



LANQUÍN AND CAHABÓN

Ground Zero for Guatemalan river running is the village of Lanquín, perched at nearly 2,000 feet in northern Guatemala's Alta Verapaz. Here the Pacific tectonic plate folds the Southern edge of the Yucatan peninsula into prime whitewater habitat, with only one drawback—the porous limestone creates an abundance of caves. Don't paddle an unknown river without a good map and before checking with the locals.

The Rio Lanquín flows turquoise-green from the mouth of one such cave. Kayakers can put on at the source and paddle travertine Class III rapids through town and deep into the surrounding jungle. More advanced paddlers will find a few Class IVs farther downstream, as well as the Class V+ "Wrong Way to Capetown," which is usually portaged.

The Lanquín flows into the larger Cahabón, marking the start of a three-day run to sea level through one of Guatemala's prettiest valleys. The only other river traffic you're likely to see is a car ferry powered by a lawnmower engine, but you won't be alone: Locals use the river for washing and bathing. Most of the rapids are Class III, with a few Class IVs in the upper section. The lower Cahabón has a longer portage around Chulac Falls, ending in a hot springs on river left. There is camping for self-supports and vehicle access at two spots.

Farther north lies the vast Petén region, where flatwater streams lead into the jungle and to remote archaeological sites. For moderate whitewater, head to the Chiquibul River in the Northeast, where you'll find 20 miles of Class II+ mini-waterfalls heading toward the Belize border.

THE CARIBBEAN DRAINAGES

The next major drainage south of Lanquín, the Polochic, offers some of Guatemala's best kayaking. All the ingredients are here: clean water, narrow canyons, extraordinary scenery, and seemingly limitless whitewater. The Polochic serves up three days of Class IV rapids and even has its own Internet gauge (see sidebar). The creek's upper section demands a lot of scouting and a few portages through the thick wild cane lining the banks. The middle stretch contains several beautiful but narrow and committing Class IV canyons. The lower Polochic is more open Class III but finishes with a Class IV bang through the fabulous "Genesis Gorge." Fewer than 20 paddlers have experienced any part of this gem.

The Class V set will want to seek out the Motagua, Guatemala's longest river, snaking between the southern and northern mountain ranges into the Caribbean. This is world-class whitewater with varied, long rapids demanding careful scouting, but only one mandatory portage in about 12 hours of kayaking. The second section is the river's best, offering eddy-hopping around huge granite boulders.

THE VOLCANO REGION

Guatemala is famous for its volcanoes, five of which are still active. Fronting an impressive continental divide near the Pacific Coast, these volcanoes harbor a wealth of waterways characterized by continuous gradients. The Nahualate is rafted commercially, and a few others—Esclavos, Coyolate, Naranjo, Cabuz—have seen the odd river runner. In between are the creeks, the best being the Ocosito. Hike down through a small coffee farm to the Ocosito put-in and you enter a world of jungle canyons and non-stop Class III-IV. In several cases the rapids disappear into tight canyons requiring scouts, but eventually the valleys open revealing read-and-run rapids.

EXPLORING THE NORTH

To the west several large drainages flow northward. Recent explorations have revealed a major discovery, the Rio Copón. Pristine jungle and Class III-IV+ rapids in deep canyons create perhaps the best multi-day river trip in Central America. The run-out flows through lesser gorges on Guatemala's biggest water, the Chixoy. Furthermore, unexplored upper runs look promising for creekers. Access is remote and the logistics require some planning, but the ride is well worth the price of admission.

—Greg Schwendinger, a drop-out electrical engineer, has been exploring Central American rivers for three years and has notched more than 50 first descents along the way.