

**BIO BIO RIVER, CHILE THE FORGOTTEN PAST OF A WILD RIVER SOUTH AMERICA 1979  
PART 2**



*Day 5 on the Bio Bio River with volcan Callaqui in the background (Bottom photo Jim Slade)*

**DAY 5** Up at 7:30 for an early breakfast. This is the fifth day of the trip, and the next two days we begin to encounter the river's most difficult white-water rapids that violently descends through the basalt-formed Nireco Canyon. Jim Slade and Dave Shore summarized our day guiding our group of rafts through violent and complex set of Class IV -V rapids. One of the sections had a hole a large semi-truck could get lost in dead center in the river. Another had a glassy chute that slid over a twelve-foot drop and ended in a back-rolling column of water, a horizontal tornado. Another was a 500-yard labyrinth, through a team of basalt rock blockers positioned like a defensive line.

Jim, as the trip leader, reviewed safety measure and the essential technique to survive in a rapid if dumped out of a boat. Whenever you fear a flip or a pin (the latter occurs when a raft forced by the current against a rock), you high-side. If you are thrown into the water, try to get back into the boat. If you can't, spread your arms and float feet first through the rapid, protecting your head. Breathe when you can; head for shore when you can. Be aware you can get caught under the boat; if you do, don't linger. If someone throws you a rope, grab it, but turn backward to the pull and tuck it under your arm; otherwise the current will pull you under and keep you from breathing. If you are in or near the boat, and the rope has a fastener, hook it to something at once and get clear quickly before the rope tightens. Keep your helmet and life jacket straps tightened, or they will be torn off. Don't get swept into the next rapid.

Nireco Gorge forms the pinnacle of the river's whitewater descent that can be dangerous if not



navigated skillfully. The Bio Bio has been moving northwest in a great bend around the southwest foot of Callaqui, and now narrows and dramatically drops through a deep cleft with high, sheer, dark, lava walls. Below we would pass a spectacular waterfall, then navigate through the worst rapids on the river: Milky Way, Lost Yak, and Lava South. Lava South is named both for its volcanic surroundings and for its resemblance to Lava Falls in the Grand Canyon. Lava (north in the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River) is among the most ferocious runnable rapids in the world, with a sudden constriction of the river producing huge, twisting hydraulics, with no easy way through followed downriver with another big rapid close below. Lava South has all of these features. Long scouting, a choice to walk around the rapid, and a rescue setup are standard procedure on all these runs. Everyone in our group chooses to make the run; all but two will make it through without being pulled into the river.

With apprehension in our group, the rafts were launched and we floated towards an incredible view of the Malla falls tributary shimmering in reflected light off the river. After 500 yards of fast, eddy-less water, the river pinched against the south wall and created a quarter-mile-long roller coaster run that dumped through half-dozen major souse holes and twice as many pressure waves. We shot the first rapid, Milky Way, where the Malla River brawls in from the right, laden with volcanic silt and turning the Bio Bio from crystal green to a translucent slate green. In one tense moment we were stuck on a rock and lose a spare oar and a boat bag, but we broke loose and both are later recovered downstream.



The next rapid is Lost Yak, where the Nireco River cascades along the right bank of sheer basalt cliffs down river, and where there was a spectacular 150-foot waterfall emanatic from Noreco River. We had seen this waterfall yesterday from above when we climbed to Malla Falls and Maria's farm. It is one of the beautiful sections of the river that to me rivals the past two days of spectacular views of Callaqui. We pull over to the left to scout Lost Yak. It is another foaming, frothing, rock garden of a world-class Class V rapid, and everybody gives it their full attention.

We climb over boulders down the river, half to scout the rapid quickly and return to shoot the rapid, the other half with cameras poised to catch the first group struggling with the terminal climax of rocks and waves.

Beneath the rapid, Dave pulls us into an eddy behind a rock where we can see and photograph in one vista all the high wall of rapids, the dark gorge with its bright waterfall in the distance, the rafts navigating throughout the technical section of drops, the whole surmounted by the snowy top of Volcan Callaqui. It was an exciting ride for everyone and there was no mishap.

The next serious rapid came quickly until we beached just above Lava South, the most difficult rapid of the river. Jack Morison, a ten-year Colorado veteran, commented this was the first rapid he had seen last year on the exploratory run that was more difficult than Lava Falls on the Colorado, a rapid considered by many to be the toughest section of whitewater in the U.S. After studying the series of drops in the warming light of morning's optimism, we decided it was possible to make the run down what we were now calling Lava South.

Scouting and rescue preparations are repeated as we divide into two groups of two, with the downstream group running rescue on the upstream. The oarsman solution to Lava South is to find the "slot," running roughly down the left, avoiding rocks and holes, then pulling hard toward the middle to avoid a giant pour-over called the Mushroom, and a violent sweep of current into the left wall, called the Meatgrinder. A skilled boatman can find and stay in the slot on about half the runs. The other half require what seems like a day's worth of frantic improvisations squeezed into 15 seconds. Our passage falls into the second half. We lose the





*Lava falls, the most difficult and technical rapid on the Bio bio*

slot and are swept far to the left, backwards over the Mushroom, into and out of a huge hole, bumping rocks, and finally dumping into two more huge holes at the bottom. We high-side furiously and repeatedly, and made it through the rapid, but bilges filled with water. Bailing as fast as we could, we waited in an eddy immediately for the next two rafts to set up a run rescue. The roar of the river was almost deafening racing through the narrow canyon, adding to the suspenseful adrenaline rush and fear of disaster on Lava falls.

I had to fight an innate fear of drowning. Having experienced the Watut River in Papua the year before, it helped calm that fear. But I know risk and enjoy a controlled amount of it climbing or sky diving. I have alpine climbed since a teenager on exposed faces and glacial icefalls, and also participated in my DMZ duty in the Army to have been on a sky diving team, jumping from as high as 14,000 feet. But deep down I still fought a childhood deep fear of drowning, once in a stream in Michigan swept away on the AuSable River as a young boy, but made it, and having almost drowned in Holden Creek in the North Cascades as a teenager, trapped for half a minute in cold water under a log jam. I had to fight that fear, we had limited risk here if the route executed well. Our lives were in the hands literally of the oarsmen.

Jack was second and made a good entry, but smacked into a lateral wave that turned him the wrong way. The path devised while scouting from shore was the path not taken. He quickly washed broadside against a boulder bar bisecting the river, and the boat started to ride up on

its side, the first stage of a flip. Three passengers threw their weight on the rising tube, and the boat slid off the rock, around the far side into a channel we hadn't been able to see from shore. They seemed out of control as they were forced by the raging current over a pair of basalt slabs, smashed into one, spun on our side, and flopped down to the rapid's end, right side up. The bilge was brimming with water, and as they frantically bailed, Jack pulled to shore on a broken oar. They made it!

The other oarsman waited their turns, and expertly picked their way through this first stretch learning from Jack and Dave's difficulties in maintaining a line in the chute, wheeling and turning the boats around rocks to avoid the steep cliff walls. The ride was exciting to watch as each boat plowed through prodigious walls of water and haystacks formed by large boulders, alternately launching into the air, then dropping vertically into a boiling hole and almost fold in half while passengers thrust their weight into the bow. Each boat trembled and shook until it emerged from the suction of the current, only to hit the next challenge. It was a grand introduction to Chilean whitewater.

Once below this huge cataract we encountered several more rapids that seem only an afterthought to Lava South. The trip turns idyllic again as we glide through a succession of pools



and rapids under the slanting light of late-afternoon sun. Basaltic columns rear up on the right, and another waterfall plunges into the river. The day had been too intense to continue any

further. We'd run more big rapids in a single day than are run in twelve days on the Colorado, and a couple were as big as the biggest in the Grand Canyon.



We camped at a hot springs named Termas de Victorino after the local land owner Victorino. We call it Camp Los Tabanos, because of the nasty, abundant local horseflies. Victorino has a farm, a built a small wood shed over the hot spring near the river. In the afternoon we go to Victorino's farm, and we soon discover he is a gracious and outgoing host. He showed us his springhouse and stacks of thick boards for various kinds of

construction: cypress for interior construction, pelén and coigue for bridges and fences. He roped and slaughtered a lamb we purchased for us, and skillfully skins it and dresses it. The small fundos is charming a few chickens, sheep and goats.



In the evening Victorino prepares us lamb asado over an open fire at our camp, barbecued on a ten-foot spit. The crew puts on a big spread in the evening, with the addition of fresh tomatoes, onion, avocado, peas and pisco sours, a favored Chilean and Argentinean drink. It was time to wind down between the two worst days of long stretches of rapids. We chatted around the



campfire after dinner, and slept in exhaustion, unable to worry about what tomorrow might bring.

**DAY 6** We left again early in the morning after breaking camp. Today we have the final descent of very difficult white-water and dangerous technical sections that would complete our last set of big rapids. As was by now the pattern, the morning began floating through quieter sections of the river enjoying the beauty of the canyon where there were back eddies and deep pools carved by the river out of solid basalt rock. These provided rest spots away from the fast current and pace of the river, as did beaches from where we could stop and scout downriver any anticipated challenges.

At noon, after one difficult rapid navigated without mishap, we reached what in later years became known as the Royal Flush Gorge with rapids named in succession: Ace, Suicide King, Queen of Hearts, One-eyed Jack, and Ten Rapids all with steep drops, huge waves, and violent twists and turns. In sections the river pinched into a sliver, barely fifty feet wide, and zigzagged through two tortuous right-angle turns. Most of the water jetted around the first corner, slid down an eight-foot sluice, and crashed into an overhanging cliff of columnar basalt. Overhangs, wedges of rock just above the surface are major risks. Each year in the years succeeding our trip in 1979, this section has drowned a several kayakers and occasionally some rafters. If a boat or body gets swept into an overhang, it easily can get pinned by hundreds of pounds of water pressure, making it impossible to escape.



With a 90 degree turn of the river just below us against a giant undercut wall, coupled with the fact that the next three rapids, all in close succession, were horrendous, gave us pause. After a half hour of studying the series of bends down river, with much deliberation, Jack warned Dave, Jim, and John "Whatever you do, stay away from that wall" before we pushed off. The tension in his voice put a lump in my throat. Dave's setup was perfect. He made it all the way to the top left, where the water was safest; but too quickly the current changed and pushed the raft into the right sluice with hydraulics that rammed us into the overhang. The wall bore down on us at an alarming speed; I could see the basalt with its deep undercut getting instantly close, with a haystack of water boiling up underneath it. We could get trapped if we were slammed into the undercut sideways, and the upriver side of the raft filled with water. Dave pulled hard with all he had on the oars, and instead of sideways we fortunately slammed into the wall with the bow. By the grace of God we managed by highsiding on the bow of the raft not taking in water aft upstream and flipping, or getting trapped. The raft shuddered, scraped along the undercut basalt, and we exited. It was close, and for me the most adrenaline pumping scare of the river so far.

This next sequence of rapids thought of by the oarsmen as a gamble, was later given the name Royal Flush. The first was the Ace; this second one we called Suicide King. We beached to scout, and our apprehension mounted as we walked back to the rafts. We secured all the lines and checked the rigging. As the first boat slipped away into the fast-moving current, we all yelled from a set of boulders 'good luck.'" The approaching chute of water appeared quickly to the right, and Dave threaded his way through several large boulders toward the engulfing hole. Ahead lay a foaming series of back-rolling waves, the narrow chute, and an awesome vertical hole of water. All but the guide clenched their teeth moving to the bow to high side the raft, grabbing the line ropes with vise-like grips. Immersed completely in white foam, the raft almost disappeared, then shook itself free with all occupants highsiding and intact, with one passenger frantically attempting to bail 50 gallons of water out of the now sluggish boat. Wet throughout from sweat and spray, each rafter celebrated the spectacular ride with loud cheering.

We continued through the next rapid, the Queen of Hearts, without mishap; if we hadn't been scared to death, it would have been fun. Shortly after we came to the fourth big one of the day: the legendary falls, or salto, that the Mapuche had warned us about, which came to be known as One-Eyed Jack. The worst rapid in the Flush, and (after Lava South) the second most difficult on the river: One-Eyed Jack. The river blasts down a cascade of chutes and holes on the left side, into a narrow V called the Notch. The center run is even worse, with huge, cross-cutting blasts of water and giant holes. The river collides with a giant boulder, splits into two channels, then slices, spits, and erupts 15,000 cubic feet of water per second. With the raft moored to

several large boulders on our second most difficult rapid, our guides scouted what was called one-eyed jack, a 20 drop where Jack Morrison had made his only flip last year on the first descent.

Dave chose to run on the right, behind a great boulder that gave it its name Eye of the Jack. Its principal features are a pile-up of current against the right wall and an abrupt left turn into a deep, unavoidable, raft-eating hole. The makings of a flip are there in several places. We pause at the brink, then shoot through in a wet but clean passage. Jim is visibly relieved but sets up immediately to run rescue on the next two boats. No time for pictures for me.

Two boats were stationed on the left with throw lines. I stood on a ledge on shore with a throw-line anchored to a rock. You throw the bag of rope underhand, just in front of the swimmer or boat to be rescued, and the line feeds out from the bag as it flies. The first raft entered the slot, paused at the top of a haystack, and disappeared behind the Eye of the Jack. When it reappeared, it is shooting into the hole at the end of the rapid. It reared up, teeters, responds feebly to frantic high-siding, and almost flips, throwing two passengers and an oarsman into the white boil of the downstream tailout wave. The oarsman Jim gets back in immediately, instinctively and the other two caught up before they are swept into the Ten Rapid below. Only a paddle is lost. The rest of the boats make it through, but all fill with prodigious amounts of water losing maneuverability. We stop at an eddy to collect lost gear and bail water out. Everyone is relieved the most difficult whitewater sections are done.





Rapids continue as we make our way down the river, but they are milder. There are long, quiet pools with only a few Class I rapids. I am in Dave's boat and he is tired, then offers to let me row for a while and navigate easy stretches of the river. The boat is slow to respond and takes a



lot of muscle, and I spin through the waves avoiding the few rocks still seen in the channel. I manage to keep the boat in a proper line, then as the current slowed down to smooth but fast current, we sit back and enjoy the sunshine with an upstream wind.

We have entered the valley of 100 waterfalls, and take a stretch break at one of the downstream waterfalls and hike a short distance to one that Jim thinks is the most beautiful. It appeared to be about 100 feet high, leaping out of the middle of an amphitheater covered with lush, green mosses, ferns, and nalca, an edible, elephant-eared rhubarb relative, while dozens of side streams trickle and sprinkle down the entire semicircle.



The lower half of the river was run easily; and several miles downstream we made camp. After a long, tough, but satisfying, day, we enjoyed a bonfire with the looming beauty of Volcán Callaqui still dominating our view over the river to the southwest. Tonight, we dined on spaghetti, soup, and pudding, and lay back for another stary evening with the sound of the river just a few yards from the security of our camp. In the distance, under a cloud, is Volcan

Callaqui. Finally, one by one, everyone takes a last look at the Southern Cross, with Alpha and Beta Centauri, and goes to bed.

**DAY 8** During the final few days of our trip, the Bio Bio descended at a low gradient, and flowed gently, sweeping below rolling foothills and scenic farmland. The south side of Callaqui became visible again as the river moved quietly through sandstone curves and under stone bridges reminiscent of past craftsmanship. We had a chance once again to appreciate the Chilean scenery as Volcán Callaqui retreated into the maze of cordillera to the east. The river floodplain around us was rich farmland from sediment laid down by the Bio-Bio's floods, and homesteads once again appeared. The branches of the oaks were filled with the songbirds of the south, the Misto yellow finch, the brightly colored red-breasted starling, and the olive-green Chilean elaenia, the bird whose call resonates over the waters of the Bío-Bío.





We pulled over to a sandy bank for lunch next to a fundos. Within a half hour the land owners husband and wife accompanied by excited children came to see us. We were on of the first norte-americanos to ever visit their farm and we were instant celebrities. They shared in Spanish about their challenges in farming, and we shared our lunch. The father then entertained us as he sang in the haunting accents of the loving tongue several Chilean folk songs. We all thanked him. I had the chance to ride his Pacifino horse, and it was well disciplined but responded to different cues than I was used to with North American quarter horses my brother trained for cow cutting.



Our final night was spent several hours upstream from the takeout at Santa Barbara, highlighted by a light mist rising of the river on a clear sky. A large bonfire was list by late evening, and the Southern Cross made its slow pilgrimage across the sky. The Bío-Bío sang its own soft song nearby, a gentle echo of the thunderous symphony of the Andes that had underscored our sleep for the past eight days. While feasting on the last piece of blackberry cobbler, our guide quoted a Chilean poem written about the Bio Bio. “for miles around, you will hear not other song; I crash to the sea in battle; I roar I the battle with the valley, the sky the rocks. I challenge you to come with me.” The challenge had been met.

*Today as I read my journal written in 1979 on the Bio Bio River, I reflected on the loss of wilderness along the river over almost 40 years ago. Two dams have been built since, flooding the rapids to the end of the canyon. The first is the downstream Ralco Dam. Below the dam, the river skirts a southwestern spur of Callaqui volcano before falling into Pangué Reservoir. Roads are now built connecting the villages, and forests felled for farms. I was so fortunate to have experienced this once wild river as a guest of Richard Bangs, and will never forget the comraderies of the oarsman, several who still remain friends, and the wildness of the Chilean mountains and volcanoes.*

