

INTERNATIONAL PADDLING

A FIRST DESCENT FIESTA ON RÍO HUEVACHI

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ROCKY CONTOS



MARIJUANA. WEED. MOTA. Ganja. Pot. Cannabis. Call it what you will. We are standing in a huge plot of it in the northern Sierra Madre Occidental of Mexico. The plants are very healthy—with verdant, sticky buds—and stand up to 6 feet tall. Aaron grabs a leaf, amused. We are the only ones around, a group of four kayakers in the middle of a 9-day first descent near the Copper Canyon.

This trip is perhaps of interest to those of you inclined to find that particular patch of mota (as it is colloquially referred to in Mexico). The fact that Río Huevachi is full of extreme Class V-VI whitewater might only pique your interest more. Just to give you a few stats, here are a few lines I used to advertise this trip: “Río Huevachi-Charuyvo-Chínipas in northwest Mexico. First descent of 126 miles; from 6700 ft elevation to 600 ft elevation; beautiful canyon; clean water; remote country; approximately 9 days; average 2500 cfs midway. There will be portages.” A simple

gradient calculated from those numbers is somewhat misleading, since 3400 ft of the drop is in the initial 24 miles. That is, the Río Huevachi-Charuyvo part averages 138 ft/mile, just like one of California’s high Sierra Nevada streams.

So let me describe the goods. On day one you’ll have to confront Cascada Bustamante, an 80-foot clean waterfall located three miles downstream of the put-in. If a high waterfall descent is not to your liking, there’s a steep wooded slope that facilitates portaging. This is a beautiful pine forest area reminiscent of Sedona, with great paddling for several miles upstream and downstream of the waterfall. There are also fine camping opportunities.

After Bustamante, the whitewater gets really “sick.” From miles six through 12, the river is often in a narrow, boulder-choked chasm dropping 150-200 ft/mile. Optimistically, I’ll say there are a few nice rapids in between the boulders and falls, and the scenery is special with some ancient pictographs to admire. However,

the portages are long, hard and time-consuming. Going through this section on our trip, we covered only three miles on our second day, 1.7 miles on our third day, and 2.5 miles on our fourth day. At such a pace, you might start wondering if the whole trip is going to take 40 days instead of 9. Your muscles will ache, you’ll have sores on your skin, and those pesky *jejenes* (biting gnats) may start getting the better of you. Morale in the group will probably get really low. People will complain about the weight of the food they’re carrying. Somewhere in the midst of the 25 or so portages, one of your buddies might mutter: “Ah, now I get it. Why didn’t you say the *fiesta* on this trip was going to be a portage-*FIESTA*.” At least you won’t have to deal with the psychological terror of coming upon an unknown, boxed-in, inescapable, must-run Class VI (something our first descent group was getting nervous about). On the bright side, you’ll still have that real *fiesta* to look forward to.

On our trip, Tom Diegel, frustrated with all the portages, poked fun at one of my

Opposite: A classic Huevachi rapid after Presa La Trinidad.

mutterings, saying, “This is going to be not only a *first* descent, but also a *last* descent.” He was confident that no other paddlers would want to tackle this river due to the portages. I actually agree with him, but only regarding that section of Río Huevachi. However, you might think differently. Perhaps you’d rather listen to Aaron Stable, who later ran the Middle Fork of the Kings and commented: “It was like *déjà vu* of Río Huevachi all over again...”

After a short runnable stretch of river, you’ll get to the end of that “sick” section (mile 12), where there’s a final major portage that is unforgettable, one that I refer to as “Zionesque.” Río Huevachi goes down out of sight under boulders for several hundred meters in a gorge. On the scout, you’ll trudge along without seeing what happens to the river below, soon to be perplexed by the sight of water flowing the wrong way! Actually, the water you see will be Río Basogachi, a tributary of approximately the same size as Río Huevachi. The two rivers meet head on in the gorge and turn 90-degrees into a slot in a 100-foot high wall (with all the water under boulders, of course). After managing to make it up above the slot gorge to an amazing flat bedrock



A helicopter could land here and take us to safety.” Fortunately, you will have the foresight that this portage is the last tough one, which should convince your partners to trudge onward. But please—don’t slip off the logs!

The Zionesque Chasm lies just past the confluence of Ríos Huevachi and Basigochi. On topo maps, the resultant stream is labeled Río Charuyvo. Although the gradient remains steep for the next several miles (about 150 ft/mile), nearly all the whitewater is runnable. Tom Diegel even commented that there were so many “high

The put-in valley by Huevachi.

any stoners out there looking for GPS coordinates to an easily accessible patch of weed. [But at least it may have prompted you to read this far!] I certainly don’t advise floating this river—or any other—with such intentions. That would make such a trip particularly perilous. As for the fiesta, we actually had not only one, but several. Each night after those tough portages, we lightened our load by eating up the food we were carrying. Particularly memorable were the Tasty Bites, pre-cooked sumptuous Indian dishes that were the source of complaints during the portages. Yet precisely because they were *soooo* heavy, as well as *soooo* delectable, our group cheered heartily on those nights when we ate them. Now those dinners *were* worthy *fiestas*!

Although you can take out at the village, I recommend pressing onward. The last six miles of Río Charuyvo continue to have an impressive gradient (130 ft/mile) with completely runnable Class IV-V rapids. If you go at our pace, it’ll be 6 days by the time you make it to the end of Río Charuyvo, where you can set up camp across from Río Maguarichic or Río Oteros. Ahead, you can contemplate running the 102 miles of Río Chínipas, a much bigger, beautiful, lower gradient Class IV river (see article in the November/December 2009 issue of *American Whitewater*).

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area, you’ll be able to look way down to the water. I refer to the chasm as “Zionesque” since it’s like something you’d see in Zion National Park. Unfortunately, you’ll face another dilemma: crossing the chasm. It’s a necessary prerequisite to descend back down to the river. If you’re lucky, you might find a few rickety logs spanning the 15-foot gap. However, a slip would mean dropping 80 feet, probably to your death. Again, your group will face another nadir in morale. They might look at that flat bedrock and say: “This is our escape!

qual” rapids. Tom Meinholz can be seen on the video grinning from ear to ear. After six miles of outrageous runnable Class IV-V, you’ll reach a more open area of river. Here, some of your group might feel so relieved that they’ll throw their arms in the air and thank God for no more claustrophobic gorges. You’ll also find a footbridge at a village called Río Las Animas where a dirt road descends to the river, allowing a take-out.

So what about that patch of *mota* and the *fiesta*? I apologize if I’m letting down