

# RIVER VOICES

## RÍO PIAXTLA: A FIRST DESCENT THROUGH THE DEEPEST CANYON IN NORTH AMERICA

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ROCKY CONTOS

**B**EN STOOKESBERRY AND I scramble down to see the next drop in the Barranca Piaxtla. It's a 30-meter broken falls where the water plunges under an incredible overhanging rock. Several hundred meters downstream in a relatively flat gorge, we clamber and swim to the following falls. This one is much higher, a clean free-fall plunge seemingly off the face of the earth, but actually just 60 meters down into a vertical-walled Shangri-La. There will be no rappel portage here. Our two climbing ropes are only 50 meters each. We also know that downstream there is an even higher falls of ~200 meters. Getting around these beasts will be difficult and time-consuming. Although we face a tough portage now, we also are enjoying a ton of runnable falls/rapids and look forward to completing this monumental undertaking ... river gods be willing.

We are hoping to accomplish a first paddling descent of the entire Upper Piaxtla through the deepest canyon in North America. You may question the assertion of "deepest canyon," having heard Hells Canyon of the Snake River or the Copper Canyon of Río Urique touted as such by others. Yet all one has to do is scrutinize the maps a bit more to realize that the Piaxtla is more profound, particularly when considering both sides. Where the Piaxtla River is at 680 meters elevation, a straight line connects rim peaks on either side at 3220 meters (Cerro Huehuento) and 3100 meters (Cerro El Tásate), making depths of 2480 meters and 2420 meters respectively. Although Hells Canyon is nearly as deep on one side of the canyon (2437 meters/7995 feet),

*This 200-foot waterfall and another 600 footer just downstream required a full day's portage (with two full climbing ropes) to rappel down to the river.*

it falls grossly short on the other (1676 meters/5498 feet). Río Urique is less than 2000 meters deep on both sides. The Grand Canyon (at roughly 1700 meters) is not even close to any of these.

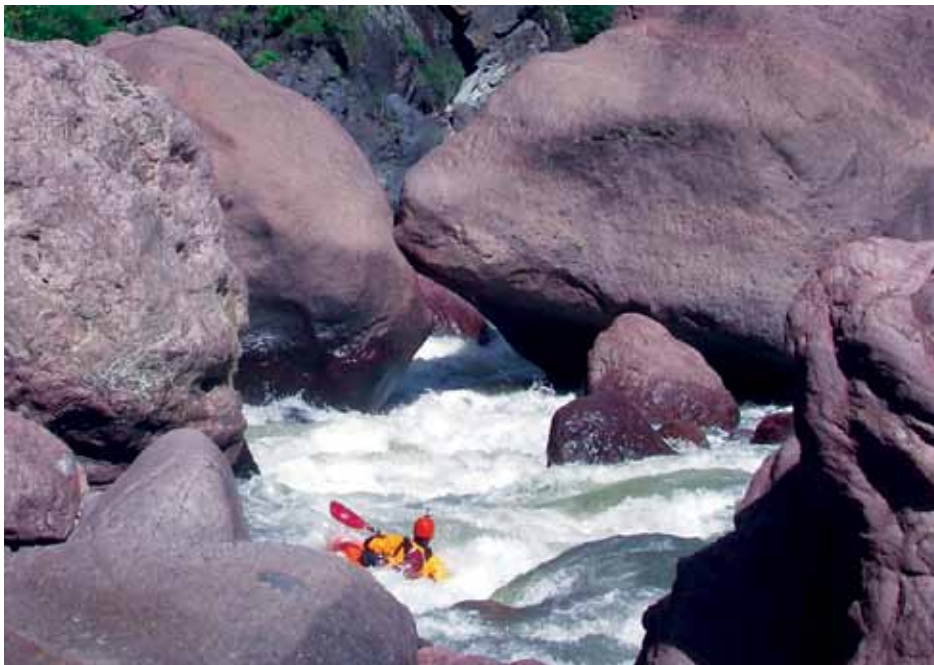
The decision to paddle through this section of Río Piaxtla was not undertaken lightly. When I invited Ben and friends down, I envisioned us skipping the ultra-steep section where the river drops 500 meters in about 2 kilometers (i.e.1300 feet/mile) by hiking into the barranca at a point just downstream. Ben, having paddled some 1

km river segments with roughly 1000 ft/mile gradients, probably thought there might be some outrageous runnable waterfalls in the steepest part. I was certain the section would be a portage nightmare, and perhaps impossible with our gear. However, after much deliberation, some scouting, and a call to some canyoneering friends who had been in the area previously, I agreed to give the whole thing a go (but only with two full climbing ropes!).

In a little over two days since starting, we have already made it down 17 km and nearly



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*In the Puerta de Piaxtla section, we navigated this Class V rapid with confused whitewater going under a boulder.*

600 meters of vertical drop. The upper river near the Río de Miravalles put-in at about 2300 meters elevation was in a beautiful pine forest with open sliding bedrock falls. The action picked up to Class V-VI in a “Spines Section,” where fantastic pinnacles rose from both banks. This upper section featured many boulder-choked rapids, but occasionally open bedrock too. A stretch of three waterfalls was a highlight our second day, with one clean 13-meter drop that we all hucked (“Limpio”). Innumerable other rapids made for quality paddling. After the high pine forests we experienced in the first few kilometers, the vegetation changed to tropical deciduous thorny shrubs, which were still verdant green this time of year.

So far, we have been fortunate to have moderate boatable flows on the river. Río Piaxtla, like all rivers in the Sierra Madre Occidental, is seasonal, with paddlable water levels mostly confined to the summer monsoon season. About the time of our trip (late August), the river has its highest average flows—approximately 150 cms (4500 cfs) down near the mouth but only 15 cms (500 cfs) in the ultra-steep section we are currently facing. The water comes from thunderstorms, so river levels can fluctuate wildly during this season. Although we’ve

had a very manageable 8 cms (300 cfs) the first two days, exactly one year previously the flows were above 100 cms (3500 cfs) here. Water levels could spike at any point. Before we began, I postulated that there was about a 50% chance we would have to abort due to high water levels. So far, at least, the gods are allowing us to continue.

After we all view the 60-meter falls from above, we retreat to our boats. Ben and I decide to scout out the portage route while our partners (Darin McQuoid, Jesse Coombs, and James Duesenberry) relax and recuperate from gastrointestinal bugs and rashes. We find some cattle trails that help us through the thorny shrubs, eye what looks like a descendible gully back to the river, and come back a few hours later stating that we think the portage will only take 4-6 hours.

The next morning we start early. We carry our loaded kayaks up several hundred meters above the river, traverse downstream a kilometer or two, and begin our descent. It is hot and dry. Our portage time estimate is crucial since we each bring only 1-2 liters of water (which we quickly consume). We drag and lower boats in the gulch initially, then have to rappel dry falls

once... twice... three times, but still do not see the river below. The rappels take a lot of time—getting our bodies down one at a time, in addition to each of the boats. Eventually we reach a ledge where we rest a bit. By this time, we have already spent 8+ hours in the portage. At least now we can see the river, but it is still a near-vertical 300 meters below us. Will it be possible to make it the rest of the way?

Adding to our dismay is the fact that we are all dying of thirst. Fortunately, we find a few liters of filthy algae-filled water in a small pool on the granite, and after straining and iodizing it, we get a tiny bit of fluid replenishment (but not nearly enough). I descend to check out the next crucial rappel moves and shout to Ben, “I think we can make it down to a tiny ledge with a tree for support, but we can’t all fit.” It seems precarious, but it is our only hope. Everyone rallies down to the ledge I am on. Ben is doubtful of my plan. He nonetheless takes the lead, and by a stroke of incredible luck, finds a thin but longer ledge midway down that obviates the need for my precarious tree-based relay plan. We rappel several more times, which requires the use of both 50-meter climbing ropes more than once. Finally, over an hour after dusk and 13 hours after starting our portage, we are back at the river, where we gulp liters of purified water and settle in for a good night’s sleep. We are thankful—the gods are still willing.

With the “portage from hell” over with, we look forward to making some real progress downstream. The next 10 km of river are still very steep (220 feet/mile) and difficult, especially since the volume has more than doubled as a result of two major tributaries that have joined in. We continue to be glad to have a low manageable flow of 15 cms (about 30% of normal). Initially we find most of this section runnable, with only about a dozen more river-level portages. In an accident partly due to miscommunication,

Jesse ends up dislocating his shoulder. An incapacitating injury in the middle of this barranca could be disastrous. Fortunately, he is still able to paddle Class III-IV, but just wants the trip to end *pronto*. We all help him through the tougher passages downstream.

We then arrive at another crux of the trip—a place I call the Puerta de Piaxtla, a gateway narrows where the river is squeezed between granite walls hundreds of meters high with steep Class V-VI drops leading down to it. From our view above, it seems roughly similar to the Crucible section of the San Joaquin River in California. We are unsure we'll be able to get through at river-level. I could see this spot on satellite imagery, but did not realize how intimidating the place would be until actually standing at the entrance. We portage several of the steep drops leading down to the Puerta, and find that the final

Class V into the gorge must be run. I take the lead through and paddle into the abyss to see what lies within. I return with relieving news: there are no more difficult drops within the gorge! Jesse makes it down the entrance rapid just fine, and soon we are all paddling through the incredible chasm. So while initially the Puerta appeared to be similar to the Crucible, it turns out not to be as tough. However, with normal higher summer water levels of 45 cms, it could get particularly challenging to enter, with an additional mandatory Class V rapid.

Out of the Puerta, we settle down for our sixth night on the trip. The next day, after another kilometer of Class IV-V rapids, the Piaxtla calms down and remains calm for the remaining 28 km to the town of Tayoltita. The riverbed here is unobstructed by big boulders. Instead, rapids are formed from granite bedrock and smaller rocks (mostly Class III with a few IV). Views up

the sides of the canyon are spectacular. It is in this section that the river canyon is at its deepest point. After all our struggles, we can rejoice in being the first to paddle through this incredible place. We enjoy the last several kilometers where the river passes through the Tayoltita Gorge with numerous Class III-IV rapids. I imagine hiking into this section will become one of the most popular ways to run the Piaxtla—possibly even in rafts. Finally, on day 7, we arrive at Tayoltita, a town whose existence is based on a major gold mine. Although roads reach the town from high up in the Sierra, an easier way to travel here is on one of the daily flights from San Ignacio (a town downstream only 1 hr drive from Mazatlán).

We are all jubilant for completing this trip. I come away with a deep respect for my paddling partners: Ben, Darin, Jesse, and James. I like their attitude and willingness to tackle the most outrageous runs. We part in Tayoltita. They all decide to take the long 10-hour ride up to El Salto and back down to Mazatlán, while I opt to paddle 10-hours and 80 km of Class II-III to San Ignacio. I had paddled this section 9 years earlier as my first major trip in mainland Mexico, and am glad to be able to experience it again. I confirm that this section would make an ideal multi-day raft trip. I take my time getting downstream and camp at the confluence with a major tributary. A storm blows in that night and the river rises over a foot. I imagine, if that downpour had been concentrated in the upper Piaxtla, would we have made it? At least this time, the gods were willing.

*Footage of this trip is featured in Ben and Jesse's latest video, Hotel Charley V. A complete description will appear in the guidebook soon to be published: Mexican Whitewater: Occidental. Additional photos and guidebook information can be viewed at [www.SierraRios.org](http://www.SierraRios.org).*

*One of the most scenic sections of river, just above the Puerta de Piaxtla, with vertical walls coming directly to the river.*

