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MISSION Exploring Michoacan

In November 2013, an international group of paddlers set out for a three-week exploratory expedition into one of Mexico's wildest backcountries. Despite being plagued by drug war violence, the whitewater potential in Michoacan will likely have kayakers soon returning to La Tierra Caliente.



INTERVIEW Martina Wegman

Over the past several years, Dutch ripper Martina Wegman has quietly proven herself as one of the best female paddlers in the world today. A humble, laid-back style belies impressive skills, a willingness to take on challenging whitewater, and a budding talent for slalom racing.



DESTINATION Pucón, Chile

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PROFILE A Peruvian Paddling Dynasty

Over the past three decades, Peru has evolved from an unknown corner of the Andes to a country boasting some of the most notable whitewater trips on the planet. Much of that exploration and recognition has revolved around a single family – the Vellutino-Ibañez clan.



EXPEDITION Magpie – A Wilderness River for All

One of the finest wilderness river trips on the planet, the Magpie's fun-filled rapids, warm water, and scenic camping also make it a perfect first multi-day trip for kayakers, rafters and open boaters alike. Unfortunately, valued also for its hydropower potential, the Magpie is a beauty at risk.



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The Vellutino-Ibañez Clan

A Peruvian Paddling Dynasty

WORDS: TYLER WILLIAMS - PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE VELLUTINOS, MIRCO GAROSQO, JACEK BOGUCKI

Over the past three decades, Peru has evolved from an unknown corner of the Andes to a country boasting some of the most notable whitewater trips on the planet. Much of that exploration and recognition has revolved around a single family—the Vellutinos. From early descents of the Colca, to the Cotahuasi explorations of the '90s, to World Class Academy's South American basecamp of today, the Vellutinos and their Ibañez cousins have played a central role. If you have any interest in Peruvian kayaking, your homework starts with the Vellutino-Ibañez clan.



Pero helping to conduct a body search on the Apurimac River five years ago.

The Colca River was angry in early April 1985. It ripped off the desert shoreline, crumbling dirt banks and filling the air with the rich scent of disturbed earth. It was the kind of flow that should turn away experienced river runners, but there is a certain seduction in a flooded river that draws us in, compelling us to join the power to become part of the event. Alvaro Ibañez, standing on shore, was doing his best to keep that compulsion at bay. Trying to open a new trip for his fledgling guide service, he had already waited for two days, watching the water rise and fall with the vagaries of upstream rains. He only needed to float a few kilometers, he reasoned, and then they would disembark for a trek to the Valley of the Volcanoes, a surreal place of small cinder cones and inexplicably clear spring-fed lakes surrounded by the stark browns of central Peru. The river access would be a perfect start to the trek, offering a little rafting while avoiding an undesirable 12-hour drive to the valley. There were plenty of reasons to launch the raft that day. So, with his brother-in-law Pepe Lucho and three friends, Alvaro pushed the boat onto the water, and started their short run to the valley.

Almost immediately, a surging wave broke on the raft, flipping it and sending its occupants into the sweeping flood. One person was randomly tossed into an eddy close to shore. The rest weren't so lucky. Carried into chaotic rapids, the swimmers were dunked and tumbled, repelled by each eddy line as if it were a brick wall. Pepe Lucho found himself separated from the group, and near enough to a projecting rock to make a grab. With flagging energy, he crawled out. Downstream, he glimpsed his brother Alvaro holding onto his friend Carolina, and then they were gone.

Pepe Lucho survived a harrowing climb and a freezing night in the canyon before news of the accident reached his in-law, Antonio Vellutino. A prominent businessman in Arequipa, Vellutino quickly arranged for a Peruvian air force helicopter to fly the Colca in search of survivors. A big, gregarious man of Italian descent, one gets the feeling that Antonio would go to such lengths for any of his friends, but for his brother-in-law, Alvaro, he had extra incentive. Antonio's wife, Ani,

and Alvaro's wife, Cecilia, were sisters (Pepe Lucho was their brother). The two couples spent much of their time together even showing duties of parenthood with their similarly aged offspring. In all aspects of life, the Vellutino-Ibañez were a family affair.

When the helicopter search produced nothing, the whitewater world was called in. Lars Holbek and friends were in Peru for a Paucartambo River expedition, and they soon encountered Antonio Vellutino. He arranged for the kayakers to fly into the Colca Canyon and conduct a river-level search. The water remained too high for a full descent of the river, but even the small section that Holbek's team combed revealed a few scraps of equipment that began to point an inevitable picture. Most likely, Alvaro and his two friends were lost. Several weeks later the recovery efforts continued. Colca first-descenter Piotr Chmielinski, who was on his way to Peru for the first ever source to sea Amazon expedition, hastened his departure from Poland in order to help with the search. He found Alvaro's raft at the high water line, confirming the now obvious conclusion: there were no survivors. Piotr's discovery of the shredded raft proved to be an end to this tragic episode: one that was nonetheless a seminal chapter of Peruvian river running, and one that began long before that tragic high water day.

Piotr and his team, called the *Canoaños* (Canoa + Andes), were two years into a paddling safari for the ages by the time they reached Peru in 1979. The resourceful Poles had barged across the Atlantic to Mexico, traveled north to the United States, returned to Mexico for a first descent of the Santa María, continued to Costa Rica for another first on the Pacuare, and made their way to South America where the crowning achievement of their journey awaited, in the depths of the Colca. They might have never reached the world's deepest canyon were it not for the help of the Vellutinos.

The *Canoaños* were an enthusiastic open-hearted bunch, with a knack for finding support for their adventures. When their car broke down in Peru, a mechanic referred them to Antonio and Ani Vellutino. It was a match that could only be

Now, Santiago, or "Santi" as he is widely known, is the hardest charger of the clan. This past year, he traveled to North America and knocked off several hard California runs including Fantasy Falls, then traveled to the North Fork of the Payette, and finally north to Alaska's Devils Canyon of the Susitna, all in a single summer season.

arranged by the river gods. Ani remembers, "They showed up to our doorstep with a hand-written letter from the Pope. We thought they'd stay for a few days. They stayed for forty." Piotr recalls a welcoming Vellutino vibe. "We were prepared to sleep in the back yard, but Antonio looked at us in an Italian way and said, 'What, our house isn't good enough?'"

The Vellutino's house was thus filled with a pack of traveling Poles, often holding nighttime sing-alongs in the living room. The Vellutino's son, Dullio, age eleven at the time, remembers "a bunch of stinky Polish guys who were always having fun." He summarizes, "The energy in my house changed a lot during that time." Ani reminisces the Conacoans with daily breakfasts, and Antonio's connections in the restaurant world (he had owned several) helped fuel them toward the Colca, where they made their landmark first descent.

A few years later the Conacoans returned for a second Colca mission. This is where young Dullio saw two of the paddlers roll their kayaks in order to pass under a low bridge at the take-out, and his own kayak aspirations began. The Conacoans left a couple fiberglass boats behind, and the universe of Peruvian kayaking began to expand. Dullio started paddling on a pond adjacent to his parent's hotel. Over the years to come, this convenient flatwater practice spot introduced several of the Vellutino-Boyer clan to kayaking, but there is a gene in this family that drives them to the next logical horizon, wherever that might be, and their next horizon in kayaking naturally led to the one of the tip of a rapids.

Dullio graduated from the Pole's fiberglass leftovers to a plastic Lazer that Lars Holbek had used on the Pucallamarca. Still intimidated by rivers in light of the Colca tragedy, Dullio spent most of his time paddling in the surf near Lima where, following numerous thrashings in the Pacific break, he finally pieced together the roll. Little brother Piero remembers, "He called from Lima to tell us, 'I got the roll.' It was big news in our house." Later that year, Dullio traveled to a river festival that

PROFILE



Dullio and Piero enjoying a rap on the Upper Apurimac in 2013.

hosted nearly every paddler in the country, about a dozen. He finished second in the slalom event, and his confidence grew. A source to sea trip on the Santa River followed, bringing exposure to class V expedition-style boating, and setting the hook for a life of river pursuits. "After that trip," Dullio says, "I remember thinking, 'This is it, this is a new life.'"

A year later he was running the Colca Canyon with Giovanni and Pietro D'Alago, becoming the first native Peruvian to descend the iconic river. Returning to the waterway that had claimed the life of his uncle was an emotional hurdle not easily passed. "I had to talk about it with my parents," he says, "but in the end it was just something I wanted to do, and I was ready." Now, almost twenty-five years after his first run, Dullio has occurred nearly thirty Colca descents, more than any other paddler.

Dullio's involvement in the sport, the "new life" as he says, was starting to spread throughout the family. Dullio's younger brother, Gian Marco, was quickly developing into a strong paddler even as a teenager. His outgoing personality and youthful confidence made him an instant attention grabber to traveling paddlers who were unaccustomed to seeing South Americans on their home rivers. Marc Goddard, now the owner of Bio Bio Expeditions, shared an eddy with a teenage Gian Marco on the Bio Bio River during the early 1990's. He remembers uncommon composure for such a young paddler. "It was high water and a raft couldn't stop above Lava South. It dropped in and flipped, and we were sitting there in the eddy like, 'hmm, what do we do now?' I mean, it was really big downstream." Gian Marco, this young kid, just peeled out of there and gave chase. Maybe it wasn't



Gian Marco hiking to the put-in of the first descent of the Santa Teresa River in 2006.

the smartest move, but I followed, and we managed to get down in one take-out and corral the yard sale. The way he just went for it—that was impressive."

Kurt Casey (KSM45) was another Northern Hemisphere paddler who was drawn to Gian Marco's bearing personality, and the two soon found themselves together on the Colca. It was now a decade after the Conacoans first brought the Colca to the world's attention, and new horizons awaited. At just nineteen, Gian Marco Vellutino was at the center of the push to explore the world's next deepest canyon, the Cotahuasi. Along with his brother Dullio, his friend Kurt Casey, and a wide cast of paddlers from across the globe, he embarked on the first exploration of Peru's classic Cotahuasi.

The next year brought another descent of the Cotahuasi. This time sponsored by several river equipment manufacturers due to the efforts of Alvaro's widow, Aunt Cecilia. Baby brother Piero was allowed on the trip at only fifteen, perhaps a bit young for such an undertaking but if anyone was ready at that age, it was Piero. The largest physical presence in the family. Besides, he had plenty of older siblings looking after him.

In the years following the Cotahuasi, Piero and other members of the family started traveling abroad to work and paddle. Gian Marco was the first to go to Italy and guide, during the late '90s, largely by Piero and Dullio. Piero has also guided in coveted Bhutan, a trip Marco Goddard could have asked anyone to guide. He chose Piero. "I asked myself, who is the one person I want with me there is a problem?" The answer came immediately—Piero. "There have been Vellutino gigs on the Zambesi, seasonal work on the Futaleufú, and of course their homeland of Peru, where they haven't just worked in the adventure tourism business, they've played a significant role in developing it.

Dullio started in the outfitting business with pure grassroots effort. He bought an old raft and cobbled together several used lifejackets. He hired a carpenter to make basic wooden paddles from scratch. He began guiding by taking friends, then friends of friends, for a little money, then college students looking for an affordable adventure. In a few years he had an entire adventure school, including climbing and paragliding excursions. The commercialization of the business wore Dullio thin over time, though, and he dropped out of guiding to pursue the hotel business like his father. Now he has come full circle, with a balance of diverse high adventure outfitting-like runner's trips on the Inca Trail and sea kayaking on Lake Titicaca through his Munaycho Adventures—shared with time of the family hotel where he and his brothers are "trying to make our father do less." Gian Marco runs Colca de Marco, featuring Peru's largest zip line, and rafting in the Sacaca



Diego books a line on the Huancayo rapids of the Calleje River, Peru.



Piero guiding a raft on the exciting whitewater of the Futaleufú.

Diego and his little brother Santiago learned to run rivers right in Arequipa, taking a bus up the Chile River Canyon at the edge of town and paddling back down in an inflatable kayak, taking turns with the one-man boat and a single motorcycle helmet.

Valley on the fringes of Macchu Picchu's tourist market. His base camp now serves as the Peruvian hub for World Class Kayak Academy. Little brother Piero is proprietor of Lero Explore Peru, bringing high-end multi-sport trips to the Andes as well as training South American guides in swift water rescue. The Vellutino apprenticeships across the world of guiding are now paying dividends in their homeland of Peru.

The world of outfitting has reached their cousins on the other side of the family as well. The offspring of the late Alvaro Ibañez and Cecilia are on the whole younger than their Vellutino cousins. The closest Ibañez, Diego, is about the same age as the youngest Vellutino, Piero. Thus, the Ibañez boys—Diego, Santiago, and Alvaro Jr.—had some opportunity to learn from their cousins. Diego and his little brother Santiago learned to run rivers right in Arequipa, taking a bus up the Chile River Canyon at the edge of town and paddling back down in an inflatable kayak, taking turns with the one-man boat and a single motorcycle helmet.

Soon, the Ibañez boys were paddling Dullio's hand-me-down kayaks on rivers across Peru. Santiago developed his skills on the Cafate River near Lima as a teenager, stealing his older brother Diego away from college classes to make afternoon runs. Now, Santiago, or "Santi" as he is widely known, is the hardest charger of the clan. This past year, he traveled to North America and knocked off several hard California runs including Fantasy Falls, then traveled to the North Fork of the Payette, and finally north to Alaska's Devils Canyon of the Susitna, all in a single summer season. North American



Gian Marco and Diego Valcechchi on the 14980-foot Salcantay Pass en route to the first descent of the Santa Teresa River in 2006. They carried their kayaks for the entire two-day walk to the river.



Dulio on the National Geographic Expedition of the Colca in 1991.

paddler Ryan Howe has run with the Peruvians both in South America and back in the States, and one thing always stands out. "You can just tell that rivers are in their blood," he says, "every time you see that look in their eyes on the water."

The level of paddling that the Vellutino-Ibañez family has attained is astonishing when one considers their lack of formal instruction. Ever since Dulio's experiments in the ocean break, the technical knowledge has grown and been passed along, but in a greater context this kayaking family is self-taught. Even basics such as entering and exiting eddies, they had to learn about on their own. "We noticed how the water behind rocks always flipped us," Piero recalls. "My brothers' advice was to always keep paddling hard." Paddling hard certainly helped, but the Vellutino-Ibañez boys aren't simply boldy and aggressive kayakers. After decades of playing and working on rivers, they've got skills.

Gian Marco, was quickly developing into a strong paddler even as a teenager. His outgoing personality and youthful confidence allowed him to instantly grab the attention of traveling paddlers who were unaccustomed to seeing South Americans on their home rivers.

This is not just a novelty Peruvian family who paddles, but a group of individuals who are all strong paddlers and expedition leaders. Santiago guides climbers up Kilimanjaro in conjunction with his safety boating gigs around the world. His little brother, Alvaro Junior, is part owner of Peru Angles Flyfishing, taking clients from the Peruvian highlands to the Amazon jungle to the crystalline rivers of Patagonia. Still, his roots are in the family sport of kayaking, and he is well aware of his pedigree. "Growing up with these guys was great," says Alvaro Jr. "It was the best school anyone can ask for."

Often, many of us find paddling as an outlet for our families, something different through which we can forge our individualities. But the Vellutino-Ibañez tribe seems to gain strength by approaching the sport together, as a family lineage. John Armstrong, a California paddler and filmmaker who was involved in the macabre search for Alvaro Senior, remembers a heart felt phrase from Antonio Vellutino, repeated often during the difficult days of the search—"Que bonita familia." "He would say this to all of us. Blood relative or not, we all felt like we were indeed part of a beautiful family."

The tragedy did leave scars, and perhaps this imbues the Vellutino-Ibañez paddlers with a deeper, more consistent respect than most. Fourteen years ago, Dulio needed an extra paddler to power his raft down the Colca for a Korean film shoot. He recruited his young cousin, Diego, who was barely twenty at the time. Before leaving, Diego shared the news with his mother, Cecilia. One can only imagine mother Cecilia's trepidation of seeing her just-grown child leave for the same abyss that took her husband. Diego remembers having "a difficult hour-long conversation with my mom," but ultimately the river was in his blood. He joined the trip.

As the paddlers approached a drop called "Rapido Alvaro Ibañez," where the ruined raft of his father still rests, Diego's paddle—a hand-me-down from his lost dad—inexplicably broke in two. The team quickly pulled ashore, shading beneath a tree that had suddenly taken root after the accident fifteen years earlier. An Andean condor, cumbersome and normally reticent to land at the bottom of a canyon, swooped in and made its perch nearby. Everything stopped. The bird, the tree, the river, the rocks, the paddlers with their broken paddle, all shared a thick silence for many minutes, and then they started off into some of the biggest rapids in the canyon. As they did, the condor lifted and circled until they cleared the last big drop. The bird soared into the distance, and the paddlers safely floated out of the gorge, blissful in the moment, and keeping a watchful eye toward the next horizon, whatever that might be.



The family gathered in southern Chile many years ago.