

## Beyond The Next Bend

by Paul Hoobyar

**F**IRST DESCENTS. The term conjures up images of *terra illicita*: forbidden corridors of the Unknown, river canyons for the seriously crazed, an ecological habitat for egomaniacs. Beyond the neon hype of the phrase, however, what is the draw of "first descents" for mortals of the world? While in Costa Rica last November, five of us were infected with the bacteria *Descentitis initiatus* and spent some time searching for an answer to that question.

We had spent the better part of two weeks kayaking various rivers in Costa Rica. Feeling tuned and smooth in the saddle, we began looking for something new — preferably something that had never been run before. As we asked around, we were told about a six-mile-long gorge on the Rio Reventazon that was still unrun. The river lay at the base of 100- to 300-foot vertical cliffs; the lack of road or trail access left its characteristics and gradient as one big question mark for both the locals and any errant paddlers who might have passed over it. A bridge spanned the gorge at its upstream end, and each time we crossed it we'd look down into the canyon and wonder what lay around the first bend, where the river dropped out of sight.

After an aerial scout by plane to ensure there were no river-wide logjams or 200-foot unportageable waterfalls lurking in the gorge, we decided to make the descent.

The only available topo map showed the gradient ranging well above 200 feet per mile in places; the adrenalin coursing through our veins manifested itself in jaws manically chomping on wads of gum and with lead-footed butterflies flittering around our viscera. What lay ahead had looked like six miles of continuous rapids from the airplane. Our boats moved sluggishly with the added

weight of first- and second-aid provisions, emergency evacuation and bivouac gear, machetes, and extra food rations.

The day of the descent had broken beautifully. As we made our way downstream, the vertical walls overhead created a stunning image in the morning sunlight. Vines and hanging plants swayed in front of the cliff faces, in places reaching almost to the water. The river cascaded downhill and kept dropping out of sight in front of us as we eddy-scouted and leapfrogged through the roaring gorge. No hairy swims, horrendous portages, or mishaps occurred, and we met our shuttle rig some four-and-a-half hours after we had put on the river. The elation and relief mixed pleasurably with a fatigue born of high physical output and intense adrenal pumping. We leisurely loaded our gear into the bus while the heady glow of a mission successfully accomplished permeated the air.

As the bus headed back toward our hotel in San Jose, the question came up: Well, what does this first descent stuff mean? What was the draw of this run? Did we make the run solely to aggrandize our own egos, or, like the proverbial climber atop the mountain, did we go through all of this effort simply because "it's there"?

Tom's answer, which epitomized the rest of the group's feelings, was that for him, the main draw to the Reventazon run was the "unknown factor." "Nobody could tell us, 'you've got this place here you've gotta scout, or there's this continuous 200-plus feet-per-mile stretch here you need to be careful of,' and that's what makes me so satisfied."

As we continued our banter about the run, recounting various rapids and moves, the sense of camaraderie was like a web of connecting tissue between us. A sense of intimacy and sharing pervaded our conversations, a sense heightened when people have taken on unknown risks and pulled through the experience intact.

The bus continued, and we stopped at a small rural cantina, the "Bar Tipico Ujarres," for a round of congratulatory beers. Amid the back-slapping and ritual naming of rapids, Robin and Tom were talking about the amount of consciousness they maintained at various points during the run. At one particular Class V rapid, they could remember what they did at the top and at the bottom of the drop, after their run. But they couldn't remember what they did while they were actually making their moves during the run. As they continued to think about it, they realized they could never remember

what they did while making a move in any kind of Class V situation. Robin mentioned that he'd like to be able to remember what he did during runs like that.

For me, however, that witnessing of the event, having the narrator-evaluator talking inside my head all the time, is not a goal. I wondered then if it's not best to leave that narrator behind during "the move." Yes, there is value in witnessing life, being conscious of life as it goes by. But maybe at that point when I have a crucial move to make, I want to leave the narrator on the bank. I want to be one with my body, my boat, and the rapid ahead; totally in the *now* of that experience with all of my faculties focused here, right here.

Probably, making that first descent had appeal to each member of the group for varying combinations of reasons. For me, it was an opportunity to exercise my pioneer spirit — a testing of new frontiers in the world and in myself. Also it was a medium to get out of my own head and become lost in the activity of the moment. The intensity of that experience kept so much adrenalin pumping through my veins that all aspects of the experience — interpersonal dynamics, tactile sensations, physical movements — were heightened.

The one thing I didn't have going so much was the tape running inside my head: the everyday mental monologue about debts unpaid, emotional as well as financial, or critical accountings of past

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because it's there"?*

and present actions. And a break from that voice, from that reality that I live with so much, is definitely one of the benefits received when making a new run like the Reventazon Gorge.

As our shuttle bus lumbered on towards San Jose, we crossed the bridge spanning the gorge for the final time. Looking down the canyon to that first bend, I was filled with a huge sense of satisfaction. Now, for the first time, we *knew* what was around that first corner. We knew a little more about the world around us. We also knew a little more about ourselves.