

Worldwide Creek Boating

Eddy of No Return

By Rocky Contos

Photos by Rocky Contos and Barbara Conboy

It's kind of romantic-stranded in the middle of the Mexican wilderness with my hunny, Barbara. Shade from the canopy of trees cools us in the warm humid weather. Birds chirp and the lava gorge is absolutely breathtaking. There is a nice place to camp just upstream where we spent the previous night. Unfortunately, we are stuck. A huge volume of muddy water (300 cms/10,000 cfs) is pouring over a massive Class V drop, with half the river swirling into an Olympic pool-sized eddy on our side of the river. A giant pile of wood flotsam clogs the head of the eddy. We try nearly a dozen times to punch through into the main current to start heading down the river, but to no avail. Even if we do get out into the current, what lies downstream? More of the same? Worse? God forbid it get any worse. What a disaster it would be to flip and lose the raft and all our camping gear and food. We're so thankful that I got the raft through this one. Hiking out is not an option—it's about 12 km and 1,000 m up over the rim through dense forest to the nearest road by Tequilita. So I guess we'll just wait indefinitely until the water level drops – I hope soon. Will this seal our fate together? Will it endear Barbara to me? Or will she despise me for bringing her into

this dangerous mess?

I first met Barbara Conboy when she enrolled in a UCSD Outback Adventures kayak rolling/surfing Class I taught in 1994. Soon after that she came on a sea kayak trip in Baja that I guided. Our group spent 4 days paddling around the San Quintín area about 4 hours south of the border. On that trip, the weather was windy, we had sand in our camp all the time, and we couldn't go very far in the ocean or around the bay. But Barbara was a good sport about it. I got to know her a little bit then. She was fluent in Spanish and had traveled extensively in Mexico while studying in Mexico City for a year. She had been working as a bilingual speech-language pathologist in San Diego, and was about to start working on her Ph.D. Originally from Long Island, she had grown up very comfortable with the water but hadn't had much exposure to whitewater. We didn't meet again until 1998, when she coincidentally moved in upstairs from me at the UCSD graduate student apartments. I invited her on some river trips and we started dating. A couple years later, I had graduated and was spending the summer in Mexico when she came down to visit and do some exploring with me.

I was based in Mazatlán at the time, and since Barb's kayaking skills weren't good enough to tackle an unknown monsoon-

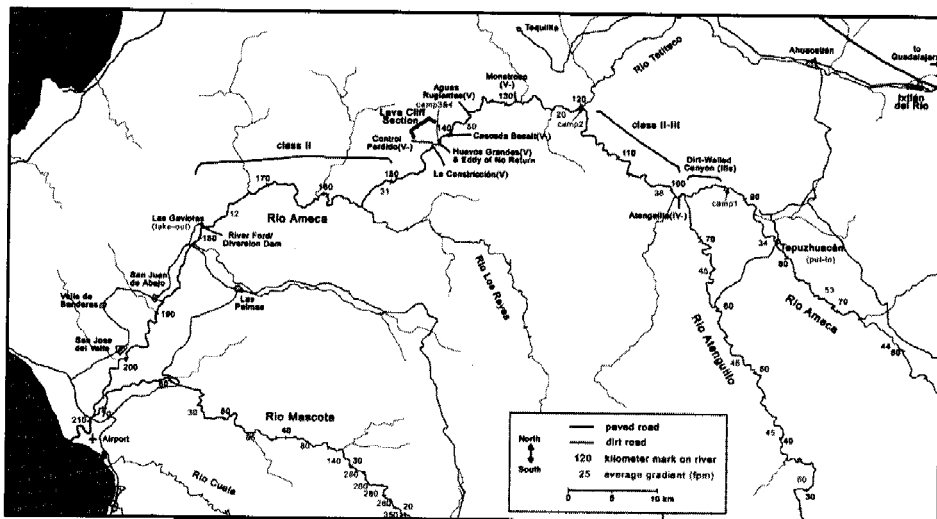
fed Mexican river, we decided to do a descent on my cataract. Barb wasn't skilled at rowing a raft through rapids, but she could help guide the raft with a paddle from the bow. The rain was falling down around Guadalajara, so I suggested we try a river in that area that might be a bit more challenging – Río Ameca. We would float the lower stretch of 130 km from Tepuzhuacán to Puerto Vallarta. The highest average gradient between the 100 m contours was ~10 m/km (50 fpm).

I said, "Barbarita, that gradient in what looks like a not-so-tight canyon probably means there will be a lot of Class IIIs and IVs; maybe one or two Class Vs. We'll almost certainly be able to portage around the Vs." It was an easy sell.

"OK, Roquito, let's go do Ameca," she said, trusting that we'd have an adventure, but nothing too dangerous.

Río Ameca is the river that debouches by the Puerto Vallarta airport. Several years earlier I had eyed up this river trip as one of the easiest to arrange logistically if flying down into Mexico with a kayak. I figured since the river runs right by this major airport with frequent flights to and from the US, all we would need to do is get a ride from the airport up to the put-in, 212 km upstream at Ameca, and then float back down to the airport where we would hop on our flight back a week later. Simple! It would be an easy way to get into the heart of the Sierra Madre and get a good feel of what the river systems were like down there. I had the maps and knew the average rainfall in the drainage, and surmised the river would be running about 15 cms (500 cfs) at the put-in of Ameca, and about 200 cms (7,000 cfs) at the mouth in the summer. The average gradient, about 7 m/km (35 fpm), indicated it would probably be a fun river with mostly Class III-IV rapids. Now I was down in Mexico with my truck, raft, and girlfriend! I would finally get to do Ameca.

As we were preparing to leave, Barb asked, "What's the weather going to be like out there?" I mentioned that she should



prepare for stormy, rainy weather on the trip. After all, this was August, the middle of the rainy season. She replied, "I hope it doesn't rain the whole time. It's been so foggy in San Diego; I want some sun!"

Her attitude vexed me. Rain is the life-blood of my cherished rivers in the Sierra Madre. At the time, there had been a fairly long dry spell that had me scraping down rivers the previous couple weeks. When it would start pouring, I would dance for joy and run around like a young kid who just got into Disneyland. I was hoping and praying that we would have deafening thunder and intense downpours each day. Contrary to Barb's desires, I wanted lots of rain.

We drove off to the put-in at Tepuzhuacán with my friend and shuttle driver, Rafael. I picked that spot, about midway down the river, since it was the last access point before the lower canyon and the river would likely be large enough for the raft there. Río Ameca wasn't flowing as high at the put-in as I had anticipated – it looked like about 20 cms (700 cfs). Maybe they diverted more water out of the upper basin than I suspected. It seemed sufficient, though, and my brand new 16' cataraft was a treat to row – much better than the \$100 army surplus bucket I had used previously on rivers like the Kern, Salt, and Grand. For one thing, the new one didn't have to be pumped up every hour, and maintained its composure well. There was no need to bail it out constantly. It turned easily and didn't drag. It was comfortable to row. But it lacked a floor, and water could splash right up onto us.

We weaved around the boulders and Barb lifted a wire cable for us to scoot under. I cringed every time the raft scraped over a rock and became annoyed. At a few spots Barb had to hop off to lighten the load so we could progress. I told her, "Look, you're getting what you asked for – clear skies, low water, and scraping." Looking back now, I think to myself - the unfortunate gal – she was already suffering from Montezuma's Revenge and a pinched nerve in her leg (from spending the 8-hour drive to the put-in wedged between me and Rafa in the tiny 2-person cab of my Toyota truck), and now she was dealing with an



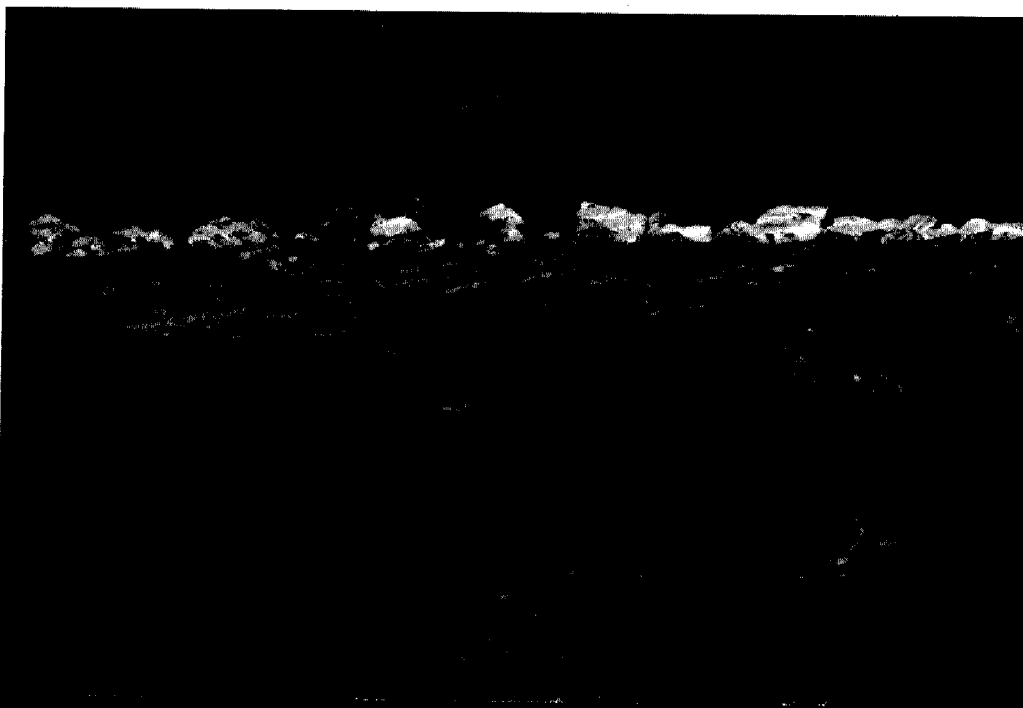
Above and below: The Lave Cliff section has a high gradient and eight major Class IV-V rapids. Huevos Grandes is located at the right side of this photo where a lower lava cliff can be seen.

ornery boyfriend whom she hadn't seen in months. To her credit, she did stick it through the tribulation and came to see my logic, saying, "Some rain for the river would be good."

We camped at the edge of a farmer's plot, having been benighted before finding an ideal beach. We were only 8 km into our 120 km journey to Puerto Vallarta. We still had 4 more days before Rafa would arrive to pick us up. The farmer came by in the morning and we chatted a while. He didn't mind us camping on his land and seemed interested in the idea of floating down the river. He said he had never seen or heard of anyone floating down before. We didn't ask what he was going to plant,

but it possibly was agaves to make tequila, a product of the region.

After a Class III dirt-walled canyon, we arrived at the confluence with Río Atenguillo. This river more than doubled the flow, and my temperament improved at least as much! "Wheeeewww" Barb exclaimed as we floated over a Class IV about a kilometer past the confluence. "That was fun. I wonder how many rapids like that we'll have?" she asked. I knew there would be a lot in the 10 m/km (50 fpm) section. We continued through many more Class IIs and IIIs as storm clouds ominously darkened the sky, then settled in to camp across from Río Tetiteco.



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"Are you happy now?" Barb asked me as we ate our pasta meal in the tent, rain pouring down hard. It lasted like that for over an hour and then off-and-on all night long. I was fearful that the river might come up to our tent, located only 2 m above the water level. The next morning I saw in the pot outside that about 4 cm (1.5") had fallen. The river came up nearly a meter, but was still far from our camp. Now I was dancing around, so excited to get on the river, with about 150 cms in it (5,000 cfs)! "Finally, this is what the river really should be like!" I said as we zipped away in the swift muddy water.

Downstream the canyon walls steepened, the gradient picked up, and we passed through many Class III-IVs. Barb was still suffering from her gastrointestinal ailment, which weakened her. Partly because of this, in a few of the rapids that were Class IV+ or more, Barb would get out on the side to take photos or shoot video of me running the raft down. This suited me for good documentation, and it suited her, since she didn't want to float through anything that might flip the raft or knock her off. Besides, she had just taken a photography class and wanted to utilize the techniques here.

We approached a left bend in the river with a huge cataract in the main channel on the right. Scouting this one, Barb said to me, "That looks a lot worse than Lava Falls on the Grand," referring to a trip we did a couple years earlier when the army raft we were on had folded back over itself and flipped. "You're not going to float through that, are you?" she asked. "What if you flip?" I acquiesced and we removed the heavy coolers to line/portage on the slightly watered river-left channel. I told her "there shouldn't be many more like that." We refer to that Class V as "Aguas Rugientes," or "Rough Water."

After more IVs, we approached a real lava canyon. "Where are all these rapids coming from?" I asked myself. Barb rode through a few of the ones above. Now in the beautiful Lava Cliff section I floated through three tough Class IV rapids. "They've got to stop soon," I said. I never thought I'd be wishing for less whitewater.

Then we came to one that looked horrendous - a 4-meter drop with the water folding over on the right side, and plunging into a sticky hole on the left. A dicey run down the center was the only possible line, but looked almost certain to

flip a raft. If that didn't get you, one of the 3-meter high exploding waves downstream would. Then there was the end of it where all the water charged into a low lava wall, with half the river swirling to the right and into the Olympic pool-sized eddy. I just kept sitting there looking at the monster. I didn't let on to Barb how terrified I was of floating over that and what dire straights we were in. We searched around for an hour to see if there might be some way to portage around, or even just to camp. The rapid was indeed ineluctable - it would have to be run. Upstream we found a place to put the tent, nestled back in the forest, and pulled the raft up to it. We settled in for the night, hoping that the water level might drop the next morning. Thankfully, it didn't rain much on us that night.

The water had indeed dropped when I went out to look at the rapid at 7 a.m.. It was more manageable. I sat there for 15 minutes still awed by the sight. As the minutes passed, the water started getting siltier and the rapid changed. It was coming up again! Geez, we better hurry and get over that drop fast. But it takes time to get a raft ready. It was over an hour later when we had things packed. The level had risen above what it was the previous day. Barb waited nervously on top of the lava near the end of the rapid, planning to take a photo of me coming down. I was delayed a good 20 minutes double checking the rigging and fixing my helmet strap that had popped off. Finally I was ready and floated into this "Huevos Grandes" beast. As I went over the center, a lateral struck my oar and whacked it away from me. I quickly regained it and tried to straighten out for the huge waves below. Up and over I went, getting doused with water and coming close to flipping but staying upright. I had lost the oar again and was headed straight for the wall at the



This is the view upstream into Huevos Grandes and the Eddy of No Return. Half the river swirls to the right in to a massive eddy that is clogged with debris at the head. At this flow, it was impossible for us to get out of the eddy and continue downstream.

end. I drifted toward it, and then to the right. I had wanted to get to the left since the eddy looked too tough to get out of. Oh well, at least I was safe, upright and in the eddy. I didn't see Barb where she was stationed initially. She was partway back up the rapid.

"Did you get the photo?" I asked as I approached her.

"No," was her reply, slightly agitated because she knew I would be upset. "What happened to you? I was waiting and waiting and thought something went wrong."

"What?? I just rafted the biggest rapid ever in my life and you missed the photo?? What the heck happened?"

"I thought you were in trouble and started going back up to see." It turned out that while I was fixing my helmet strap she couldn't see me from her perch atop the lava, so she had climbed down to check on me, fearing I had slipped on my climb down to the river and had either hit my head or hurt a limb. And she didn't get back to where she could snap the photo in time. I eventually forgave her.

She hopped on the raft, and although we tried to get out into the current many times, we couldn't. Whether she was helping paddle or off the raft to lighten the load, it was impossible. The swift water would just spin the raft around and it would float back down into the eddy. Part of the problem was all the wood at the head of the eddy, preventing a peel out up there. This "Eddy of No Return" wouldn't let us continue downstream.

So we waited. The water level started dropping by lunchtime but I still couldn't punch into the current. We set up camp again in the same spot upstream, relaxed, and perused around a little. I tried to scout out the next rapids downstream. I saw a couple tough rapids that looked manageable.

The next morning the water had dropped considerably and it was easy to punch out into the current. After the two rapids I had previously seen, we came upon "La Constricción," another Class V named for the river narrowing to 10 m wide at the exit. I wanted to portage but couldn't. Barb had to stay on the raft through this one, since there was no way for her to get down below where I could pick her up. It was a good thing she rode along because she employed a dexterous high side to keep the raft from flipping as we hit one of the big waves!

The only real casualty on the trip was at the following rapid ("Ponchado") where we hit the lava wall hard and the tube bent back up so far that the frame punctured a hole in it. We patched it at lunch, which held remarkably well. Soon the canyon opened up and rapids eased to Class II. At that point Barb wanted to take the oars.

She did well for a while. But then we came to a spot where I said, "You've got to miss that stick over there. It'll come up on you fast so start moving left now."

She didn't hear me say to move left - I guess it's true that I often don't have the loudest, clearest voice. She tried to get around it to the right, underestimating the force of the current. We hit it and I angrily took the oars to move us away. Luckily there was no damage.

"I need to practice reading the river and steering the raft where it's easy, not where there's something dangerous to avoid!" she snipped, defensively. "And those oar-rights that other rafts have would help. And it would really help if you would speak more clearly!"

We arrived at the Las Gaviotas river crossing/diversion dam and instead of portaging it and finishing the 36 km to the coast, we decided to take out there, since we were a day late and Rafa was due to arrive about that time. I went off to make the call to change the rendezvous and Barb

stayed behind to watch in amusement as the locals washed their truck by driving over the dam.

Not all people interested in whitewater are daring adventurers that want to do Class V rapids. Many are like Barbara - willing to go out for a good adventure, but nothing too scary. Río Ameca was a bit much for her and could have put a rift between us. However, I think in the end that the experience brought us closer together. Barb got to see first-hand what it was like to descend one of those unknown rivers south of the border, and helped get us through on the raft. A year later, she even kayaked another unknown river with me - Río Balleza.

Despite our occasional bickering, I love her dearly. She did nix my plan to spend our honeymoon doing a 4-week descent of Río Marañon in Peru (she didn't want us to end up like Glen and Bessie Hyde!), but we still enjoyed a month of sea kayaking in Southern Baja. She continues to regularly come out on raft trips to rivers like the Salmon, Grande Ronde, and Deschutes, and enjoys kayaking Class III water. A few minor issues still plague us on the river, though. For instance, in spite of her background in speech-language pathology and almost 8 years together, she hasn't been able to cure me of my oftentimes-incoherent mumbling speech (for which I've earned the nickname "Mumbly").

We enjoy our life together. As we entertain people in our Seattle home or on a river, we fondly reminisce about the Eddy of No Return.

"Hey Roquito, when are you going to write up the Ameca trip?" Barbara asks me.

"Well, hunny ... here it is!" 