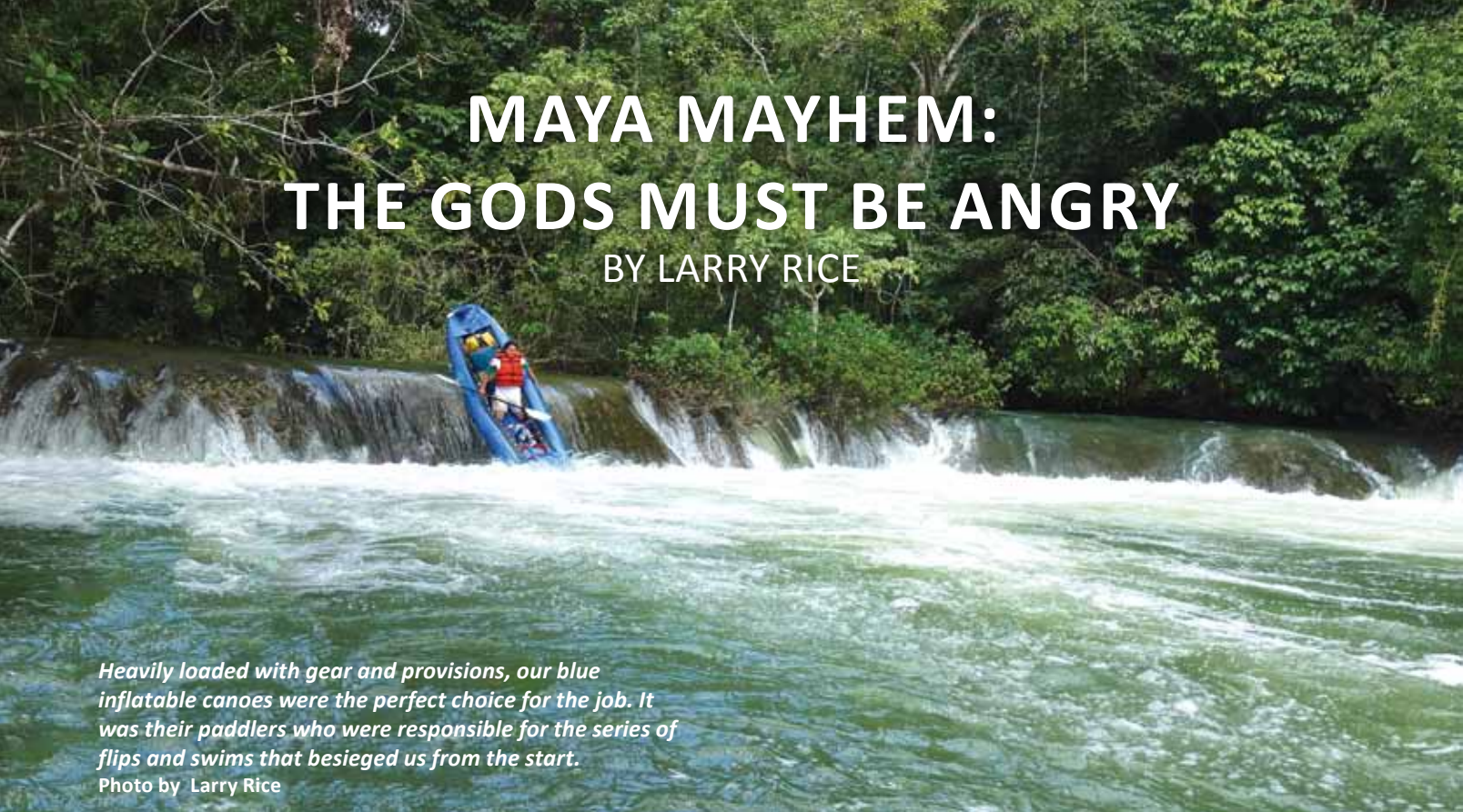


MAYA MAYHEM: THE GODS MUST BE ANGRY

BY LARRY RICE



Heavily loaded with gear and provisions, our blue inflatable canoes were the perfect choice for the job. It was their paddlers who were responsible for the series of flips and swims that besieged us from the start.

Photo by Larry Rice

THE THRILL OF the paddle—and a yearning to extend my boating season—has brought me many times to the constant warmth and abundant moisture across Mexico, Central America, Venezuela, and as far south as Bolivia.

Throughout it all, whether canoeing or kayaking in these steamy, sodden, and buggy settings, I'm often rewarded with a sweet and satisfying experience. But sometimes, through no fault of my own, I've found myself an unwilling actor in a rainforest junk show, making me wonder if I shouldn't have ever left home.

It was last December when I hooked up with a loosely led outfitted expedition in the Mexican state of Chiapas, near the border of Guatemala. Our goal was to explore the rarely run and whitewater-laced Río Lacanjá, an 86-kilometer willowy tributary of the mighty Río Usumacinta. We would then continue down the Usu itself, which was once considered one of the ultimate rafting journeys in the world. In all, the back-to-back river journeys would last about three weeks and cover 328 kilometers.

Our route on the Lacanjá snaked through the Reserva Montes Azules, the largest remaining sub-tropical rainforest in southern and central Mexico. Watched over by the native Lacandón people, it is one of the few intact old growth forest areas remaining in Central America. The sprawling reserve is home to jaguars and other rare and wonderful wildlife species, as well as a number of important Mayan archeological sites.

The Río Lacanjá I knew not at all. But this wasn't going to be my first rodeo on the Usu, the iconic "Sacred Monkey River" of the Maya. In April 1995, my small rafting party was a day behind another group of American rafters who were robbed and shot, two critically. When word of the ambush reached the authorities, the Mexican military swooped in with helicopter gunships and commandos to "secure the river." We were glad they did. Otherwise, there was a good chance that our group would have been assaulted next.

That incident was the straw that broke the Usu's back when it came to river running. In the ensuing years, no one risked boating in this lawless frontier forming the Mexico-Guatemala border. I, for one, never thought

I'd be returning to this wild part of the world, thinking once was enough. But an invitation by my friend, Larry Laba, owner of SOAR Inflatable Canoes, to join a December 2013 trip he had organized to celebrate his 60th birthday and his company's 20th anniversary, was too beguiling to pass up. Especially when I learned that the leader was hard-core river explorer James "Rocky" Contos, someone I thought I'd like to know.

Fluent in Spanish with a PhD in neuroscience, Contos, 42, is the founder and director of the non-profit river conservation organization Sierra Rios. Not one to stay put in his San Diego home for very long, he has somehow managed to kayak nearly every river in Mexico, including several hundred possible first descents. He solo kayaked the entire run we were about to do in early 2010. And in 2012, he cemented his reputation as an extraordinary explorer/adventurer when he discovered the most distant source of the Amazon and made the complete first descent of the entire river and all the headwater streams.

But even a swashbuckler like Contos can encounter rough patches that can't be smoothed. It's that Murphy's Law thing: If anything can go wrong it will. And on

INTERNATIONAL

this foray deep into the Emerald Forest of Chiapas, Murphy took pleasure in kicking some serious ass. Heavily loaded with gear and provisions, our blue inflatable canoes were the perfect choice for the job, but capsizes and swims besieged us right from the start as we catapulted over a series of travertine ledge rapids up to 12 feet high. We were not exactly a crackerjack team of seasoned whitewater pros.

Besides Rocky and his coterie of five Norte Americano clients, all of whom were approaching Social Security age, there was Morgan Arnaud, 22, our fearless French safety kayaker. Plus, we had with us three locals. There were Sunci3n Lopez, 36, and Melgar Lopez, 19, two eager guides-in-training with less than a year of river running under their belts, both from the border town of Frontera Corozal, a mostly Ch'ol community located on the banks of the R3o Usumacinta across from neighboring Guatemala. There was also Mario Chambor, 28, a member of the Lacand3n tribe, one of the contemporary Maya peoples. Their population now numbers only around 600.

Mario's long, straight black hair and angular face looked like the ancient Maya portrayals of themselves in murals and relief carvings. Brave and nimble, he had agreed to be our local Lacand3n guide as stipulated by the tribe, even though this was to be his very first wilderness river trip.

One drop after another lay ahead, waiting to trip us up. At the fifth or sixth of the sheer travertine ledges, no more than three kilometers from our put-in on the Lacanj3, there was a mishap. Laba and

his bow partner, Marty, went airborne, then hit the water hard. Laba bent over in his seat and wrapped his hands around his neck. He was in excruciating pain. We helped him to shore and had him lie down. The acute whiplash had rewired his upper body's nervous system; numbness radiated from his neck to his shoulders, arms, and hands. Would a year's worth of planning be derailed on the first day of our trip?

Laba was a tough guy, but with tears welling in his eyes he said there was no way he could continue. An emergency evacuation the next morning was deemed necessary. Rocky soberly stated that it would be a hellish portage of boats and gear through trackless forest to get back to the Lacand3n camp where we had started.

With scant daylight remaining, we hastily hacked out tent sites in a tangle of wet, nearly impenetrable understory. Serenaded by the roaring calls of howler monkeys in the treetops overhead, we gloomily crawled into our hot and humid nylon shelters, dreading what lay ahead.

Dawn ushered in clear skies instead of the monsoonal rain that pelted us throughout the night. And even better than the welcoming sunshine, we heard the extraordinary news that Laba had made a miraculous recovery, perchance due to the handfuls of ibuprofen he had ingested. Though still sore, he proclaimed that he felt well enough for the jungle show to continue. He grinned sheepishly when we told him that that the ledge drop that nailed him would from now on be known as "Laba Falls."

As we pushed off into the current through tight, twisty drops, river-wide ledges, and blind, brushy channels we encountered a series of mystery doors. Take the correct one, smooth ride; take the wrong one, get spanked.

My bow partner and almost-wife, Fran, one of the first female firefighters in Denver, Colorado, not to mention the only female on this trip, watched anxiously as did I when Morgan, then Rocky, reached the horizon line of yet another unknown, intimidating drop and vanished out of sight. Nosing up to the lip ourselves, we each took one last

Here the author is trying to be a good-will ambassador by taking "selfies" of himself with the throngs of curious children in Arroyo Jerusal3n, a poor, isolated Mexican settlement of a couple hundred inhabitants, where we spent a long day and night navigating the inter-cultural craziness.

Photo by Larry Rice



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hard paddle stroke before plunging straight over the vertical 12-footer...directly into an ugly keeper hole.

The boat tilted to the right, caught a side tube, and over it went. We both got sucked into the boiling, recirculating turbulence, but Fran, being farther downstream, managed to break free and get washed out. Me? Not so lucky. Once, twice, maybe five times, I got pulled deep into the vortex, unable to do anything except catch the briefest gulp of air when I bobbed to the surface. "Well, this is it, this is how it's going to end," my brain flashed red, when I didn't think I could hold my breath any longer. Just then I popped to the surface again, but this time I found myself right at the edge of the hole. Somehow I managed to scream, "Help!" and swam for dear life. When Morgan scooted in, I caught the grab

loop of his kayak and hung on tight as he towed my nearly limp carcass to shore.

"That looked pretty sick," Rocky said, as he pulled alongside. He said he had capsized too, but didn't go for a hole ride. "Sick?" I wheezed in reply. "Let's say after some 40 years of canoeing it was one of my top two worst swims." To cheer me up, our leader told me that from now on the drop would be known as "Rice's Hole." Laba and I both were now immortalized on the map.

The next day, and each ensuing day, there was rain. There were more Class III-IV travertine ledge rapids, more swims, more drenched, hacked-out campsites, more no-see-ums, ants, chiggers, and more mosquitoes. More of everything.

But there was also indescribable beauty: the magical, pristine forest; iridescent-blue Morpho butterflies the size of dinner plates; scarlet macaws, parrots, and toucans flying and squawking overhead; and spider and howler monkeys making a ruckus from high in the trees as we drifted beneath.

Also mind-bending were the nameless, completely unrestored Maya ruins along the river known only to Mario and his people. He led us to several of them, by baffling bushwhack through forest so thick that we had to stay right on his heels to avoid losing him. Pointing out intricately carved rock staircases and walls abandoned to the jungle for hundreds of years, he explained that these long-forgotten ruins are probably more extensive and larger than Bonampak, the sprawling ancient Mayan city that lay a day or so downstream.



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Mario Chambor, 28, a member of the Lacandón tribe, one of the contemporary Maya peoples whose population now numbers only around 600, getting a helping hand from Morgan, our fearless kayaker. Brave and nimble, Mario had agreed to be our local Lacandón guide as stipulated by the tribe, even though this was to be his very first wilderness river trip.

Photo by Larry Rice

Bonampak is renowned for its well-preserved murals that depict scenes in great detail of angry Mayan gods, human sacrifice, costumes, musical instruments, and the weapons of war. Mario stated that our band of voyageurs would be among only a handful of modern-day people who have ever arrived at the site by river. "And after what we've been through, I think you know why," he added, lighting up the forest with his infectious smile.

After five hard days we came to Cascada Reina, a thundering 30-foot-high waterfall pinched in a rocky escarpment. Directly below the maelstrom, a Class V+ according to Rocky, was a long, chaotic cataract, an imposing Class IV+. There was only one way to get past all this explosive fury: a heinous half-kilometer portage that required schlepping boats, a tonnage of gear, and our motley selves.

One of the first travertine ledges nearly ended our expedition before it had begun.

Photo by Larry Rice

It was full-on machete whacking, stumbling, and cursing from beginning to end. The footing was treacherous. The forest bed was a minefield of slippery downfalls and ensnaring roots and vines. Every step and handhold had to be carefully taken; non-



retractable, flesh-burying spines were the penalty for carelessness.

Like a train of leaf-cutter ants, back and forth we struggled with our ungainly payloads up and over the rough terrain. Other than our familiar litany, "I'm a celebrity, get me the f___ outta here!" our march went well. Except for a spectacular, death-defying fall.

Marty, a retired NASA engineer from California, lost his balance while hauling one of the canoes and took a header off a rooftop-high crag. Down below, Laba and I watched in disbelief as he fell to the soft ground and landed with a sickening, loud thump. Running to his motionless body, we expected him to be busted up, or worse. We were flabbergasted when he sat up, dumbly shook his head, and reported that he was all right. "Marty, do you know how damn lucky you are?" shouted Laba. He pointed out the sharp rocks a foot to the left and right from where our friend had alighted.

In the meantime, young Morgan, who had joined our group at the last second when he had a chance meeting with Rocky, shocked everyone except Señor Contos when he announced that he was going to run the

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One of the many unrestored Mayan ruins known only to Mario and his people that we were lucky enough to see.

Photo by Larry Rice

waterfall from top to bottom. Never mind there was no safety, we were light-years away from medical aid, and that he was in the beginning stages of some enigmatic tropical fever.

In the pool above the fearsome waterfall, Morgan wiggled into his kayak, took a few strong paddle strokes, and over Cascada Reina he went. Peering through my camera viewfinder, I thought for sure I was going to watch our intrepid Frenchman die, but he blasted through with only one flip and a lightning-fast roll, thus becoming, according to Rocky, the first to make this bold—some might say foolhardy—descent.

With the portage finally behind us, the next day we focused on bashing through a flat, featureless section of the Lacanjá besieged by blow-downs, boat-stopping brush, and a maze of confusing, sometimes dead end, channels.

Sunci6n, who had never run a river until a January 2013 R6o Usumacinta trip led by

Rocky, demonstrated his prowess with a machete as he whacked a navigable path through the spider's web of vines and branches. Slowly, very slowly, we inched our way toward the R6o Lacant6n, one of two big and wide rivers forming the even mightier Usumacinta.

In a masochistic sort of way, all the drama, all the arduous physical labor, was kind of fun—the type of rousing challenge I had expected from a river journey deep within a Mexican rainforest. What wasn't amusing, or expected, was the rapid onset of jungle rot affecting my feet and the feet of more than half our team. Common in tropical climes, this crippling disease is often a result of continuous exposure to damp, unsanitary conditions—exactly what we were experiencing from day one. If neglected, this medical condition can extend through the muscles and tendons and even reach the bones.

I had been plagued by jungle rot many years before when I was part of a

trekking expedition to replicate Spanish conquistador Vasco N6nuez de Balboa's 1513 crossing of the Isthmus of Panama's wild and dangerous Dari6n Gap. My feet had turned into an ugly, inflamed mess of red, weeping blisters and open sores. The same conditions were afflicting them now. Walking was unbearably painful, akin to stepping barefoot on broken shards of glass.

The only cure for jungle rot is to keep the feet clean, warm, and dry. Not a chance of that happening until, after eight days in the boonies, we finally reached Frontera Corozal, Sunci6n's and Melgar's home town, which was perched alongside the rain-swollen R6o Usumacinta.

On the outskirts of Frontera, which is the stepping-stone to Yaxchil6n, a jungle-shrouded Zona Arqueologica that protects one of the most mythical and classic Maya cities in the Usumacinta region, we found some low-end cabañas. Here, we five battered gringos, who were actually paying good money for all this merriment, hoped to rest and recover. In the meantime, Rocky and Morgan headed back to Palenque, a sweaty, humdrum city about a three-hour drive away. They needed to spend a day food shopping for our upcoming Usumacinta trip, and also pick up nine clients who were flying in from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico City. The newbies, some of whom were friends of mine, had no idea what we'd been through already. And, like us, they had no idea of what lurked downriver....

For two nights, the four of us Lacanj6 refugees afflicted with foot rot moved very little. Fran, who somehow avoided the fungal in the jungle, scurried back and forth to the local farmacias to buy anti-fungal ointments, antibiotics, and a bleach rinse to help vanquish the creeping crud.

Other than fighting boredom and watching our lesions slowly heal, we castaways were good. There was a small, deeply average restaurant within hobbling distance. The



thatched roofs on our cramped bungalows didn't leak from the daily rains. And the too short but otherwise comfy beds cloaked with mosquito netting beat the hell out of foam pads on the spongy forest floor.

Did I say "comfy?" It was still pitch-black outside during our second and final night in Frontera when I suddenly heard Fran shriek from the other bed. Caught in the light of her headlamp, a Titanic Norway rat scurried across the concrete floor and darted under my bed. Fran flung a sandal at the wood plank wall and shrieked some more, but the rat didn't budge from its secure hiding place.



"No big deal," I sleepily muttered, trying to slip back into what had been a pleasant, mildly erotic dream. But my tryst with a Victoria's Secret model came to a screeching stop when I felt something small and furry brush against my infected, pustulated feet. In a panic, I threw off the covers and shone my headlamp at the foot of the bed. Now it was my turn to shriek loudly enough to rattle the thatch roof. Curled up in a small, squirming pile, sharing the mattress with me, were four bright pink baby rats! No doubt mama rat was still in the room, desperate to be reunited with her wriggling and squeaking brood.



Later at breakfast, after packing up in order to meet Rocky and the others who would be arriving from Palenque, I told the others about my unwelcome bedmates. Stan, the carefree, good ole' boy from Texas, said, "Cool! Show me. I gotta get a picture!" Laba said, "Thanks for ruining my breakfast. I think I might hurl." Only Marty displayed

Top: Only three kilometers from the put-in our expedition nearly ends with a back injury.

Photo by Larry Rice

Middle: Búfalo, the captain of our motorized gunboat escort, holding an iguana he had caught.

Photo by Rocky Contos

Bottom: The four rat babies in my bed!

Photo by Larry Rice



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After the Cascada Reina the Lacanjá became flat and brush choked.

Photo by Larry Rice

any type of sympathy. “I hope you got a good supply of Doxycycline with you. Rats are common transmitters of leptospirosis, a disease you definitely don’t want to get.”

After Rocky arrived, it took almost the entire day before our new group was ready to embark on the Río Usumacinta. Our flotilla had now ballooned to three oar rafts, seven inflatable canoes, and Morgan in his kayak. Big group. Big river.

Flowing swiftly between thickly forested banks, the Usu was almost unrecognizable compared to what I remembered from nearly 20 years earlier. Then, apart from the shooting of two rafters and the dramatic military show of force, there was warm, clear green water. There were enormous sand beaches, appealing campsites, a number of fun, low-stress Class II-III rapids, and perfect sub-tropical weather.

And now? With the river still rising to flood stage levels that Rocky and Sunción

had never seen before—30 to 40 vertical feet above normal flows—the water was soupy brown with massive whirlpools and unimaginably large and powerful eddies. Finding a campsite for our large group was going to be a huge problem. All the beaches were inundated and the river was spilling into the shoreline trees.

But, on the upside, at least this go-around it was highly unlikely we’d be molested by banditos. At Laba’s insistence, Rocky had hired a “gunboat” to be our escort as far as the Gran Cañon de San José. The captain of the motorized lancha was a burly, badass hombre named Búfalo. He and his crew of three moonlighting Guatemalan soldiers, always at the ready with rifles and shotguns, would make any desperado think long and hard before assaulting us.

After “camping” at an abandoned Guatemalan military outpost—the only dry ground we’d come upon—we made a lingering stop at Yaxchilán. Downstream of here, it was highly unlikely we’d see any more day-tripping tourists. Which was why we had recruited Búfalo and his gunboat.

The next two rainy nights we took refuge at a secluded Mexican ranger station, the only place we found to pitch our tents without fear of having them wash away. We then let the beefy current take us to El Porvenir, a forlorn, no-frills Guatemalan army garrison about 40 kilometers downriver from Yaxchilán. Not a single soldier was there at the moment. Instead, the facility was overseen by two lonely, elderly caretakers who graciously allowed us to set up our tents in the vacant, disheveled barracks.



The author and his bow partner, Fran Rulon-Miller, boof yet another ledge
Photo by Rocky Contos

A few kilometers upriver of the garrison, reached by a muddy forest footpath, was Piedras Negras, an exotic, unrestored, and largely unvisited Maya archeological site. Guided by the caretakers, we spent a full day hiking to the ruins, which were still as hauntingly enchanting and mystical as I remembered them. Backed by dense rainforest vegetation, this remote place was the perfect spot to watch for all types of critters, from crocodiles at river's edge to howler monkeys up high in the trees. On the rain-soaked trail, we even observed the fresh, easily recognizable pugmarks of a jaguar.

Our original plan had been for all the clients to be in inflatable canoes the whole seven days and 142 kilometers on the Usu, while Rocky, Sunción, and Melgar would row the rafts with most of the gear. But we

decided that because of the increased high water risks—as evidenced when Mitch and Dean, the two Canadians, got sucked into a medium-sized whirlpool that flipped their boat— at this juncture only the rafts with six “volunteer” hitchhikers from the canoe group and an ailing Morgan in his kayak would continue through the Gran Cañon de San José. Lying in wait within the canyon's narrow confines would be giant whirlpools and at least four big rapids. “A very bad place to flip and swim,” said Rocky.

The rest of us, Laba and myself included, would pile into Búfalo's gunboat and be ferried 10 kilometers upriver to Arroyo Jerusalén, a dirt-poor, isolated Mexican settlement of a couple hundred inhabitants. Here we would somehow arrange for mini-bus transport back to Palenque, where we'd eventually rendezvous with the others.

A couple of hours after breakfast, the jam-packed rafts shoved off on the still-rising river and disappeared around a broad, sweeping bend. Trailing behind them in the gunboat was Búfalo and his homeboys, providing protection as far as the head of the canyon, 25 kilometers away.

Waiting for the lancha to return, the rest of us passed the time playing cards, reading, and bird watching. All was peaceful as I swayed in a hammock near the river, daydreaming of spicy tamales, ice-cold cervezas, and a rat-free bed back in Palenque, when my placid world abruptly turned upside down. The two caretakers came running past me, followed closely by a platoon of heavily armed, rucksack-carrying, camo-garbed Guatemalan soldiers who looked like they had just been humping the bush for a couple of days.

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Speaking in rapid-fire Spanish, of which I could only understand bits and pieces, Fidelino, one of the caretakers, breathlessly conveyed there had been a gun battle between the soldiers and a large band of banditos—“en el bosque,” in the forest, “no lejos de aquí,” not far from here.

I was speechless. And confused. “Vaya, vaya! Go, go!” Fidelino impatiently implored. “Hombres muy malos. Very bad men. They come. Not safe here. Take your boats! Vaya!”

Just then four more soldiers came hustling by, no more than 10 feet from me. Between them, they were carrying a crude litter holding a gravely injured man. Attired in blood-soaked civilian clothes, the man was moaning pitifully, obviously in great pain. As the litter-bearers passed, the injured man reached his arm out to me as if begging for help. His terrified eyes looked straight into mine. I knew this man would soon be dead.



The soldiers jostled the stretcher down the steep bank to one of two tied-up lanchas. There, they brusquely dropped their human cargo into its hold. Then the entire platoon, along with the caretakers, piled into the lanchas, fired up the 75-horse outboards and sped away, heading upriver. We eight unarmed, clueless turistas were the only ones left behind to guard the fort.



We hustled down to the shoreline, bewildered and frightened. “What the hell just happened?” we all wondered. The unnerving thought crossed our minds that the bad guys were still at large and might be headed here right now, thirsty for revenge. Someone said it was like being in a bad Hollywood psychological horror movie, except this was real and we didn’t know when or how it was going to end.

Top: The author running another of the Río Lacanjá’s many ledge drops.

Middle: Portaging blow-downs.

Bottom: Marveling at Mayan ruins.

Photos by Rocky Contos

Sandwiched between the wide, swift river and the dark, forbidding forest, our options for a hasty exodus were severely limited. All the inflatable canoes were deflated and rolled up, awaiting transport by Búfalo. Furthermore, the hand pumps to inflate them had gone with the rafts. “Well, then,” said Dean, one of the Canadians, “if these bandito characters show up, I guess we’re royally screwed.”

I was scanning the forest for a place to hide, a hole to crawl into, when Búfalo and his posse returned and pulled up to shore. In my broken, survival Spanish, I quickly explained what had transpired while they were gone. Big bad Búfalo’s eyes lit up, as did his mates’. He commanded us to get into his gunboat and leave all the canoes and other boating gear behind. Before we were even seated, the lancha was already in mid-river struggling against the swift current, our destination Arroyo Jerusalén.

After yet another day and night of, by now, routine mayhem spent navigating the intercultural craziness in Arroyo Jerusalén, we were finally able to rejoin the others in Palenque. Only then did we learn from Rocky, via Búfalo, that the soldiers indeed had been in a firefight with banditos only a few kilometers behind the garrison, and that their wounded prisoner did die from his gunshot wounds.

As unsettling as was the news, at least we all survived, in relatively good health—with an incredible story to tell friends and family back home—even though this entire trip had been so bizarre that no one was likely to believe it.

It was the German existentialist philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who said, “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” Well, after this second river adventure to the Chiapas region, after enduring banditos, Rice’s Hole, mangled feet, rats in my bed, floodwaters, and banditos again, oddly enough I do feel stronger. But I can’t help wondering what I’d done to make all those Mayan gods so damn mad.