

# River Stories

## Correction

We regret to announce that in our January/February 2006 issue, we made a last minute decision to hold a story, then neglected to remove a reference to it from the cover. Anyone who's been wondering where they might find a story about "A 330-mile Solo Descent in Mexico" can now satisfy their curiosity by reading the following story from James Contos. We received this story as part of last year's AW River Story Contest and regret that it's taken this long to reach print. Thanks for your patience!

## Ineluctable Defiles on Rio Sirupa

By James "Rocky" Contos

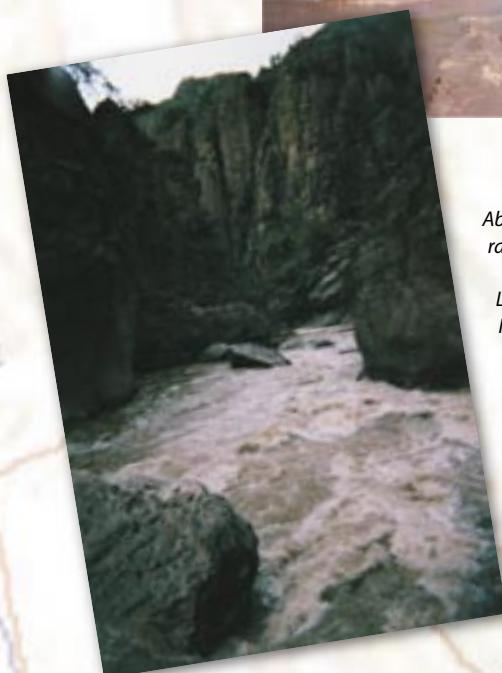
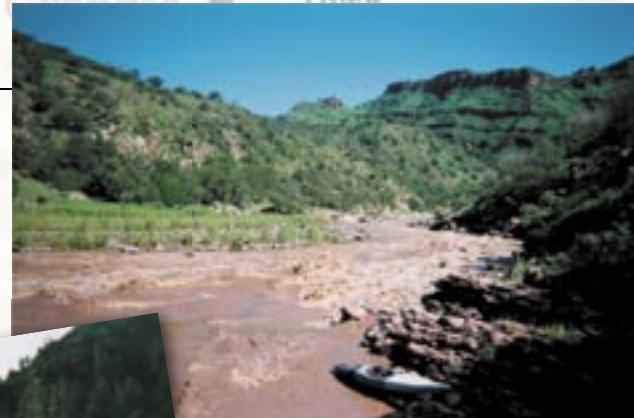
Steep walls rose vertically from the river. About 3000 cfs of muddy water was gliding slowly through the canyon. A deep Class II-III rapid made it a spot from which return upstream would be impossible. I had just passed through a similar section upstream containing a Class V rapid that was nearly unportageable. I climbed up the side and tried to scout the gorge around the bend but it was impossible to see into. This was the fourth day of my planned 10-day, 337-mile trip down the headwaters of Rio Yaqui. If I made it through this section, the remaining 227 miles were bound to be much easier. Racing through my mind was the question, "shall I continue?" Hiking out was a possibility, but not with a kayak.

The setting was Northwest Mexico, in one of the largest river systems in the country. Most of the 10-40 inches of annual rainfall in this region come in the summertime, and I suspected its 20,000 square miles of drainage area in the states of Sonora and Chihuahua would make this river voluminous. Rio Yaqui is at the northern end of the Sierra Madre Occidental (SMO), the mountain range extending from Arizona to Guadalajara. I suspected the Upper Yaqui would be one of the crown jewel rivers in the range, since it had contiguous river trip lengths up to 350 miles, nearly no human habitation, close proximity to the US, and moderate gradients (or so the topo maps showed). In fact, the Upper Yaqui in the Guaynopa Canyon, with a maximum depth of more than 4000 ft, is on par with the deepest canyons in North America—including the Grand Canyon, Hell's Canyon, and the Copper and Sinforsa Canyons. Unfortunately, the Yaqui cannot be followed all the way to the Sea of Cortez,

since two 100 meter high dams block the flows in its lower 350 kilometers.

Only minimal information was available about floating this river system. A 112 mile stretch between the two reservoirs was described by Tom Robey in his guidebook *A Gringo's Guide to Mexican Whitewater*. Also, an intriguing raft picture and laconic description of a Rio Aros trip in the 1980s was present in one of Richard Fisher's books on the region.

My intent was to float through the upper canyons on the longest journey possible, starting at Tomochic and taking out at Presa Novillo (337 river miles with a drop of 5400 ft). Looking for more information, I called Richard Fisher and asked him if he knew anything about the upper canyons. He said the canyons of Rio Aros contained fine Class III-IV whitewater. Additionally, in a solicitous tone, he warned me against boating through the main gorges of Rio Sirupa, saying they were not passable



Above: A easy Class III rapid on Rio Sirupa I dubbed "Brownie"

Left: The Tomochic Gorge was filled with Class III rapids (the final "c" in these names not pronounced, thus this is pronounced "toe-moe-chee")

All photos for this story by James Contos

and extremely dangerous, even for expert kayakers at low flows. Although I respected him greatly for his first descents in the region, I took his admonition with a grain of salt, realizing from my maps that the maximum average gradient in those sections (and indeed, on the whole trip) was 45 fpm. At the time of our conversation, I had already paddled a dozen other rivers in the SMO, some with gradients up to 150 fpm. On the other hand, the maps I was using only had 100 meter contour intervals, so more steeply sloped sections between such contours were possible. Also, the drainage area of the Rio Sirupa section in question (3500 square miles) suggested it would have an average flow of about 3000 cfs in summer—pretty high for tight gorges, even if they only dropped at a rate of 45 fpm. I contemplated waiting for a partner to join me, but the few competent and willing to come were unavailable for at

least a month. Alas, exploratory temerity overwhelmed me, and I resolved to undertake the journey alone.

I found the gorges of Rio Tomochic to be spectacular, and all the rapids runnable and fun. I noted three Class IVs and over a dozen Class IIIIs. At such high elevations, even in Mexico, the nights were very cool (about 60 degrees) and the days only warm (about 75 degrees). Coniferous trees abounded along the banks and up on the hills imparting a redolence of Sierra Nevada or Pacific Northwest canyons. Vertical and overhanging walls rose directly from the river in places, and large caves in cliffs slightly removed from the river invited exploration. An undeveloped warm spring in the gorge watered verdant growth, and just downstream, fluted granite at the “Tomochic Constricción” squeezed the entire 1200 cfs of the river into a gap six feet wide. The gorges ended,

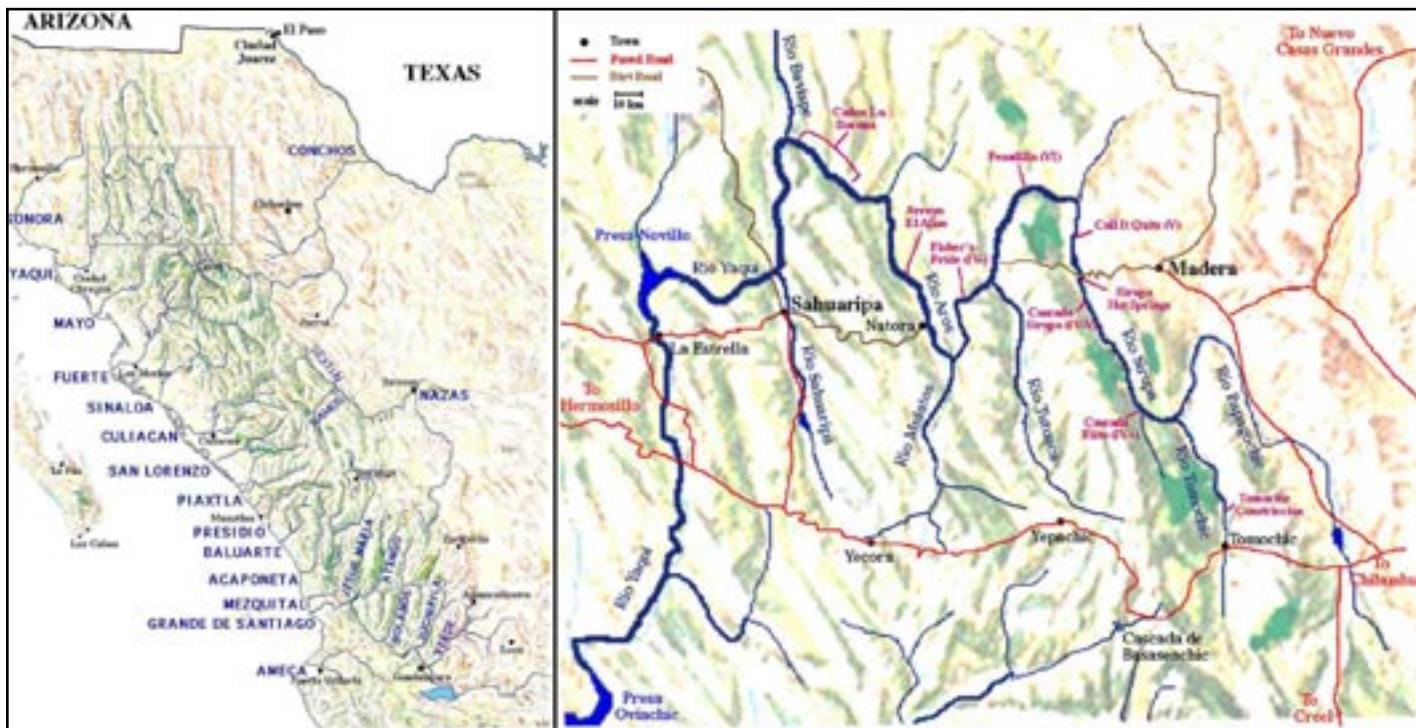
and I camped in open ranchlands 40 km into the trip.

On my second day, I passed the confluence with Rio Papagochic, thus starting Rio Sirupa (pronounced: Seer-oo-pah). The next 91 kilometers to Puente Huapoca had a big river feel, with numerous Class III-IV rapids and one V (the Cascada Sirupa, near Sirupa village). The canyons in this first section of Rio Sirupa were not of the same ilk as the vertiginous gorges found both upstream and down. Instead, slopes rose more gradually from the water. The hillsides still supported a few conifers, but were primarily dominated by scrub-oak. Summer rains a month earlier had imbued the canyon with a particularly enchanting

*A Lone Spire is prominent on Rio Sirupa about 19 km below the confluence with Rio Papagochic.*



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Map of rivers in the Sierra Madre Occidental (left) and higher detail of the Rio Yaqui system (right). Like most rivers in Mexico, Rio Yaqui is named differently at different points from its headwaters—the two main branches at the headwaters are Rio Papagochic and Tomochic, which join to form Rio Sirupa. After the confluence of Rio Tutuaca, it is called Rio Aros, and then after the confluence with Rio Bavispe, it is called Rio Yaqui.

pale emerald iridescence, in the form of thick stands of nopal (prickly-pear cacti). Red poppies along the banks contrasted with the tawny water. Piles of driftwood accumulated 15 feet above the river. Large sand beaches provided fine campspots. Clear blue skies in the morning gave way to cumulus clouds at noon and then crepuscular nimbus thunderheads on this and nearly every day of the trip. Rolling thunder crackled and resplendent lightning scintillated the evening sky for hours after dusk. Heavy rain fell that night. Although my tent leaked profusely through the seams, dampening my bedsheets, a complete internal flood was prevented by the circumscribed trenches I had excavated. The river level rose more than three feet by the morning, and I strolled up the canyon for glorious

vistas of the surrounds before continuing through the Class III-IV brownwater.

After running the glissading Cascada Sirupa, I soon arrived at Sirupa Hot Springs, where two large concrete pools were built to hold the thermal water streaming out of the rock. I relished soaking in the warm (about 95 degree) water and was rejuvenated enough to face the intimidating gorges downstream. A long Class III rapid led to the gorge entrance, where I floated under the scenic Huapoca Suspension Bridge.

Here began the most trying part of the journey. Downstream were the gorges of which Richard Fisher spoke. Rapids came in quick succession. I passed through three Class III-IV rapids before the gorge opened up briefly for a Class IV-V six-foot drop. I dropped back into the gorge and passed five more Class IV-V rapids, portaging the second (which I refer to as Terror Wave) and part of the fourth in the next four kilometers before stopping to camp.

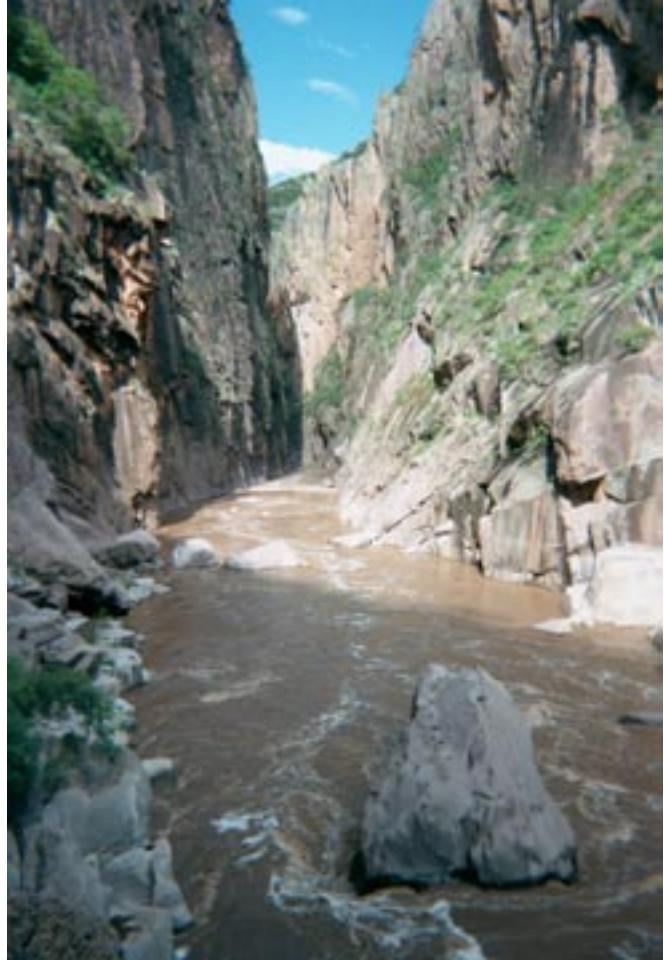
By morning, the water had risen six inches and I guessed the river to be running at

nearly 3000 cfs. After nine kilometers of enjoyable Class III whitewater, the canyon walls started closing in. In the next one and a half kilometers I paddled through five more Class IV-V rapids. Just past the last one, Reconnoiter Rapid, I stopped and tried to scout the downstream vertical-walled gorge. I saw that after running the next Class II Committing Rapid there would be no way to get back upstream nor stop and climb out. Fearful of mandatory Class V and/or VI rapids around the bend, I made an attempt to climb up on river right to glimpse the gorge, but soon was walled out in a shallow cave. I returned to my kayak and ferried across to the left side of the river to again attempt a reconnaissance. Here I had more luck, finding ranchers' trails about 300 meters up. As I passed through the thorny scrub, though, I realized I wasn't able to see down into the gorge. However, the only audible rapid sounded like it was just downstream of the gorge. I could see that the opening lasted about half of a kilometer before the river seemed to pass into an even more foreboding chasm. I returned to my kayak and decided to enter the first gorge.

I easily passed through Committing Rapid



*"Committing Rapid #1" prompted me to make a serious attempt at scouting out the gorge below*



*Above: "Shall I Continue?" was the question on my mind looking into the second unscoutable gorge and the Committing Rapid #2*

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#1 and was treated to the vertical-walled grandeur for nearly a kilometer. As I predicted, there was only one minor rapid around the bend until a spot downstream where I could see the gorge opened up. Unfortunately, the audible rapid I had heard from above was located 50 meters before the end of the vertical walls! From my vantage in the kayak, it did not appear to be portageable, and possibly not even scoutable! All the worse, I was alone with nobody to help (or even know!) if something went afoul. It seemed I might be forced to run this drop blind. Luckily, 100 meters upstream of the rapid on river right there was a place where I could stop and maybe get a glimpse. I climbed up but could only tell that the river apparently dropped four meters in the falls, and there were some nasty rocks in places that could easily pin or broach me. It did not look good on either far side in the rapid—a sneak would not be possible....

There was some hope. On the far left side, just after the first waves, there was an eddy where it looked like it might be possible to stop and portage. It didn't look promising

*The "Terror Wave," a Class V rapid below Sirupa Hot Springs that I portaged*

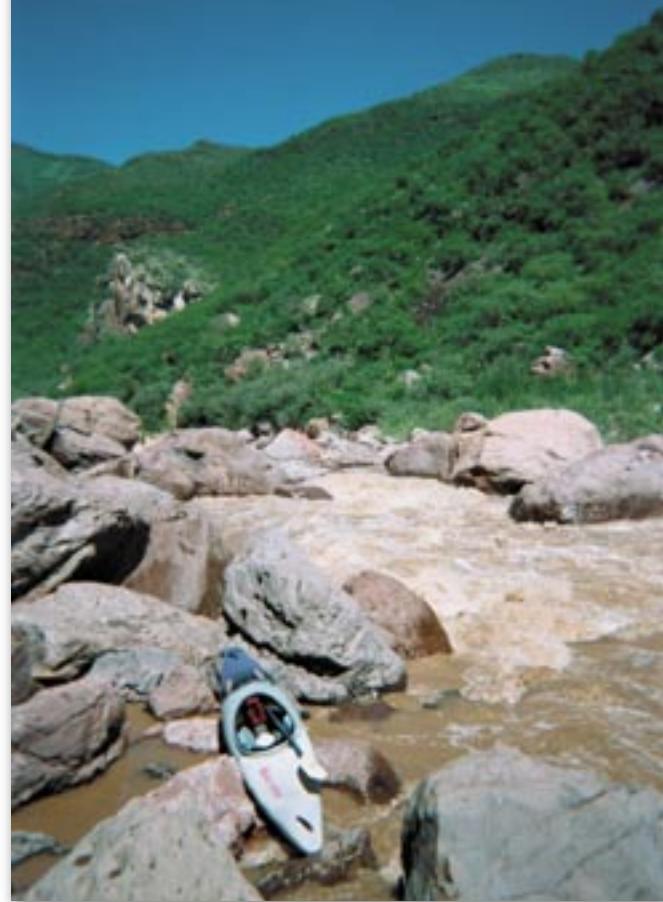


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since the water was swirling and surging and moving over the drop quickly. Also, the dropoff just past the sloping granite might be too slippery to get back down on the other side. After a pensive 15 minute review of all the options, I decided to go for the eddy. I was pleasantly surprised to find the stopping there fairly easy. Although the bedrock was slippery, I found that I could portage the kayak with rope support down into the water below. The rapid, a solid Class V, was not something I would have wanted to undertake solo (even if I could have scouted). With higher water, the portage would be more perilous. I was having doubts about continuing in such gorges, so I dubbed this rapid Call It Quits.

Relieved to have made it though the first gorge and into the short Shangri-La open area, I passed through another IV-V rapid and looked for a place to stop and camp, but found nothing ideal. The best spot was a flat rock about one meter above the river level, just before the river entered an even more imposing gorge. Even though it was early in the day, I was so psychologically exhausted that I decided to stop for the night. Passing through the next gorge might take a long time, and there weren't likely to be camping spots within it. This gorge also had a Committing Rapid (#2), beyond which retreat upstream was out of the question. While I had gotten lucky with Call It Quits in the upstream gorge, this one might not be so accommodating; I needed to reconsider continuing. I spent the rest of the day poking around the area, perusing the book or two I had brought, and scrutinizing my maps for signs of other tight gorges downstream. I decided that if the water rose by the morning, I would either wait longer or abandon the expedition. If the water dropped, I would attempt passage. I knew from my previous reconnaissance that this gorge could not be scouted from above. Although still present, the customary thunderstorms did not build as strongly that day, and it looked like only a minor rain was falling in the distance. However, before dusk the water rose several inches—nearly to my tent—causing me to abandon the Flat Rock Camp for a less commodious but higher spot in some bamboo. I spent

A Class V+ rapid (Pesadilla) in the Guaynopa Canyon that I portaged.



a restless night wondering what would happen the following day.

A bright morning dawned on the fifth day of my trip. Checking the water level, I was elated to find that it had dropped slightly below the level of the previous day. Since "the gods were willing," I packed up and floated through Committing Rapid #2, finding it more challenging than the view upstream suggested. The water then placidly flowed down and around a bend to the left into the heretofore-inscrutable abyss. Around the bend I encountered a stout Class IV+ rapid, Chasm Falls, which, fortunately, was both scoutable and portageable. Had the river been one meter higher, this would have been complicated or impossible. It seemed to justify my former stipulations for progress. As I passed through the narrows, I was awed by the marvelous splendor of the place. Continuing with both trepidation and euphoria, I could see the opening of the gorge downstream, where behemoth boulders clogged the riverbed. There, the river dropped betwixt house-sized boulders in Class V-VI water. I did find it odd, but not unlike other SMO gorges, that the hearts of the gorges didn't thump

from water running over mountainside chunks. But it was plausible; floodwaters rising high in the narrows could lift and move such boulders downstream to irenic places where they might lie in peace.

Downstream, in the next 6 km, I encountered one more Class VI and five more Class Vs, two of which I ran. One of these rapids, Warp 3, was very similar in nature to the Warp 2 rapid in California's Kings Canyon, with a steep, smooth three-meter sloping falls. In the following Class V-VI rapid (portaged), High Log, there were amazing diluvial logs wedged 15 meters above the river level. What a flood it must have been to jam logs up so high! It was hard and a bit scary to imagine such narrow gorges channelling flows of 50,000 cfs.

The previous section had been slow going. I had covered less than eight kilometers in about six hours. As if to make up for it, the next 21 km of river were one of the finest stretches of felicitous whitewater I could have imagined. Running four Class V-, 15 Class IV, and nearly as many Class III rapids, I was so ecstatic that I wanted to scream for joy. The geology was

also fascinating, as I watched the gorge metamorphose from gray to red and then to black.

After passing through an unmistakable knife-cut in a 50-meter high black-stained narrows with a sloping Class V falls, I caught views of an El Capitan-like massif on river-left downstream. There I expected more tight gorges as the river went through the Guaynopa Canyon. When I arrived, it appeared it would take a long time to traverse this section, so I camped at the first suitable sandspot just after the rapids began. The following three kilometers were intense. With the Magnificente Massif rising on the left, the river plunged down and down, through numerous Class IV-VI rapids, including one I called Pesadilla. Portaging many and running a few, I spent nearly three hours traversing this canyon. Near the end of this section, I ran what I correctly thought would be the last Class V on the trip, Just When You Thought It Was Getting Easy. This was a fitting conclusion to an amazing stretch of whitewater-filled canyons.

Over the next several days I passed through several more canyons with fun rapids, though nothing harder than Class IV. The trip continued to be full of stimulating places. At one coppice of fan palms that I stopped to explore I also found abundant cultivated mota (marijuana), prompting me to leave immediately. The ensconced Arroyo Los Alisos was a paradisiacal side canyon, rife with hanging plants, five-striped sparrows, and deep pellucid water—a perfect spot for lunch, a swim, and water purification. A small village, Nátorá, with a dwindling population of 50 provided some conversation, but few provisions from their understocked store. The Paso Nacori Chico Gauging Station in Cañon La Bocana was an interesting stop, where I spoke with the attendant, and learned that the flow was actually 11000 cfs (I was estimating it at 15000 cfs), and fairly typical for this time of year. The cajon (box canyon) after this gauging station provided a long series of extremely fun roller coaster-type Class III waves.

I arrived at Puente Sahuaripa, the most logical take-out, but continued on, down the last free-flowing stretch of Rio Yaqui. Fifteen kilometers downstream of the bridge I found a Class III silt-moiled rapid, resurrected by the below-capacity reservoir downstream. The low reservoir level also gave me swift water for another 30 kilometers before the river hit the warm lake. I imagined what whitewater might lie drowned under this reservoir in the tight canyons of Rio Yaqui. I suppose I will never know. I hope, at least, that the majestic beauty of the upstream free-flowing Yaqui system will eventually be appreciated by kayakers, rafters, fishermen, and eventually, the Mexican government. Only then might it be preserved for future generations to enjoy. 

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*One of the fun Class IV rapids I called Oh Mama! in the fun stretch after the terrifying gorges.*

