



Cañon Del Rio La Venta An Adventure Story

Nov. 10 - 20, 2014
By Ken McCarthy

Preface

I think I should preface this by saying that this was my story. Jen was with me and she certainly influenced my story but her story is going to be different than mine. But I also want to say that I am so glad I have her to experience life with. She adds so much to my story and I love her for that.

We often talk about adventure and perhaps use the word rather loosely. When I looked up the word in the dictionary I found this definition: *to engage in hazardous and exciting activity, especially the exploration of unknown territory.* That second to last word, unknown, makes such a difference. When you have a description or a guide book or a good map that shows a complete view of what you are getting into you can decide before hand if you are willing to except that level of danger and excitement. When you know it will not be any harder than what you are willing to accept it is pretty easy. But when you have no definitive knowledge of the difficulty or dangers ahead your mind can easily start going to the worst possibilities. When you believe the adventure is small, (difficulty easy and little danger) but then something happens that makes you start to question what you know, it can raise the fear level very quickly. This third view of the unknown is what happened to us on this trip.

We used all the modern technology available to learn all we could about this place. We looked at lots of websites that had information on the La Venta Canyon, we watched videos

on Youtube of rafting the canyon and hiking it and motor boating up the lower reaches from the reservoir at the bottom. We studied Google Earth from every angle and looked at all the



pictures posted of the canyon. We sent emails asking about information on the canyon from the raft company that claimed to run commercial whitewater trips down the canyon. (Perhaps we should have taken it as a clue when they didn't reply to our emails.) We read their trip descriptions for these adventures. From all this data I formed a picture of the canyon. It looked like amazing scenery in a deep jungle canyon with ancient ruins and lacy

waterfalls everywhere. There would be rapids but calm, glassy pools seemed to be the norm. The rapids could all be portaged although there was one towards the end that would take a lot of time to get past. With this picture in mind we set out to float the beautiful Rio La Venta Canyon in our inflatable kayak, a nice little vacation adventure.

Flying Standby

This whole thing began because our friend Mike Duggin gave us a couple Delta Airlines buddy passes. It would cut the cost of flying in half. We wanted to go someplace warm because winter was just getting started in our country and we wanted to get really warm before going into 4 months of winter. The trouble with flying with buddy passes is you never know if you are going to get on a flight or if you are going to be bumped and have to wait for another. In fact we had to change our flight the night before we were living because the flight we had planned to take was full. So instead of flying to Mexico City we found ourselves headed for Cancun. On November 10th we drove to the SLC airport and easily got ourselves on a plane to Atlanta, Georgia. From there we made it on another plane to Cancun, Mexico. Everything went well on the way down.

From Cancun we had to cross the Yucatan Peninsula to the state of Chiapas and the city of Tuxtla Gutierrez. We would have been willing to pay for a flight but there were no flights available for several days so we ended up taking the bus.

With all our internet researching we had made contact with a guy who was running a tour business out of Tuxtla. His name was Nic Standaert and he was from Belgium. He had married a woman from Chiapas and, for now, was living there. He had been down to the La Venta River (to it, not down it) and posted something about it on the Summitpost website. He was very help full in our planning and he agreed to take up to the put-in and pick us up at the take out. He had recommended a hotel in Cancun which was just across from the bus terminal. Amazingly found the hotel and stayed there our first night in Mexico.

The next morning we found a bus heading in the direction of Tuxtla Gutierrez. By 7:50 AM we were headed west on a nice modern bus. When I bought the tickets I asked what time we would arrive in Villahermosa (our first destination) but there was something wrong with my understanding of the answer. We were on the bus a long time. We first drove through a flat,



tree covered plain. We could see nothing but the green forest flashing by the windows. Eventually the ocean appeared on the right side of the bus. We passed a few populated areas in this first part of the ride but not a lot. Once we could see the ocean it was more interesting. There were times I could have thrown a pop can into the ocean from the window of the bus. That is how close we were to the water. We crossed a spit of land that divides the ocean from the Laguna Del Terminos at the town of Carman, with the ocean on both sides of us. The sun was low on the horizon and I got some very cool pictures of fishing boats on the water and little fishing villages with palm tree and men working on there fishing nets.

After 14 hours on the bus we came to the town of Villahermosa, where we would need to change buses. The bus we were on would go north to Veracruz and Mexico City. We needed one going south to Tuxtla. We only had to wait a half hour or so before we loaded into a van type, mini bus heading to Tuxtla. I think there were only 5 people on the bus plus the driver. I still don't know what road we took, it was dark and I couldn't see a thing but I am pretty sure we crossed the bridge over the Malpasos Reservoir, which would be the end of our river trip.

We arrived at the Tuxtla Gutierrez bus terminal a bit after 2:00 AM and decided it would be a waste of money to pay for a hotel at that time of the night. We found a quiet corner in the terminal and laid on the floor and slept.

Tuxtla Gutierrez, Mexico

We were up by 7:00 AM and found there was a huge shopping mall next to the bus terminal. We exchange some money at an ATM in the bus terminal but we wanted to find a bank to exchange more. We hoped to find a bank in the Shopping Mall but the only thing open was the grocery store. We got some cheese and tortillas for the river trip and some breakfast to eat right then. We sat in the center hallway of the mall and ate our pastries and bananas before going back to the bus terminal to call Nic and have him come get us.



I thought it would be relatively easy to call him but it turned out to be a real challenge. In Argentina last year, calling people was an easy thing. All public places had phone stores. The counter person sent you to a booth, when you came out they said that will be 20 cents. There was even a meter on the wall in the booth that told you how much it was costing you. We tried using the one public, coin operated phone in the bus terminal but after losing a number of coins we gave up and started asking questions. Finally we found a lady who took pity and called on her own cell phone and got through to Nic who showed up in 15 minutes.

Nic spoke English very well and knew his way around Tuxtla so we were very glad to have his help. We wanted to get white gas for our MSR stove and a few more groceries. We still wanted to exchange a larger amount of money so we would have it when we came off the river. We imagined either would be difficult, but once we started we found both to be a bit of a problem. The bank had money exchange rate signs and seemed to be the logical place to change money. We went to the Santander bank which was not only Nic's bank but it is also the sister bank of Bank of America where I have a credit card. All good. But when

we went to the window with US dollar and said we wanted to exchange them for Pesos they said they couldn't do that. We could put the money into a bank account today and withdraw pesos tomorrow but they couldn't give us pesos for dollars. It was something having to do with money laundering. We tried another bank and got the same story so we set out to find a Combio or Money Exchange house. With Nic asking questions it didn't take to long to find one but the rate wasn't as good as the sign at the bank had said. But we changed money anyway.

With that problem taken care of we set out to find white gas, better known in the US as Coleman Fuel. After checking hardware stores and department stores we ended up at Walmart. They had no white gas. We had the option of buying unleaded regular gas and using that but it is smoky and clogs the stove fairly quickly. Then someone made the suggestion of buying the little propane stove burner and the propane tank they had right there in Walmart. It would cost us \$30 US but then we had the simplicity of propane. We bought it and off we went. We stopped at a little place and had lunch before setting off for the river. I wanted to go someplace quiet and go through our gear but Nic suggested we go to the river and sort it there. It sounded reasonable.

To The River



It was an easy drive to the river, around an hour, maybe less. The first and second places we tried didn't get us to the river but on the third try we found a little trail that covered the quarter mile from the end of the road to the water.

The drawback to going to the river to sort stuff was two fold. First there were a lot of biting flies working hard to make life miserable. Second I get excited about being so close to the start of a great adventure and have trouble being calm and focused. I had been documenting everything up to this point so I had to get a couple pictures of getting everything ready to go. Rather than taking my time and sorting out all the little things I wouldn't need and carefully loading everything into it's proper place I kind of threw everything in. I quickly changed out of my traveling pants and into a pair of shorts for the river, exposing myself to the biting bugs even more. I stuffed the pants into the bottom of the dry bag and loaded everything on top of them.

We carried all the stuff down to the river and inflated our little yellow kayak by the water. We loaded it up with the big dry bag on the bottom and a backpack full of stuff we needed but didn't care if it got wet. Jen and I each had a smaller bag between our legs with

things we wanted to be able to get into while floating. We were finally ready to get on the river. Just one last picture of the launch. I looked for my camera and realized it must be still clipped to my travel pants at the bottom of the dry bag. Darn, I had to pull out my waterproof camera and take the picture with it.

We waved goodbye to Nic and floated off down the lazy Rio La Venta. It was 2:58 PM when I looked at my watch. Where we put in it was farm land with low hills and not much of a canyon but soon the banks started to rise and we were in a little canyon floating through the sand bars. It was sunny and glorious and we were very happy with ourselves.

We only had three hours until it would be dark so we needed to stop and make camp well before that. We made good time on the river and after an hour my GPS said we had gone 4 miles. There was a nice sand beach on river right so we decided to pull over and camp. We had planned to camp near mile marker 45 so we were just one mile from our planned campsite. I marked our maps with GPS coordinates counting down from 50 at the start to 0 on the lake. That way we would know where we were.

We unpacked the boat and went about setting up camp. My first priority was to dig out my camera from the bottom of the dry bag. When I got down there and found my pants there was no camera. I went through everything. I had to have left it up at the car when we unloaded. Jen was sure it was just in the car someplace but I had a bad feeling that it wasn't. I had either left it on the roof of the car or it had fallen off my belt when I took my pants off and was hidden in the grass someplace. I was so bummed because all the pictures of getting to the river were on that camera and if we didn't get it back we would have no picture before the river. But for now there was nothing I could do.

The next problem came when we got out the stove and fuel bottle. When Jen went to screw them together she realized they didn't go together. There was no way to connect the two pieces, they had completely different connections. We suddenly realize we would not have a stove, we would have to build fires if we wanted to cook anything. It is so easy with a little gas stove. It is quick to start, very hot, and works in any weather, rain or shine. A fire on the other hand can be a pain. Taking the time to light a fire and heat up water in the mornings is not likely to happen. I told myself that at least down here at low elevation the fire should burn well since there is plenty of oxygen in the air. That turned out to be wrong.

Disasters always come in three's. But this was already the third thing because earlier that day Jen started her period. She had brought a small emergency supply of tampons and was going to have to conserve to make them last. It was going to be a problem for both of us because it would mean no sexual encounters on warm sandy beach for a while.

Other than these few setbacks it was a great camp, flat sand to put the tent up on, rocks to sit on while cooking and eating, beautiful flowers growing at the back of the beach, plenty of



fire wood laying around and - one of the best things - very few biting bugs. By 6:00 it was pretty much dark so we got to bed early and that was okay with me because sleeping on the floor of a bus terminal isn't really very restful and that was the only sleep I had gotten the night before.

Day 2, November 13th 2014

Dawn came around 6:00 and we were up not long after that. We had a cold breakfast, finishing off our last bananas with peanut butter and Nutella, and trail mix and granola bars. We loaded our yellow boat with gear and set off down river again.



Just a mile down river we came to Cascada El Aguacero. This is the place Nic had hiked down to. There is a trail down from the right side of the canyon. My understanding is it has 745 steps down from the top. It is a small tourist attraction with a little restaurant at the top. People come and do the 745 steps down into the canyon, hike around and see the falls and walk along the river a short distance before returning to the rim for lunch at the restaurant. We had to paddle under a small part of the falls to get down the river. Even though the water, both in the river and the falls is

really quite warm it is kind of shocking on a cool morning to get hit with all that water. We stopped and took pictures before moving down river but we saw no other people at the falls. We did see 40 or 50 vultures fanning their wings on the other side of the river.

Just past the waterfall was our first rapid, a steep rocky drop that may have been runnable but it was also an easy portage so we unloaded and carried everything around it. If this rapid had been toward the end of the trip I might have just run it. By this time we were aware that the river was not as low as we had been hoping. The debris on the sides of the river told us that it was not even close to high water but we had been hoping for more the level it is when they hike down the river. It was much higher than that level. We might have some good sized whitewater farther ahead.

It may have been an easy portage but it was still over slippery, moss covered rocks and somewhere along the way Jen fell down and made a mess of her leg and hand. Her leg was scraped and bruised from her knee to her hip. Her hand had a fairly deep gash just below her wrist on the palm of her hand. She didn't realize it at the time but she also lost her sunglasses in the fall.

The sunglasses weren't much of an issue for a few day



because we didn't see the sun much for awhile. The wind was blowing a bit and in that afternoon it started to drizzle. Jen had goose bumps all afternoon and I was none too warm.



Sometime around the middle of the day we saw a place where a number of people had obviously been hanging out on the shore. We pulled over to take a look and I noticed what seemed to be a trail heading up the hill. After briefly checking it out we decided to secure the boat and go exploring up the trail. We thought it might be a trail to some Mayan ruins but after it kept going we decided it was more likely a trail people who lived up on the top used to access the river or maybe to

cross over to the other side of the canyon. In 45 minutes we found ourselves looking down on the river from the canyon rim. There were signs of horses and cattle fences but we saw no people or houses. After a quick look around we turned and went back down the hill and back to the kayak.

We were finding rapids almost every quarter mile or so. Most were easy enough to just run but some Jen got out and walked around while I ran the boat through. Jen was getting more and more apprehensive about the rapids. It was looking more difficult than we originally thought. Around 3:00 in the afternoon it was drizzling and cold and we spotted a sandy beach in front of a rock wall that had a big overhang above. The ledge below the overhang was dry and big enough for all our stuff. It



would be a perfect camp for a rainy night. It wasn't far from marker 35 where I had hoped to get to that day. We had made good miles and other than the rain it had been great. Now we were stretching out, dry and warm, and out of the rain.

There was a flat sandy area that had a pile of wood on it. At first I thought it was just drift wood from high water but on closer inspection it looked more like someone or something had stacked the wood there. There were strange looking squiggly tracks in the sand coming out from under the ledge and going to the pile. I guessed it was probably an iguana's track. A couple times I had spotted something on the rocks as we floated by that looked like small iguanas. Could an iguana have somehow built the pile of wood? We



needed to move the pile over so we could put our tent up on the flat, sandy spot the pile was sitting on. I used a paddle to push it over and scoop the sand flat under it. When I started moving the sand a black scorpion surfaced and looked menacingly at me. I scooped him up and sent him farther down the beach. Then we notice a large snake skin just below the tent. The snake had molted there. It was almost six feet long and could have been as big around as my arm. Maybe I was wrong about the iguana. What ever it was it sure made us careful about zipping the tent door closed.

There were almost no bugs out at night so after I took off my wet clothes I ran around naked the rest of the evening. It was plenty warm when dry. We built a fire using some of the iguana sticks. We kept having to blow on the fire to keep it going even though the wood was good and dry from being under the ledge. I think the difficulty was due to the extremely humid air. The nice thing about fires over stoves is they are nice to sit around in the evening and watch the coals glow and the flames licking up from the wood. It was nice laying there warm and dry listening to the rain falling out beyond the ring of light the fire was making. It was a great adventure. This place was meeting my every expectation.

Day 3 Another wet day of rain and even more whitewater.

It was still raining in the morning, more of a drizzle than rain. Neither one of us was eager to get out in it so it took longer than usual to break camp. I was still feeling like we had time to waste. If we got eight to ten miles in each day we would get to the lake with two days to paddle across. And we might be able to find a boat to take us across the lake. If things kept going the way they were we could be out early.

This morning I put on my usual t-shirt but then I added a long sleeved long underwear top and my Gortex rain jacket and then my life jacket. Jen did the same.

It wasn't long before we came to our first rapid. Jen feared they were coming more frequently and were becoming more difficult. I think she was right. There were a number of beautiful waterfalls that morning. One came straight out of the canyon wall high up on the cliff. There was a lot of water shooting straight out like a faucet. The next was a feathery, lacy affair pouring over a wall of travertine. We stopped on the beach below it and took pictures. I found an amazing little sand feature that I really liked. Small pebbles laying on the surface protected the sand below. The sand that was not under the pebbles wore away, with the rain and mist from the waterfall, leaving little towers of sand. In this one little area of the beach the conditions were just right and hundreds of these little towers had formed, most were 2 to 6 inches tall. After taking pictures we moved on down the river finding more rapids all the way.

During my research on Google Earth I found what looked like a rough road that seemed to make it down to the river. I marked the location on the map and was hoping to follow it up out of the canyon. Not far from where I placed the mark on the map we noticed a beach with foot prints all over it. We got out and found what might have once passed as a road but was now more of a trail. It seemed that locals may have brought cattle and horse down to the river for water. After a quick lunch on the beach we started up the trail to see where it would take us.

Even though it was drippy and wet on the trail we spent time examining the plants along the way. I was most impressed by some of the seriously unfriendly looking thorny trees and bushes. I thought the trail would lead us to a road and civilization but instead it split and split again and again, eventually petered out. I'm sure at least one trail would lead to a road but we didn't have the time or the need to find it. I just wanted to get up on top and look around.



Most of the trees have been cleared from the top of the canyon and we could see for miles around. It all looked pretty much the same all around us, lush, green, rolling hills. It was hard to tell there was a deep gorge right in front of us.

Once back on the river the rapids were coming fast. Every 10 or 15 minutes we would find ourselves looking down another drop. Sometimes we only had a hundred yards from the tail of one rapid to the head of the next.

How to scout a rapid.

As we approached a rapid we would start craning our necks to see if we could see the tail of the rapid below. Once I could see the bottom I could guess how big the drop was. If I could see the water all the way down I knew it was probably runnable and not very hard. But most of the rapids were steeper than that and we couldn't see the water all the way down. Sometimes there would be a horizon line that indicates a big step down in the river, like a small waterfall pouring over a thing. Then I would have to get out and see how big it is. That meant finding a place to park the boat close enough to the rapid so we didn't have to walk too far but could also paddle back up river to get to the spot where we would need to start through the rapid, that is if we are not going to take the boat out and portage around.

Then we have to climb over slippery boulders and rocks and through bushes and trees until we get to where we can see the whole rapid. I have to figure out what routes might work and if I feel I have the skill to make the boat go there. Then I have to come up with markers in the river that will tell me where I am and where I want to go, certain rocks, logs, holes, calm spot, anything I think I will be able to see from upstream. I have to be able to visualize these markers as I'm going down the rapid. It sounds like this in my mind: enter on the green tongue just to the right of the big, mid river rock, paddle to get through the first hole then back right across the dead water below the hole to miss the bad hole in the middle, find the green spot that splits the left hole from the right, hit the green spot with momentum going left, keep the left momentum so I cross to the left wall before the giant middle river hole at the bottom. When I get there, I can breathe easy - I'm home free.

Once I have all that in my head I'm ready to start. I often take one more look to be sure I know where the entrance is before getting the boat back in the water and paddling up stream to get to the entry point. There are always some butterflies in my stomach as I paddle out into the current. It is much easier to see the markers from atop a boulder on the side of the river than from a boat, so as I enter the current I'm searching for my first marker. Often I can only see the first marker. I have to trust that by the time I get there I will be able to see the next one and I am already headed where I want to go. How hard the rapids is determines how much trouble I will be in if I miss a marker.

The point of all this is that it takes quite a bit of time to scout a rapid. The majority of the rapids we were now encountering were steep enough we needed to scout them. They weren't really hard but there were so many. It made our down river progress very slow.

Jen kept saying, "Where is our hot, Mexican weather?" It drizzled on us all day. There was a good up river wind too. Jen was just barely keeping her body temperature out of the hypothermia range and I was a long way from being hot. It was getting close to 5:00 PM and we were still on the water. We really wanted to find another big overhang to camp under but we weren't finding it. We passed a nice little beach with a very small overhang and kept going but only a hundred yards down river we approach another rapid. We decided it was worth paddling back up to the little beach we had passed.

Someone was smiling on us because soon after we got out of the boat it stopped raining. We didn't get the fire going until well after dark but even though it was hard finding any dry

wood, we did get it going. We were able to get dinner cooked and we even got some of our clothes dry by hanging them over the fire.

I was really glad we had extra days because we only made around five miles. We did spend a lot of time on our hike but the bigger problem was the slow going with so many rapids.

The river seemed to be getting bigger and the rapids more difficult. I guess bigger is to be expected. All the water coming into the river from the sides had to make it bigger. It was at least a 1000 CFS now. Not big as rivers go but bigger than we had started with. Jen wasn't enjoying the rapids. They scared her. I don't think she was actually scared of what we were doing but more scared of what might be coming up ahead. The thought of the unknown was a fearful thing. The cold was a problem too. It added to the depressed mood we were both feeling. To make things even worse, Jen was still on her period.

Even though the rapids we were running were the fun kind and we had walked around the ones I felt might push my abilities, and Jen could walk around any she didn't like we were acting like it really wasn't going well. It was all because we didn't know what was coming. I kept telling myself that they run commercial raft trips down here. How bad could it be?

Day 4 Sunny but we are now in the thick of it.

I am going to start with the good things that happened. Even though there was a layer of fog lying on the river when we got up it looked like the kind of thing that would burn off with a little sun and it did. It made so much difference having the sun out and being able to get dry. We kept our rain gear on because we were getting wet from the rapids but it would quickly dry and we were warm.



The canyon walls closed in and grew high in places giving a rather prehistory look to everything. The walls were hung with ferns and moss and flowers and trees. Everywhere I looked it was so beautiful I wanted to take another picture of it. I saw an upside down tree. It was hanging off the edge of a huge overhang. The trunk grew down from the rock and then branched out into a broad, flat canopy. Shafts of sunlight sliding down from above would catch the droplets of water coming from waterfalls high above and fill the canyon with sparkles.

There are always vultures flying high above and sometimes they would drop down on to the lower walls and glide along silent and slow only a hundred feet above the river. I

saw another large lizard scurry across a stone ledge. I have to assume they are some kind of iguana. There is a very cool flower that grows in the water. It is pure white and maybe the size of the palm of my hand. It looks a lot like an Easter Lily but it has six long ribbons of white that curl over and hang down below the main flower. They seem to grow in clumps with several flowers. There are cactuses growing all over the high cliff walls, I'm guessing some of the cactus are over 30 feet tall. Above one of the rapids there was a huge spire sticking up right in the middle of the canyon with all kinds of vegetation growing off it. For some reason I have a particular attraction to this kind of tower.

Sometime around noon we came around a bend in the river and instead of finding another rapid there was a really big sand beach with a little cabana like structure build out of sticks and palm leaves. The sun was shining on the beach and we had to stop and enjoy it for awhile. We got our seats out of the kayak and dug them down into the sand so we could sit in them and recline. We sat eating salami and cheese with crackers and watched the river glide slowly by. This was what we had really signed up for, lounging in the sun, toes buried in the sand, watching the clouds float across the sky. I wasn't looking for a big adventure, just an exotic one.

We were still seeing plenty of human foot prints on some of the beaches. In fact during the afternoon we came around a little bend and there was a guy sitting on a rock fishing. We may have been surprised to see him but he was more surprised to see us. I asked him how he got here and he said he had come down from the rim on a trail. I think the people who live along the top of the canyon know a lot of places to hike in and out. He was the only person we saw on the river the whole six days. We also didn't see anymore foot prints after that. About this point in the trip we would enter the El Ocoté Selva Reserve. The farmland would be gone and it would be jungle in all directions even on the top of the canyon. We would soon be deep in the wilderness.



The hard stuff.

As soon as we got on the water that morning the rapids started again. They were more frequent than the day before. We tried to remember how many rapids we had portaged but couldn't be sure. It was either four or five. I have talked about how long it takes to scout a rapid. A portage takes even longer. At this time I was really glad we had more time than I thought we needed. We were going to need every bit of it.

I wanted this to be a relaxing little float where Jen could relax and not have to be afraid but it was definitely more difficult than that. Jen was stressing and therefore I was stressing. It was hard work getting us down the river. The portages weren't particularly long or difficult but they are a lot of work. We usually had to travel the portage routes three times. The first time was to make sure the rapid was not runnable and if not runnable to find the route to portage. Then it took two more loads each to get all our gear and the boat down.

By mid afternoon I was feeling pretty tired. We needed to find a place to camp. The walls had closed in making beaches hard to find. I had been feeling kind of funky all day. I was chalking it up to stress. In any case my stomach was feeling like it wasn't happy. We were sliding along on some very quiet water in a dark slot, walls only twenty or thirty feet apart and three or four hundred feet high, listening for the roar of another rapid ahead. As I peered down the long tunnel at the far corner it became apparent there was a sandy beach on the outside of the turn. If it was flat at all it would be camp.

It was only about 3:30. We could see plenty of sunshine through the slit in our sky but it was rather dark down on the little beach we were going to camp on. We were glad for that little patch of sand anyway, in fact excited to have it.

Again it was even harder to get a decent fire going. I had to get out the air pump we used to inflate the kayak so I could keep blowing on it to keep the flame going long enough to get dinner cooked. Eventually it got hot enough to burn on its own but that was after two hours of pumping air into it.

Day 5 on the river November 16, 2014 A day to remember.

This was a rather extraordinary day any way you look at it, the good and the bad. Not long after breaking camp and getting on the water we came to a long steep rapid. It may well have been runnable but I didn't look very hard at it because it was certainly a step up from what I had been running. When I was assessing the risk of running the rapids it wasn't just about whether or not I could do it, but also about what if I made a mistake. It wasn't so much about a fear of getting hurt or killed, as it was about what would happen to Jen if I did. Or even more simply, what if I lost the boat or the gear bag or all of our stuff. None of it really seem all that dangerous, I had certainly chosen to run much more dangerous stuff back when I was kayaking with all my kayaking buddies. But most of the time there were several people to rescue me. Most of the time I could have walked back to my car. I wasn't going to leave my wife standing at the bottom of a jungle, wilderness canyon with no food or shelter and no way out. So if there was a chance I might mess up, it was much better to err on the side of safety than to go for it.

There was perhaps a time when making that decision would have been really hard on me but now it is much easier. Let's just walk it. It took us two and a half hours to get around this rapid. We had to scale cliffs and crawl through caves and traverse long areas of incredibly slippery rocks. There was one place I fell down all three times I crossed it. We made it about a hundred yards carrying the kayak inflated before we rolled it up and made it into a backpack for me to carry.



It is impressive that Jen was so worried about the rapids but she was more than willing to crawl through the cave and over all this rough terrain with the possibility of bugs and spiders and snakes in every little crack or hole. We discovered one plant with serrated leaves that must have been related to stinging nettle. There was a bunch of it in the place I kept falling down and each time I got in it. How many things could there be out there that could cause us grief and we had no idea what they were? Jen never complain or grumbled about the hard work hauling big loads over all the difficult terrain. Of course we had practiced this plenty on our previous trip in Venezuela, and she never complain there either.

Once we were finally back on the water we entered the most impressive area of the canyon. It is what coming to this canyon was all about. The walls came in and the water became deep and quiet. Water poured off the walls forming waterfalls that drift down on top of us. Someplace ahead was the feature we have been calling the “Arch”. I looked at pictures of this place and it made me feel like I had to go there. A mile or two below the portage it looked like the river disappeared into a hole in the wall. It looked dark in there but as we entered we could still see. Water poured into the crack and I could tell there wasn’t a roof. Some light was still making it in from above although we really couldn’t see out. As we drifted through this amazing crack we watched at the walls grew higher and higher and then we could see the roof close in above us. The cavern was huge. We could hear the waterfalls behind us but here there was just the slightest gurgling sound as the water slid deep and dark through the cavern. There was a giant rock laying in the middle just before the down stream opening. We paddle over to it and I climbed out of the boat and Jen turned and paddle back up river a ways so I could take her picture coming through. Then we traded places and I paddle down out of the arch so she could get a picture of me in that direction. We played around a little longer before gliding out the mouth of the cavern and into the full light again. All I could think of was how amazing it was and how worth all the struggle it was.

I was under the impression that not long after the arch all rapids stop and it became a quite float out onto the lake. Just how I developed that impression is hard to say. Having gone back now and reviewing the data there is a kind of blank spot there. All but one of the rafting videos I looked at ended before they ever get to the arch. They show no pictures that far down. The one that does have footage, shows much lower water levels and it talks about the “Grand Portage.” But they never show a picture looking



down river. Nothing else shows or describes anything other than one big portage someplace near the arch. The canyon is so narrow at this point that you can’t see down into it. Just past marker 10 you start to see the river again and there are no rapids. I figured the long portage we did just before we got into the arch narrows must have been the portage they talked about.

So as we drifted out of





the mouth of the arch we were tentatively celebrating the idea that we had made it and were home free. It wasn't far before we learned how wrong we were. Big rapids make a deep rumbling kind of sound and as we approached this next rapid it was very much the rumbling of something big. The river was chocked with huge boulder that had fallen of the walls above into the river. Resigned to another portage we climb up over a wall of rock through a small cave and onto a rock standing fifty feet above the river. As I looked down river I could feel my heart sink into my stomach. This was the worst possible situation, a huge rapid disappearing around the next bend in the river, reaching from vertical wall to vertical wall, wet and slippery, moss cover, black walls. There was no way to walk around it.

I had feared this kind of situation but I can't remember ever being in it. I was suddenly scared and confused. We continued down over the rocks as far as they went. We climbed onto a flat boulder the size of a Mac truck and sticking 15 feet out of the water. This was the end you could go no farther without being in the river. My eyes scanned the wall for some kind of ledge or crack that would allow us to get pass but there was nothing. The walls were even more impassable than the river.

The only good thing was the little sand alcove nestle in the rocks just before the final Mac truck rock. We could camp there and try to figure something out. We headed back up river to start hauling our gear.

It took another hour and a half to get everything down to the sandy spot. We set about gathering firewood and setting up the tent. We didn't talk too much, both of us in our own little worlds trying to come to terms with where we were. As soon as we had a pile of wood ready to burn I started the process of building a fire. Nothing was working. We tore up paper. I whittled little slivers of wood from the inner dry areas of sticks. We even tried spraying propane out of the useless little tank we were carrying around. Finally I think we had made enough attempts that we dried out some of the wood along with some plastic wrappers that burned longer than paper, and we got a flame to last. It had been at least an hour and a half. We had to pump air into the fire for the next two and a half hours to get the water boiling to make dinner. It was very frustrating for me but it kept me from thinking too much about where we were.

A very long night

After dinner we sat by the smoldering coals of the fire and talked. I don't even remember what we talked about. I'm not sure what we could have really said to each other that would have helped. The problem was an endless loop playing in my head that always came back to "We are screwed". Jen went to bed first. She always went to bed first and read or wrote in her journal. I was scared to go to bed. When I finally did I wrote in my journal for a few minutes but it turned into the same endless loop thinking. Jen was reading her book and when she set it down and turned off her light I took the book and started reading. I was afraid to try and sleep knowing my mind wouldn't let me. Thinking about it wouldn't help anything. Here, in the dark there was nothing that could be done. It only stressed me out and made me feel bad so I read and read. At one point I put the book down and turn off my light but it wasn't long before the loop was spinning around in my head so I got the book out again and read more.

I don't know what time it was but finally I thought I was tired enough to fall asleep so I tried again. I must have slept for a while but when I woke it was still night and the loop was playing over and over in my head. It went something like this:

The yellow line is the portage



We can't tell much about what is down river but it is a very big rapid and we can't tell where it ends. There is no way around it. There is no way to get back up river. There are rapids that we can't paddle up and there are steep walls all the way. Even if we could get up a ways we would have to go a long way up to get out of the canyon. If we stay put how long will we have to be here and will someone come looking for us? Could they even get to where we are? There is just a sliver of sky that we can see from here. A helicopter is out of the question. How long will it take for the water to go down enough for us to get past this thing? How long could we last sitting here? We will go crazy before we starve. We just have to get in the boat and paddle down there but what if it is a death trap? If we start down and find something we know we can't get through we might be able to get out on one of the huge boulders but then we would be stuck there and we wouldn't last long. Is it better to just stay put?

There were lots of variations to this loop but that is the general idea. The loop just went faster and faster and my blood pressure went up and up and my heart raced and my breathing became more and more labored. I wondered how Jen could be sleeping. I so wished I was asleep. Just the roar of the rapid was enough to drive me crazy. In fact I have to wonder if it wasn't part of why it was such a difficult night.

The roar of the rapid was trapped between the massive walls. The only sound in the canyon was the roaring. I couldn't hear Jen beside me. I couldn't hear bugs or wind. I couldn't hear myself breathing. The constant roar blocked everything else out. The sound changed too. It would sound like a jet engine and suddenly it would change in pitch or a second thrum would start up over the jet engine. It might have had something to do with the sound bouncing back and forth off the walls and getting mixed up with itself. I don't know if it was really changing or if it was just my ears but I wanted to get away from it.

Sometime well before dawn Jen was moving around and we started to talk. We had to talk loud to be heard over the roar. We talked about how we had gotten here. Which was interesting because if we had talked weeks earlier we wouldn't have come. Last year after Argentina and Aconcagua I decided I didn't need to do any more big adventures. I was happy to stay home and do trips around the Rocky mountain area. But then Mike gave us the tickets and we were planning to go someplace. I tried hard to find something in the USA that grabbed my attention but in November nothing did. Then I came across this river idea and it sucked me in. But if Jen had said let's not go I would have been relieved. I thought Jen wanted to go world traveling. I knew she didn't want adventures like this one had turned out to be, but I thought she still wanted to do exotic trips. Laying there in the dark she said she was never really excited about this trip and she was happy just staying close to home. She said she was relieved when she read my comment about being done with big adventures.

It is a strange thing when you have time to talk about dying in the very near future. We talked about all kinds of things we had never really discussed before but it seemed like this might be the last chance we would have if things didn't go well. There was a good chance we would make it through this rapid but looking down into that mess below us there was plenty of reason to believe we might not make it. It is a little strange to me that I wasn't able to focus more on the possibility that we would make it through.

It was barely light when Jen got up saying she was going to look at the rapid again. It was better than just laying there so I went with her. We climbed up onto the Mac truck rock and looked down river. It looked pretty much the same as I remembered. I suggested we go up on the high rock and look from there. From up on the high rock I saw something different

this time. When I had look the day before I saw nothing but drop. There was no indication that we were seeing the whole rapid. But now I was seeing what looked like it might be the tail of the rapid. It was hard to tell from this distance but it gave me hope.

Jen was not planning to sit it out. She was ready to go for it. She was ready to get it over with for better or worst. That was okay by me. We made our plans and headed back to camp to get ready to take on whatever was coming. Surprisingly just that made me feel better. At least I was going to do something not just sit and worry.

We packed up and loaded the boat with a minimum of words. We were still both in our little worlds, do in part to the deafening sound of the rapid. When we were ready we climbed in. I was very nervous but it was so much better than the worries of the night. Now I had to perform. I had to do it right.

Day 6, The day of reckoning.

There was quite a bit of calm water the first hundred yards below the Mac truck rock. On river right it was mostly quiet with one pour over that looked small from up river but we really couldn't see it at all. The plan was to run this little pour over and stop just above another huge boulder that leaned up against the right wall. We sat in a calm spot twenty yards above the pour over looking at it. We could see nothing. There was a log sticking six or eight feet up out of the left side of the pour over. It bothered me because I feared there was something in there holding it. It might not be clean. But we had no better option so we turned the boat and headed in. I didn't want too much speed, just enough to get us through the hole at the bottom. As we reach the lip and even before I could see anything Jen yelled, "it's bad." Half a second later I could see the water didn't flush out. It ran straight into a rock that lay just where the hole was supposed to be. The water turned left and went someplace. I gave a hard stroke hoping to push the front of the boat up onto the rock blocking the way. Jen landed on the rock but the back of the boat dropped into the slot and the pour over poured onto me and the boat.

What ever else happened I knew I didn't want to go where ever that water was going. I dove forward onto the slippery rock, clawing to get some kind of grip to pull myself up. In doing so I let go of my paddle. Immediately I knew I had made a mistake. I yelled, "My paddle!" It slowly floated away below the rock. Jen tried to reach out with her paddle to pull it back but it was already gone.

The back of the boat was still under the pour over along with everything else we had. We had to get it up on the rock and out of the water. The back of the boat was fully swamped plus all our gear so it didn't come out easy. But with some struggling we did get it out. We were now down to one paddle.

It had been a bad decision to run the pour over blind. I really hoped it was the only mistake we would make. We had to drag the boat over one more pour over that had almost no water going over it. We parked ourselves under the leaning boulder and I climbed up to see what came next. When I looked down the right side below the leaning boulder I could see my paddle sticking up from under a rock. It would be possible to get to it but it would commit us to running the right side. I studied that route and decided I didn't want to be there. We would have to forgo the paddle.

I turned my attention to the left side. We would have to cross the entire rapid to get there but the middle section wasn't very difficult. I could do it just fine. There was one rather large hole we would have to hit just right but I felt I could do that too. Even from my perch on the rock I couldn't see over the last big drop. The drop had to be pretty big, and I had no idea what was below it. In the very far corner, just above the big drop, there was a huge rock against the left wall. The rock turned all the water and sent it back into the middle of the drop. There was a thin eddy just in front of this big rock that if we were really lucky we

could stop in and possibly drag the boat over the rock and miss the final drop. Just to the right and slightly up river of this eddy another rock split the current making two spouts that dove over the final drop. The first one would put us right into the center of whatever chaos was down there. It seemed to me the second one had less water and would drop us in past most of the chaos. If we missed the eddy we would go for this second spout and hope for the best.

There was just one small problem with this plan. Just before reaching the eddy or the second spout there was an angle wave coming off the left wall that looked like it would turn the boat the wrong way and point us right down the first spout. I could see no way around this problem. We would have to take the risk. One way or the other we would come out the bottom.

I climbed down off the rock and prepared to get in. Jen was going to be a passenger, helping lean the boat but she wouldn't be able to add power. It was all up to me to get it in the right place. My mouth was dry and I was shaking. I couldn't get control of my breathing. I wanted to be more calm to start this run but it wasn't happening. I ran the route through my head a couple more times and climbed into my seat. Just being in the boat calmed me down a little. The first move was to cross a jet of water to another eddy more to the middle of the river. The jet was pretty fast and wide and with just me paddling there was a good chance we wouldn't get across in time to stop there. I told Jen if I didn't make it I was going to turn the boat and go for it. Which is what happened. Jen said later she was glad we didn't stop because that would have meant more time to think about it.



We hit the one big hole just right sending us toward the angle wave which turn the boat, just like I feared. But we had caught the slow water just above the mid-current rock. We were pointed straight down the first spout but not dropping in yet. I gave a couple of my most powerful back strokes thinking maybe I could push us into the eddy which was now behind us. It wasn't enough to get us into the eddy but it was enough to allow the boat to

pivot on the slow water and send the back of the boat into the second spout. I looked over my shoulder and could see a 15 foot waterfall and we were going in backwards. In a surprisingly calm voice I said, "We're going in" and wrapped an arm around the boat tube and braced for the impact of hitting the bottom. But there was no great impact. I watched Jen splash down in front of me and we didn't even take in significant water. Surprisingly there was no unstableness, the boat just floated backward through the foaming water. Suddenly a blood curdling scream shook me. What was wrong? It took me a second or two to realize it was Jen's cries of joy. We had made it.

As we went over the falls and the boat went vertical Jen went straight into the air, not having a paddle she had already wrapped both arms around the tubes and was holding on for dear life. She had the seat back behind her and she never moved from her seat. I had the seat back plus the big dry bag behind me and I never moved either. Had we gone off forward it was very likely that I would have been launched over Jen's head as the boat went vertical.

We were giddy with relief. We had made it. We weren't going to die here. Even though the walls were close and rising right out of the water, the river was calm in front of us. There was plenty of reason for hope.

Heading for the lake.

I was now pretty sure that this had been the last big portage the rafters talked about. It seemed unlikely there would be more big rapids but I wasn't certain. Jen was still very worried that there might be more. We did come to more rapids in the next hour or so. There were a few that were a little bigger but I ran them all without worry. Jen was happy to take pictures of me running them. There were plenty of small rapids where Jen stayed in the boat too. After an hour and a half the rapids stopped and the river widened. The sun was shining down on us bright and warm. It was pretty clear we were now really home free.

There was a second, smaller river, that came in from the left and I was sure there were no more rapids after that point. Jen finally decided she could take off her rain gear and helmet. There were some huge sand beaches around the mouth of the other river. There were birds everywhere. Everything was changing for the better.

There were a lot more birds down here. There had been vultures all along but they seemed like a different kind down here. The cormorants, snow egrets and white heron we had seen early on had disappeared in the narrow but were now back. For the first time we were seeing pelicans and they weren't afraid of us. We could paddle right up to a lot of them. There were some sitting on a branch over the water and we paddle right under them. They just twisted their heads around to aim a glassy eyeball at us. I spotted an iguana sunning itself on a log sticking out over the water. We were able to paddle within 15 feet of it before it spun around and crashed into the bushes. We saw another sunning itself in a tree growing out of the water. We paddled all the way around it. We were so close it could have jumped into the boat if it wanted to. When it finally moved it spun and dove into the water in the opposite direction.

From the mouth of the small river to the mouth of the La Venta and the lake, it was six miles. We only had the one paddle so we took turns paddling. We would need to cross the lake in one day if we were going to get out as schedule. It was 21 miles from the mouth of the river to where we planned to take out, near the big bridge across from Malpaso. It could be done easily if we had two paddles and if the wind didn't blow but we



now had just one paddle and the wind always blows on big lakes. It was going to be a challenge but it was the kind that just means hard work. We would make it. And we weren't yet writing off the idea of getting a motor boat ride across yet.

There were a couple of other things that were starting to bother me although the first wasn't that big a deal. Even though the stress was now gone my stomach was not getting better, maybe it was even worse. It was churning and grumbling and I seemed to have other aches and pains too.

The second problem was a little more significant. It was the end of the rainy season and the reservoir was as full as it ever gets. It was backed up into the river a long way. We hadn't seen a beaches or even flat areas we could get out on for a few miles now. What if we didn't find a place to camp this afternoon?



The river house.

As we neared the mouth of the river it got a lot wider, maybe 400 yards across. The wind picked up significantly and of course we were paddling into it. We snuggled up close to the right bank hoping to find protection. Suddenly I thought I got a whiff of Mexican cooking, tortillas or something. I asked if Jen smelled it and she had. We paddle another hundred yards and a cabana roof appeared on the cliff just above us. We rounded the corner and there were people looking down at us. I remembered seeing a picture of a place like this and the caption said something about stopping for beverages. I asked if this was a restaurant and they said no it was their house but they invited us to come up. This was a very good thing. There was no obvious place to camp as far as I could see up the shoreline. We secured our gear and went out on the patio to talk.

They were the Pura Family. They lived here a couple months a year and worked as caretakers of the property and the entrance to the El Ocota Silva Reserve. There were four people; Arturo was the patriarch of the family. I am guessing he was in his late 50's or early

60's. Arnolfo is Arturo's son, in his mid 20's. Nehemlas, wife of Arnolfo, mid 20's, and their son, Alex 13 months. When they weren't living here they lived across the mouth of the river in a village called Kaloniaias. Arturo had 7 more kids and a wife over in Kaloniaias. They were interested in talking to us and willing to work at communicating. It seemed like we were quickly making a connection with these people.

Arnolfo made a little money taking people on jungle walks into the El Ocote so we asked if he would take us up there. We spend an hour walking up to an overlook and back. It was a fitting look back up the river we had been on. I could tell where the river was but if you didn't know you wouldn't suspect it was such a deep gorge. Here looking over the rolling hills everything was covered in thick trees. We saw three or four Spider Monkeys in the trees on our way back down.

We paid Arnolfo 60 pesos for his time, about \$3.00 each. He said we didn't have to but we wanted to anyway.

That evening a little boat motored in from across the mouth of the river with a couple of young girls and a guy named Yohani. One of the girls was his daughter and the other was Arturo's daughter, Sofia and Miriam respectively. They were ten or eleven years old. It turned out that Yohani was the boss. He had the power to make things happen. He said we could sleep in the dormitory house and that he could give us a ride to a place we would be able to catch a boat to Malpaso and on to Tuxtla. The problem was we couldn't talk to him. He only talked at us and we didn't understand anything he said.

After a lot of discussing we had a plan but I didn't know what it was. In the end we would go with Yohani in the little boat at 5:00 AM. I didn't know where, or how much that was going to cost us. I was pretty sure wherever it was we would be able to get a ride from there on across the lake. It worked for me.

Day 7 Getting across the lake.

We were up and ready to go at 4:50. It had rained all night and we were so happy to have had a roof over our heads. Yohani's boat was full of water and he had to bail it out before we could get in. He mounted the little six horse motor on the back and got his Coke bottles of gasoline lined up. Then we loaded our boat and our other gear in. We took off north across the lake. Immediately I noticed we were heading for a light several miles away, below some far hill and decided we must be going somewhere near there. It only sprinkled a little on us but we were motoring into a light headwind all the way across. It was around six and a half miles across to our destination and it took us a little over an hour to get there. I could be completely wrong but I think the village was called Manicipio.

As we pulled into the little bay where Manicipio is hidden we could see several bigger boats lined up along the beach. At least one was loading people and appeared to be getting ready to go. When we landed it seemed there was a bit of a rush to get on the other boat. I had messed up when loading stuff and put all my money at the bottom of the big dry bag. I had to unload everything to get it out. I didn't know that we had talked about a price for Yohani to bring us across and when I asked now I was sure he said 200 pesos. I wanted to give him more but 200 was the smallest bill I had. I should have just given him another 200 pesos. I feel bad now that I didn't. The ride he had given us was so worth it. Four hundred pesos would have been only \$40, not that much considering he just saved us two days of misery. I say two days of misery because it would have taken us that long to paddle across



the lake and it was windy and raining and very few places to get out of the water. As we motored across, I imagined us in our little kayak, with just one paddle, paddling into a driving rain, waves breaking over the bow, me cursing all the way.

Yohani had gotten us to a place to catch a speed boats, and that was a true blessing. We climbed onto one of the boats and found seats. Within 10 minutes we were on our way. Somehow Jen got the seat in front of me. I was sitting beside an older little lady and an older gentleman. Jen was sitting beside three cowboys. A couple of minutes after getting going the lady beside me asked the driver for plastic rain covers, sheets of red plastic. They stretch across the laps of all the people on each seat. There were just the three of us in my seat but Jen had to share with the three cowboys. Twenty minutes into the ride it really started to rain. The waves were getting bigger but we were doing 25 or 30 MPH. All I could think about was what if we had to get up this morning and climb into our kayak and paddle out into the wind and rain? What misery.

Instead we had an hour of slightly uncomfortable sitting, and then we pulled into the town of Malpaso. We paid the guy 100 pesos, \$10 and dragged our gear off the boat. We asked one of the cowboys how to get a colectivo to Tuxtla and he waved us to follow him. We walk a hundred yards through some little buildings to a street where two little white mini vans sat waiting. These little communal taxis are called colectivos. Several of us climbed in and we were off. I had no idea where to, but the cowboy had indicated this would get us to Tuxtla. Ten minutes later the van stopped and everybody got out. I understood then that this van only got us to where the real vans were. From here we would get on another van that would take us to Tuxtla. We took our stuff out of the first van and put it into another bigger van and got in. It was another 100 pesos to go to Tuxtla, for both of us and all our gear.

It rained all the way to Tuxtla and again I thought about us out there on the lake, struggling into the wind and rain. I was warm and kind of dry and heading for a hotel. We had another problem or rather an old problem getting worse. Both of us had stomachs that were getting worse and our heads were kind of fuzzy. Over all neither of us felt very good. We both had barely been able to eat the night before at the river house. Something was wrong.

When the driver told us it was time to get off in Tuxtla we set all our gear down on the sidewalk of a bustling street in Tuxtla. All we really knew was we were someplace downtown. I wanted to get someplace to sit down and look at the map and consult our guide book. We carried all our stuff about a block before stopping in front of a drug store. There was a little alcove in the front where we set our bags. I got out the guide book and Jen went into get more Tampons. She had run out a while ago.



I had read about some decent hotels downtown and I wanted to find one right away. The book said Hotel Fernando was spotlessly clean and nice but it was a little out of the busy part of down town. That was us. We got a taxi and had him take us there. For \$40 bucks it was perfect. We hauled our stuff up to the second floor and found our room. We fell onto the bed and just laid there.

Back in Tuxtla Gutierrez

We got up and took showers. It felt so good. Afterwards I laid back down on the bed for a real nap. But Jen went out to find a laundry and an internet café so she could email everyone and tell them we were still alive.

In the end I wasn't able to sleep. I wasn't feeling very good but I started worrying that we needed to get a hold of Nic and let him know he didn't need to pick us up in Malpasso. I also needed to get something for my stomach. I finally got up and went out to take care of business.

It was hard to get a hold of Nic. We finally had the owner of a little restaurant call for us on his cell phone. He was a very nice guy and spoke English well. So we had a meal and tipped him nicely for the phone call. His food was great, and different than most places. It was more of a breakfast places. But we felt bad that we could hardly eat it because of our stomachs. I think it was about this time that we were deciding we had giardia.

Nic came by around 6:00 in the evening. We got our stuff out of his car, no camera, and went out for dinner. He was quite interested in the adventure. He said he would have waited until the next day and then tried to get us some help. That was nice to hear.

Even though I had slept most of the afternoon, that night it was so nice to get into a real bed and just sleep - no specific time we had to get up, nothing to do, just sleep. It was good because that would be the end of relaxing for us for two more days.

Moving on.

The plan was to get a bus to San Cristabal, an interesting colonial town just an hour up the road. The company that said it ran raft trips on the La Venta was headquartered there. If anyone was going to buy our boat it was probably them. Plus we wanted to talk to them about the river. Then we would go on to Palenque and visit some Mayan ruins and finally catch a bus on back to Cancun and perhaps play there in the ocean for a while.

We got a taxi to the bus terminal. I sat on a seat in front while Jen ran over to the Supermarket to get some food for the bus ride. While she was gone I started think about how much fun we were going to have being tourists and riding buses for three more day and feeling like crap. I was not a happy camper right then. I was pretty sure we could get a plane to Mexico City for around \$200 and then we could change our flights and be home the next day. When Jen came back I gave her the new idea and she thought it was the best idea she had heard in a long time.

I am going to spare you the gruesome details of traveling with giardia for the next two day but the general idea is we got a plane to Mexico City and manage to get on a plane to Atlanta where we ended up having to spend the night. We flew to LA the next morning and spent several hours trying to get a plane to SLC. We got to SLC around 4:00 or 5:00 and were back home to Heber around 6:30 or 7:00. We were so thankful to be home.

Conclusion

Perhaps I should direction you back to the preface at the beginning of this story because I think this conclusion is a long way from Jen's.

I have seen a lot of beautiful places in my 58 years of wandering around in wild places and the Canyon of the Rio La Venta is perhaps the most beautiful, intimate and assume places I have ever been. It is an amazing wilderness surrounded by millions of people. The thing that saves it from being over run with people is that most people don't have the interest or the skills to go and experience it.

When I tell people about our trip I say how beautiful and amazing it was but I don't have any way to really make them understand just how spectacular it really was. They usually say, "Oh, I'm glad you had a good time." But then if I say something about being glad to make it

out alive, that really catches their attention. The drama of that one short section makes the story. I wish I had somehow of catching their attention with it's amazing beauty and the feeling of true exploration and discovery rather than how I scared myself.



Now that the trip is a little bit behind me I can look at it more objectively and I see it wasn't a difficult trip. Even the final rapid was within my ability level. Before that anything that even began to push my abilities we just walked around. All of it was interesting and exciting because it was new and beautiful but more because I had to use my wits and skills to figure it out. Even all the studying before hand was fun because I was learning stuff that no one, or at least very few, know. There was no map or guide book to tell me how to do it. It was me using my head, doing the best I could do.

I wasn't planning it to be so challenging but I knew there would be some hard parts. You can't go to a place like that and not find things you didn't expect. Things happen and you have to deal with whatever it is. And that is what it is all about, dealing with changes, surprises, fear, my own thoughts and, of course the forces of nature.

That is why I have spent so much of my life searching out places like the Rio La Venta, that is where I can find true adventure and meaning. And I can test my self and find real fear and real joy. When I look real danger in the eye, a danger that is right in front of me, that is when I really know I am alive. And when it is all over I have a real feeling of accomplishment and joy. And what can be better then that?

I don't believe I have to go to such exotic places to find this kind of real adventure. I think after talking with Jen about it I think we are much more likely to seek out our adventures much closer to home from now on and I am okay with that.

