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A Mexican Wilderness Adventure

By Tom Diegel

Mexico has long been famous for such great rivers

as the Usumacinto, the Agua Azul, and the Santa Maria in Chiapas and Veracruz. However, the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains, the range that forms the Mexican continental divide and runs from near the U.S. border down past Guadalajara, has tucked away deep in its canyons dozens of potentially world-class but little-known rivers. Although only a day or two's drive from the U.S. and with a relatively predictable season, these rivers have seen few or no descents. But they have the potential to rival their southern counterparts as Mexican classics.

Rocky Contos, a UC San Diego neuroscientist, has devoted years to researching the rivers of the Sierra Madre Occidental. During his doctoral studies he spent as much time poring over Mexican *topo* maps as he did dissecting mouse brains. This resulted in the identification of at least 25 rivers that are long, remote, beautiful, and challenging, and have not been explored. Rocky measured the drainage areas, identified access points, noted the historical rainfall amounts (which conve-



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niently comes during the monsoon season of July-September when the western US rivers are drying up), determined gradients, and painstakingly marked hundreds of kilometer-by-kilometer ticks on the *topo* maps. In anticipation of his explorations he concentrated on improving his Spanish, and finally, after finishing his dissertation and a subsequent post-doc position to amass some funds, Rocky headed to Mexico in June 2000 to pursue his dream.

Soon we began to get tantalizing e-mail dispatches from Rocky's new *hotmail* account: first descents that were hundreds of miles long with great rapids, lots of wildlife, no civilization, and awesome scenery. He was exploring them on his own, but wanted some partners. We all had busy summer schedules, but were trying to find an appropriate time to meet him. As the summer wore on it began to look like we wouldn't be able to make it, but his insistence that the paddling would be some of the most demanding we would ever do was finally too much to resist. So in early October, Mike Hobbs (another intrepid SoCal boater), and I flew to Guadalajara to meet Rocky for one of his adventures.

A couple of weeks before our arrival, Rocky had started down the Rio Mesquital, one of the longest and most committing rivers on his agenda. The Mesquital drains most of the state of Durango to the south and east of Mazatlan. However, due to fairly high water, a vertical-walled gorge, a severe gradient, and the fact that he forgot the map for what appeared to be a critical section, he decided not to solo the remainder of the run (nearly 200 miles). Instead, Rocky elected to hike out at the last possible opportunity,

leaving his boat at the river with the intention of returning and finishing the river with us. The tiny pueblo he hiked to (and spent two days at waiting for a back-of-a-pickup ride) was Xoconoxtle, four hours of rugged driving from Mesquital, an equally small village, that was in turn two hours from the relative metropolis of Durango.

Hooking up with Rocky proved to be more problematic than we had anticipated. Two days before we arrived we got a message that his truck had been totaled in an accident (Rocky's shuttle driver was still in the hospital with a skull fracture; he had been forced off a narrow mountain road by a log truck and rolled several times). So we would have to get from Guadalajara to Durango on our own, which didn't sound like a big deal. However, we soon found that Mexico has recently upgraded all of its long distance



All Photos by Tom Diegel

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buses and now none have any racks on top. Only one or two styles of buses could accommodate a kayak as big as a Rockit inside their luggage compartments. So Mike and I spent a frustrating couple of days in hot, dusty, and desolate bus stations, watching bus after bus roll on towards our destination without us aboard.

We finally made it to Durango and met up with Rocky and a new shuttle driver in a rented jeep. We headed for Mesquital. At the bridge (where Rocky had previously put in with an estimated 1200 cfs) we were dismayed to discover that there was no more than 50 cfs trickling through the rocks. With some trepidation we continued to bounce down the road toward the pueblo. When we finally arrived the local doc and a few others of the 200 folks who lived there came tumbling out of their homes, psyched to see Rocky again. Later that night, as we were about to fall asleep in the doctor's yard, a ear-piercing baby's cry in the house lit up the night; now there were 201 residents of Xoconoxtle.

The next morning we hiked to the river, retrieved Rocky's boat, and put on. Looming just downstream were the huge overhanging walls of a deep gorge. But we weren't too worried about getting walled out; with only 50 cfs we were pretty confident that we wouldn't be in danger of committing ourselves to an unrunnable section. As we paddled through the long gorge we were forced to portage every rapid and could only paddle the pools between them because of the low water. Rocky assured us that according to the topo map, there was a pretty good-sized tributary not far downstream. But when we reached it, it only contributed about 5 cfs (Mike and I didn't have our hopes up too high anyway, so we weren't too disappointed). With 200 miles to go and only 55 cfs, it



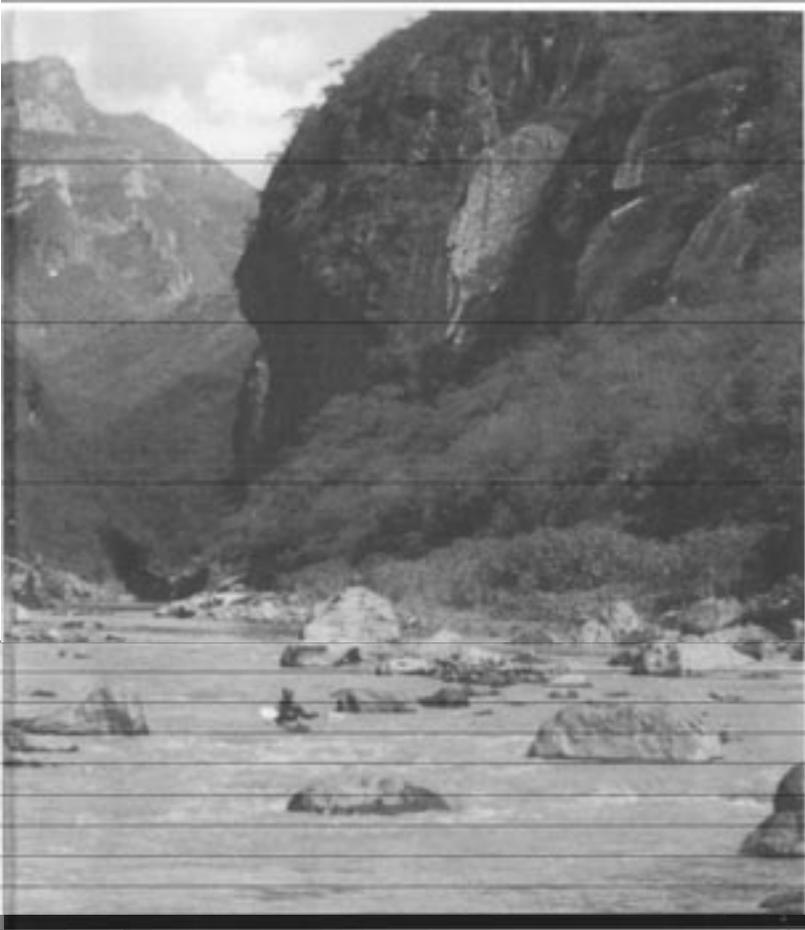
looked like it might be a very long trip, and our food supply suddenly looked very small.

This scenario continued for a day and a half. We had an unusual number of difficult portages, but the scenery was magnifico. Reminiscent of the Delores or the Zion narrows, the gorge was approximately 2,000 feet deep. Many times the walls rose straight up from the river to that height. The boulders that we were negotiating through were gigantic; house-sized hunks of polished and colorful schist (we thought) that had tumbled down from the walls to form a riparian maze unlike any we'd ever seen.

The feeling of isolation was intense; we realized with each passing kilometer that we were getting farther and farther away from what was already pretty remote. It was around this time that Rocky told us that ours wasn't actually the first descent; according to the Gringo's Guide To Mexican Whitewater, the Mesquital had been attempted first a dozen years before but a pin by one of the team members resulted in breaking both his legs, which were later amputated. This, combined with a couple of broaches by Mike and I trying to run the rock jumbles, encouraged us to be even more careful. (Several other parties have reportedly paddled the Mesquital in entirety.)

Late on day two the clouds that had been cooling our portaging began to get bigger and darker, and we started wondering if either the hurricane that had been hammering the Yucatan peninsula or the tropical depression that had been lingering off the SW coast might be moving our way. In the evening it started to rain. This continued through most of the night. Rocky said such a prolonged rain was unusual. At about 2 am we awoke to a roar and





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realized that the river had not only come up, it had come up several feet. The roar was the tiny rapid we had camped beside! We quickly gathered our stuff, scrambled above the high water mark, and tried to settle into sleep again. But the dim view we had gotten with our headlamps though the driving rain of the surging river made us start thinking that maybe we'd finally gotten what we wished for and then some. The steepest section of the river (100-plus feet per mile for three miles) was not far downstream. And the canyon walls didn't look any less steep or confining; it was a bad place to get flooded out.

At dawn we were surprised to find that the river had dropped a foot from its crest in the night. Now we had 500 manageable cfs of muddy water. The rapids that we'd been portaging due to rock fences had been magically transformed into mostly-runnable drops. The great maze continued, but now the enhanced flow created many different channels and options. We were in the heart of the steepest section; probing was a bit nerve-wracking. As we eased our way into the eddies behind the behemoth boulders and looked downstream, we were never sure if we'd turn to see a nice clean rapid, an awful river-wide sieve, or simply a pool.

It was a challenge to keep from getting over-committed to drops since the horizon lines were rarely straightforward. We rotated the scouting/probing duties. But even with utmost caution we had a heart-pounding moments. Once Mike mistook Rocky's shoreline signal for "scout" (hand to the forehead) to be "OK" (hand patting the top of the head). He launched into a particularly nasty rapid, where he had to make a desperate mid-rapid juke to avoid a massive sieve.

As we picked our way down the river we passed many tributaries, which was good for two reasons: we were treated to awesome waterfalls that sometimes tumbled 2,000 feet down to the river, and we had a little more water to hasten us along. Although the gradient was decreasing, the pools just got longer and the rapids stayed interesting and challenging.

But the hard fact remained that after four days we had only covered 45 of the 273 kilometers, and we had started with only seven days worth of food. We knew that after the river made a significant bend towards the south the gradient dropped below 20 feet per mile for over 100 miles. In order to avoid starving and make it out in time to catch our flights home, we'd be paddling hard on little food.

So paddle we did. About 50 km per day. Mike and Rocky were both experienced long distance sea kayakers and used to stroking all day, but it took a bit of getting used to for me. Fortunately, the scenery stayed very high quality. The vegetation in the upper gorges was sparse, but as we continued towards the ocean it gave way to lush jungly stuff. The canyon walls began to open into rolling hills. We spotted eagles, osprey, herons, 2-3 foot iguanas, desert sheep, otters, and a coatimundi (according to Mike; it was kind of a cross between a possum and a raccoon, but a little bigger). While trying to escape the wrath of the deadly kayakers, the poor coatimundi attempted a delicate friction move on a wet slab high above the river, slipped, and came careening down towards us. After a couple of big bounces over ledges he crashed into the water right next to us. I was certain he was going to be at best bro-

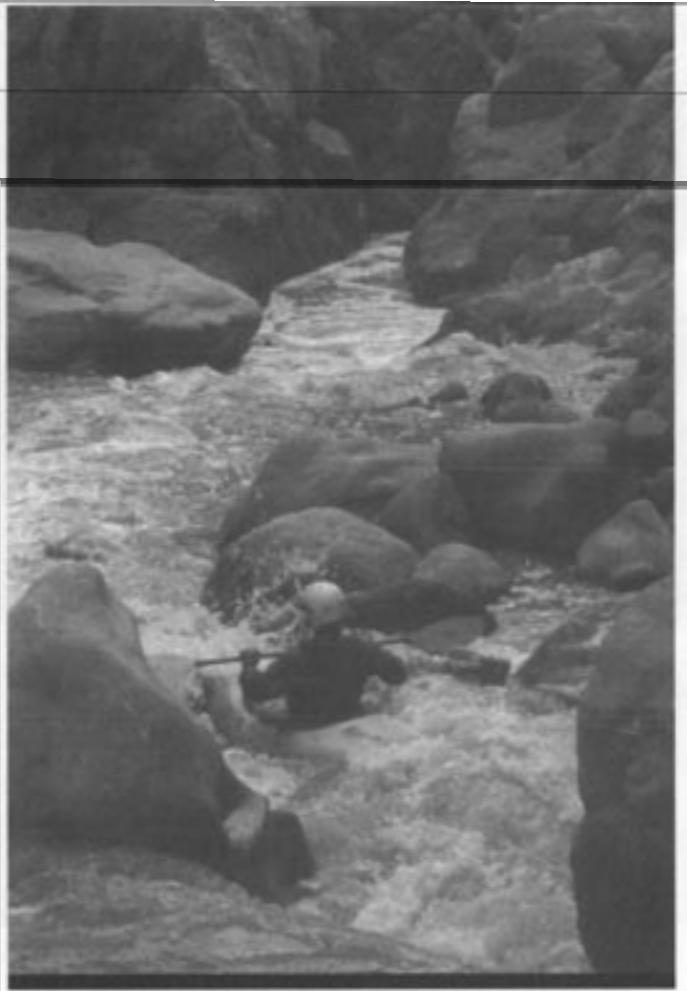
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ken and at worst dead, but instead he just sheepishly slunk away into some safer riparian grasses. Later we saw something weird floating fast in front of us. When we got to it it gave a quick and surprisingly large thrash and disappeared; we realized that in some of the 1/2 mile long pools there were alligators lurking, something that tempered Mike and my enthusiasm for rolling our boats to cool off.

We knew that a small pueblo was located 40 km above the take-out, and on day 8 we arrived tired and ready for some food. We had lunch in a place that was part home and part chicken coop, but the fresh handmade tortillas were awesome. At this point the gradient was in the single digits and we were floating through avocado orchards. With the increased vegetation the bugs (mosquitoes, no-see-ums, and sand fleas) were intense.

Finally we reached the first village on a primary road. After stuffing our boats on top of and into a nearly-destroyed seventies-style station wagon taxi, we rolled all the way back to Mazatlan to see if we could fly home from there. But all the flights were full, so we had to drive 7 hours back down to Guadalajara to catch our original flights.

But our adventures were not over. As we groggily hit the outskirts of Guadalajara we were psyched for the first hotel we could



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find. Mike and I were waiting in the car outside the reception area when we noticed that this hotel seemed to have "garages." As we accompanied the receptionist to the room, trying to talk her into letting 4 of us share one double room for the single price, we saw a nicely dressed woman tipping along the fake cobbles of the parking lot.

I began to suspect something was up with this "hotel." My suspicions were confirmed when our "receptionist" pressed the power button on the TV to show three people getting it in some hard-core porn.

That gave us a chuckle. She's probably still laughing with her friends about the four gringo dorks who wanted to share one room.

A strange ending to a great adventure.

Postscript

Two months after our return Mike Hobbs, a 13 year veteran of the Santa Monica Fire Department and intrepid global traveler/paddler/adventure racer, died in his sleep of a congenital heart condition. Mike left behind many sad friends, family, fellow firefighters, and his fiancée.

Mike was about to leave on his next trip, one to Chile to paddle yet again one of his favorite rivers, the Futalafeu. There has been a trust created in Mike's name for Futafriends, the organization dedicated to keep Endessa from damming and flooding this South American jewel. For more information contact www.Futafriends.org