

RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE

Wet season boating in Costa Rica

By Chris Wheeler (first published in 'CKUK' magazine)



Day 2 - we're cruising down Costa Rica's classic paddle, the Lower Pacuare, through a jaw droppingly stunning gorge, with clear water from side streams cascading over waterfalls and into the river. The paddling was however, rather tame grade 3 and I was starting to daydream....

Day 10 - we'd endured a 3 hour slog through the jungle, with 30 kgs of boating and overnight kit, to get to the river and after only one hour of paddling over rocks, we were confronted with two bad options. We had a choice between either a) running the committing gorge and 60ft waterfall blind or b) hauling our boats up a near vertical 60 ft high wall of jungle and then down another 90 ft high wall of jungle. We opted for option b) but heaven knows, afterwards, we could understand why the infamous Steve Whetman opted for a).

So, which one is the real Costa Rica? Whetman style epic adventures deep in the jungle, or big volume picture postcard grade 3? We'd headed out to Costa Rica to find out, and being self confessed white water 'tourists', we were armed with copies of the new white water guidebook, 'Chasing Jaguars', and cameras, dangling from our necks.

We were a mixed bunch. 4 of us were looking to scare ourselves silly on grade 4/5- Mark, Andy M, Simon and me. Andy L was usually up for paddling most of what we did, often at the very limit of his comfort zone after much coercion. The 'mature' member of team, Dave, was recuperating from a dislocated shoulder and was looking for some nice fluffy grade 3 and off the water flora and fauna. Cheryl, Simon's long suffering girlfriend, was looking for grade 2/3- and to spend some time with him for once! So, were we all going to get what we were looking for, or would not still be talking to each other by the end of the trip?

Peering out the window as we descended to land at San Jose, Costa Rica's capital, I was confronted with a familiar sight- low cloud- and then out of the gloom came something all together less familiar- a sprawling city surrounded by hills, covered in dense tropical rain forest. Welcome to the Tropics and the Third World! (sorry, 'Less Economically Developed Country', LEDC). Jet lagged and disorientated, my boating buddies, Andy McMahon, and Andy Levick, and I staggered out of the airport to be greeted by the advance party, Dave and Mark. We were barely functioning but thankfully Mark saved the day by diving into the chaotic jungle of taxi drivers and coming out with a minibus with roof rack that would cope with 7 paddlers and 7 boats, and after much pushing and shoving as we squeezed boats and paddlers into and onto the bus, we were quickly on our way. As we headed out towards Turrialba, the Costa Rican capital of white water boating, 40 miles to the east, I stared out of the window at the passing scene. Motorways and McDonalds, it all really looked quite developed. 2 hours later and we were still on the road, winding around hill roads past some very basic houses- Costa Rica still has some way to go and the further you venture away from the strip from the airport to downtown San Jose, the less developed it gets.



We arrived at the popular kayaking Mecca, the 'Interamericano Hotel', which was situated in a rather dodgy, scruffy part of downtown Turrialba, next to the old railway station- no, this was not the 'Hotel Intercontinental'! After the standard diet of rice, beans and beer, we crashed out, with no idea of what was going to happen next. The next morning, as if by magic, everything just seemed to fall into place. Luis, the English speaking hotel manager had rustled up a breakfast buffet and our taxi driver for the week, Martine. Martine didn't speak much English and to our shame, we certainly didn't speak much Spanish, but he knew the way to the local rivers and just as importantly, drove a truck with an open wagon to the rear for the boats and lots of seats to the front. Enough to cope with the whole group when it was finally assembled entailing 7 boaters, 7 boats and mountains of smelly wet kit! More importantly still, he'd drive us pretty much anywhere at any time of the day or night- if we offered him enough dollars. We were in business.



So, we headed off to paddle our first classic, the Reventazon. 2 sections, the Canon and Dries, had been blighted by dams (a truly Worldwide problem) and so were too low, so we decided to opt for a 'gentle warm up' with the 4 sections downstream of the Dries- 18 miles which were rated in the guidebook as big volume bouncy grade 3 to 5-, and so it proved. It was an ideal warm up for a bunch of jet lagged Brits. Having said that, I did manage to get lost on the 100 yards walk to the river and end up flailing around in (I imagined) snake infested long grass. The river itself was easy enough but it did have a habit of pulling

surprises. Whenever we started to doze off, we'd suddenly find ourselves drifting towards some rather large holes, including a couple that were almost river wide.



Day 2 and it was onto our second classic river, the Pacuare. The Upper offered up good technical grade 4 to 4+ low to medium volume boating and the Lower, the definitive Costa Rican paddle, with grade 3 rapids running through a stunningly beautiful gorge deep in the jungle. The Lower however, offered us something all together more exciting as we were engulfed in a tropical rainstorm with horizontal rain driving into our faces, complete with thunder and lightning. Within a matter of minutes all the side streams had turned brown, and brown water was cascading into the river. Our grade 3 jaunt had turned into a super fast spate run and we found ourselves amongst a bizarre and quite intimidating mixture of thunder, lightning, jungle mist and brown cascades, as we raced through several miles of brown water to the finish. Welcome to the wet season!



Onto the Upper and Lower Orosi (were Orosi sunglasses named after the river or is there a Mr Joe Orosi out there?). As we got changed amongst the coffee plantations, the river looked rather low and unexciting. However, as we rounded the first bend, the river dropped away to the right down through a super-steep and congested jumble of boulders, which sparked off much chin scratching and a small portage as we squeezed our boats past the rounded smooth boulders. Soon afterwards, a capsize by

Andy Levick produced our first injury, as his face scraped over rocks, cutting his nose and eyebrow. At the conveniently located hot springs, it was time to test out those mouldy old first aid kits! Simon saved the day with some 'steristrip' to clamp together the wounds and Andy was paddling again ("pull yourself together, man!"), albeit looking understandably wobbly. US Dollars and a travel insurance card are an open sesame to the VIP treatment, and as we headed off for some lunch, Andy was being whisked past a queue of local Mums at the local clinic, who were most amused by Andy McMahon's gloriously tasteless Bermuda shorts. Undeterred, we demoted Andy Levick to 'shuttle bunny' status for the afternoon and picked off two rather easy sections of the Reventazon, immediately downstream off the Canon section.



We returned to Turrialba to find that Simon Wiles and his girlfriend Cheryl had finally arrived, our careful planning and countless e-mails having ensured that the team flew in randomly on different days. We had a repeat run on the Reventazon with Simon, whilst Andy Levick joined Dave and Cheryl for some culture, whatever that is. I believe that in fact 'culture' may have entailed a visit to the local 'Serpentaria', which actually would have provided us with a useful opportunity to identify all those nasty killer snakes and spiders that we were likely to encounter bushwhacking our way to the rivers through the jungle. As for the river, it was noticeably higher and we quickly realised that the fun holes of day 1 were now to be avoided at all costs!

The next day and the 'A Team' was up at 4.30 am ready to take on its first major challenge, the notorious Chirripo Atlantico. The early start stemmed from the river's reputation, gleaned from epic tales in the magazines and the warnings of local boaters. The major worry, aside from potential 2 to 10 hour carry in through the jungle, was the 12 mile long committing gorge, a risky proposition in the wet season. As it is, we were saved from ourselves by a night of heavy rain. Mission aborted. We never did paddle the Atlantico, and probably never will.

Undeterred, we made a mad dash northwards to the next paddling area at La Virgen, on the northerly Caribbean slopes. En route, we paddled the nice technical grade 4 boulder gardens of the Toro Amarillo, a paddle that was enlivened by the sight of a JCB rearranging the river in front of us. We put on the Sucio in a thunderstorm, with overhead lightning and torrential rain. What could possibly go wrong? Pausing to take photographs of lethal spiders, we put on. The waters of the Rio Sucio ('dirty river') are unusually, orange, from lava deposits upstream and so it was hard to tell just how in spate the river was. A little way into the trip, a no-name side-stream blasted masses of silty water into the Sucio; the river stepped up several gears and we found ourselves in the midst of some full-on 'balls to the wall' big volume spate boating. We hurtled towards orange and brown horizon lines and some heinous looking holes, sometimes scraping down the sides and sometimes making a break for the far bank. Yes, very exciting, especially as rocks kept loudly moving around in the riverbed. We passed the confluence of the Rio Patria and looked upstream with morbid fascination - this was the epic river featured in Steve Whetman's talk show, with THAT waterfall.



The Toro (Casa Maquinas, Recreo Verde and Upper Toro sections) provided us with a splendid 14 mile paddle. We started deep down in a gorge amidst jungle and incredibly high waterfalls and paddled our way out to the sugar cane plantations of the Caribbean plains, past boulder gardens, and remarkably, a hot springs complete with riverside bar. There was enough boulder action early on for Andy McMahon to break his paddles.



The Upper Sarapiquí was pleasant enough, rather like the Upper Dart in low to medium water but the Poza Azul was to provide us with some excitement, as we bushwhacked our way to a clean 10 m drop. My pencilling technique saved my back but the impact propelled all the gunk in my ears towards my ear drums and my ears were filled with water for the rest of the trip!



We befriended a local boater called Ferdinand, who spent his life raft guiding and making paddles. He turned out to be something of a rarity, a Costa Rican who is into grade 5 creek boating (whereas most of the local talent is into grade 3-4 and play boating). The fact that he is $\frac{3}{4}$ German may have something to do with this I suspect. We were the sacrificial lambs he was looking for, as he led us off to probable slaughter on the upper reaches of the Poza Azul, which he had paddled for the first time 3 weeks earlier (a first descent). Boating with strangers is always risky and sure enough, I was cursing him as he got us lost on the way there through the jungle (I mean, how the hell did he forget?) and then proceeded to lead the group upstream. Two more big drops and various gnarly boulders and slots and we were back at the 10 m drop, which we immediately ran without pausing for breath. The result was that I popped up behind the fall as Mark landed. Mark was rather surprised to look around only to see bats flying out from behind the fall followed by a bemused looking Chris, Hurley Weir's very own Dracula, the Prince of Darkness.



The Poza Azul was clearly nothing more than a masochistic tester, because Ferdinand was then talking about teaming up to run the Patria, which, along with the Atlantico, is one of Costa Rica's epic test pieces.

After a couple of easy days on the Sucio and Peyibaye, there we were again, loading up in the middle of the night- 3 am. By 5.30 am, at first light, we were bushwhacking our way through the jungle. After 3 hours of blood, sweat and tears, spent hauling kit along a tenuous 'trail' whilst trying to look out for snakes and trying to avoid a long slide down the steep slope to our side, we finally made it. After an hour of rock bashing down a ditch of a river, we arrived at the portage from hell, as we were faced with a choice between a blind gorge and 60 ft drop and a portage up near vertical jungle clad walls. We opted for the portage but, heaven knows, I'd be tempted to run the falls next time- if I ever went back. A cheap comment indeed given that I probably won't!



As we started to look for a suitable camping spot, sure enough it started to rain and to make matters worse, I wrote off my boat, a sharp rock cutting a long gash in the hull. Rather worrying given that we were deep in the jungle and still had some 15 miles to go. Dinner was a grim affair, as we sat in the rain pathetically trying to make a meal out of cheese slices and tins of tuna and scrambled to save our kit as the river started to rise. Poor Mark- he looked so happy and snug in his brand new Gore-Tex bivvy bag, blissfully unaware of the rising waters surrounding him.

The following day, our day of suffering was rewarded with 14 miles of top quality continuous steep boulder garden grade 4+ to 5. Wonderful stuff, and certainly interesting in a boat half full of water.



Our epic adventure was supposed to be followed by a 'rest day'. However, Mark's idea of a rest day was to drive for 4 hours to the south coast and paddle the Buenavista and Upper General, which as it happened, were in big brown water spate.

The Lower Chirripo Pacifico provided us with more great 4+ boulder garden boating, and one more broken boat. For the last 3 days we wound down with runs on Rios Guabo, Division, Savegre and Naranjo. More importantly, we finally found time to chill out by the beach and test out the surfing capabilities of our blobby creek boats. The sea was so hot!



We at long last had time to rest from our punishing schedule and contemplate. Within the space of 16 days, we'd given the new guidebook a thorough road test, paddling 16 of the 20 rivers covered, and both the guidebook and country had surpassed our expectations. Is there more to Costa Rica than a limited number of grade 3 classics and extreme epics? You bet there is. Sure, we experienced both of the above, but also beautiful gorges, waterfalls, spate boating, surfing and an endless supply of boulder gardens rapids. Coupled with tropical rain forest, beaches, volcanoes, exotic wildlife and a wonderfully friendly local population, and it really is about time that Costa Rica experienced something of a renaissance amongst UK boaters.

THE FACTS:

Finding out more...the guidebook:

We won't bore you with a lengthy fact file, because pretty much all you need to know is contained in the new guidebook, 'Chasing Jaguars- The Complete Guide to Costa Rican White Water', by Lee Eudy (2003). This book represents a big step forward from the 1987 guidebook. It's comprehensive, covering 20 rivers/ over 40 sections, plus accommodation, rafting companies and even taxi drivers. The book can be ordered direct via www.earthboundsports.com.

When to go:

Costa Rica is in sub tropical Central America, sandwiched between Panama and Nicaragua. Go between June to December, during the wet season. Rainfall peaks in June and October. We were there during the latter half of August during a relatively dry spell, by wet season standards. Expect maximum temperatures ranging from around 22 degs c inland in the hills at San Jose to 30 degs c or more on the coast, and expect sunshine in the mornings and rain from mid afternoon onwards.

Getting there:

Flights to San Jose via Miami are available through kayak friendly British Airways. They team up with other airlines, typically American Airways or Iberia, for the Miami to San Jose flight, who will try to charge you for kayaks on the way home.

Getting around:

Taxis are readily available, consisting of everything from cars with roof racks to cattle trucks and minibuses. The 4 main paddling areas are not far from San Jose but the roads are not great. It typically takes around 2 to 4 hours to travel between each area, so it is possible to paddle every day, without losing a day to travelling.

Where to stay:

Cheap hotels are readily available, with kayak friendly accommodation available in Turriabla and La Virgen.

Where to eat:

Cheap restaurants are plentiful. You will, however, develop a deep seated hatred of rice and beans.

Kayak hire and rafting:

Kayaks are available for hire from the very helpful Phil Coleman in Turrialba but the choice is very limited. I was lucky and found a mint condition H3 to hire after writing off my boat. Fly out with your own boats. Rafting takes place in all the main paddling destinations.

And finally:

Learn some basic Spanish. It's a great help when it all goes 'pear shaped' (and let's face it, it's bound to at some point, it always does).

Chris Wheeler was nervously looking out for snakes 'deep in jungle' with Andy Levick, Andy McMahon, Mark Rainsley, Cheryl Robinson, Dave Surman and Simon Wiles. Also see, '[Rumble in the Jungle Part II](#)'

[Mark's Costa Rica photos.](#)

[Chris Wheeler and Andy McMahon's photos.](#)

