



THE PRIMARY SOURCE OF THE AMAZON RIVER

Running Rio Marañón

PADDLE! PADDLE! PADDLE! BRACE! PADDLE HARDER! MY MIND SCREAMS to me as I am engulfed in a constant barrage of monstrous waves. I can hear the boulders moving beneath my kayak as the river churns and pulverizes any obstacle in its path. Brown chocolaty water surges and pulses in the river eddies, around every corner and behind every rock. Gigantic walls tower 8000 feet on both sides leading to a dark and ominous sky. To our knowledge no human being has ever experienced the shear volume of water currently running through this spectacular gorge. With a mixture of adrenalin, trepidation, and exhilaration, we continue downstream into the unknown.

Only a few months earlier, I had run into Tom and Sam Morrison, two of my former CMU students, fresh off the river. Both had spent a month rafting down the Rio Santiago, Mexico's most polluted river, with the intentions of filming and making a documentary to bring much needed awareness to these troubled waters. Now they were hatching a new plan, to kayak and raft down Peru's Rio Marañón, the principal source of the Amazon River. A few beers later, the plans unfolded. We would meet in Peru to join river activist Rocky Contos, the most prolific paddler of the Rio Marañón, to make a documentary about




this amazing free-flowing river. Slated for no less than 20 hydroelectric dams, time was running out for a chance to run the longest free-flowing river in the world.

The Rio Marañón has been called the Grand Canyon of South America and for good reason. Traveling 1000 miles from the Andes to the confluence with the Ucayali River where it officially becomes the Amazon, the river forges through high desert terrain reminiscent of the Colorado Plateau. With towering 10,000 foot cliffs, cactus, layers of sedimentary rock, slot canyons, sandy beaches, and amazing rapids, the river's path no doubt resembles the mighty Grand Canyon. However, the comparisons stop there. First of all, the Grand Canyon is one of the most famous places on the planet with over five million people flocking to its canyon rim every year and its Colorado River segment of 277 miles sees more than 20,000 people a year. Every square inch of the Grand Canyon is mapped, documented, photographed, and Google earthed. On the other hand, only a handful of people have seen the Rio Marañón and even fewer have navigated its waters.

To tackle the Rio Marañón's swollen banks is to embark on a true adventure. If something goes down, there is no golden helicopter rescue option. River beta is not found in a guidebook and dams do not regulate its flow. Rainstorms far upstream can swell the canyon with an additional 20,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) of water in only a few hours, as we experienced in the class V inner gorge section. To paddle down the Marañón today harkens back the days of John Wesley Powell — sans the wooden boats of course.

The first four days involved kayaking 130 miles self-supported down the hardest section of the Upper Rio Marañón. We started out with nice fun class III and IV whitewater with around 2000 cfs. Camping along the shore with wide sandy beaches and a natural hot spring, our adventure seemed set to progress perfectly. Rocky's knowledge of the river proved invaluable for building confidence. However, when we awoke on the next morning, our nice-sized beach had almost disappeared. As we pushed into the river that morning, the manageable



A lush tropical jungle scene featuring a multi-tiered waterfall cascading over dark, mossy rocks. The water flows into a wide, turbulent river with brownish, foamy rapids. A person in a small, colorful raft is visible near the base of the waterfall. The surrounding forest is dense with various green plants and trees, creating a vibrant and dramatic landscape.

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—Chad



Awajún villagers checking out the expedition

river of the day before quickly turned into a raging sea. For the next two days we danced with some of the biggest whitewater I had ever seen. The dark churning silt and sand repetitively doused my face, leaving grittiness between my teeth, but always a smile across my face. We careened down the river as a single unit, scouting rapids, running in unison, watching each other's backs and simply paddling in total awesomeness. I remember running the last big class IV-plus rapid and encountering our first class II section. I had never been so happy to see mellow water in my life. We had just done the highest volume descent of the Inner Gorge ever, with over 45,000 cfs pumping down the Rio Marañón's narrow chasm.

We joined the rest of our expedition at the small town of Chagual. I quickly stored away my kayak and prepared my raft for the remaining 17-day journey. The rest of our group consisted of professional U.S. raft guides Ashley Borman and Brooke Johnson, a local Peruvian river guide Pedro, Doctor John Cook, NASA scientist Marty Brenner, and our friend Hillary Wolff, making a total of ten. Pushing off the shore this time felt less intimidating. With the

biggest rapids behind us and the comfort of a raft flotilla, the rest of the trip could be dedicated to making a film and exploring the rest of this magnificent river corridor. Little did I know, the adventure had just begun.

The Marañón is truly a wild gem and some of the hardest Peruvians live along its shores. Perhaps the most significant difference from the Grand Canyon is the opportunity to experience Peruvian culture in an untouched environment. People have inhabited this region for thousands of years, living in small homesteads and villages, diverting water from the river to irrigate fields of bananas and mangos, raising livestock and living a much simpler life than their Western counterparts. To experience this way of life is quite wonderful. Children run around barefooted, playing with simple toys, climbing trees, frolicking in side streams, and eating mangos with their friends. Life beats to a different cadence, where a spinning top provides far more entertainment than a play station. And there is always a smile on their shining faces.

The locals on the upper sections of the Rio Marañón seem to embrace our presence. Rocky Cantos has



The Rio Marañón's transition into the lowland jungle



Sentiment runs high among the villagers about the proposed dams.



Sam Morrison

paddled the upper Marañón more than any person on the planet, building meaningful connections with locals and helping to spread awareness of the proposed dams along the river. No doubt sentiment runs high when talking to villagers about the proposed dams. No one wants to lose his or her way of life. The writing is literally on the wall, “No a Chadin II,” no to the dam soon to eradicate their small village. In this remote part of the world, their voice is seldom heard. This is where we come in. Tom films with a steady hand as Sam interviews some of the women concerned about the social and environmental effects of the dam. Their words have a lasting impression on my psyche. We are more determined than ever to see and share this amazing river and its inhabitants.

As we progressed down the river, we ran hundreds of rapids, encountered horrendous winds, camped on huge sandy beaches, ate wonderful food, explored slot canyons, visited numerous villages, and simply soaked in the scenery. Eventually the dry air turned moist as the smell of the jungle loomed ever closer. In one of the most dramatic landscape changes I have ever witnessed, we went from

desert to lush jungle in a matter of hours. The river opened up into wide expanses with calm braided sections, then rounded a corner into lush green tropical jungle. We were now entering the territory of the Awajún, northern Peru’s largest indigenous population. A fiercely independent people, they have fought for years to preserve their land. They battled off Incas and conquistadors, but now oil and gold extraction is threatening their way of life. So naturally a group of white folks floating down the river is a bit suspicious.

While the Grand Canyon requires a permit, running though Awajún territory requires permission from a tribal chief. As we approach the shore, hundreds of villagers come to check out the spectacle. Tying our rafts next to dugout canoes, we are escorted to the center of the village where elders greet us and begin a dialogue in a tongue I have never encountered. Spanish is no longer the lingua franca. In the previous village, two regional chiefs joined our group to help gain access to the region and to translate. At first the conversations were friendly, then things started to heat up. Before we knew it, over



Ashley Borman and Hillary Wolff



a hundred people had joined in on the debate. The conversation seemed to ebb and flow, eventually leading to some kind of mutual agreement. The entire village led us back to our rafts, where we promptly pushed away and waved goodbye to our suspicious new friends. As we rounded the corners, village after village appeared with often hundreds of indigenous people coming down to the shore to check out our floating vessels. Many exchanges were less than agreeable. These people were highly skeptical about our presence.

The following day most of the group decided to end the expedition early in the small town of Imacita. But rather than return to Lima, Sam, Tom, Ashley, Marty and I chose to continue down stream to Iquitos, the largest jungle town in Peru, 75 miles downstream of the Ucayali River. If we made it to Iquitos, we would have essentially boated the entire navigable section of the Rio Marañón. I had visited Iquitos nearly 14 years earlier and thought it a fitting place to end my journey. Lucky for us, fishing boats or pongas made local journeys up and down the Rio Marañón. We were able to negotiate several rides downstream, utilizing a combination of small pongas and large commercial barges. Five days later we arrived in the city of Iquitos. In total we had floated nearly a thousand miles down the Rio Marañón.

But the journey did not end there. After spending a few days back in civilization and preparing to fly back

home, Tom had decided not to leave and calculated a new plan to continue all the way to the mouth of the Amazon. It would involve a sidetrack into Columbia to get a required visa to enter Brazil. But I am proud to say on January 14, I received this Facebook post from Tom. It said, "8000 continuous river kilometers, 55 days, 3 countries, from glaciated mountains to high desert to lush jungles to Caribbean tropics, from 3000 cfs to 7,000,000 cfs, from kayak, to raft, to small speed boats, to cargo ships with 900 people, the biggest whitewater I have ever seen, beautiful sunsets and sunrises, river dolphins, secluded river beaches, and great people. It was an incredible journey and I am sad it is over. Life is good!" Yes. It. Is. ❖

If you go

World premier of the documentary "Primary Source" about our epic river trip down the Rio Marañón will show in the Colorado Mesa University Center South Ball Room

■ Wednesday, April 29 at 7:30 p.m.

■ Free to the public



The author writing his December Grand Valley Magazine story about skiing in the Alps