

## The Colca Plunge

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### First Commercial Descent

At Pope Paul II Falls—a torrential spill at the bottom of one of the world's deepest canyons—they sat cross legged and prayed for a safe journey. You need all the help you can get when you pierce the Andes by raft. ?

“See those?” The Peruvian gas station attendant is pointing at the yellow running lights rimming our over loaded bus. ?

“They will be perfect target for the Sendero.” ?

The Sendero Luminoso, that is: the Shining Path, who has frightened away tourist expeditions like ours for nearly a decade. At least the Sendero helps to keep our minds off the equally notorious challenges of the river we intend to float, the seldom-navigated Colca, which plunges through one of the world's ?deepest canyons.

Our group, organized by Earth River Expeditions, includes some of the best kayakers and raft guides in the States, as well as a handful of intrepid paying passengers. We've been lured to Peru by the Colca, but most of us could have been attracted to this country by any number of other baits. Those who do make it down here succumb to an incredible array of temptations: the planet's driest desert (the Atacama, where there is no recorded rainfall); its highest navigable lake (Titicaca, 3,200 square miles of water lying at 12,508 feet); the longest left break known to the surfing □ world (up to three-quarters of a mile, at Puerto Chicama); the headwaters of the world's most voluminous river, the Amazon; □ the archaeological wonders of Machu Picchu, to name only □ the country's most famous site; some of the world's finest mountaineering, in the Cordiller Blanca; and innumerable lakes proffering trout fishing comparable to New Zealand's. □

Some scientists break the world down into thirty-three major ecosystem types—of these, twenty-eight exist in Peru, a country twice the size of Texas. Peru may not contain the highest peak in the Andes—that honor goes to Argentina's 22,835-foot Aconcagua, but the country can boast of a higher concentration of 20,000-foot peaks than any place outside Central Asia. Just sixty miles from the sea, base altitudes in Peru (that is, the bottom of mountains), typically lie between 10,000 and 14,000 feet. But as the mountains build, water goes to work tearing them down. Scattered among the high peaks and plateaus are some of the world's deepest and most vertiginous gorges. Which brings us back to the Colca Canyon, the reigning queen of crevices, and the Colca River, whose siren calls have drawn here from the other side of the equator. □

We have decided to enter the Colca at the only reasonable point of access within the canyon proper. Reaching the river requires a hiking descent of 6,000 vertical feet—from 10,600 feet to 4,600 feet. We leave the dusty town square of Huambo with burros loaded with personal bags, food, rafts, and kayaks. The upper part of the trail passes through pastures verdant despite the moon like aridity of the surrounding landscape. An ancient, elaborate irrigation system brings water down from the melting glaciers and snowfields at 20,000 feet. In the near distance we can see barren hills striated with scree slopes of sandy black gravel. □

Once we leave the terraced fields the path becomes increasingly littered with sharp rocks threatening to puncture the soles of our shoes. Just sixteen degrees off the equator, the Peruvian sun wilts whatever it touches. The funkiest-looking cacti I've ever seen—half-dead from lack of fluids—line the path. The deeper we get, the windier it becomes, threatening to blow the uncared-for down the near-lifeless slopes. When the river finally appears in the distance, looking like a brown ribbon threading through a crack in the canyon's wall, we can also make out a small village. □

Canco is comprised of just six families, all of them living off the corn, wheat, and cane they grow and the fish they catch. These campesinos ("country people"—the term "Indian" is considered □ offensive) have seen adventuring gringos like us before, but it's still a rare event. □

Even from a distance we can tell the river is running high. Its chocolate color is not a good sign either, implying recent rains. If the river has a volume above 2,000 cubic feet per second (cfs), we expect the big, technical rapids downriver will be hard—or impossible—to run. □

When we reach the river, we quickly ascertain it is running high. A long, nervous guides' meeting begins. There are few options: we can wait here a couple days and hope the water

level drops; we can hike back to Huambo; we can set out and pray the river doesn't get any higher. None are particularly attractive. □

All are set in the context that once we set off into the canyon, for forty miles there is no reasonable way out but downriver. Our deliberations take place against a backdrop of massive scale and raw power. I am sitting in the shade of a 10,000-foot wall listening to the rush of the muddy river and watching a trio of Canco's fishermen cast their nets. Standing waist deep, the fishermen are easily caught by the river's swift, unpredictable power; every ten minutes one of them is swept downstream and has to thrash his way back to shore. Across the river to my right is a huge, seemingly vertical scree slope of black-and-tan gravel. I'm surprised it hasn't slid and completely dammed the river. To my left, tan hills seared by v-shaped striations stack higher and higher until I can no longer see their summits. Invisible around the bend rise active volcanoes, Coropuna (21,079 feet) and Ampato (20,702 feet), and the Chili Range, featuring 18,363-foot-high Mismi. □

Giant saguaros and drought tolerant brush cling desperately to the sides of the canyon, while strange flora flourish in spots rich in volcanic ash. Huge rocks balance precariously over the river like enchanted castles. The 236-mile-long river begins at 15,000 feet and drops to the Pacific. □

Its headwaters are formed by a fan of tributaries that spread in an arc for more than forty miles over the Andes. Even among the world's most experienced river-runners the Colca is regarded as nearly inaccessible and highly technical. Marked by sharp, undercut rocks, this is a river where you do not want to fall out of your boat. □

But what truly sets the river apart are the imposing walls. At points the river narrows to eight feet wide, with steep walls rising 12,000 feet on one side, 10,000 on the other. The sun sets at 6:30 on our first night on the banks of the Colca, and most of us are trying to sleep by seven. The mood-setting last words of the evening are uttered by Duilio Vellutino, a young Peruvian kayaker who has already kayaked the Colca. □

"You haven't seen anything yet," he says melodramatically, pointing downriver. □

"The Colca lives down there." □

When we wake, the river is still muddy, high, and fast. At 1,400 cfs it is twice what it was reported to be a week before. The boatmen put on confident faces, but I know they are apprehensive. Once we leave this first camp the only way out is down. Climbing up 10,000-foot walls of crumbling stone to get out of the canyon, then walking across god knows-how-many miles of desert would take, at the minimum, tremendous endurance. None of us are anxious to be so tested. □

The day begins with a hike upstream to Pope John Paul II Falls, a torrential spill of roaring brown muck. Here the river is split by a monstrous rock, three stories tall. The left side of the river cuts hard around the central pillar, then disappears under a ledge, emerging in powerful jet and joining its other half now pouring over a sixty foot drop. Where they meet is a tumult of pounding, spraying, brown backwasbelching sounds like those of a crashing freight train. Duilio climbs down to the edge, sits cross legged, and offers a silent prayer. I follow his example, sending my own best wishes to "Apu," the god the local campesinos regard as supreme being and creator of water. The Christian name for this maelstrom was conferred by a 1981 Polish team, the first to run the river, in honor of their recently anointed countryman. □

At ten o'clock we launch our four rafts and three kayaks. The first rapids are short, laden with rocks hidden just beneath the surface, obstacles not even the best river readers can predict. The rocks grab at the boats and stall them, tossing paddlers forward (but not overboard) and boats off course. These are particularly tough conditions, requiring tight, specific maneuvers that are repeatedly foiled by unseen, underwater boulders and "river snakes." □

By noon the wind in our faces has become so strong we are forced to quit. The wind establishes our pattern for the week-long trip—we will enter the river by 6:30 a.m. so we can hope to camp before the wind has gained Herculean strength. □

Our second day's adventures begin with a warm-up ride over a string of class III and class IV rapids, followed by an extremely technical class V (class VI, the top of the "navigable"-river rating scale, is almost by definition a near death experience). This particular class V rapid involves two big drops that plunge through a narrow channel capped by an overwhelming hard left turn that threatens to slice—or decapitate—bodies on the left or right of the boat, depending how the craft emerges from the second of two "holes"—forward, backward, or tea kettled (upside down). If the boat were to flip, its passengers would be tossed into a swirling miasma of undercuts and life-sucking holes.

At twenty-seven the youngest of the four guides and the most eager, Joe Dengler volunteers his boat to make a test run. His four-man, self-bailing boat nearly sinks as it spins around out of control and submerges before being pushed violently out of the channel. Head boatman Mark Kocina goes next, suffering similar, if different, results. All paddlers stay in both boats, but barely. After watching the near calamities of the first two rafts, the rest of us decide it isn't worth the potential swim and carry our boats around the rapid. □

Joe's day takes a turn for the worse around the next bend. We come upon him and his three paddlers stuck in an unenviable position—standing on the apex of a small rock, mid-river, their 1,000-pound rubber boat having completely disappeared beneath the surface. Only a glimmer of yellow underwater—where the boat has wrapped itself around the rock they are standing on—tells us they haven't lost the boat completely. Dispatching his mates—actually pushing them gently into the rapids, from which they can easily swim ashore—Joe stays tippy-toe on the rock as throw lines are tied together and a human chain is assembled onshore. With one end attached to a D-ring on the boat's bow, the onshore pullers strain on the rope. As we lean back, pulling against the push of the river, the nose of the boat comes slowly, slowly to the surface and the same power that imprisoned the raft eventually pushes it free. Joe hops on, bronco style, slightly embarrassed by the miscue and happy that the only damage appear to be a repairable tear in the bottom of the boat. □

While the Colca once ruled undisputed as the world's deepest canyon, some explorers-cum-geographers have recently declared Tibet's Brahmaputra to be deeper still (though the exact definition of "canyon" is open to dispute). □

Most guidebooks avoid the controversy by calling the Colca "one of the world's deepest canyons." What is irrefutable is that the canyon cuts over 10,500 feet into the earth's crust, twice as deep as the Grand Canyon, and slices through 500 million years' worth of sandstone, limestone, slate, and quartzite. All this is capped and interlayered with volcanic effluents. □

The remote valley immediately upstream from the canyon proper was a productive farming area even before the Incas claimed it. During the Incan period, the Colca Valley, to which was added a sophisticated network of irrigation canals, proved vital to the Empire. We can still make out remnants of steep stair ways cut into the bare rock walls during this time. When the Spanish reached the valley they found terraced fields and thriving herds of llamas and alpacas. Later, when the valley became part □ of the route linking the silver mines of Bolivia to the coast, farmers were snatched from their homes and forced to work in the mines. □ Eventually, however,

the new railroad bypassed the Colca Valley on its way to Arequipa, and the region fell into near total obscurity. □

Until the 1970s, that is, when a massive irrigation project was conceived to service the barren Majes Valley on the far side of the mountains. The Majes is one of the driest deserts in the world, but with water, it was reasoned, it could be made to bloom. That necessitated constructing huge dams across the Apurimac (the source of the Amazon River) and Colca rivers and building more than sixty miles of tunnels through the mountains, along with 250 miles of service roads. While 150,000 acres of desert are now fruitful, the controversy over the environmental and social consequences of this massive project are hot enough to drive a turbine. □

Down on the canyon's floor, the incredible display of geology continues to stagger us. It is four in the afternoon and we're camped beneath a football-field-sized overhang across from the 1,500-foot high Condor Falls. One of the canyon's most dramatic sights, these "bridalveil" falls tumble in three distinct sweeps. Blown by a steady breeze, the last spray to reach the riverbed creates a perfect shower for six, which we take full, naked advantage of. As we shower a shout of "condor" goes up and we jump out and stare at the sky. We've sighted four already (as well as lots of osprey and otters but each is an event. The one above has a wingspan of more than ten feet. Known to the campesinos as "Lord and Master" of the Colca, the condors find that the canyon's structure creates perfect thermals for soaring. □

The canyon recently has been named a national sanctuary for their protection. We watch from far below as the condor drifts, soaring without moving its wings, circling, then disappearing over the next ridge. On day five we're drifting between rapids, studying the tall walls looming above, when Duilio says, "Look, look how grows the river!" He's pointing to a crevice in the mud-colored cliffs, where—fifty feet up—is crammed a thick stack of uneven bamboo sticks and odds and ends of driftwood. When the Colca runs high and fast, starting in January, this section of the river rises as much as 100 feet. Evidence of massive flooding isn't the only sign of violence in the canyon. Giant cracks are everywhere, created by the tearing, wrenching, stretching of the earth. It looks like the whole place could split wide open and swallow itself, the entire canyon altered by a single shudder or a heavy downpour. I would not want to be anywhere near this place during a heavy rain or an earthquake. □

Each day we are amazed by what the Poles did in 1981. During the first descent of this river they had little knowledge of what lay around each turn. They carried too much gear, no river maps, and had only rough-hewn river skills. They must have been as brave (or fool hardy) as John Wesley Powell on the first descent of the Colorado River. At any moment they could have

rounded a bend and found them selves squeezed into a box canyon, with up the only way out. Soaring canyon walls and forbidding desert could have made escape impossible. Or, for all they knew, they might have been swept through a series of big rapids too big to pull out of, and then been launched over a 100 foot waterfall. □

The half-dozen descents since then have benefitted from the maps made by the Poles. That hardly means the trip is a cinch, however. Water can rise big rapids can cut boat or man, undercuts can suck either down under, and anyone seriously injured would be hard pressed to escape. Even last year's map of the river means little, as the crumbling walls overhead change the river's structure annually. □

Today's rapids are fast, bumpy brown tongues lapping over steep drops, winding through gardens of big boulders. Midday we pass through a thin chasm that reduces the river to about eight feet in width—about the width of the boats. We squeeze through by aiming straight for the slot, then lifting paddles out of the water and throwing all our weight toward the center. Beth Rypin's boat gets stuck between the opposing walls; she likes her boats hard and the heavily pumped Princess is just a couple inches too fat to fit without some wrestling. □

During the night a rockslide on the far side of the river bolts everyone awake. The rumbling only lasts a minute, but it feels like an eternity during an otherwise silent night. Sparks light up the darkness as the avalanche crescendos before dropping into the river. Those of us sleeping nearest the water drag our tents and bags higher up the bank. The intrusion is made more ominous because in a few hours we are to meet the biggest navigable rapid on the river, the Reparaz (named by the Poles for Peruvian geologist Gonzalo de Reparaz, who mapped much of the canyon). □

We'd been dreading and preparing ourselves for it during the whole trip. Just above Reparaz we pull the boats out of the water and scout. After an hour of pondering we choose a complicated course: after squeezing through a narrow slot that drops four feet, we need to paddle hard to an eddy in order to line up for the next slot-drop. From there we must paddle hard to river left, push the boat over a short, unrunnable drop, and then backpaddle like madmen—just to reach a point from which we can properly address the main drop of Reparaz itself. □

Mark's boat doesn't backpaddle fast enough and slams into the biggest rock, throwing everyone out of the boat. One passenger comes up gasping for air; another bumps up under the boat several times before emerging. □

Next to launch, Beth's boat doesn't quite make the upstream ferry and gets hung up on a big underwater rock. For fifteen minutes they rock madly, attempting to dislodge it. Finally, with the help of an onshore throw rope and tug, they're off and safely through the meat of the rapid. □

Our four-man crew is next and, thankfully, we go through without incident. When Captain Steve Jones shouts "go, go, go," we paddle furiously upstream, positioning the boat to be swept through the tight channel. We drop hard left, then hard right between big rocks before exiting over a third steep, ten-foot drop. □

The next morning, our last on the river, dawns bright and blue. After a smoothly organized, two and-a-half-hour portage through Poles Canyon we run the last big rapid on the river. It necessitates tipping the loaded rafts onto one side in order to squeeze them through a narrow slot, then poising atop a rock before plunging into the rapid. Once in we throw all our weight to the left, then to the right, then left again, then put paddles out over the bow to pull the boat over the six-foot drop. We do it with just three men in the boat, one of whom weighs 100 pounds dripping wet. □

The rest of the day to the takeout is thankfully anticlimactic. We spend it "reading and running," bumping over long trains of bumpy, shallow boulder gardens. Fun, but jarring. When we clear the last canyon wall, grassy plains spread out before us in a tableau like a soft watercolor. There are a few whoops of joy, but most of us are quiet, tired, reverential. □

The following morning it feels odd to wake beneath open skies. For a week the view above had been limited to a sliver of blue or a slice of stars above the tall canyon walls. The ability to roll our heads from side to side and see blue sky for 180 degrees above—as well as the view of the dusty panorama of mountains we've left behind—seems both luxurious and unreal. We've grown used to the confines. The closeness of the canyon had enveloped us, held us, and then kissed us out safely at the bottom. Among us there is a feeling more of loss than reward at bringing to a close our week of survival in the Colca's rugged depths. For many, it was the closest we would ever come to experiencing the earth in its most exposed and evolving state. For each of us the Colca will forever occupy a place in our memories—remembrances deep and raw, silent and magnificent.