

# RÍO MULATOS-AROS: THE BEST RAFT-SUPPORT RIVER IN MEXICO

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ROCKY CONTOS



*Río Mulatos-Aros is filled with scenic beauty such as the high cliff walls in Cañon Los Arrieros.*

SEE NEIL LINE up perfectly entering the big Class III-IV Morita, the most impressive cataract on Río Aros. As he plows down into the drop, the huge waves appear to nearly sink his cataraft, but he stays upright and comes out smiling! The rapid occurs in a limestone gorge known as Cañon La Bocana where the Aros, typically flowing with 8000 cfs this time of year, has a boulder field that backs it up. About 60% of the water goes over a single steep Class IV drop on the right, while the other 40% of the water goes over an easier multi-step Class III chute on the left. I go up to run the tougher right line in my kayak, and am impressed by the exhilarating ride through the huge waves. Pure fun!



Despite being almost unknown to the boating world, the Río Mulatos-Aros trip is on par with the best 7+ day trips that the Western USA has to offer—with no permit required. Located in Sonora, Mexico just south of the Arizona border, the 148-mile journey down the Aros offers subtropical savannah wilderness boating. With only one village midway down, you can count on experiencing solitude, beauty, and interesting wildlife on a generally relaxing scenic float with occasional rapids of up to Class III-IV character.

In mid-August our group arrives in Sahuaripa, a small Mexican town five hours south of the border and only 10 miles from the take-out. With me on this trip is my wife, Barbara, and two catarafters, Neil Nikirk and Lacey Anderson. We poke around town checking out the hotels and restaurants and the others settle in for a nice meal as I continue searching for my friend Pokis who will serve as our shuttle driver. Soon we are on our way to the put-in by Mulatos—on a road that is shorter than the total distance we'll be on the river!

At the put-in we befriend Ken Balleweg, an American geologist who has worked at the nearby Minas de Oro Nacional gold mine for 10 years. He says he never sees other Americans in the area. We chat a while and he points out the different ores from which they extract gold. Since some of us were a bit concerned about the risk of drug-related violence, I ask Ken, "Do you think it's safe to travel in the area?" He says, "Yeah, it's safe around here. Nobody will bother you on the river. Just don't drive on that one section of highway at night as some assaults have happened there." Ken longs to join us on the rafts, but has work scheduled. He's hiked into the barranca downstream on an exploratory mission, though, and says "I imagine it will be pretty rough in there, especially with all this water."

We take off on about 2500 cfs in our three rafts, zipping along quickly through Class II water punctuated by an occasional Class III drop. After a pleasant night on a small beach, the next day we enter the 10-mile long Barranca Mulatos, a scenic granite gorge in which I know there are several Class IV rapids: Amargosa, Saucito,

# INTERNATIONAL WHITEWATER

*This huge playa at Arroyo Pérdices in Cañon La Bocana is only one of many big beaches offering amazing camping opportunities on Río Mulatos-Aros*

Unscathed, and the double-whammy Dos Más—all named by me on my solo kayak first descent trip in 2002. I am anxious to see how our rafts will handle them. As we get out to look at Amargosa, Neil seems a little nervous. I say, “Don’t worry, Neil, you’ll go right through. It’s easy Class IV.” After we witness Lacey’s cataraft catapult high on the side from one of the holes, I change my tune just a little, “OK, maybe it’s solid Class IV.” We all make it through fine.

Later we face Dos Mas, the most challenging rapid on the whole trip. Dos Mas is actually two Class IV rapids separated by about 100 yards of Class II-III water. We pull to the side before entering and I briefly explain what I recalled of the rapid from eight years earlier: “There’s big waves and some holes. Just remember as you get to the lower rapid to make your way to the right around the big whale-rock boulder.” I take off with Barb up front helping paddle the big cataraft. Up and down we bob over waves. Barb sits back to hold on tight as we hit a big one. The raft spins around. Soon I regain control as we crash through more



waves in the final rapid. Suddenly, we are through! I wait and watch as both Lacey and Neil have fine runs as well.

About 34 miles down from the put-in, we reach the confluence with Río Aros, and the flow jumps to around 5000 cfs. A few miles downstream, in the distance we see the Pirinolas—nipple like projections of the mountaintops around which the Aros flows in a great bend. We soon arrive at the one village along the river: Nátora. It is barely noticeable; there are casas near the river but they are hidden high up above the bank

and not obvious from the river. The town offers a small store where some basic foods can be purchased.

On day four we arrive at Arroyo El Aliso, which enters the Aros through a slit in the bedrock wall on the right. We swim in the deep clear 85-degree water—ideal on a warm summer day and much more appreciated than a hot spring. Perambulating upstream, we find several small waterfalls that provide free back massages. This is a must-do side excursion. Like the Grand Canyon, the Aros has a



# INTERNATIONAL WHITEWATER



*Barbara Conboy hikes into the Narrows of Arroyo Santa Rosa along Río Aros, one of many interesting side excursions along the river.*

number of inviting side stops that are part of the attraction of paddling the river.

Another such must-do side-excursion is at Arroyo Santa Rosa, where we stop to hike up the side canyon leading to a shady narrows with another small pool that provides a cooling soak. Downstream we face the easy Class III Santa Rosa and Roca Roja rapids as we enter Cañon Los Arrieros. Walls rise straight from the river in scenic splendor. I hear the raucous calls of Military Macaws—amazing huge green parrots with long tails. Flying in pairs up high near cliffs by the river, they scream so loud that you can hear them miles away. In fact, this is the northernmost latitudes where such large parrots are found in the wild.

*Lacey Anderson drops into a big wave in one of the fun Class III rapids in Cañon La Bocana.*

Soon we are at the Estación Nácori Chico (a gauging station), where the attendant comes down to greet us. I ask, “Sabe el gasto en el río hoy?” He replies, “Sí—ayer y hoy es más o menos ciento sesenta metros cubicos por segundo.” That translates to about 5000 cfs, about 70% of normal August flow. Although a bit lower than normal, it is still plenty of water to make the river fast and the rapids great fun. We chat a bit more and he bids us “buena suerte” as we depart.

We set camp just before entering the final rapid-filled gorge on the Aros, Cañon La Bocana. The following day we are through the Morita rapid—the toughest rapid on the Aros—and then enjoying additional Class II-IIIs through a beautiful gorge. We stop for lunch at Arroyo Las Pérdices, the biggest beach on the river. Fairly level and measuring roughly 300 ft X 150 ft, the playa is the size of a football field and reminiscent of the biggest beaches in the Grand Canyon. But in the heat of summer, we all enjoy soaks in the warm clear pools of the arroyo much more.

Back on the río, we soon enjoy the final rapids in Cañon La Bocana, including Class III Cajones. After we pass the Río Bavispe confluence, the river officially changes name from Aros to Yaqui. The remaining Class I-II paddle to the Sahuaripa bridge is still pleasant through low canyon and offers some nice camps. Perhaps too quickly, we arrive on our seventh day of the journey at the take-out ranch of José Córdoba and are soon back in Sahuaripa, showering in the Hotel Casa Grande, a fine end to what is perhaps the best multi-day rafting river in Mexico.

*About the Author: Rocky Contos, Ph.D., is director of the non-profit conservation organization SierraRios, has paddled nearly every river in Mexico, holds first descents on about half of all whitewater rivers in Mexico, is author of the guidebook Mexican Whitewater: Norte, and arranges raft support and kayak trips in Mexico and Peru. To learn more about Río Mulatos-Aros and future trips, please see the website [www.SierraRios.org](http://www.SierraRios.org) or contact Rocky [rocky@sierrarios.org].*

