's El Lago resort) we were anxious to leave. Departing from Arequipa, we spent all day in a rented bus staring at a lunar landscape, enroute to the adobe village of Huambo. Numerous pit stops allowed us to experience the breathless altitude of the Altiplano. The only sign of life on the shuttle, a few llamas running in the distance, added to the stark feeling of the area.

Fortunately, after a midnight arrival, we were able to get a hot meal and place to crash. Accommodations consisted of an old stable with concrete floors that reeked of mule piss. What little sleep we got was interrupted midway through the night, when we were awakened by ringing church bells. At breakfast we learned that someone from the village had died.

A celebrity farewell from the locals (many of whom spoke only Quechua, the local Indian dialect) awaited us in the plaza the next morning. After passing out used clothing to the kids, we made our passage through Huambo's narrow side streets out of town. The main access to the river, a trail down the Rio Huambo, was a challenge for man and beast alike - with kayakers, a paddle raft and food lashed to the backs of mules for the grueling ten hour hike to the river. Disaster was narrowly averted when a mule loaded with Mike's kayak slipped on the trail, tumbling head first down the talus slope. Fortunately the mule came to a safe stop with the load intact, just shy of the abyss.



John Foss running a boulder slot on the Rio Colca



During the hike we marveled at the surroundings. Geologically, the Colca Canyon displays some of the wildest folding and faulting imaginable. The plastic oceanic sediments characteristic of the western Andean Cordillera offer a spectacular mélange of anticlines, synclines, and recumbent folds in the grandest dimensions. Poorly cemented mudstones, sandstones, siltstones and shales blend together and are reminiscent of a deformed chocolate layer cake. We were awed by the grandeur all the way to the bottom.

A nice hot spring awaited us at the put-in across the river from the little village of Hacienda Canco. Due to irrigation diversions upstream the Colca was marginally navigable until the confluence with the Rio Mamacocha, four kilometers downstream. At the Mamacocha confluence the river more than doubled in volume to a flow of approximately 1200-1500 cfs. The warm, azure water of the Mamacocha was a visual delight as it mixed with the verdant flow of the Colca. After the trip, we learned that there are more diversions planned in

the future, further down entering this world class treasure.

There has been much hype about the Colca's difficulty, but in reality it is just great class V fun. Granted, a wipeout would be disastrous due to the arid, if not impossible, bailout possibilities. High water runs might be suicidal, as evidenced by the driftwood lodged high above the river. Virtually all the rapids are runnable during the dry season (June-October) at low to medium flows. Every drop can be scouted and/or portaged. Whitewater high-

lights include Cano Andes I and II, Reparaz Canyon, and the Pole's Canyon, all featuring technical, class V pool-drop rapids.

Due to the precipitous relief and frequent land slides, the rapids frequently change character. Rock falls are commonplace on the talus slopes above the narrow inner gorge. Duilio, who has been down the Colca three times, noted that the rapids have changed every trip. Wearing a helmet at all times is a good idea. While waiting in an eddy, Kurt got hammered by a condor egg-sized rock that landed on the bow of his kayak! At La Ducha del Condor camp (site of a magnificent waterfall and condor roost), we had to sleep under an overhang to avoid getting pummeled by rock fall.

A self-supported kayak trip down the Colca is best due to the difficulty in negotiating a paddle raft through the maze of rock gardens. On our trip, the paddle raft carried the food, while the kayakers were left with the burden of their own personal gear. The raft came in handy when Gian Carlo suffered a dislocated shoulder and was forced to lash his kayak on the boat. We spent eight days in the bowels of the earth, but the river could easily be paddled in four. However, a leisurely pace is recommended. The canyon is awesome; excellent hikes abound in the side canyons, but suitable camps are few and far between.

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turned out to be one the best whitewater runs we had ever paddled.

The Urubamba was very challenging and rivaled any of the great runs in California. The water quality was dubious due to local sewage problems, but the whitewater was outstanding. Non-stop, class V action, technical maneuvers, waterfalls, explosive ramps, and a continuous gradient of over 100 feet/mile left us totally drained by the end of the day. Local guides thought it may have been the first complete descent of the Machu Picchu gorge.

However, the highlight of this wet, cold, dreary day occurred off the river, while hiking out along the tracks. With the river becoming increasing class VI-ish, and fearful of missing the shuttle train back to Aguas Calientes, we hurried along the tracks for the last kilometer to the take-out at the train station. Approaching the station with kayaks in tow, we were amazed to be greeted by a crowd of beautiful wanna-be shamans singing in the rain. These seekers from Europe and South America were on spiritual quest to Machu Picchu via the Inca Trail and got rained out. The party was on as we enthusiastically traded stories about the day's adventures.

Chaos reigned the next morning on our return train trip to Cuzco. In the five minute spans allotted for the stop at the station, Franz and I frantically pushed the kayaks on top of the train while Mike and Kurt lashed them to the top of the railroad car in a torrential downpour. With the train leaving the station, and the conductor screaming up at Kurt and Mike about the illegal load, I sprinted along the cobblestone walkway, hurling packs and paddles to Franz before jumping aboard. With our few remaining soles, we paid off all the principle characters, ensuring a secure ride for our cargo back to Cuzco.

Don't let negative media and State Department reports deter your travel plans to Peru. A majority of Peru is safe, especially the Arequipa and Cuzco regions. Most Peruvians are very friendly and welcome the return of tourism to revitalize their dismal economy. With some of the most stunning landscapes in the Western Hemisphere, adventure beckons for those willing to take on Peru.

References:

In Kayak Through Peru-Whitewater Guides by CanoAndes
South American Explorers Club
126 Indian Creek Road
Ithaca, NY 14850
800-274-0568

Editor's Note: AWA Regional Coordinator John Foss resides in Banks, Idaho, when he is not off kayaking in exotic places.

P A D D L E E C U A D O R

Until last year, only a handful of boaters had ever experienced Ecuador's magnificent whitewater, but some things are just too good to be kept secret, and that is the case with Ecuador's rivers. If you can envision warm-weather, world-class, winter boating in a remote tropical forest environment, at an altitude that is high enough and cool enough to feel like summertime in Colorado (no bugs), then you have an idea of what to expect of the boating in Ecuador.

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