

River Voices

Exploring Mexico's Copper Canyon

By Rocky Contos

Getting out to scout, Tom Diegel and I saw that the next rapid consisted of a two-meter sloping falls into a short pool, followed by a six-meter clean vertical drop into a deep, massive emerald pool. They were clearly runnable, even reminiscent of amusement park rides, but we decided to wait until morning to take the plunge, since campsites looked harder to come by downstream.

The place was enchanting. Just downstream, overhanging vertical walls lay only ten meters apart and squeezed the river as it exited the pool. Black streaks of desert varnish were painted on the tan sandstone. Conifers, shrubs, and grasses grew profusely along the canyon sides upstream of the falls. The main riverbed was free of any type of brush, scoured clean by the floods that periodically sweep through. Pine-forest odors mixed with the smells of the tropical thorn forest wafting up the canyon; agaves and cacti were just beginning to make appearances near the river. Canyon wrens solemnly trilled their characteristic down pitching notes as distant crackling thunder echoed down the gorges. We were still within an open bedrock section of the river that coursed around two huge loops known as the Incised Meanders.

We were only four kilometers into our seven-day, 135 km journey through the Copper Canyon (Barranca del Cobre in Spanish), but already we were ecstatic to be descending one of the grandest and deepest canyons on the planet. Tempering our enthusiasm was the pitifully low water level, and the treacherous high gradient sections downstream where we were certain to encounter unknown numbers of portages. Up to this point, most of what we floated through had been Class II-III, with the exception of one Class V bedrock falls we had portaged due to the low water. We settled in for a cool September night just above 1600 m (5200 ft) elevation on a flat sand beach, I in my tent with a bed sheet and Tom in his bivy.



A view down Barranca del Cobre from a point near Divisadero

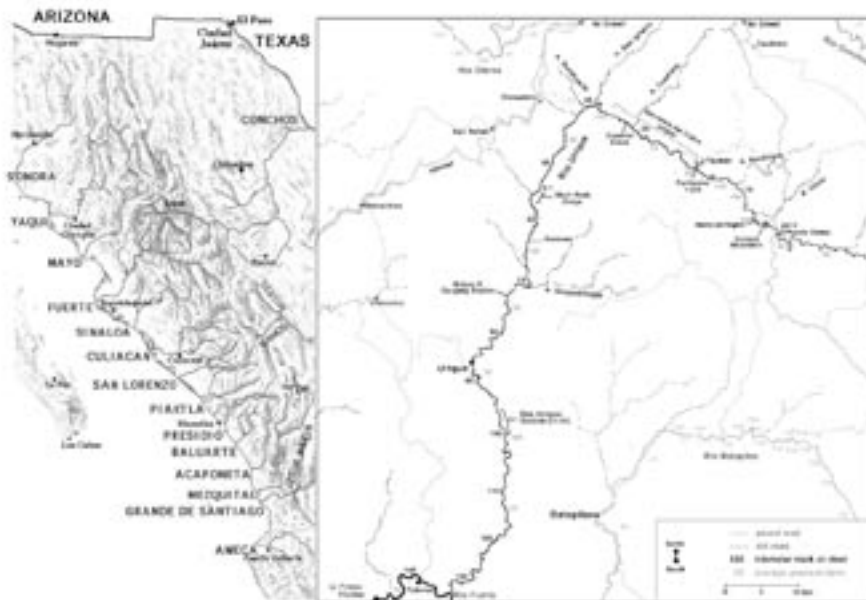
photo by Rocky Contos

The Barranca del Cobre is close to the US, yet so far away in the minds of paddlers. Almost nothing has been written about the river and few paddlers have heard of it. Say the words “Copper Canyon” in the right company and you might come across someone who knows that it’s deeper than the Grand Canyon or a person with knowledge of the Copper Canyon Train, which traverses 700 km from Topolobambo by the Sea of Cortéz to the city of Chihuahua in the middle of northern Mexico. Riding the train can be an all-day affair, with multiple stops, including one at Divisadero on the rim of the Copper Canyon. There, amidst the native Tarahumara women selling their colorful woven creations, one can peer 1300 meters down to the canyon bottom and just barely glimpse Río Urique below. Although this is the extent of the train rider’s encounter with the Copper Canyon,

in another section toward the coast riders have a much more intimate experience with the canyon country. There the train passes along Río Septentrión for its entire length, yielding exquisite views of the river and its gorges. Although smaller and steeper, this river looks mostly runnable with innumerable Class IV-V drops, and would make any ogling paddler wonder about the larger river in the nearby famed canyon. So, exactly who has floated Río Urique before, and why aren’t hordes of paddlers flocking to it?

According to Tom Robey, author of *A Gringo’s Guide to Mexican Whitewater*, John Cross led the first descent of the 41 km Barranca del Cobre stretch from the Umirá bridge to the trail that leads up to Divisadero in 1963. Although their initial attempt was aborted, they later returned to finish the trip in inflatable kayaks. In

Overview map of the Sierra Madre Occidental (left) and more detailed map of the Copper Canyon area (right). The detailed region is boxed on the left. Rio Urique (pronounced "oo-ree-kay," "oo" as in "boot," and accent on "ree") flows through the Barranca del Cobre and Barranca Urique before joining Rio Fuerte. Kilometers along the river from the Umira bridge are shown in black. Additional gray points along the river are where 100 m contour lines cross the river, and the average gradient between these is indicated in feet per mile (fpm; italicized in gray). Paved and dirt roads are shown in light gray, and the railroad in gray with tick marks.



1971, John Cross led a descent down the next 47 km to the town of Urique. Robey's guide also states the geologic nature of the canyon (rhyolite, silicic tuff, and granodiorite), the average gradient of the various sections and their difficulty: the upper 41 km section to the Divisadero trail is very difficult (Class V), the middle 47 km section to the town of Urique is Class IV, and the lower 35 km to the confluence with Río Fuerte is also Class IV, but easier than the upstream section. He cross-references Jim Cassidy and Dan Dunlap's book, *World Whitewater*, where the lower Urique is described as having a lengthy portage about ten miles downstream of Urique at a place called Dos Arroyas [sic].

I had been yearning to paddle the river for years, but realized from the nature of other rivers I knew in the region, the descriptions I had read, and the gradient of the run (averaging ~30 m/km (>140 fpm) for the ~12 km past the Incised Meanders) that it would be extremely challenging and dangerous, especially with the possibility of wildly fluctuating water levels. These reasons, including the lack of accurate descriptions, are no doubt why this canyon has remained relatively obscure to paddlers.

Like most of my paddling expeditions in the Sierra Madre Occidental, I planned to do this trip sometime during the rainy season summer months. Although mean flows at the Umirá Bridge from July to September are 25 cms (800 cfs), there are often rainless periods when the flow can

drop to 1 cms (30 cfs), or deluges that can push flows up to 200-300 cms (7000-10000 cfs). Although I paddle many rivers solo, I wanted support and better photo documentation for this one. My friends Tom Diegel and Mike Hobbs had come down the previous year for a descent of Río Mezquital (described in *American Whitewater* July/August 2001) and were keen to float some more of Mexico's rios. Tragically, Mike passed away the previous winter due to a heart problem. Tom is still game, though, and managed to make it down in early September 2001.

Tom is one of the best paddling friends I can imagine. Born and raised in the Portland, Oregon area and now living in Salt Lake City, he's a technically competent Class V kayaker who's paddled all over the US and Canada as well as in Chile, Ecuador, Norway, and India. He's always excited to do a new run, and undaunted by the lengthy sections I suggest. He judges rapids well, knows his limits, and portages when the danger factor is too high. Tom is a great team player, as evidenced on the numerous Grand Canyon descents we've done together. On one Canyon trip, we had a raft float away in the night; Tom let me sleep in and went in hot pursuit at 4 am, tied up the errant raft five miles downstream, and ran back up the canyon in time for breakfast! He's does all he can to rescue others on a river, even to the point of endangering himself. I would probably have drowned in a recirculating undercut eddy below Triple Falls on the Kern if Tom had not taken quick action to swim across



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the river and give me a life-saving hand when I popped up. In 1994 when I met Tom on the Kern, he worked at Patagonia, where he helped design and produce some seminal paddling shoes, which, not surprisingly, we were wearing on this trip to Mexico. He continues to design gear in the business he currently runs. Since Tom works in the outdoor industry, he is also a great resource to connect with others. I have him to thank for introducing me to many of my paddling friends.

Arriving in Creel via train from Chihuahua, Tom greeted me with a hug and a baritone “Mumm-blay” (his nickname for me is Mumbly). After we provisioned our seven-day trip, my chauffeur, Neche Chávez, accompanied us in my truck to the put-in at the Umirá bridge. There had been good water levels in local rivers for most of the previous five weeks, but at this point rains had ceased, and we were disappointed to find only ~80 cfs in the river (about 10% of the mean flow for early September). On the bright side, we thought, we may not necessarily want high flows when going through the toughest sections in the first few days anyway. We put in late in the afternoon in the rain, and made it to the six-meter falls in a couple of hours.

“Wheeeewwoooooee,” Tom exclaimed after hucking the falls. We felt as fortunate as the German archaeologist in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when he opened the ark and said, “It’s beauuu-ti-fulllll!” However, just another kilometer past the Incised Meanders, the riverbed became clogged with house-sized boulders and we remembered that shortly after opening the ark, the archaeologist summarily found the angels inside were actually angels of death!

This section was described previously by Robert Gedekoh, former editor of *American Whitewater*, who authored a chapter in M. John Fayhee’s book, *Mexico’s Copper Canyon Country; A Hiking and Backpacking Guide*. In the chapter titled, “Umirá Bridge to the Incised Meanders of the Urique River,” Bob described a four-day backpacking trip at very low water where they arrived at Río Urique

by descending Arroyo Umirá, arriving approximately 7 km downstream of the Umirá bridge. From there, they day-hiked downstream several kilometers, and then made their way upstream through the Incised Meanders. He had this bleak account of the river:

Being ardent kayakers, we evaluated the Urique as a potential run. All agreed that it would be a technical nightmare. The river flows under rocks as much as around them. At high water, the river would be ripe with undercuts and siphons. Portaging would be a logistical horror show.

We did portage many times in this section, strenuously lifting our loaded boats up and over, sometimes going under a boulder, and sometimes ferrying to the other side where portaging would resume. However, the two kilometer stretch to Arroyo Umirá wasn’t all portages, and we enjoyed running several Class IV-V rapids. Overall it took us about three hours to get through. Would we call it a “nightmare?” Sure. However, as part of a lengthy expedition through this wild chasm, it was a small entrance fee to pay.

Below Arroyo Umirá, pool-drop Class IV-V rapids continued for over five kilometers to just past Arroyo Basihauere, where we camped on a huge beach. In this section we only had a couple of portages due to the low water. About a kilometer upstream of our camp, we filled our water bottles at what Tom dubbed the “Whiz Wall,” a warm spring where a little stream of water shot horizontally out of a rock wall. From camp, I wandered into a cave and noted a stick fishing pole left there by a local. As Bob Gedekoh comments, this part of the river is a difficult place to get to, and doesn’t see many visitors. However, that’s probably not as true for the Tarahumara people who inhabit this region. They are noted for their foot travel all over the barrancas, spotting trails where others could not and not giving second thoughts to the sketchy climbs, traverses, or swims that are often necessary for progress. They also are known for their long distance

running, and many can go more than 100 km in a day.

Near the end of the following day, after paddling through innumerable rapids, we peered downstream to see what looked like an eerie apparition wavering along the river-left shore just below the next rapid. After running the Class IV-V drop, which we dubbed Fantasma Falls, we realized the “ghost” was actually water pouring from a cave in the wall, about two meters above river level. Sunlight and wind playing on the aerated whitewater made it waver and flicker like a spirit.

Not far downstream, we arrived at the Barranca del Cobre proper, where copper mining took place centuries ago. We wandered up to explore some ruins, finding them overgrown with weeds. Around here trails ascend up ~1000 meters to the rim on both sides of the canyon and another also continues downriver. At one time, this trail was part of the historic Camino Real, on which the silver, gold, and copper from Batopilas, Barranca del Cobre, and other mines were hauled up toward Chihuahua via Tejabán at the rim. A few of the Tarahumara still mine here, and have been known to sell their white gold nuggets for life’s essentials. On this trip, we saw nobody around, but the small arroyo just downstream carried red silty water, indicating recent mining activity. After finding another fine beach to camp on, we turned in for the night. The lower gradient and trail along the river downstream were good indicators that we would probably not encounter many more portages.

Starting our fourth day in bright sunshine, we found that the canyon had a more open feel, and there were many enjoyable Class III-IV rapids for the 10+ km past Arroyo Cusárare. This arroyo flows over a scenic 30-meter falls up on the mesa closer to Creel and is a primary tourist attraction in the area. Past this arroyo confluence, the gradient picked up again, and the walls closed in. Huge boulders again cluttered the riverbed, and Class V rapids came one after another.

One of the initial Class Vs ended in a

Tom in a scenic vertical-walled section between Arroyo Cusarare and Arroyo San Ignacio

photo by Rocky Contos

mandatory portage around a sieve. In the first drop of this rapid, I pinned briefly and handed my paddle to Tom as I pushed myself off with both hands. Tom ended up backward in the second chute, breaking a paddle and flipping in the mayhem. He rolled up, but seeing that he was floating quickly toward the sieve with a broken paddle, exited the boat and swam to shore. We managed to pull the boat out, but the broken paddle and his valuable camera went under and we never saw them again (hence, the lack of exceptionally nice photos to go with this story!). Fortunately, we had a spare paddle, and Tom recovered quickly from his loss and slightly damaged ego. This “Disaster Sieve” was followed by two more boulder-choked rapids we called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. After a few more Class Vs that could have used more water, we floated through an unmistakable four-meter bedrock sliding falls at the confluence with the large Arroyo San Ignacio. This arroyo also descends from the mesa by Creel and hosts the soothing Recohua Hot Springs. As we later learned, the springs are more easily accessed from the mesa than from the river.

We continued down some Class II-III to a beach by one of the arroyos that descend from Divisadero. It was only lunchtime, but we decided to camp there and spend the rest of the day ascending to the rim, about 10 km and 1300 meters up a trail above our camp. Hiking up the arroyo was pleasant, with a clear stream of cool water gurgling over rocks beneath a canopy of trees. We saw tadpoles and small fish scuttering in the limpid pools as we climbed up various falls. In one pool we took a refreshing swim, cooling off from the 90-degree heat. Unfortunately, after two hours we still hadn't found the trail and eventually came to a high 20-meter falls that was too sketchy to ascend, so we were forced to turn back.




We spent two more leisurely days paddling the 46 km down to Urique. It was all runnable, and generally Class III-IV. We encountered one exception about 12-15 km downstream of Ojo del Cañon in the fun Class IV-V Cañada Calavera section (Skull Rock Gorge). The name derives from a four-meter-high piece of bedrock coming out of the river that looks just like a skull staring at the other side of the river. At high water, the skull would probably be drowning, and you'd only see the eye sockets and nose. Another six kilometers downstream we approached a dark and scenic high-walled narrows that had us shivering at the sight of house-boulders, which seemed to clog the way. Fortunately, we found a paddling route through a cave underneath one of the boulders, and though this route probably wouldn't be available at normal summer flows, I verified that portaging up and over on the right would be possible.

At the town of Urique, we beached near a flirtatious local named Rosa, who was swimming in the rio. Another friendly resident watched our boats as we enjoyed a celebratory meal of pollo, tortillas and beans in one of the local restaurants. Tom wasn't too thrilled about continuing on the river down to Río Fuerte and then across 50 km of reservoir to the train station, so he looked into getting back to Creel from Urique. Since it was a holiday in the town (Fiesta de la Virgen), the bus wasn't running, compelling Tom to spend

several hours on the road for a ride, but to no avail.

We settled in to camp on the beach by the town that night, albeit with nerve-racked insomnia due to loud voices of partying borrachos and firecrackers, which went off periodically. At one point, some puerile kids lobbed a watermelon at us, which splattered nearby and scared the scat out of us. Fortunately, the following morning Tom found a ride with some guys in a truck. I paddled the remaining stretch of Rio Urique without portaging and eventually hitched a ride back up to Creel, up the tortuous roads, arriving only to find the World Trade Centers topple on 9/11.

Would I go back and float the Copper Canyon again? You bet! Preferably with a healthier water level, and with time to do many of the hikes that I missed on this trip. Overall, this is a stretch of river that should definitely be on paddlers' to-do lists. The drivable proximity to the US, challenging rapids, canyon grandeur, astounding side hikes, and wild solitude make it an excellent choice for a summer adventure. I look forward to the day when more than a few kayakers have experienced the magical qualities of this profound defile in the earth. 

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