

## "On the Wild Side of Chile"

By Peter May

FUTALEUFU, Chile—So, my neighbor said, you really should come along. It's summer down there in February and this river is supposed to be beautiful. Chile? Yeah, right. That'll happen. Rafting? On a real river whose name I can't pronounce which has sharp rocks and big rapids? I don't think so. But, of course, it did happen. I'm here to report that I survived my first white-water rafting adventure—thanks to my swimming ability. I'm also here to report that if I can do it, just about anyone else can, and that I'd do it again. My neighbor had predicted this reaction. You'll come back a convert, he assured me. You'll be looking for the next big river now that you're a Class 5 guy.

You have to understand my neighbor. He's an outdoorsy kinda guy with the full Patagonia fleece wardrobe, his own wetsuit, a couple canoes, and needless to say, experience as a white-water rafter. He's run the Colca in Peru and some river in China where no raft had ever been before. He speaks the language.

My rafting experience wasn't quite so impressive. I did do a canoe trip on the Saco River in New Hampshire when I was 12. But rafting? My idea of rafting was sitting on an air mattress in Lake Winnepesaukee and bobbing in the wake of a Boston Whaler. This wouldn't be quite like that, my neighbor said. He showed me a video where these 19-foot rafts disappear from view going into a rapid. They do pop up again and the people actually appeared to be smiling. I read the brochure and all it said was that you needed to be in shape to do it. My supportive spouse told me to go for it. So I dusted the cobwebs off the NordicTrack, dropped 13 pounds, and pronounced myself ready to run the Futaleufu, one of the great white-water rivers of the world.

At the time I made this eventful decision, I knew as much about rafting as I did about the Punic Wars. Maybe even less. I soon discovered that there are five classes of rapids, starting with Class 1 (bathtub) to Class 5 (tsunami)

Most sane people don't begin white water rafting on a Class 5 river. The Futaleufu, or the Fu as it is known to the rafting community, is full of Class 5's with some fun and challenging Class 4's thrown in just to mix it up.

There were 16 of us on the trip, which was sponsored and efficiently run by a company called

Earth River Expeditions. They take care of all the incidentals. You supply the body and the life insurance.

Actually, we were supposed to have 17 people, but Dennis from Montana was felled on the first day by, of all things, a kidney stone. He thought he pulled a muscle in his lower back until he started talking to the lone doctor on the trip. The conversation went something like this?

Doctor: "Have you ever had a kidney stone?"

Dennis: "No, but my mother has. So has my father and brother."

Doctor: "Welcome to the family."

As Dennis was being hauled off to a hospital for an infusion of liquids and very potent painkillers, he raised his fist triumphantly and shouted, "I'll see you on the Fu!" (He did recover in time to make the next trip.)

After spending the good part of a day getting to the Futaleufu (four flights and one, three-hour drive) and to the breathtakingly beautiful Earth River base camp that overlooks it, I soon discovered that I was—how should I put this?—out of my league. Or, to be more topical, out of my class.

Of the 16 people in my group, I was, easily, the most boring one of the bunch. It wasn't even close. People in my group had climbed Kilimanjaro, rafted on the Yangtze and Zambesi, been on the US Ski Team, trekked through southern Chile, helicoptered into lakes in British Columbia, and rock climbed in Yosemite.

One member, Randy from Seattle, had been a river guide himself in the Northwest and had ridden horses at Spahn Ranch in California, the onetime home of Charles Manson. There also was a state senator from Vermont who spoke Russian, liked to throw rocks, and who grew up

riding horses and diving of cliffs. I am not making this up. Her soon-to-be-husband likes to parasail behind a snowmobile and was an alternate on the US Ski Team.

"What have you done", I was asked?

"Well, I did the Disney World thing a couple times with my kids, negotiating the treacherous white water in It's A Small World and Pirates of the Caribbean. That was pretty grueling."

"You mean, you've never rafted", they asked incredulously. It was as if I was advocating water pollution.

"Uh, no."

Actually, I was not the only one in my group with no rafting resume. I was just the only boring one. There was Wes, who runs a fishing lodge in Colorado and was scouting the Fu for a potential southern branch of operations. Wes brought about \$10,000 worth of high-tech, state-of-the-art fishing stuff and caught fewer fish than the locals, who use a can and a string. But Wes was an adventurous sort. He not only had been a three-time national ski jumping champion, he also had been a professional rodeo guy. He'd ridden bulls.

Then there was Steve from Ohio, who looked even more unlikely to be on the trip than I did. Steve doesn't do Nordic Track and Steve had never been rafting before, either. But Steve owns his own airplane. Steve has landed his plane on landing strips the size of a paper napkin in desolate stretches of northern California.

"Well, I've been to ARCO Arena in Sacramento", I said. "That's near some nice white water."

Earth River takes no chances with people like me. Or, for that matter with anyone. The first day is a training day. You put on your wetsuit, paddle jacket, and life jacket and purposely tip over the raft. The drill is to climb back on top, re-flip the boat and get back in.

The problem is that your raft never flips in calm, flat water which is, of course, where the drill takes place. You tend to flip when you are flying through some raft-devouring rapid with a very fast current, a lot of rocks, and nowhere to swim.

We successfully completed the drill and then did some rapids. I made sure I was paddling in the back because the view in the front row is like being in the first seat of a roller coaster. We later did some swimming in the turquoise blue river (the wetsuits and current made you forget you were in 50-something degree water) and I made it through that day, unscathed.

The next day, we started .serious rafting. We put in just above the aptly named Inferno Canyon, which had three Class 5 rapids and one Class 4. We were told it was OK not to do it if you didn't feel up to it. I knew I didn't feel up to it, especially when the guides said there was no escape, that once you went into the canyon, the river was the only way out. (Geez, I thought. I came 7,000 miles for this?)

The guides had been running rivers for 15 years and were as good as they come. My guide had watched me the day before and had no doubt I was up to Inferno Canyon. You are a good paddler, I was told. Even more important, that I was the best swimmer in the boat. That was reassuring.

The first rapid in the canyon was named, appropriately, Inferno. If you've never been rafting before you quickly learn that rapids tend to have sinister names like Terminator and Purgatory. Or Widowmaker. They're never named Serendipity or Sugarplum. All three river guides took a long time scouting the rapid to see if it had changed from the week before.

"You really have to be careful," Randy advised me. "One time a guy fell in and caught his foot on a rock. He was lucky. He only broke two bones. Usually, they don't even find the body until the next spring.

"That's nice to know. "

Earth River is big on safety. Before any of the rafts descend, two paddle-catamarans make the trip. They are solo driven by guys who know what they're doing. A third paddle-cat is also

involved; it's for the trip videographer. They wait at the bottom of each rapid in case someone falls in.

We are the last of the three rafts through Inferno. We are told where we want to go, which is up the middle and then quickly to the left. We go up the middle and then veer to the right. "Back paddle, back paddle," The guide exhorts us. We do. We get back on course and make it through. It takes about 15 seconds. It feels like about 15 years. But when it's over, there is a sense of exhilaration and achievement. We get through the rest of the rapids without incident, although the Class 4 is so rough that the guide falls off the perch and, temporarily, we are bereft of leadership and don't know which way to paddle. But we make it. By the end of the day, we are at a different camp, laying our sleeping bags on soft sand in a giant, natural cave and drinking Chilean wine. I am now, officially, a Class 5 guy.

One of the side benefits of the Earth River trip is Day 3. There is no rafting. You can ride horses. You can rock climb, repel, hoist yourself over a small gorge, and then do a zip line into the river. Being a Class 5, macho kinda guy, I did everything.

This also is a day to learn more about your group. In my boat, there were four of us: myself, my neighbor, Bill from Connecticut and Jon from Texas. It was an eclectic gathering.

Bill is twenty-something and had joined the trip after backpacking through the Andes. He also faced an unusual life daily-double when he returned: starting his own food catering business while signing divorce papers. Bill used to work for a caterer in exclusive Fairfield County and recalled one visit to a very nice home which had an even nicer kitchen.

"I'm short a pan," he told the matriarch.

"You'll have to ask the maid, dear," he was told. "I don't use that kitchen. The only reason we use one that looks like this is because we did a shoot for Better Homes & Gardens." Jon, the fifty-something Texan, likes to talk about all his prior river runs. Turkey. Africa. California. It was only when he started talking about his investments that the guide reminded him where we were and that no one cared.

Also in the overall group was a father-son combo from New Jersey. The son was fearless. The dad was just like me, certain he'd be river kill. There was Bill from California, who came home from his job one day and discovered his wife of 24 years was leaving him.

Brad, another Coloradan, had run the Fu last year. He was so taken with the area that he bought property along the river. He instantly recognized my trepidation and, after the first day, came over and slapped me on the back.

“You've done it. The hard part is over.”

Day 4 was a day of Class 3 and Class 4 rapids, all of them enjoyable and some fairly rigorous. One rapid, called Thing, stands out. The guide explained that when they first ran the river, no one picked up this rapid. As the raft got tossed around, someone said, “What was that thing?” The name stuck. The same logic applied to another rapid, Asleep at the Wheel. Someone was and got wet.

The final day of rafting is described in the brochure as “one of the most impressive commercial rafting days in the world.” It starts out with Terminator, an ominous looking (and sounding) Class 5 and; continues with several more. Once again, the guides gathered to scout the water. The first boat got whacked around and the guide, Steve Jones, lost his oar, not a good thing. We made it, unscathed. I exhaled.

Then came Himalayas. Wow. This was the singular, most enjoyable part of the trip. It was straight into big, 15-foot waves, one after the other. We just went right up the middle and kept paddling. Boom, Boom. Boom. There were a couple more Class 5s, which we also handled with aplomb, and then came a break before the final two killers.

“The next stretch is just some easy Class 3 and 4s,” the guide informed us.

Of course, we flipped. somewhere between two Class 4 rapids, we got turned upside down. Later, I was told it was the first flip of the season. Of course, it had to be my raft.

If you flip, you are told not to panic and relax, to get your bearings. Fine, I'm thinking. Let me get out from under the raft first so I can breathe. I had some trouble doing that.

I finally made it and the guide was already back on the boat. Meanwhile, we're churning through white water as this is all going on and I'm thinking, this is not good. The guide sees me and tells me to swim to another raft. OK, I say. I can do that. But the raft doesn't know I'm coming and is preparing to enter a rapid. Uh guys? Wanna wait for me?

Finally their guide sees me and tells his crew to back up. Patrick, a dentist from Anchorage, the one who climbed Kilimanjaro, pulls me in. I turn to the guide and say, "is this what you meant by the total rafting experience?" I was exhausted.

Eventually, our boat got turned back over and the crew reunited. We ran a couple more rapids and then the guide said it was time to take stock. There was a convenient drop-off before the final two big rapids. Did anyone want to get off? Three Nos. One yes. I told the guide I had nothing left in my tank. I didn't want to be a liability to the boat. There was a lot of truth to both. I also knew that if for some reason we flipped again, or I fell in (as one person did in the last rapid), I couldn't swim 5 feet. I opted to take the land route.

The guide was concerned my decision would put a damper on the trip, but that was simply not possible. I said I'd had too much fun and that it was a great vacation. I was just too pooped. I met the boat at the end and, surprisingly, they did quite nicely without me. So I missed the last two Class 5s. Big deal. For a wise Class 5 guy like me, I already knew I'd had enough.

NOTE: The Author did this trip before many additions like the Terminador Camp, Tree House Camp and Cave Camp Challenge Cirque were added.