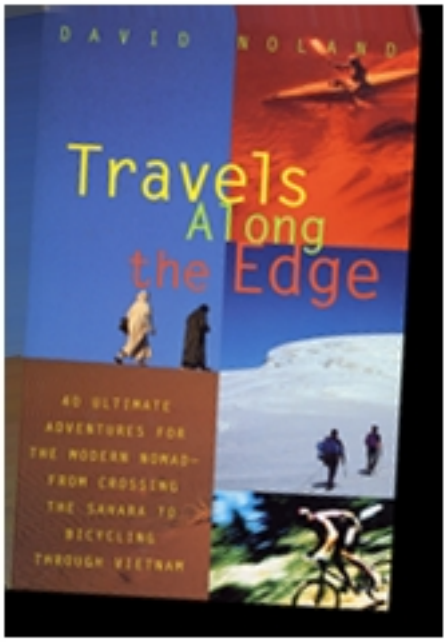

"Rafting the Futaleufu"

By David Noland
(book chapter)

One day in 1989, as Eric Hertz's rented Toyota van bucked along a dirt road through the remote mountains of southern Chile, he looked down from a bridge and was what appeared to be a narrow tongue of the Caribbean Sea, a ribbon on bright aquamarine blue foaming with whitecaps.

Hertz, the owner of a small whitewater rafting company called Earth River Expeditions, had paddled down wild and scenic rivers all over the world, but he'd never seen anything like this. He stopped the van, walked over to the railing, and stared down at the rushing water. “I knew in an instant that this was the most beautiful river I'd ever seen.” Hertz recalls. “No other river has ever affected me like that. Not the Colorado, not even the Bio Bio. It was like God had designed the perfect whitewater river and laid it at my feet.”

According to the tattered map in Hertz's glove compartment, the river flowed from a glacial lake in the Argentine Andes to the Gulf of Corcovado on Chile's Pacific coast. There was not a single human settlement along its entire 150-mile length. The map said that the river was called the Futaleufu.

In those days, virtually no one in the whitewater rafting business had even heard of the far-off blue river with the melodic name, pronounced FOO-ta-lay-oo-FOO. Three daring kayakers had run it in 1985, encountering a gauntlet of Class IV and V rapids—the biggest and most powerful that can be run—through deep granite canyons past meadows, temperate rain forest, glaciers, and eerily spiked summits. A year later, an exploratory three-raft expedition had given up halfway down, emerging wet, bedraggled, and without one of its rafts, which had flipped in a vicious Class V rapid, danced upside down in a whirlpool for several hours, and eventually flushed into a lake 30 miles downstream.

Unfazed by the horror stories from the previous raft attempt, Hertz returned to the Futaleufu in 1990 with a group of expert river guides and two lightweight self-bailing rafts. Despite some scary moments—inevitable when you don't know what's around the next corner—Hertz's crew completed the first full raft descent of the river. The whitewater and scenery turned out to be ever bit as dramatic as he had imagined, and the water still ran that astonishing blue.

Hertz was hooked. He bought some land along the river from local farmers, set up temporary camps, and in 1991 began taking a handful of paying customers down the river. His clients raved. He began to make a little money. And the best part was that he was spending two months a year on the most beautiful river in the world.

Then came ENDESA—Empresa Nacional Developmente Energie Societe Anonyme. In March of 1994, Hertz's partner in Earth River Expeditions, Santiago native Robert Currie, was chatting with a friend in Chaiten, a coastal fishing town that serves as the last jumping-off spot to the Futaleufu put-in, four hours away. “So how are you guys going to run the Fu after they put in the dam?” the friend inquired.

Currie was stunned. The friend showed him the legal notice in Chaiten's weekly newspaper: ENDESA, a huge, privately owned energy company based in Santiago, was planning to build three hydroelectric dams on the Futaleufu and sell the power to Argentina. The first dam alone would create a lake 20 miles long, submerging the world-class whitewater and the scenic heart of the river.

Industry-friendly Chilean law allowed citizens opposed to the dam only forty-eight hours to respond to the legal announcement. Currie rushed to the provincial governor's office to register

his objections. Waiting to see the governor, he struck up a conversation with a real estate developer. “The Futaleufu dam is a billion-dollar deal,” the developer told him. “I'd advise you not to try to fight it. Your life is probably worth less than a billion.”

ENDESA had already steamrollered opposition to a series of hydroelectric dams on the Bio Bio, a wild and glorious river 300 miles to the north that had become a favorite of white water connoisseurs during the late 1980s. At this writing, construction of one dam on the Bio Bio is well along, and a second is under way. About a third of the river has been lost to rafting, and all whitewater operations are expected to cease there by 1998. ENDESA plans to eventually build three more dams on the Bio Bio, essentially destroying the entire river, as well as the ancient culture of the Pahuenche Indians who live along its banks. The Bio Bio, it seemed, was the grim blueprint for the Futaleufu.

Hertz and Currie decided to fight the Futaleufu dam their own way. A former playwright, Hertz knew the power of emotion. “You have to get the local people and the decision-makers involved in a very personal way,” he says. “You do that by taking them down the river on a raft. Once they see the extraordinary beauty with their own eyes, run the rapids, get wet, catch trout, maybe see a condor, it's no longer just a matter of kilowatt-hours and dollars. What was abstract is now in their hearts.”

Hertz had already employed that philosophy to good effect on Quebec's Great Whale, an untouched wilderness river on Cree Indian land that was to be flooded by the vast James Bay hydroelectric project. In the late 1980s, New York State signed two twenty-year contracts to but $19 billion worth of James Bay electricity starting in 1995, a deal that provided the project its major financial impetus. Hertz, who'd been commercially running the nearby Magpie for several years, organized a series of raft trips down the Great Whale for New York officials. The politicians and bureaucrats spent a week in virgin wilderness, sleeping in tepees on pine-needle beds, listening around the campfire as Cree elders talked of their sacred lands that would soon be inundated.

State Senator Franz Leichter was one of those who accompanied Hertz down the Great Whale. “Seeing it with my own eyes brought home to me in a very dramatic way what a shame and a tragedy it would be to dam that river,” says Leichter. He and Assemblyman Bill Hoyt, who also spent a week on the Great Whale with Hertz, subsequently held public hearings on the power contracts, which were scheduled to come up for renewal in 1992 and 1994. Faced with an outcry from environmentalists, as well as changing economic conditions, New York decided not to renew the power contracts. Without its prime customer, the James Bay project was put on indefinite hold.

But the situation in Chile was different: Unlike the politically savvy Cree, most of the people who lived near the Futaleufu had no idea how a big dam would change their lives. The nearest village, also called Futaleufu, was 2 miles from the river and well upstream, out of sight of the first proposed dam and lake. Most of the river valley itself was wilderness; the few inhabitants were farmers whose houses for the most part lay well away from the river. The farmers might lose some grazing acreage to the rising water behind the dam, but surely there would be a hefty check from ENDESA in compensation. And wouldn't a dam create jobs and boost the local economy?

“The only time most local people ever notice the river was when they went over the bridge,” says Hertz. “To many of them, it was a place you drowned.” Hertz knew he had to grab the farmers and villagers by the heart. “If they didn't care enough to fight for this river, there would be no fight at all. It didn't matter how good the fishing was or how wonderful the rapids were.”

Hertz and Currie approached farmers who owned land along the river and offered to drive them up to the Bio Bio to take a look at what happens when a wild river is dammed. Ten landowners accepted. For many, it would be their first trip more than 50 miles from home.

Currie and the farmers piled into two vans and headed north. Hertz, not wishing to appear the meddling gringo, stayed behind. The farmer's first surprise came when they rolled into the town nearest the Bio Bio dam to find the main guest house strangely empty. The owner, surprised by the unexpected influx of customers, had to rustle around to make up the beds as they waited. “No tourists come here anymore since they started building the dam,” she apologized. “My business is just about dead.”

At the dam site the next morning, the Futaleufuians saw a scene of devastation: newly gouged roads, blasted granite, canyon walls stripped of trees, massive piles of rubble, trucks, machinery, and mud. The farmers looked stunned. Currie recalls, “They had no idea you could do such things to a river.”

The farmers saw that the ENDESA workers had their own self-contained town. Without identifying themselves, they walked up to one of the workers and began to quiz him. Do you buy your food and supplies from the local merchants?

Oh, no, came the answer. The company ships everything down from Santiago. We don't buy the junk they have around here.

Do you hire local people?

Of course, replied the dam worker. To clean the toilets.

At a town meeting back in Futaleufu, Nedea Dicares, a fifty-six-year-old woman whose family farm lies along the banks of the river, stood up and told her neighbors what she'd seen at the Bio Bio. Her impassioned tearful speech stirred shock and outrage.

That same month, Hertz and Currie organized a cultural-exchange raft trips for kids. Six ninth-graders from Smyrna, Delaware, and two young girls from the village of Futaleufu paddled and splashed and screamed and giggled their way down the easier sections of the river. Along the way they met a Chilean woman who roasted them a lamb and knitted each of them a pair of wool socks. On the last night, as the kids snuggled into their sleeping bags around the campfire and the river rushed by in the darkness, one of the Chilean girls on the trip, a pretty dark-haired twelve-year-old named Suj ey, stood up and announced that she had something to say.

With Currie translating, she told her new friends how she'd never really thought much about this river till now, that she had been a little frightened of it at first, and that her parents almost didn't let her come on the trip because they were afraid of it, too. But she'd had a wonderful time, and had seen what a beautiful river it was.

Suj ey said that she was amazed and grateful that the other kids would travel halfway around the world just to see this river in her backyard, and to help save it. “I didn't even know about the dam until recently,” she said. “My father thinks it will be a good thing. But now I feel very strongly that it shouldn't be built, and I'm going to tell him exactly how I feel.”

Hertz, listening in the darkness, made himself a promise: Every kid in town, and every

Futaleufu's son and daughter, was going to get a ride down the magical blue river.

OUTFITTERS

Earth River Expeditions staff meet rafters in Puerto Varas, a quaint town in Chile's lake region 600 miles south of Santiago. The following day it's a commuter flight farther south to the coastal village of Chaiten. Next comes a three-hour drive on dirt roads—with a stop along the way for a hike to a glacier—to Earth River's Futaleufu base camp on the banks of the river.

The first day on the river is a training day from the base camp, with a swim test and several short practice runs through Class IV rapids. (Rapids are rated I through V, with V being the most difficult and dangerous.) Day two begins with a van ride upstream to the put-in, just below the Argentinean border. You'll proceed downriver through Inferno Canyon to Campo Casa de Piedra, another Earth River camp set in a cave just below Zeta, a monster Class V+ rapid. (Zeta and another V+ rapid, Throne Room, are considered too dangerous to run commercially. Rafters will walk around them while the empty rafts are floated along the shoreline attached to ropes.)

During a rest day at the cave camp, rafters may hike, rock climb, ride horses, fish, swim, or kayak in a large spring-fed pond. After another night in the cave, you head downriver to the base camp. The last day is a long, hard run that Hertz calls the best day of Class V rafting in the world. From the takeout, you head directly back to Chaiten, thence to Puerto Montt, Santiago and home.

You'll cover a total of forty miles on the river, in the process traversing thirty-three Class IV and V rapids.

What to expect

This is no float 'n' bloat trip. Because of the difficult rapids, all participants must paddle energetically for extended periods. This kind of upper-body exertion can be surprisingly strenuous—check the statistics for heart attacks suffered while shoveling snow—and requires

good overall cardiovascular fitness. In addition, you'll need to have your upper-body muscles in good shape. Weight training before the trip is a good idea, especially for pectorals and lats.

With its ten Class V rapids, the Futaleufu is more technical and difficult to run than the Grand Canyon. There are various definitions of a Class V rapid, but Hertz's criterion is that a capsize and subsequent swim have serious consequences without immediate rescue.

Earth River, which made the first full descent of the Fu by raft in 1991, uses only veteran Class V river runners who know the Fu intimately. They employ a fleet of rescue kayaks and ultra-stable “catarafts” to quickly pick up swimmers in case of a capsize. Earth River uses custom-built 18 foot Sotar self-bailing rafts specifically designed for the Fu. For better maneuverability, they carry no supplies. Hertz says that raft capsizes on the Fu are rare, but it is not unusual for paddlers to be washed or catapulted overboard in big rapids. So far, all Earth River swimmers have been quickly pulled out unharmed, although not unshaken.

If all this sounds a bit intimidating, there's an out: a horse trail that runs virtually the entire length of the river. The faint of heart can walk, or ride a horse supplied by Earth River, around every big rapid.

Novice raft-paddlers are accepted for this trip, but only the very fit, strong and fearless. Preferably, you should have paddle-rafting experience on Class V rivers such as the Gauley in West Virginia or California's Tuolumne. Although guides in each raft command all maneuvers, you must be able to respond instantly and correctly with great vigor and proper paddling technique. Mistakes or hesitation on one paddler's part may jeopardize the safety of everyone on board.

Earth River's camps are about as plush as you can get and still call it camping. The camps have beautiful open-air, hand-hewn wooden cliff dwellings with beds for sleeping, and hot tubs atop cliffs overlooking the river. Campo Casa de Piedra is a large stand-up cave with a sandy floor and natural venting for a campfire. All camps offer the services of a Chilean masseuse. (Sorry, massages are extra, not included in the price of the trip.

The rafting season runs from late November through mid April, the austral summer.

NOTE: The Author did this trip before many additions like the Terminador Camp, Tree House Camp and Cave Camp tower Climb, giant rappel, tyrolean traverse and zip line were added.