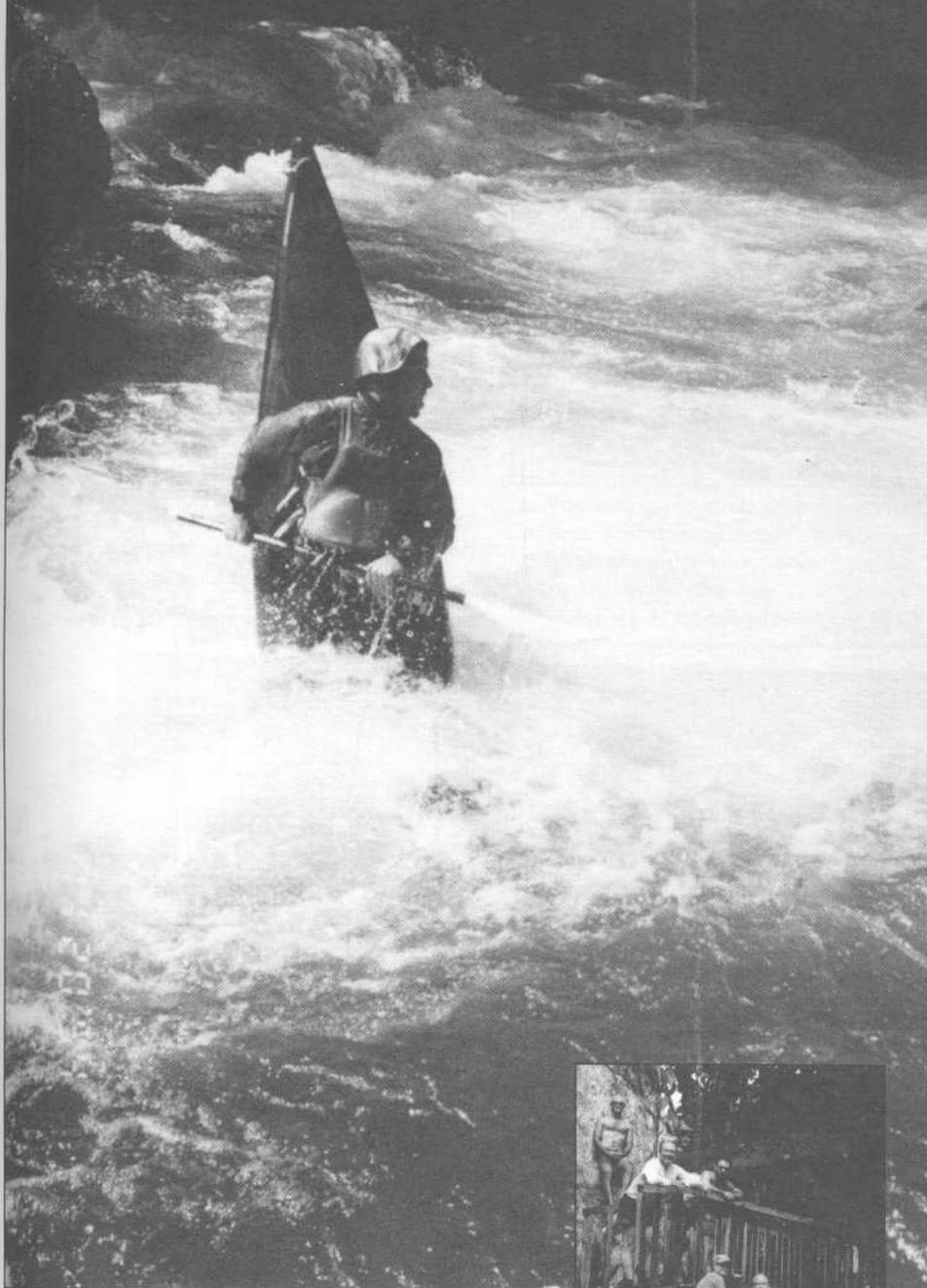


Whitewater High In Guatemala

Designed by Lauren Farr



Dave Bonomo getting air below a rapid called Tres Piedras, Upper Lanquin.



The tree house/cabana built in the roots of the Saba tree. Panima River.

by Joe Greiner

High in the Sierra De Las Minas of Guatemala, the quetzal bird, resplendent in his iridescent green feathers and red breast, awoke to a new day. The cloud forest was uncharacteristically clear. He could see all the way to the Rio Panima, one thousand meters below. His sharp eyes spotted a number of equally resplendent creatures, floating on the clear green water. He watched them for a time, then soared off to find his breakfast of fruit and berries. He thought no more about his sighting.

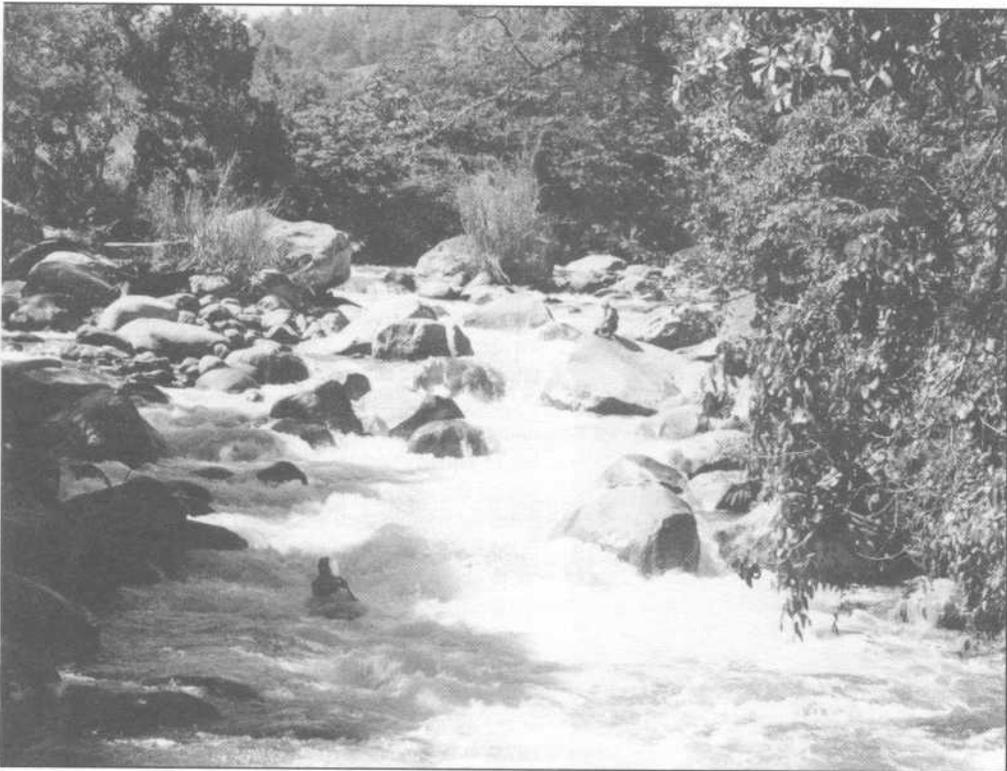
Perhaps he should have. Life in the eastern Guatemala highlands will never be exactly the same again. Kayaking has come to Guatemala.

What follows is NOT a hair boat story. It is a story of what turned out to be, for the most part, a relaxing whitewater vacation. Crystal clear water, interesting rapids, a couple of portages, hot springs, cloud-topped mountain views, and friendly people populated this trip.

Paul Heesaker and his wife Marian have been coming to Guatemala for years. Paul is a river guide on the Arkansas River in Colorado during the spring and summer. Come fall, the Heesakers move to Antigua, Guatemala, where they have established a business leading hiking, snorkeling, and rafting trips. They also help tourists book trips to the Mayan ruins, sailing, etc. From the first the highlands and cloud forests, home to the quetzal bird, have spoken to Paul's soul. His company is named Area Verde Expeditions, whose acronym A.V.E. means "bird" in Spanish. The symbol of the company is the quetzal bird, whose livable habitat, much like our own, is disappearing.

In late 1994 Paul wanted to explore beyond the two or three rivers that were being rafted in Guatemala. Maybe Guatemala would be a good place to lead kayak trips? So the word went forth. Anyone interested in discovery and willing to share the cost was welcome. Bring your good humor, your flexibility, your patience. Ten accepted the invitation.

Paul and four others drove a school bus from Salida, Colorado to Antigua, Guatemala. Four more flew in from various cities. Roberto Rodas, from Guatemala City, was waiting for us. Paul, along with Max Young led the group. Paul, Max, Roberto, Dave Bonomo, Marc Brown, Sean Dougherty,



Olympia Rapid on the Panima.

and Marc Haug are all rafting/guiding professionals. Ed Lucero makes whitewater jewelry when he is not kayaking. Sarah Beaubien is a student at Colorado College. I am ... well ... let's just say that I am blessed with the time to do this kind of stuff.

We set out from Antigua very early, five one morning, so we could beat the heavy morning traffic in Guatemala City. Roberto had managed to secure some previously "classified" topographic maps and Paul and Max had worked out a two-week circuit that would yield a couple of first descents. It was not the gradient or the difficulty which had left these rivers unexplored. They had not been paddled because of access difficulties and because there just haven't been that many kayakers in Guatemala.

The Spanish cultural influence ebbed slowly the further from Guatemala City we traveled. We were now in native Indian territory. These people are the descendants of the Mayans, whose many unspoiled ruins attract tourist traffic in Guatemala and in Honduras to the south.

Our first river was the Upper Lanquin. To our knowledge only one group had done this run before, and that was only two weeks prior to our trip. The put in was in a

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clear blue-green pool just downstream from the cave that is the origin of the river. The Upper Lanquin proved to be an interesting creek, similar in size and rapids to south-eastern runs like the Lower Tellico. It had one rapid that most of our group portaged.

I got out to scout it with Ed. We were surprised to see two strangers, downstream, waving. They hailed from Capetown, South Africa and had heard rumors about boating in this part of Guatemala. The pair was on a six month holiday and had driven from the USA with their boats.

The South Africans had attempted the rapid on the day before our trip. Jeff had stayed to the right, but his friend, Bruce, had been blown left and gone backwards down a siphon. At the last second Bruce had put his arms out to the side and chinked himself in between the two rocks. This stopped his body, but his boat was "sucked" out from underneath him and disappeared into the siphon. Bruce "chimneyed" out from between the rocks and then walked to the takeout. Later they used a pulley and Z-drag to rescue the boat.

That was enough information for me. Scouting was difficult and the rapid was long. It did not look much harder than a long, eastern-creek, class IV+, but I knew we would be back tomorrow with more



Four boaters plauing on the Panima.

time, so I walked it. Ed took a better look and decided to run it. He aced it in perfect control. Since the rapid didn't have a name, in honor of the previous day's events, we named the rapid "The Way To Capetown."

That night, Bruce and Jeff came by to

visit our group. They had their own 4WD pickup truck with boat racks. They were only going to be in Guatemala a few more days and then they were going on to El Salvador for some surfing. Ultimately they planned on driving through Nicaragua to Costa Rica for more boating. This itinerary was just too tempting to Ed when the South Africans asked him to join them. After some deliberation, Ed did just that. Now we were nine.

The next day, Paul and Max and the rest of our crew delivered medical supplies to the local medical clinic in the town of Lanquin. Some had been purchased with the proceeds of Area Verde Expeditions, the rest had been donated by medical supply companies in the USA. The clinic director was delighted.

The rest of the morning was spent in a visit to Semuc Champey. It is here that the Cahabon river tumbles out of the cloud forest, only to disappear INTO a cave. The opening to the cave is covered with clear, deep, travertine pools. They reminded me of Havasu Creek in the Grand Canyon, but they were much larger. These were delightful for bathing, swimming, and just relaxing.

Paul has a dream. He dreams of a camp and some cabins. He dreams that he can buy this land, build the camp and cabins, and hire local Indians to run it. He has a dream that he can turn it over to the Indians. He has a dream that the native Indians may see that there are other ways to profit from their beautiful homeland, besides slash and burn agriculture. He is realistic and understands

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Joe Greiner running the bottom of Wrong Way To Capetown. Upper Lanquin.

that, at the moment, the locals have little choice but to do what is required to feed and raise a family. Right now that means slash and burn to raise corn or graze cattle.

But Paul does more than dream. He has invested several thousands of his own money from the meager earnings of A.V.E. in what he calls the Semuc Champey Project. Paul is like a salmon swimming upstream. But, I think he has a chance.

The next morning we geared up for a three day, two night trip on the Cahabon, taking great care to put in below the cave. This river is well-known and has been run by A.V.E. for several years. We found the same clear water and interesting rapids as on the Lanquin, but on a slightly larger scale. We spent a lot of day one playing, surfing, ending, and enjoying the sun.

The second day was supposed to feature an easy cruise to the settlement at Chuloc.

At the end of every trip, participants willing, I make a "Last Supper" request. I ask everybody to reflect and describe what for them was their "most _ moment." I try not to put words in anybody's mouth. They can use any adjective they want after "most." Often, people will have two or three



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"most moments." After this trip, the nine people told of sixteen "most moments." Ten of those moments involved "The Incident At Wrap Rock."

The rapid is a long, low gradient, straight shot with a rock at the bottom. An eddy runs all the way down the right side. It should be easy. There was a tree limb showing about 30 feet upstream of the rock in the current that would normally carry a craft to the right. Marc and the oar rig had made it safely. Six kayaks were at the bottom, waiting. Roberto and Sarah were in the paddle raft. As he entered, Roberto spotted the tree. I saw a moment of hesitation as he glanced to the left of Wrap Rock. Then he and Sarah started to dig to the right.

Too late! The middle of the raft hit the branches of the tree broadside. The raft stopped and they both catapulted into the current and were quickly retrieved. Not so the raft. It was stuck on the tree like a gigger frog. Seven rafting professionals proceeded to caucus. I watched. The river was too wide for a tag line. The raft was bucking wildly. Even if someone got out to the raft, nobody was sure they could stay there. All but one agreed that just getting a person to the raft and a line on it was impossible.

But Max did not agree. Without a word, he opened his dry bag, put on his T-

shirt with the "S" on the chest, walked up the eddy, and dove into the current. He passed by the bow of the raft, reached up and grabbed a D-ring with one hand and the top of the tube with the other. One mighty move later he was on top of the raft, grinning at us.

He later said that his "most moment" came when he looked over to shore and saw us staring back at him, open-mouthed and stunned. Several others described their "most moments" as the astonishment at Max's accomplishment.

Once we were sure that this was no illusion, we all cheered and started getting lines and biners to Max. The raft had folded under itself, in addition to being wrapped. This was not going to be easy. Max took the lines and biners and worked his magic - all the while riding the bucking raft. He made multiple attachment points. He sent out two lines. We pulled to the right. No luck. We broke that setup down and paddled over to the left shore. We Z-dragged to the left. The raft started to break up. One thwart was ripped free and our pump (attached to the thwart) was never seen again.

We broke that setup down and paddled back to the right shore. We Z-dragged to the right. Those of us on the ropes were sweating like NBA players. Two hours after the wrap, the raft moved slowly free. Once we got the raft to shore, we retrieved the rescue

gear and triumphantly sprinted down river, trying to reach Chuloc before nightfall.

We didn't make it. When our headlamps failed to illuminate the water more than ten feet in front of us, Paul and Max figured that was a good time to make camp, filter some water, eat and catch some sleep.

Our last day of the Cahabon trip was relatively uneventful. We broke camp, paddled about two kilometers, portaged Chuloc Falls, and put back on the river. We managed to flip the oar rig at a big hole around noon. Here we lost three of the four oars. With no oars we needed bodies to paddle the "oar rig". So we lashed some of the kayaks onto the rig and paddled it out with the spare raft paddles.

Early that afternoon, we found a perfect hot spring jacuzzi (bubbles and all) and soaked away the cares of the trip. We had lost one pump, three oars, and a lot of ego. Such is the price of adventure travel.

We took the next day off from river running to enjoy a power boat ride across Lake Izabal to El Paraiso (Paradise). Along the way the boatman took us near shore and we were able to watch the howler monkeys in the trees. That particular grove is one of the

Raft spins on the Cahabon. Sara Beaubien, Max Young, Roberto Rodas, Mark Haug.





Traveling Guatemala style to the put in of the Panima.

monkeys' last habitats in that portion of Guatemala. El Paraiso turned out to be a delightful cold creek/hot creek waterfall combo. Knowing that we still had two rivers and two first descents to go, we relaxed and soaked and refreshed ourselves.

After leaving El Paraiso we headed to the village of La Tinta. Every town in Guatemala has a patron saint and on the feast day of that saint, the village celebrates and a traveling carnival comes to town. The celebration feast of San Tomas in Chichicastenango is said to be akin to the Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Well, the Festival of Sainte Katerina in La Tinta is not of that magnitude, but it is an excuse for a lot of drinking, fireworks, carrying on, eating, and schmoozing. It is like a Guatemalan Gauley Festival. And it lasts two days and two nights.

Between festival nights we managed a first descent on the nearby Rio Polochic, running a section that we called Genesis Gorge. It was a clear water creek about the size of John's Creek in Virginia, and about that difficult. Keeping with the "Genesis" theme, we named the rapids Adam and Eve, The Serpent, The Garden Of Being Eaten, Cain Killed Abel, and the final rapid, Everybody Out Of The Garden!

After two nights of festival and two days on the Polochic, we took aim on our last target, the first descent of the Rio Panima.

We traveled to Tuccuru and hired a single Toyota Land Cruiser to haul all of us over two 4,000-foot-high passes, traversing a definite "4WD only" road, to the Rio Panima. This 60 foot-per-mile stream felt like Section III of the Chattooga - complete with one portage, at a rapid we called Olympia. The water was crystal clear as always.

The trip was mostly uneventful but interesting. We did see much more evidence of slash and bum agriculture than we expected, given the inaccessibility of the head of the river.

After four days we returned to La Tinta. Then we headed back towards Antigua. We had one more stop to make. On the last day we entered the mystical misty kingdom of Biotopo Quetzal, a cloud forest preserve. Guatemalan Indian legend says that in 1524, the Quiche Indian, Tecun Uman, a warrior-leader and wizard-shaman, faced Pedro Alvarado and two hundred soldiers, near the town now called Quetzaltenango.

During the battle of Llanos Del Pinal, he was mortally wounded and fell bleeding upon the ground. The quetzal, having watched his noble struggle against overwhelming odds, took pity and sheltered Tecun Uman's body with its wings. The bird then lifted the Indian hero from the battlefield.

Pedro Alvarado had won the battle, but Tecun Uman's spirit lived on. The bird, heretofore whitebreasted, acquired its distinctive red breast from the blood of the fallen leader. Since that time, the quetzal has remained red-breasted. Now the Indians consider the bird to be a symbol of Heaven's protection.

There are a few places on earth that inspire and awe. These are the sacred places; the Grand Canyon, Chongma-longma (mother goddess of the world, Mount Everest), and the giant redwood forests of California.

For me, the quetzal-inhabited cloud forest of Guatemala is another. It is a soft, moist, fertile, quiet place. It feels like a cool sauna. The sound of water dripping falls softly upon the senses. Ferns wave gently. It is an enclosed place, enveloping the body and the spirit. It is the birthplace of the clean and sparkling waters that we had played upon.

Wandering through this sacred forest was my "most moment" in Guatemala ... listening, watching, and reflecting.

All over Guatemala, the cloud forests are slowly disappearing. The quetzal bird sleeps.

Will any of the forests remain when Paul's son, Zach, becomes a man?

For now, Zach sleeps.

His Dad is on the job.



Author's commentary: In late 1995 and early 1996 Paul Heesaker and Area Verde Expeditions will be running raft supported kayak trips on the Lanquin, Cahabon, Polochic, and Panima Rivers. Nine day trips will cost about \$990, plus air fare.

In the opinion of this author, Paul is more than a businessman engaged in tourism and providing adventure trips. I have seen what he and A.V.E. have put back into the community at Lanquin and the proposed campground at Semuc Champey. While

1994 was the first organized kayaking trip, he has been doing tourist business in Guatemala for several years.

For a whitewater vacation with an environmentally ethical professional, you should consider this. If you can run (not necessarily play) the Ocoee, the Cheat Gorge, or the Numbers, you ought to be able to enjoy paddling in Guatemala.

Information is available from Area Verde Expeditions, PO BOX 476, Salida, Colorado 81201. 719-539-7102.



Raft ends on the Cahabon. Roberto Rodas, Mark Haug, Marc Brown, Dave Bonomo, Paul Heesaker.