

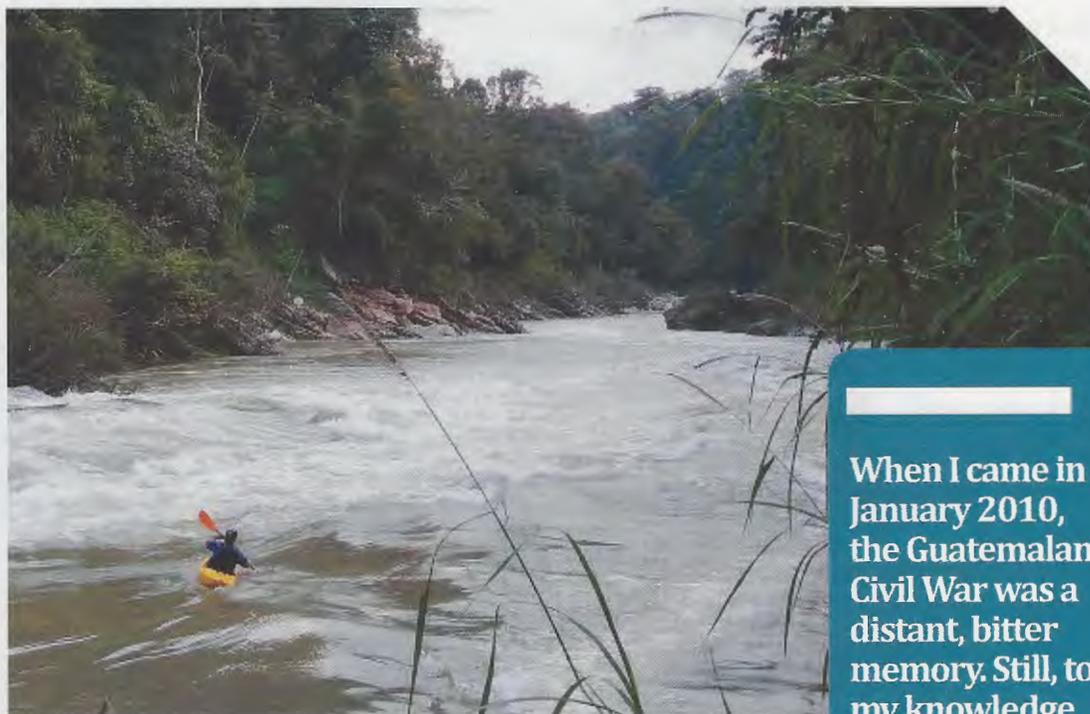
TESTING THE USU

■ By Rocky Contos

Just past the ancient Mayan ruins of Piedras Negras, I round a bend in the river and spot about a dozen men, waving me to shore. Every one of them is carrying an assault rifle.

I can feel the fear clutching at my throat. Will they take all my money? My boat and paddle? My life? In a way, I'd been expecting this. You don't embark on a solo kayaking trip on the Usumacinta without considering the possibility of assault. But now the hypothetical scenarios I'd played out in my head are suddenly very real. Should I try to run? Will they shoot if I do? Why am I even paddling this river?

The Usumacinta has a reputation as one of the best river trips in the world, and also one of the most dangerous. It forms the border between Mexico and Guatemala through the heart of the Mayan region, a vast, densely jungled wilderness where traditional authorities hold little sway. In the 112-mile section from the confluence of Ríos Lacantún and Chixoy to the end of the canyons,



the Usumacinta features a handful of Class II-III rapids, giant beaches, massive play-waves and major Mayan archaeological sites. The surrounding forest is full of toucans, macaws, and howler monkeys. Because of these amazing features, the Usu became one of the world's preeminent raft trips in the 1970s, and a prime winter playground for off-season Grand Canyon guides.

Then, in the 1980s, the simmering Guatemalan Civil War reached full boil, and in the 1990s, the Zapatista movement erupted in southern Mexico. Militants took refuge in the jungles near the banks of the river, where some turned to

robbery. At times they assaulted rafting parties on the Usumacinta—some of the most notorious incidents were documented in Christopher Shaw's book, *Sacred Monkey River*. The stories created an aura of fear, and the river-runners stopped coming. Raft traffic on the Usumacinta went from hundreds of people each year to none after 1997. When I came to run the river in January 2010, the Zapatistas had been quiet for years and the Guatemalan Civil War was a distant, bitter memory. Still, to my knowledge I would be the first person to paddle the Usumacinta in nearly a decade.

The ruins of Yaxchilán lie just a few miles downstream of Frontera, the small town at the put-in of the main Usumacinta run. By day, motorized pangas carry tourists to the ancient Mayan city. I left Frontera late in the afternoon, pulling my boat ashore just as night descended on the ruins. Bats scattered as I passed through a cave-like corridor emerging into a main plaza with major structures and stelae monuments. I climbed a high flight of temple stairs but lost my nerve in the gathering darkness. I wondered what this civilization must have been like more than 1,200 years ago, with its revered jaguars, ball games, and human

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sacrifices. The imminent end of the 5,125-year Mayan calendar was also on my mind, due to arrive December 21, 2012. Would it usher in a new era of greater understanding, or a cataclysmic astronomical apocalypse?

When I returned to my kayak, one of the caretakers, Felipe, was waiting for me. We chatted a while and he invited me to share a delicious *caldo de pescado* (fish stew). Felipe told me that sometime in 1999,

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bandidos had come to Yaxchilán, lined up all the tourists, and stripped them of their valuables. Non-motorized rafts had stopped passing in 1998, and the large motorized boats a few years after that. There was little local river traffic for many years, though it was starting to increase. Felipe knew of no recent assaults.

The next morning, I continued downstream and soon was enjoying the first gorge and some big-water Class III action in the Chicozapote rapids. I found a huge beach on the Guatemalan side across

from the Mayan ruins of El Cayo. It was too early to camp, so I ate lunch in the hot January sun and took a swim in the warm river. Later I passed women washing clothes and kids playing on the Mexican bank of the river. I didn't look directly at them or stop. That night I camped on one of the numerous inviting beaches, serenaded by the breathy metallic calls of howler monkeys.

I didn't know the precise location of the Piedras Negras ruins, so I was ecstatic when I spotted the Mayan rock cairn by the river marking the trail. There was nobody

around. I walked through dense jungle and eventually found the mostly unrestored ruins, as well as the old tractor from earlier in the century when university researchers were excavating the site. As I walked along another trail, I heard a *PLOP* next to me as something fell from the canopy. Looking up, I saw spider monkeys. Apparently a male had attempted to drop a load of *caca* on my head. That was my first near-miss of the day.

A few kilometers downstream, I see the armed men waving me to shore. Escape is impossible, so I prepare for the worst. As I approach my would-be assailants, however, I notice they are wearing uniform fatigues. Relief washes over me. These men aren't smugglers or bandits or *guerrilleros*. They are the Guatemalan Army!

As I approach, the soldiers put their guns away. The boss of the compound asks me for identification and says, in a somewhat bored tone, that I should have stopped to check in before exploring Piedras Negras. I explain that I'd left my passport and wallet in my truck because I hadn't wanted to lose them if I'd been assaulted. He tells me to bring ID and check in next time.

The *jefe* tells me the last assault occurred 10 years earlier on a motorized raft, which prompted the army to set up this station to protect the ruins and secure the region. The troops had quickly routed the *bandidos* and nobody had been accosted since. I cannot contain my joy. I want to hug them all, but simply express my gratitude.

I paddle the remainder of the Usumacinta without the fear of assault. I frolic in Cascada Busiljá, a fantastic double travertine waterfall dropping directly into the river; hike upstream on Río Chicoljá to view the turquoise Class III-IV travertine rapids near the confluence, and enter the Gran Cañon de San José with its imposing thousand-foot-high limestone cliff walls directly out of the river. Huge waves and whirlpools push my boat around, but I enjoy every second of it. The big Grand Canyon-style rapids of La Linea, Whirlpool, San José and San Josecito are just pure fun. I relish in the thought that I am probably the first person in years to surf these amazing waves.

— Rocky Contos, the director of the conservation nonprofit SierraRios, has paddled scores of rivers throughout Latin America, including numerous first descents. In 2011, he led two raft-supported trips on the Usumacinta. He plans two more this winter. SierraRios.org.

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