

Creeking



First Descent of Río Chínipas - A To Be Class IV Mexican Classic

By Rocky Contos

It is the eighth morning of our first descent of the Ríos Huevachic-Charuyvo-Chínipas, and we are very happy to be paddling the lower section of river that has a more moderate gradient (here, called Río Chínipas). At this point, we are in a gorge section located >more than 3000 feet below the rim where the village of Gasogachi is located. So far it is meeting my expectation, an excellent Class IV river that all other advanced paddlers coming to the Copper Canyon area will want to do. It has a pretty good flow (average 3000 cfs in August), a gorgeous canyon, tons of challenging and fun Class III-IV rapids, fine camps, clean water, no trash, comfortable summer weather, and short

or long sections to do. The only question we face now is whether the remainder of the river will be as nice as what we've already seen.

Geographic Details of Río Chínipas

Río Chínipas is a major river that flows west and south to join Río Fuerte downstream of the confluence with Río Urique, but upstream of the city of El Fuerte. The headwaters of Río Chínipas are in the region just west of Creel, the main mountain outpost town for explorers of the Copper Canyon area. Most people

Tom Diegel mockingly named this rapid "Rocky's Class IV" - it may have been a Class V

Photo by Rocky Contos

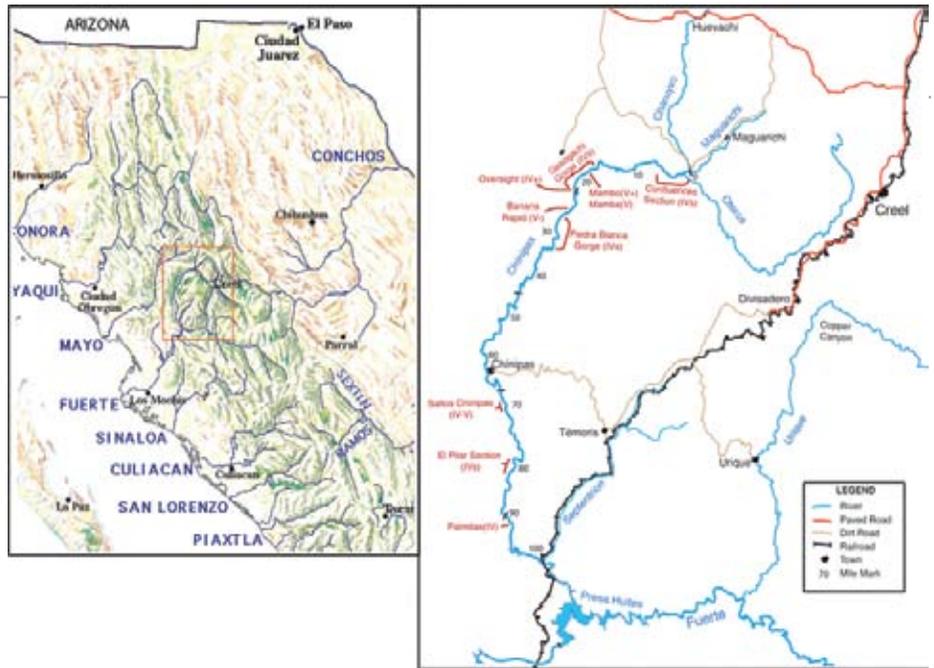
familiar with the area know that the train stops at Divisadero, a point on the rim from where tourists can peer down into Río Urique in the Copper Canyon. What most people don't know is that Río Oteros-Chínipas is the bigger river on the other side of the tracks, carving a canyon nearly as deep and passing through beautiful remote terrain. Río Chínipas has up to 102 miles of Class III-IV whitewater to float, and is similar to the Tuolumne River in California in volume. There are three main upper branches, each with its own Class V run: Río Oteros (the longest), Río Huevachi-Charuyvo, and Río Maguarichi. All three of the upper branches join within 1 km of each other, at a point that can be

accessed by dirt road. The Main Chínipas starts at the upper confluence where Ríos Maguarichi and Charuyvo join. About 60 miles downstream, the river passes by Chínipas, the town that gives the river its name. This town is another access point and divides the river into upper and lower sections.

The Confluences Section

We camped at the Río Maguarichi-Charuyvo confluence on our first descent trip, after six days of physically and mentally exhausting paddling/portaging down Río Huevachic-Charuyvo. Although tired, I still found the energy to hike for a couple of hours up to a higher points so I could see into the gorge below and view Río Oteros (only 1 km downstream of our camp), which sports a chasm of greater than 250 feet/mile several kilometers upstream. While I couldn't see Río Oteros on my hike, I could see the next rapid that we were to face downstream: apparently a Class IV that led into a pool and gorgy section. I returned to camp and relayed the observation to my partners: Tom Diegel, Tom Meinholz, and Aaron Stabel.

When we arrived at that rapid, it looked worse at river level, with the last hole having



a sticky recirculation. Tom D thought this was Class V. I agreed might He mockingly named the rapid "Rocky's Class IV." I sympathized with its true y. At this point no one want a potential swim in the hole so we did the simple portage and moved on, running two more Class III-IV rapids to Río Oteros. Río Oteros was tumbling down to the confluence in a Class V rapid by a footbridge, and doubled the flow to about 2500 cfs. For the next four miles, we ran a number of fun Class III and IV rapids, some in a red-walled gorge where several prospectors seemed to be camped (the Sierra Madre here is known for its

silver, gold, and copper mines).

Later that afternoon, in another section of Class III-IV rapids, the rain started pouring down on us. This was more a pleasure than nuisance, since it was still warm and we were all decked-out in our paddling gear. It only lasted about 30 minutes, as do most summer thundershowers in that area. This brings up another aspect of this river and others in the region: their season. They are fed from rain that usually falls from monsoon-type thundershowers in the summer. The most reliable month for good flows is August, followed by September and July.

The Gasogachi Gorge

One of the highlight sections of this river is the "Gasogachi Gorge," below the village of the same name that sits high above the river. The walls closed in and we were confronted with two major Class V rapids, the first of which I dubbed "Mambo." I was probably thinking more of the venomous "mamba" snake than the Cuban dance at the time, but even after bestowing the label, I decided it still made sense if you think about "dancing with the water" through the rapid, but being bitten really badly if you mess up. I suppose the second one could be called "Mamba." These two Class Vs are



View into Rio Chínipas Canyon just before the confluence with Río Oteros

Photo by Rocky Contos

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easily portaged, and would liven up a trip for expert boaters willing to tackle them. They could be considered equivalents to the Class V Clavey Falls on the Tuolumne, although Mambo is more difficult. Soon after these rapids, we made our seventh camp (21 miles into the run), which is where this story began.

So, what is the river like downstream of our seventh camp? Class III rapids continue as the walls of the Gasogachic Gorge gradually recede, and then we come to another Class IV, “Oversight,” that appears from a scout at the top to be nothing more than big waves all the way down. I send Tom D down armed with this information, but he hits a hidden hole, backenders and flips, and then rights himself only to get thrashed around in another hole. I say to myself, “Oops!!! Very, very sorry Tomster!!!” It does make for amusing video. He is furious, though, and I apologize profusely.

The Piedra Blanca Gorge

We come to two more big rapids with boulders in the river of IV+ and V-difficulty. The second has bananas growing by it, so I refer to it as “Banana Rapid.” The line requires starting on the right side of the river and running a drop aiming toward the center, and then riding down the center main channel in a rushing flume of water. The danger is if you don’t make it to the center channel, a sieve on the right side could be problematic. I run it first without problems, and then Tom M goes, spinning around in the upper drop but gathering himself well and making it to the center channel fine. The other guys portage. [We don’t know it at the time, but this is the last Class V of the trip, 25 miles downstream of the confluences.]

These rapids lead down to another footbridge and gorge section with whitish bedrock, so I refer to it as the “Piedra Blanca Gorge.” Here we find three miles of fun and squirrely Class III-IV water. The river then goes through a Class III section, a Class II section, and finally a long Class I section down to Chínipas. Aaron takes off his helmet and jacket and laments not having a faster boat for the “flatwater.” In my mind, the “flatwater” will really start

when we hit the reservoir in another day or two. This section of free flowing river scoots us along quickly. Since we are behind schedule by two full days due to the portages on Río Huevachic, we paddle the rest of the day, making the 40 miles to the town of Chínipas late in the afternoon.

The Town of Chínipas

It is usually a pleasure to arrive in a small Mexican town after a wilderness journey of a week or more, and Chínipas is no exception. Some friendly local people cheer us—we’re the first boaters they’ve ever seen on their river—and deliver us to the center of town. We decide to stay the night in the hotel, and amble over to the restaurant for dinner. We practically clean them out with our ravished appetites, prompting them to fetch more food. We learn that a bus goes up to the train station in Témoris in the morning, providing a convenient way to end the trip. The other guys decide to end the trip short, their main reasons: (1) being mentally and physically beaten from the Huevachic portion of the trip, (2) not digging the Class I-II section of river near Chínipas that they believe may continue on to the end, (3) not wanting a potentially lengthy paddle out on the reservoir to the train stop at Palo Dulce, and (4) being behind schedule, they want to be sure they can make it to their reserved flights back to the US. The next morning, I try to get them situated on the bus with their boats, but to no avail – there’s not enough room. Fortunately, we find a guy who will drive them up there in his pickup for about twice as much money as the bus would have cost (still only \$50). That is another great thing about traipsing around in little in rural Mexican towns: you can usually find someone to help get you around, even if it takes them out of their way. Tom M later relates to me that the vistas were spectacular on the sinuous road that climbs 3500 feet up an over the mountains. They eventually get back to Tom’s van in Creel and return to the US through El Paso.

The Lower Chínipas

I launch solo on the remaining 41 miles of the Lower Chínipas.” The townspeople warn me that there are some big “saltos” or drops/jumps/falls in the river downstream.

One guy says there is a drop of 20 feet! In about six miles the walls do close in and I come upon the two Saltos Chínipas.” They are Class V rapids in the main channels, but with easier Class III-IV sneak routes that I run. The river now has about 4000 cfs of muddy water and feels similar to the Colorado’s Westwater Canyon. The lower Chínipas gorge has several hot springs in it, another two-mile section of great Class IV rapids (El Pilar Section), and then a long section of fun Class III rapids through an amazing canyon. At Arroyo Las Palmitas, I come upon one more easy Class IV rapid, from which I can see the high water mark of the reservoir. I get to enjoy two more Class III rapids before the real “flatwater” begins, then I paddle the nine miles to the train stop at Palo Dulce, passing through a gorge section where the vertical walls rise hundreds of feet directly from the lake, only 60 feet apart. They must have drowned one amazing section of river here (and only in the late 1990s).

The Copper Canyon Train

One last interesting aspect of this trip is the Copper Canyon train that can facilitate shuttles. This train line is the only one remaining in Mexico that continues to operate passenger service. It goes from Los Mochis to Chihuahua, crossing Río Chínipas by its junction with Río Septentrion under the backwaters of Presa Huites. Up higher, the train runs between Ríos Oteros and Urique, stopping by the lookout at Divisadero. On this trip, we found out that they recently stopped trailing the cargo car, complicating the shuttle of hard kayaks. However, we still managed to get our boats to our destinations.

In conclusion, Río Chínipas does end up being an incredible Class IV journey all the way down to its terminus on Presa Huites. True, there are a few Class V rapids, but that is typical of many rivers that are considered “Classic” Class IV runs. The few Class Vs give perspective to paddlers and excitement to experts, but since they can be portaged, should not present too much of a hassle for advanced boaters looking for a fun trip that is not scary.

For additional information (more photos, video, and a soon-to-be-printed guidebook), see www.sierrarios.org

Josh Anderson below Tarnation Rapid

Photo by Daniel Anderson

