

Hollowdogs & Hollowed Logs

At Play In The Land Of Pura Vida

by Paul Hoobyar

FERNANDO drove across the violent eddy line just as the gaping throat of a whirlpool opened up in front of him. His kayak's bow dove into the maw of that whirlpool, and he smiled serenely at everyone while the river spun him in graceful, slow pirouettes. The cauldron danced downstream along the eddy fence, lost its power, and spit Fernando out—right side up.

We were on the Rio Chirripó in Costa Rica, a river unequalled for outrageous play spots by anything I'd ever experienced before. This particular hydraulic, for instance, had us re-writing the book on what entertaining manifestations were possible from water spilling over rock.

The river made a sweeping right turn through this rapid, and a dike of bedrock stuck out from the left wall on the outside of the turn. As the Chirripó poured over the end of the dike, it created a sheer, pulsating eddy fence between the calm eddy-water behind the rock and 10,000 cfs of current screaming by.

We were lined up like school kids in the playground at recess time, waiting our turn to cram in as much fun as possible before the bell rang for class. We'd sit there, bobbing in the roiling water next to the eddy fence, waiting for a whirlpool to take shape. When the paddler at the head of the school saw one coming, he'd paddle like hell straight for it, trying to jump into the spinning depression just as the whirlpool opened up

and showed its throat. It was like paddling into a grand toilet bowl that was flushing.

If you were really lucky, you could stuff the nose or tail of your boat into a throat, then do nosestands and pirouettes, or tailstands and pirouettes. Other times, your boat might straddle a cauldron, with the seat over its vortex. Then as you spun downstream, boat, boater, and helmet—the whole works—would be sucked below the surrounding river surface, and for one split second, disappear before popping back up.

If you got knocked over during one of these romps, you'd feel the force of the pool tugging on your knees, stretching your spine as it pulled on your helmet and paddle, trying to suck you out of the boat. When it lost its power, you'd feel the suction diminish, roll back up, and head for the big eddy; the eddy would truck you back upstream to start over again. It was a river-runner's dream come true—a perpetual motion machine of whitewater frolics and hydraulics. We couldn't get enough of it.

Tom Stults figured out the hot tip. We were all getting rides, but not consistently sliding down into the vortexes. Tom popped his sprayskirt and filled his boat partially with water. On his next ride on this



Left: A young Costa Rican occupies the author's venerable Hollowdog. **Facing page:** Mike Shulze takes a shower, Rio Pacuare-style.

Paul Hoobyar



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riparian carousel, his nose-heavy kayak was like a submarine, going clean out of sight as he spun down the eddy fence.

While we whirled and played, two *campesinos* (subsistence farmers) watched us while they sent their horses swimming across the river below the rapid. We were

spellbound, intoxicated by this hydraulic as exotic as the surrounding jungle we were traveling through.

When this cookie-jar of fluvial delights had been raided to exhaustion, we slid off downstream, charmed smiles creasing our faces. Tom said it all as we left: "Gee, I never played in a whirlpool before..."

RIVER-RUNNING in Costa Rica means world-class whitewater in a tropical jungle setting. Sitting as it does 10 degrees north of the equator, Costa Rica's seasons, climate, flora and fauna are just that — equatorial. The seasons divide into "wet" and "dry," with temperatures lingering between 70° and 80° F. year-round, except at extremely high elevations.

We were running rivers at the tail end of the rainy season, a great time to look for whitewater adventures; the swollen, turbid rivers offered an abundance of excitement. The climate was sweaty, sultry. If I wasn't drenched in the proverbial bath of whitewater kayaking, or a torrential afternoon downpour, I was bathed in a lather of my own sweat.

Kicking back in the saddle, letting the currents aimlessly carry us, I noticed the geometric form of a thatched roof sticking out of the equatorial lushness — another solitary outpost of civilization in the all-encompassing jungle. Built on upright logs, the hut was elevated above the jungle floor. The thickly matted, palm-frond roof contrasted sharply with the open-air spaces where windows and doors would normally hang on a house in the States. The open construction allowed easy air circulation in the sultry climate.

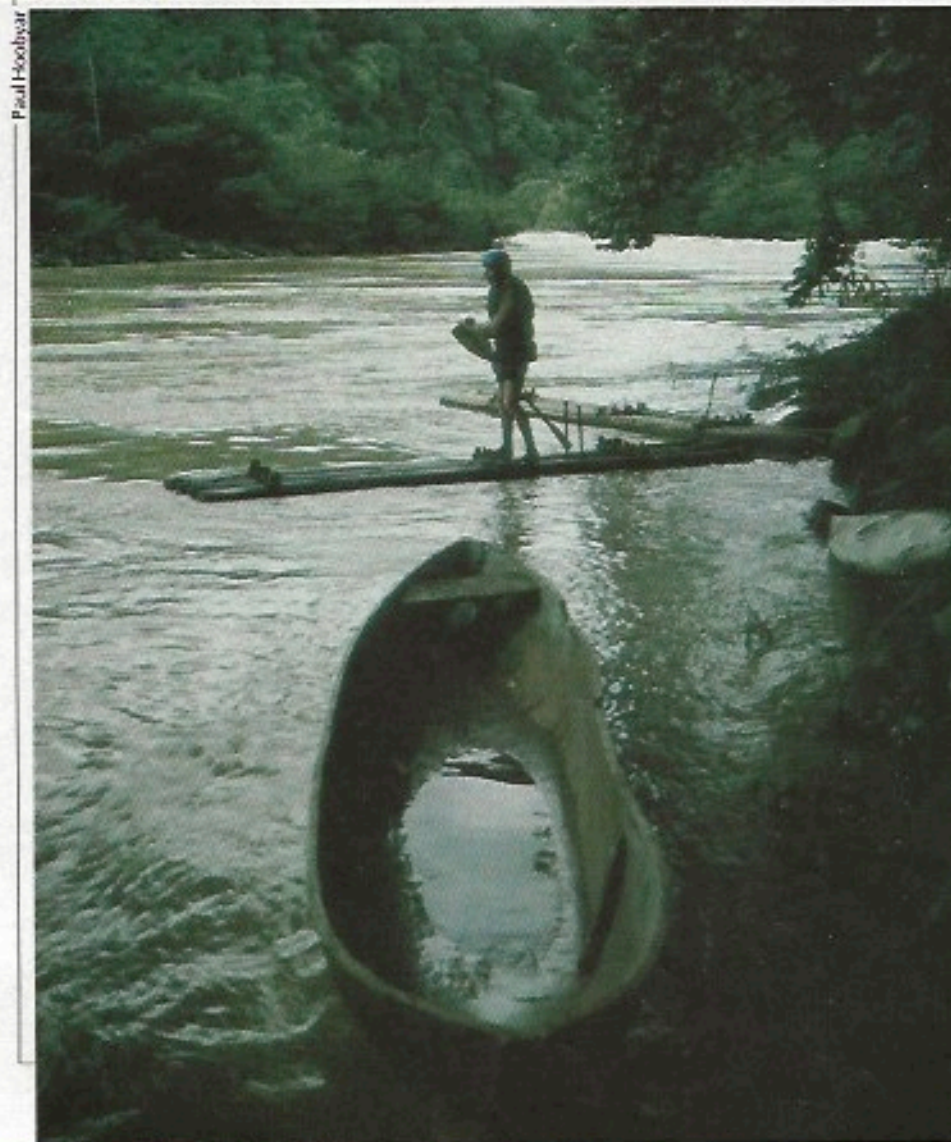
We drifted around a corner in the pleasant embrace of relaxation and fatigue. As we rounded the bend, we were greeted by two dugout canoes and two log rafts tied in front of a small sandbar. One of the kayakers sprinted for the sandbar while the rest of us stared with awe at the apparitions. Maybe we had played so hard, had spun in circles so fast on that last hydraulic that we'd endo-ed through a crack in time and had landed in the era of the Mayans. There were no other humans around (save us five kayakers) to burst this illusion. We cogitated the scene before us in the vastness of the jungle quiet, punctuated by an occasional bird call and the rustlings of the river flowing by.

The dugouts were made from hand-hewn, hollowed-out logs. What kind of

Above: Sugar cane closes in on Costa Rica Expeditions' shuttle van. **Left:** The dugout sent the author back into time, or time sent the author back into the dugout, or...



Robert Harrison/Whitewater Photo



Paul Hoodbear

wood? Possibly the Ceiba tree I had heard so much about, the tallest tree growing in the jungle. The locals said it sometimes reached 300 feet tall. The Mayans considered it sacred.

The log rafts were made with the same ancient technology as the dugouts. The rafts consisted of logs, rough-hewn wooden pegs, and vines lacing everything together.

The sense of dissonance struck me again. *There were absolutely no metal parts to these craft.* If there hadn't been a metal cable tying the rafts to the bank, and a metal pot in one of the dugouts, the entire scene would have been composed of Pre-Columbian technology.

There were no paddles in the canoes, and the only sign of human life was bare footprints leading from the canoes across the sandbar and up the canyon wall into the jungle thicket. I looked for a path that the owners of these boats could have taken up the mountainside, but peering into the darkened light under the jungle canopy, I couldn't discern a thing.

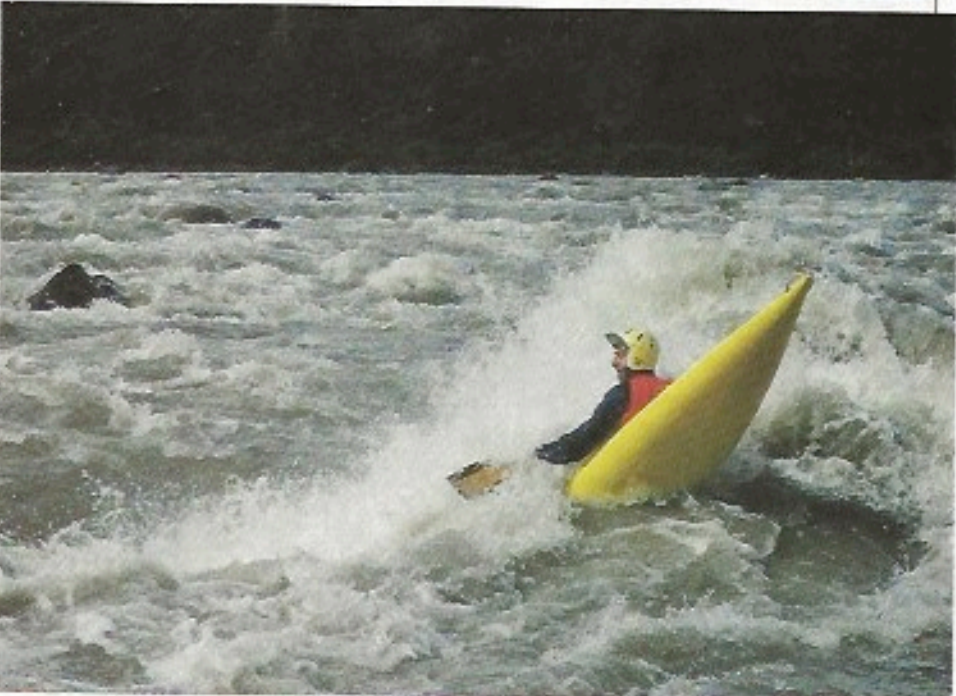
My sense of being a tourist, a *gringo* in this exotic land became even more acute. Never mind that these people were barefoot and had climbed into the jungle wilderness. Never mind that we were being chewed, scratched, welked and worked on by the vines, grasses, bugs, and fungi of the tropics — even with our river tennies on, and Gore-tex, bug juice, and skin creams nearby. We weren't "street-wise" in the ways of the tropical jungle, and we knew it.

I walked back to the dugout canoes again, and stared at those utterly primitive wooden boats, with our brightly colored tupperware kayaks alongside. The evolution of boat designs over the eons, from the ancient dugout (did they run rapids in those things?) to the whitewater kayaks we paddled, reeled across my cerebral screen.

BACK at the put-in three days earlier, I had watched as the stable of kayaks available for this trip was quickly whittled down. By the time the owners of various boats had claimed their own, and the younger, lighter paddlers had poured over the remaining designs, it didn't take long to figure out that big ole me was destined for a Hollowform River Chaser, that paragon of tupperware kayaks for so many years.

The boat I drew (one of many owned by Costa Rica Expeditions, the outfitter who organized the trip we were on) was a terracotta-colored '79 Hollowdog, a relic from

Above: With tropical jungle on either side, the river's the only way out. **Right:** Robin Kinnaird ends out of a massive wave/bole on the Rio Chirripó.





Access To Costa Rica

An island of stability

Costa Rica. For most residents of the U.S., that name conjures up images of dictatorships and death squads, or another domino in the Havana-Moscow paranoia of creeping communism south of the border. Whenever I mentioned to people that I was about to head to Costa Rica for a month, invariably the response was something like, "Oh... uh, good luck," or "What are you going *there* for?" and even "Keep your flack jacket handy."



Map for canoe by Barbara Peakes

"The entire scene looked like a Froot Loops commercial combined with footage from a National Geographic film."

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that long-gone time when Yakima foot-braces weren't available and Hollowform installed the "Two Screw You" foot-braces. You remember... they were the ones where you had to crawl inside the cockpit and assume an advanced yoga posture with a screwdriver in hand every time you wanted to adjust them. Good for a lot of frustration and swearing, the two tiny screws had to be taken out, the foot-brace moved, and the screw-holes *exactly* realigned before you could coax those stubborn little so-and-sos back into place.

The hull of this particular boat was a bit tired, with some oil-canning under the seat, and a tweaked nose from one too many scrapes with the river. There were so many holes in the deck from the knee-braces being moved around that the boat leaked like a sun-dried wooden skiff. But after a frustrating hour of adjusting the footbraces and taping the holes, the old scow felt pretty comfortable as I snuggled my tail down into her.

Over the past couple of days of paddling I had fondly taken to calling her "Bloata." Now, looking at the line-up of Dancers, Hydras, Mirages and Bloataform next to the dugouts and the log rafts, I was amused by our continual quest for specialization and perfection.

We decided we'd better catch up with the rest of the group, and left the dugouts log rafts, and our musings on the sandbar. So far, this day had been one of novel critters: a five-foot-long iguana stretched out on a tree over the water, its bright-red combing highlighted in the equatorial sun; a three-toed sloth hanging upside down and immobile from a tree limb; a Fer-de-Lance, one of the deadliest snakes in the country, coiled up under a fallen log. Others had seen a couple of monkeys in a tree. Parrots and parakeets were visible along the banks with amazing regularity, but we stood little chance of hearing them over the roar of the water.

The water this day was even more exceptional than the fauna. Most of the Chirripó's "Biggies" were in this 15-mile stretch. We traveled on 6,000 to 7,000 cfs, with a gradient of about 70 feet per mile. That translated into some pretty exciting water indeed.

I came around the corner of one Class III+ rapid, and spotted Bob Taylor of Virginia standing on the bank, his camera

in hand, the rafts and other kayakers sitting in an eddy. *Uh-oh*. I knew there had to be some kind of Big Hole down there somewhere. It came into view, I slid through one side of it, then snapped into the eddy to see what was gonna happen next. Bob kept his camera out, pointed at the hole, and it was the age-old game of "Wanna be a star, kid?", "Who's game?", and "Beat me, rape me, hit me and steal my wallet," all rolled into one.

Finally, Joe Monroe paddled into the abyss. Although that monster snorted, bucked, thrashed, and stomped on Joe, he stayed upright, and eventually slid out the door on the other side to a chorus of cheers and applause from the crowd. With that, the entire group of kayakers hopped on in for a taste of oblivion as well.

And it was a friendly hole, even though it was eight feet deep and 20 feet across. Robin Kinnaird dropped in there and had the crowd going wild. It was a whitewater rodeo of the tropics. He side-surfed from one side of the hole to the other, got rocketed off a tail-stand, dug his paddle in, spun his nose into the trough, got endo'ed and did a quick series of ass-over-teakettle cartwheels before he washed out and rolled up. For its size, the hole was soft, inviting: a big Baby Huey with lots of power but kid gloves on. The Chirripó had quite a few holes like that one, and the rafters, by the end of the third day out, started complaining about always having to wait for the kayakers to catch up — a sure sign that the playing was superb.

THAT night the usual festive vibe after a day of Biggies on any river coursed through camp. The happy hour punch was a Costa Rican variant of the Tequila Sunrise. As the barrel of punch was consumed along with other leisure aids, the conversations kept coming back to the day's water, but my mind wandered away.

Night had slammed shut on the heavens, once again, and the evening rains had ceased. Glowbugs pulsed their cadence of light to the background chatter of birds and insects in the jungle night. Ahhh... the tropics! The place felt alive, not just birds talking and bugs chirping, although those sounds were intense.

There was something about the air itself. Looking up at the stars peaking

through the clouds, the night air felt fecund, like life could spontaneously erupt out of the vapors that tropical evening. I looked at my legs, a mosaic of scratches, bites, and rashes. I expected to see, any second, some weird fungus incubating on them like I could see on the rocks and trees all around.

The next morning we awoke to raucous squawking and screeching overhead. A lesser toucan, that ungainly bird with the oversized beak, was loudly defending its treetop against the marauding advances of a parrot. We'd camped near another small farmhouse, with its peaked grass roof standing above the jungle growth, and the entire scene looked like a Froot Loops commercial combined with footage out of some National Geographic film. Another big iguana sat nearby, watching the toucan and parrot with a disdainful eye.

Sliding out of camp under the deep blue equatorial sky, we climbed back on the "Swiss Mix Express." Waterfalls cascaded into the muddy river from both sides with unequalled frequency; some plummeting 300 plus feet. As these additions were absorbed, we blended in with the gathering swell and rode on a continually growing beast. If we started out on 2,500 cfs the first day, we were now riding 10,000 cfs.

That afternoon we came to the last of the Chirripó's hydraulic highlights. At the bottom of a rapid named Chachalaka (one of the few named rapids on this river out of the scores of IIIs and IVs we ran), there was another of those big, benign holes to play in. Robin led the forays into that canyon of negative ions, riding that stallion on a brace, doing spinners in the hole, getting back endo'ed, cartwheeled, then window-shaded before rolling up still in the hole and riding that bronc like it was gonna be his last ride ever.

I went out and got a taste of that hole, too. After a couple of times of being stuffed, cartwheeled and flushed out the ass end, I was somehow more intrigued by a gorgeous wave that preened and pranced just upstream. Bob was also intrigued with the same wave, and as I walked Bloata upstream to slide onto it, I saw Bob park his Dancer on the face.

It was a quintessential wave, flexing its glassy, clean lines in the Costa Rican sun. Twenty-five feet across and 10 feet high from the base to its frothy, cresting crown, it was an archetype of a wave, something out of a textbook on fluvial processes.

Bob slid onto the face of that moving Matterhorn. Once he caught up with it and was stable in the trough, he looked like he was sitting on a surfboard in a boomer off Hawaii. That Dancer carved a whole new line on the swell, a line I'd never seen any kayak make before. Bob sat on the

wave and leaned back so his boat was parallel to the river bank, not parallel to the 45-degree slope of the face.

And there he parked, like he'd put a quarter in the meter and planned to stay a while. There was so much space between that proud little filly's nose and the oncoming water that you could see her shadow under her, outlined on that glossy beast in the afternoon sun.

If he leaned forward, she pranced across the rough and up the back side of the next wave upstream, nestling her nose in the nape of its back. If he leaned the other way, she slowly edged back across the trough and up the face to the lofty heights of the crown. A couple of quick strokes put him back in his parking place, watching it all go by with a cheek-bustin' grin on his face. Finally, Bob slid up, crested on the foamy peak for a second, then slid downstream. His amazing ride at Chachalaka had burned one of the prettiest sights of the trip into the collective cranial cavity of all who'd witnessed it.

And with that, I grabbed Bloata and high-tailed it up the bank so we could get a taste of that same energy. Now, Bloata's a bit porkish around the mid-section, and she doesn't have the sexy lines of Bob's Dancer, but after our first humbling, unsuccessful attempt to climb on that beast, we found the line, and she climbed out into that coliseum of trucking hydrology like Mick Jagger sauntering onstage at The Forum. She was right at home as we slid into the Aqua Bowl, but she was headstrong and kept trying to bury her nose in the wave. But Bloata started to find her stride, to relax into her turns, and when we found the rhythm of that charging pachyderm, we were both home free.

Perfectly tuned to the slope of that roller, we cut back and forth like a skier linking turns down a virgin powder run. I could feel Bloata's spine flexing on the face of that wall. I could feel her working against the force of that wave as we rode on, the kayak seat throbbing and pulsating from the sheer force of the water. The intensity of the energy brought the wave alive. It was a charging elephant, a brontosaurus rampaging through the primordial jungles of time. And Bloata was alive, too, a lioness in full stride of the hunt.

When she'd had enough, when it was time to grab an off-ramp from that highballin' freight, we cut a snappy series of turns, backed up the face to the summit, and just let 'er go. I leaned forward as we screamed down the face, and Bloata drove her nose home into the oncoming current.

A Ceiba tree, tallest inhabitant of the jungle, dwarfs kayaker Claude Terry.

She got rocketed so far out of the water that my ears popped from the altitude change.

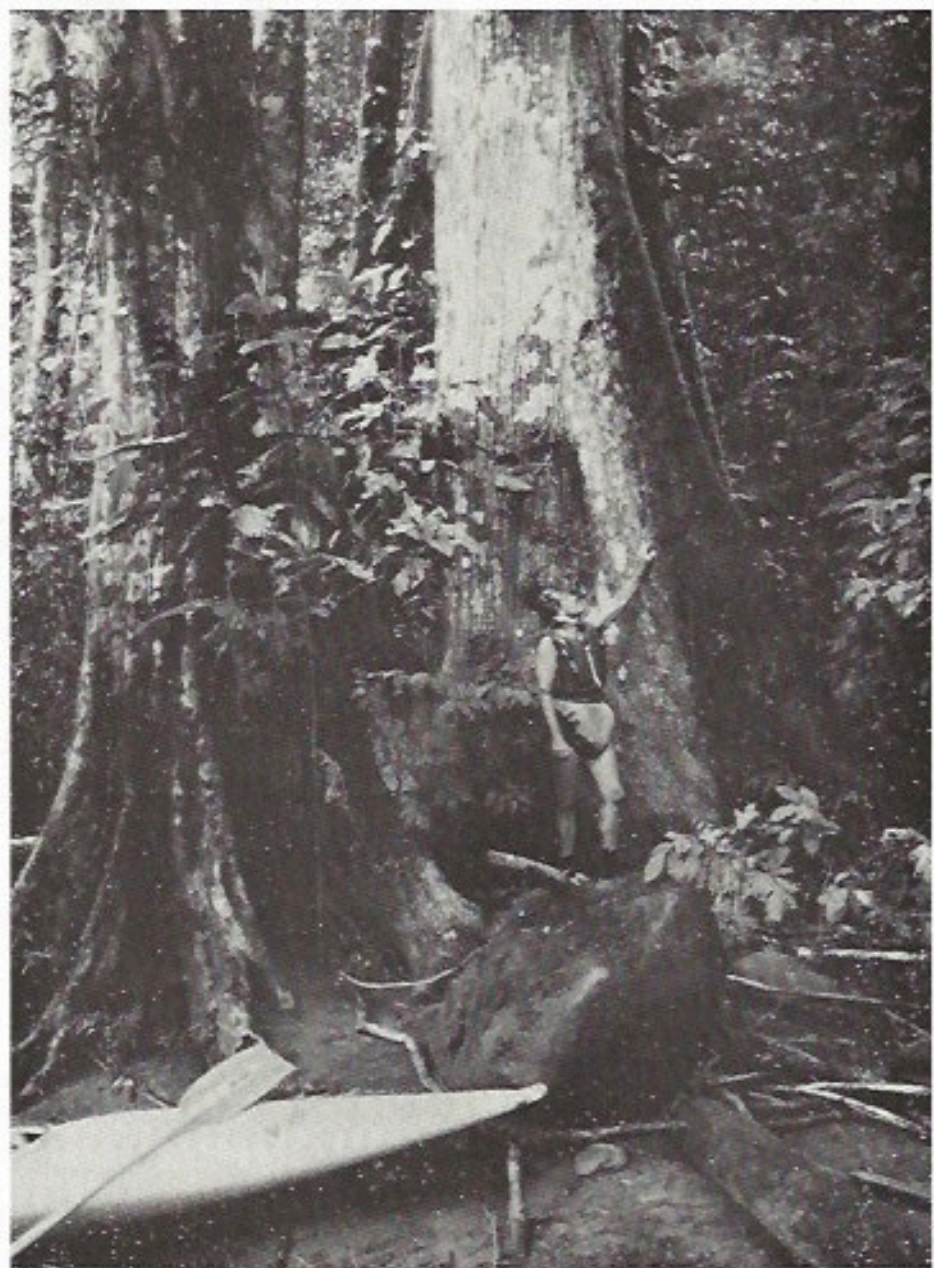
In camp that night, our last night on the Rio Chirripó, the warm glow of the day's antics were mixed with the pain of a fungus growing on my feet and between my toes. Of the 25 people in our party, almost half of them got a taste of jungle rot before we finished running the Chirripó and another river, the Rio Pacuare. Dave Heckman, one of the guides, got the rot so bad that he had it treated in the capital city of San Jose. He returned with little paper tubes of Voodoo drugs to administer to the rest of us. Every night on the Pacuare, a small group of us took turns soaking our feet in bail-buckets while Dave mixed his potions with the ceremony of an alchemist.

After taking-out from the Rio Chirripó,

we did a three-day tour on the Rio Pacuare. Running through middle-elevation, Atlantic-facing jungle, the Pacuare's hydraulic formations were more reminiscent of Stateside rivers like the Tuolumne or the Chattooga. Talk on them often turned to the multitude of rivers yet to be explored on this isthmus of high mountains and torrential rains. While we thought about the unexplored river frontiers that were still available in Costa Rica, we also felt full from the generous serving of rivers we had experienced.

The locals have a saying: "*En Costa Rica es Pura Vida*." — "In Costa Rica is the good life." For a hot-doggin' paddler, that statement is especially true.

Paul Hoobyar is canoe's Merlin, Oregon Bureau Chief. His most recent article, "Jocin' In The Mother Lode," appeared in the May/June 1983 issue.



Robert Harrison/Whitstone Photo