

## Pikes Peak River Runners

### **Crocs In Costa Rica Rivers Nov 2001**



*By Christina King*

#### **Day 1: November 16, 2001, Friday, Grano de Oro (Grains of Gold)**

*I am prefacing this trip story with the fact that I had two cameras on this trip, one waterproof and one not. Both cameras struggled with the wet and humidity and lighting conditions. Eventually they both died by the end of the trip. A few others on our trip experienced the same issue. I have a few pictures I salvaged or got from others but most were not usable (lens fogging, lighting or blurriness) so I have turned to the internet for images of places we visited other than a few people pictures. In addition, along our journey I purchased a lot of postcards that captured the images we saw (or did not see-as in the volcano exploding-though we did hear it). Lastly, some of these photos are my scanned postcards.*



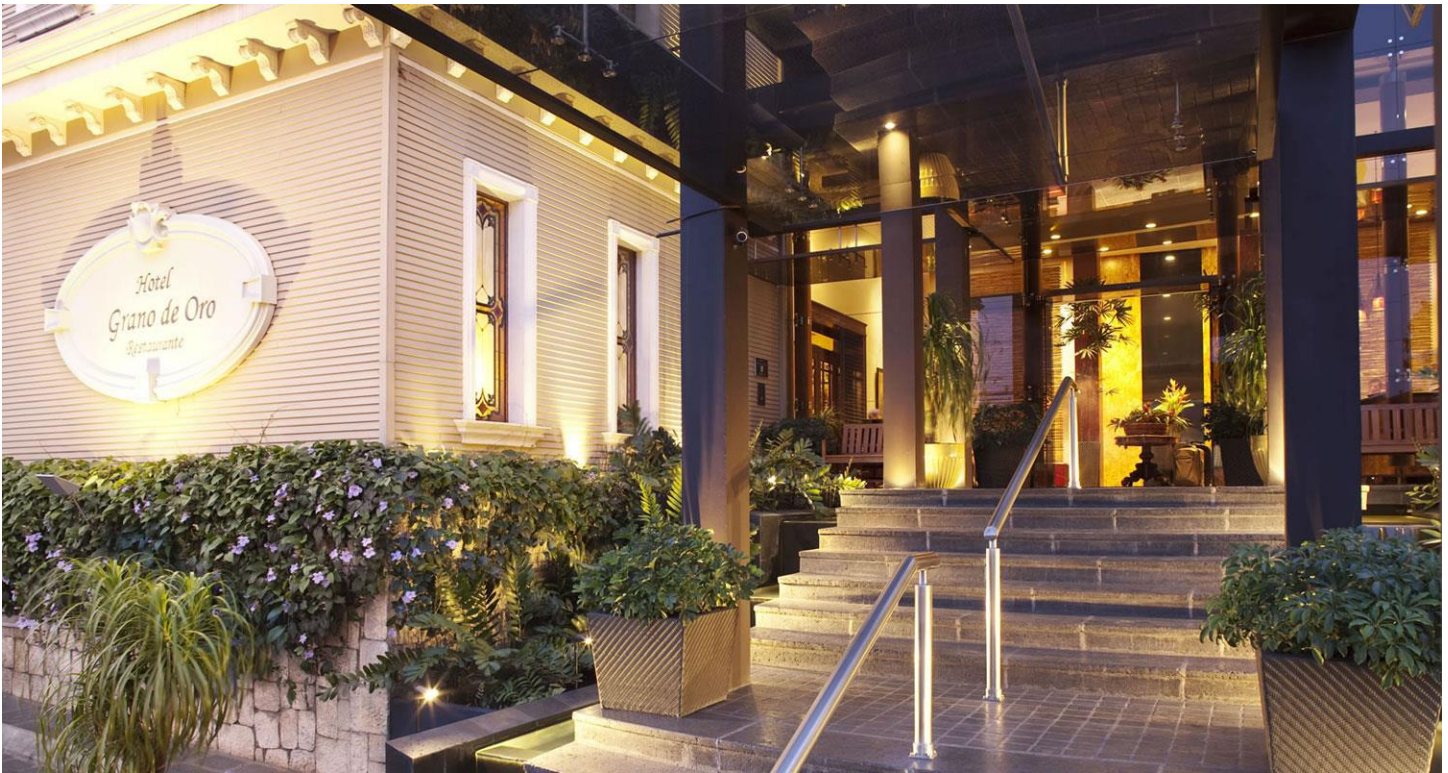
Our journey started in Woodland Park, CO at 5 am. I was whisked away to catch an early flight from Denver to San Jose, Costa Rica via Houston. Our trip really started a year ago, when members of the Pikes Peak River Runners club decided to plan a trip to Costa Rica. **Trip participants were Jim & Nancy (Cohen) Wason with children, Jessica (12) and Daniel (14), David & Cheryl Conley, Keith Fuqua, and me.** Our group of 8 met in Denver and finally arrived in San Jose at 9 pm. I felt like we were in a "Hurry up and Wait" mode all day. DIA's security lines were a breeze, and we had a lot of wait time in Denver and Houston.

Pre-trip planning: I got a prescription of weekly malaria pills from the doctor and one of the side-affects is hallucinations. I have had vivid dreams of rafting and jungles before, during and after the trip. Malaria pills are

taken 2 weeks prior, during the trip and 3 weeks post trip to combat the effects of contracting malaria via mosquito bites.

The Wason family had arranged to get Costa Rica colones from their bank in Denver. Note: Wait until you get to the country to exchange. US Bank exchange rates are poor. \$100 US dollars = 30,000 colones (Costa Rica's currency). The exchange rate sure did make us feel loaded, though. The Wason family teenagers were already getting Nancy (Mom) to cash travelers checks before we left DIA to fund traveling "essential" items (Star Trek book for Daniel, sunglasses for Jessica). Jim kept trying to persuade Jessica that everything would be cheaper in Costa Rica, but she just was not falling for that excuse. Jim informed us that he brought long underwear, wet suit booties, fleece hat and gloves for our river adventures in Costa Rica. We thought he was crazy, but he felt prepared.

Our flight to San Jose was packed full. When we finally arrived in San Jose, Costa Rica (so did 3 other flights) therefore we had to wait a long time (1 hour) in a slow moving (hot and sweaty) immigration/customs line. We hailed a taxi van big enough for all eight of us and checked into the Grano de Oro hotel (Grains of Gold). I managed to fall asleep quickly (by 11 pm) after hearing an airplane jet engine scream outside our open window (no air conditioning). This hotel was converted from an old home and no two rooms were alike.



## **Day 2: November 17, 2001, Saturday, Arenal Volcano and Tabacon Hot Springs**

The morning started with a rooster crow, rain, and a traditional Costa Rican breakfast of *Calle Pinto* (black beans and rice), fried egg and fried plantains (like a banana). We picked up our rental van and Jim started driving and David was the official navigator. The rest of us squeezed in the van and became unofficial navigators, safety monitors and destination experts. Our first destination was a volcano and hot springs.



## Notes on driving in Costa Rica:

- street signs are poor or non-existent
- directions are invariably two lefts and a right (2 km) spoken in fast Spanish and delivered with a friendly smile
- locals DO NOT want to look at your map
- all roads are very circuitous, rainy, and steep
- drivers play chicken (when passing)
- Max speed 45 mph on curvy roads (or else Cheryl and I get carsick)
- windows must be cracked open enough for fresh air but not too much because of the rain
- gasping too loudly gets the driver irritated
- never believe the directions
- mudslides and rain close roads and bridges
- communication is poor
- locals often do not know the way if you ask for directions too far from their hometown
- sitting backwards in a van is not fun
- teenagers can sit backwards much better than adults
- just because you can get from A to B on a little dirt road does not mean you should try to attempt it
- avoid the potholes (they are big)
- driving the wrong way on a one-way is exciting (especially when we attempt it on the same street twice)
- driving in the rain gets old
- 4-hour drives can turn into 8-hour drives
- more navigators are not necessarily better
- driving after dark is not recommended but we did it anyway (we still do not recommend it)



We stopped for lunch in a small town called Zarcero and walked through the local Topiary maze park, filled with hedges trimmed in the shape of animals and interesting shapes. We enjoyed a traditional Costa Rica lunch of Arroz con Pollo (Rice and Chicken) and delicious refrescos (blenderized fruit juice drinks). Costa Rican fruit is wonderful especially the pineapple, unbelievably sweet. Cheryl and I tried the papaya every day but never did develop a taste for it. We finally reached Tabacon Hot Springs late in the afternoon





and soaked in the hot springs until dark. It rained continuously but we did not let that stop us from enjoying ourselves. The volcano was covered with rain clouds and we never did see it but did hear it explode.

Each of us has a vocabulary of about 75 Spanish words with David being the most fluent. That means in theory our group vocabulary should be about 600 words. Despite our efforts (and they were continuous) we communicated poorly in Spanish and struggled along. Residents of San Jose and workers at the hotels know English well but once you get into the countryside, English speakers (other than tourists) are few. I know our grammar was atrocious but at least we tried.

Tabacon Hot Springs were the most beautiful volcanic hot springs I have experienced. The hot springs featured numerous pools of varying temperatures, quiet pools, waterfalls, cascades, deep and shallow pools, a water slide, and a sunken pool. The landscaping was wonderfully architected. At night they shine lights on some of the lush vegetation and the wild jungle plants look bewitching. I brushed against a plant during our soaks and end up with a blistered rash on my arm (stings similar to nettles). The rash heals in a few days. Our hotel is lovely, and I listen to the bugs and birdcalls later that night.





### Day 3: November 18, 2001, Sunday, Canopy Tree climb

Last night the power went off for 3 hours and we listened to a loud generator until 6 am. I decide to soak in a volcanic hot pool before breakfast and during breakfast we see our first coatimundi (cross between a raccoon and rat). Tourists feed it fruit from our outdoor breakfast verandah. Before you know it the coatimundi is begging from everyone. During my early morning soak in the rain and low clouds, I hear a loud explosion. At first, I think, must be a construction sound, then I comprehend that this is the active Arenal Volcano. At least I heard it since I cannot see it because of the rain and clouds.



At 8 am we begin our tree canopy tour (climbing in ropes and harnesses high in the jungle trees). We have 5 guides that help us clip in and take us through the trees. What a fun morning! Once I get past the first steep staircase and the narrow ladder I am feeling much better about this adventure. During my entire time climbing the ladder, I chant under my breath, "Don't look down, don't look down". The narrow ladder only allowed one foot in at a time. I realized about halfway up that there was no way I was going to climb down (that would entail

looking down) so I might as well continue upward. What had I gotten myself into?! Once I got to the tree platform approximately 50 feet in the air I felt better. Then I faced my first zip line (Tyrolean Traverse) to the next tree. I initially thought I would have to bungee jump or leap off the platform. Fortunately, they explained that all I had to do was sit down in my harness and lift my feet and start sliding down the line to the next tree, then brake when I reach the next platform. Daniel came zipping onto the first platform and managed to kick me and knock our guide to the





side. We kidded him a little and the next time he nailed a perfect landing. Since only a few of us fit on the platforms at a time we moved in stages from platform to platform with the guides leading the way. This was the absolute best part of the tree tour. We also rappelled and climbed around in the trees, but zipping was the best! Muy fantastico! I would do it again in a minute.

Note to self: put bug spray on before doing the tree climbing, this is one of the buggiest parts of our trip. Monkeys do not like the rain either and they curled up in balls high up in the trees. I never saw the monkeys swinging from tree to tree. Bugs in general were not that bad on the trip but it was buggy at dawn and dusk.



After the tree canopy tour, we drove to the Arenal National Park area and hiked a lava fields trail. It was very muddy (slick) and wet. The lava boulders were hard to walk on, but the jungle and lake background made a spectacular backdrop. The pumice lava rock is light and friable but rough and difficult to walk through. After seeing a brief look at the Arenal volcano base the clouds closed in again and the rain increased. After returning for lunch at the hotel some of us soaked in the hot springs and others signed up for spa massages. I felt like my feet got a free mudpack massage during our hike and passed on the massages. I got pleasantly wrinkled at the hot springs and returned for some quiet time at the hotel. We enjoyed a wonderful dinner (\$7) at a local restaurant in the tiny town of La Fortuna.

Tabacon Hot Springs has bins for recycling, power cards for rooms, automatic lighting, energy efficient lighting, recycled paper stationary (made from bananas) and shampoos. Costa Rica in general recognizes the value of their national parks and Eco-tourism. Tabacon really emphasizes this philosophy.

Keith visited the hotel lobby before retiring for the night and saw a rat run across the lobby. They told the front desk people, but no one seemed too concerned. Hmmm... Several guests were looking for a lost

companion so maybe their attention was diverted. It turns out that their companion really did disappear (we read the story in the paper on our last day in San Jose).

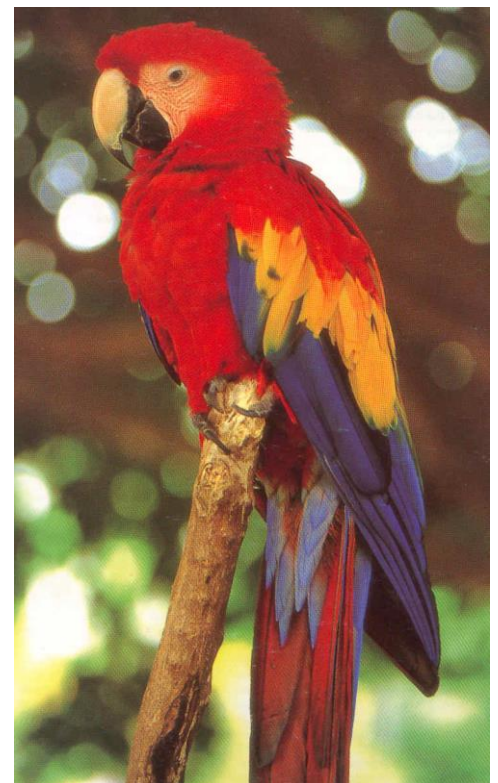
#### **Day 4: November 19, 2001, Monday, Pacific Coast**

More rain (all day and night). My waterproof camera has bit the dust. Too much moisture. The electronics on my camera have gone haywire. I am using my backup disposable panoramic camera. Keith and David's cameras also have moisture problems.

Costa Rica is known as a birder's paradise. More than 800 species are known to visit or live in Costa Rica. If you are an ornithologist, please do not read this next section. I am NOT a birder but enjoy looking at birds.

These are the types of birds I have seen:

- Big
- Tiny
- multi-colored
- squawking
- bright beaked
- gangly
- soaring
- birds that eat dead things (a.k.a. vultures)
- pink
- spoon-billed
- hook-billed
- Scarlet Macaws
- Toucan's
- long-legged
- humming
- spearing
- etc..... I think you get the point. Lots of birds!



I walked down to see the monkeys again (balled up in the trees) but they were gone. I visited a vendor selling interesting wooden gourds, wooden bead/seed necklaces and facemasks from indigenous Indians who live in the jungle far away. After breakfast we drove to the La Fortuna waterfall (another ratty, dirt road with bad directions) and hiked the many steep steps down to the bottom of the waterfall. The force from the waterfall is stupendous.





It sprays a mist on everyone and is deafening. After hiking the waterfall, we left for our 4-hour ride to the Pacific Coast. Guess what, it took us 8 hours! See *Notes on driving in Costa Rica* paragraph early in this story for the reasons why. Daniel's driving quote of the trip, "2 KM sure does take a long time on this trip".

We arrived at the Pacific Coast (Punta Leona) after dark and managed to get lost finding our condo but at least we avoided making roadkill out of opossums on the road. We ate dinner at 9 pm and cranked the AC in our room up to high. It is hotter and more humid on the coast.

#### **Day 5: November 20, 2001, Tuesday, Pacific Coast**

We awoke to a partially clear morning with no rain! We are up early for a Rio Tarcoles river adventure this morning. I did not realize there were crocodiles living in this river before we agreed on this river trip. We saw Scarlet Macaws (look like parrots but are an endangered species), iguanas, Jesus Christ lizards (they walk on top of the water) and lots of crocs. None of us dangled arms or legs over the side after seeing the crocs (the largest was about 15 feet long). Costa Ricans swim in the river during the day. They say that the crocs only feed at

night (the same time the poisonous snake "fer de lance" roams the jungle). You could not pay me a million

dollars to swim this river! I never wandered around in the jungle after dark either. The river empties into an estuary (mangrove swamp) and finally the Pacific. I asked if the crocs go in the ocean and our guide said, "only the big ones do". Later in the day I did not find this very comforting as I was swimming in the murky Pacific wondering if every floating log looked like a croc.





Since we had a condo, we picked up some groceries and enjoyed the rest of the day at the beach/pool. In fact, we looked like the lounging iguanas perched in the trees around our condo pool. Coatimundi's are back, so we keep an eye on them. They are quite the scavengers. It clouded up at noon and rained off and on the rest of the day.

**Day 6: November 21, 2001, Wednesday, Sunset Pacific cruise**



Second and last day of morning sun for the trip. We spent the morning checking out the surfing/tourist town of Jaco. We enjoyed a leisurely day with a long lunch and then a trip to a luxurious resort for a sunset cruise on the Pacific. We explored the marina and I even got myself invited on a well-appointed yacht. The owner ordered me to take off my shoes before boarding. I must have looked scruffy. Very opulent, carpeted, 2-bedroom/2 bath, king size bed, satellite 25-inch tv/vcr, sophisticated radar and GPS system, immaculate galley with teak counters, all the amenities. The retired Canadian owner flies to Panama, picks up the yachts, sails them to Costa Rica and sells them. This yacht is his personal boat. He also shared with me that the boat next to him called "*Day Money*" was the famous country singer, George Strait's, boat, and he typically visits during the month of February. I think I could get used to this.

We got on our boat and motored out into the Pacific towards the Nicoya gulf. Daniel landed a large tuna, and we enjoyed a beautiful sunset. During the boat ride, Daniel noticed something dark fall off the front of the boat, I commented that, "maybe it was a fish". Turns out it was probably Keith's wallet (without his passport) falling overboard. Fortunately, he only lost about \$100 and credit cards/ license. As we were cruising, I noticed that the entire coast is covered with jungle, which comes right to the beach lined with palm trees. In general,



all the rivers and waterfalls we have seen are brim full from the heavy rains. If you want to run rivers in Costa Rica the best time is to come during the shoulder season between rainy and dry. Rainy: rivers are too high to run, Dry: rivers are too low to run. This year the rainy extended later and as a result the rivers are high which make the ocean murky.

### **Day 7: November 22, 2001, Thursday, Thanksgiving**

Up at 5 am for a 3-hour nature/birdwalk with a guide. Not a typical Thanksgiving Day.

#### **Things we saw:**

- Kapok tree-core of trunk used for the old-type Mae West lifejackets (rafters used them in the early 1980's).
- Smelled and saw clove, anise (licorice), bengay, Panama Hat Trees
- Millipedes that emitted poisonous Hydrogen Cyanide gas (smelled just like almonds, yes that means I smelled it....)
- 2 pairs of Scarlet Macaws
- Macaw nests
- Old and new growth jungle forest
- 400-year-old big tree (Ceibo)

I tricked Cheryl with the rubber snake trick. We are having fun with the fake snake that I brought along. This rubber snake is making the rounds, all western rivers in the US, Peru, Australia, and now Costa Rica. Left for San Jose and turned in our rental van. We spend the night repacking our clothes into plastic bags for our upcoming 2-day river adventure on the Rio Pacuare. I kind of forgot that today was Thanksgiving, but I am thankful for this trip.

### **Day 8: November 23, 2001, Friday, Rio Pacuare**

Whitewater! The drive to the Caribbean side of Costa Rica is through more rainforest (i.e., rain) and lots of waterfalls. Our shuttler and outfitter (Rios Tropicales) picks us up on time and we drive to the river put-in eating breakfast at their headquarters on the way. We cross the Reventazon river on the way to the Pacuare, which is also a whitewater river.

The river road is a typical dirt, narrow, steep, rutty river put-in road. I am glad we are not driving it. The boats are being rigged at the flooded put-in and we have a safety talk, put on our helmets and lifejackets, and push off. The first day is just Class III but the waves are big. We meet a guide that spent the summer in Buena Vista, Colorado running our home rivers. Small world.... Another guide spends the summer running California rivers. Our guide Christian says that if the river does not come down by the next day we will have to hike out. The last 3 days have been too high to run. I ask if there are any crocs and Christian says no but there are piranhas. My eyes got big and then he said he was just kidding. A few other boaters have joined our group and we start our trip with 3 paddleboats, 2 oar boats to carry our food and gear and 2 safety/rescue kayakers. Keith, Daniel, Cheryl, Jim, and I make up our boat with our guide Christian. Christian runs a few rapids sideways in the big waves for fun and then proceeds to run into a mid-river rock. Keith and I just looked at each other and wondered. I guess Christian never saw the rock. As a result, Daniel fell out and was picked up by another boat. We have our first swimmer. I have my reservations about Christian, and he says that "Those two (Keith and I)



are very serious". It is hard to be a boatman and not run the boat, but Keith and I do what Christian says. We do not stop for lunch on the river due to rain.







We arrive at our jungle lodge and eat lunch there. It looks like a Swiss Family Robinson scene. We unload the boats and carry everything up to the lodge and/or way above high water. Our rooms have wooden cots with mattresses. We have a group shower area (cold water), outhouse toilet and minimal electric lightbulbs (from a small hydroelectric generator). We use candles and flashlights at night. Waterfalls abound. The Class III rapids today were big due to the high water. The trees on the river's edge have their trunks submerged, plus the rapids are not pool/drop and more continuous than we are used to in the US. Our run today was only 6 miles, but the morning was taken up with the long drive to the put-in. Everyone who has run the Pacuare before told us that the water was warm. I guess it was but with all the rain it felt cooler than I anticipated. I was not cold and the showers felt good but I guess until you experience it you never know what to expect.

After getting settled, we take a jungle hike in the slippery mud, heat, waterfall, and trees. We play in the waterfalls and paint Jessica and Daniel's faces using colored mud. The rubber rattlesnake made another appearance at dinner tonight and scared everyone including the guides. Everyone had a lot of fun at dinner and many screams resulted from the snake game. The atmosphere of candles, dark jungle and night jungle noises contributed to the scare affect. Johnny's (our safety kayaker) family (20 brothers and sisters) caretakes the lodge and are responsible for the buildings, jungle growth and paths. The guides cook chicken dinner, and we retire early. Our room was hot and stuffy, but I was not about to make a late-night visit to the outhouse (just in case of real snakes). I expected screens or netting but the bugs came right on in. The cracks between the wood were quite substantial (bugs easily flew in and out) and everything smelled mildewy and musty.

#### **Day 9: November 24, 2001, Saturday, Cemetery rapid (Upper and Lower Huacas)**

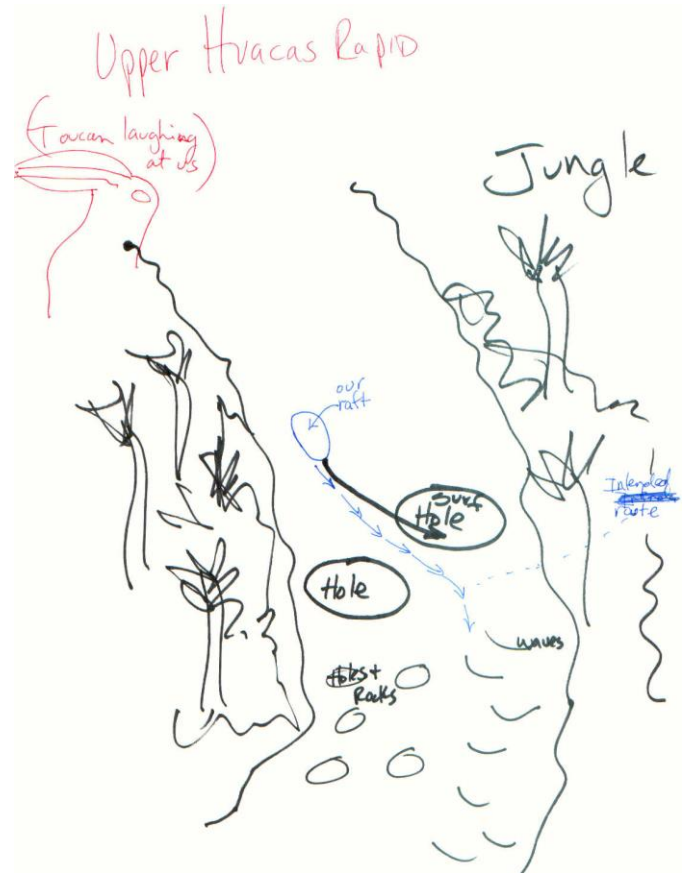
I awoke early to loud bird noises and watched toucans fly up and down the river corridor. First, I glanced at our red painted marker rock. If the water would have been above this mark, we would have had to walk out. Yesterday it was above, but today it is right on the mark. Yeah!!! We can continue down river on the boats rather than hiking out. What a relief!

I put on my still soaking wet clothes, nothing dried overnight. We ate breakfast and loaded up the boats again. We ran a few rapids including our first Class IV. Christian seems hesitant and has other boats run ahead of us. We stop and hike up to a big waterfall then continue down river. Kayakers intersperse themselves among the rafts and the oar boats run first. We run several more Class IV's and I wonder about Christian's river reading ability. He seems to know how he is supposed to run the rapid, but the other guides hand signals the run to Christian. Keith and I have difficulty hearing Christian's commands from the back of the boat and tell him to yell them out. I could not read the rapids as we dropped in. In the middle of some rapids Christian

miscalculates some drops and commands us to paddle into holes when I spied a sneak (conservative sneak queen that I am).

#### Upper Huacas (Cemetery rapid):

We paddle into a large hole and surf for a long time. We highside (climb to the highside) and finally pop out of the hole. Remarkably close call! At one point I think to myself, "looks like we might go over). Cheryl grabbed Jim's shorts in a successful effort to stay in the boat and prevent being sucked out. Jim said that he could have cared less that he almost "shot the moon" and was glad to get out of the hole. The blue line was our intended route, but the black line was where we ended up. Then we continue to Lower Huacas rapid.





### Lower Huacas (Cemetery rapid):

Christian is very hesitant and keeps us paddling hard to stay in an eddy above the rapid. Keith and I are pooped by the third round of "paddle hard" commands to stay in the eddy. As we finally enter the rapid, we paddle into a huge hole and it is all over in seconds. Keith and I get washed overboard immediately. I swim the lower part of the rapid (as does Keith) and manage to breathe in the troughs of the waves. I reach my paddle out to Jim and they pull me in. Keith floats further away and swims through more holes and gets picked up by another paddleboat. At least our boat did not flip. After Keith and I fell out, Cheryl said Christian yelled at them to "Paddle harder". All Cheryl could think of was "there are only three of us left". I have no idea what the rapid looked like since I was swimming it. Keith said this swim was harder than his Lava Falls swim in the Grand Canyon several years ago.



I asked Christian when he had flipped last and he said, "last Monday". Christian gets more conservative as the day progresses and the Class IV rapids continue. Lots of continuous paddling. Another paddleboat hits a huge hole at Los Indios rapid and all, but two people fall out. They quickly get back in and we continue. Thank goodness Christian runs conservatively to the left at Los Indios because that hole was huge.

### Christian (our guide): my thoughts

- Hesitant and undecided
- Not paying attention at times
- Inexperienced at high water
- Having fun with us
- Cannot see well.
- Cannot read the water well.
- I am judging too harshly.
- He is fine, it is my problem.
- I am being too critical.
- I probably would have flipped us if I had been running the boat.
- All the above
- Combination of the above
- None of the above

- Get over it Christina!

The river mellowed at the end and we floated through a calm narrow steep sided canyon section called "Dos Montanas" where the Costa Rican Electric company wants to put a dam. This would flood the entire section we ran today and flood the jungle for many miles. I hope they do not do it.

We ran 12 miles today and thoroughly enjoyed it. I would prefer not to swim Lower Huacas rapid but as they say, "stuff happens". We take the shuttle back to our hotel and enjoy

dinner with a one of our rafting cohorts, Todd Julien. Todd and Jim are the only ones with working cameras by the end of our trip and we promise to keep in touch and share pictures. Todd is a boater from Arizona so we might meet him on the Salt next spring. Tomorrow we return to Denver.



#### **Day 10: November 25, 2001, Sunday, "Pura Vida"**

A typical Costa Rican saying is "pura vida" which translates literally to pure life but really means enjoy the moment and life. We enjoyed the trip despite the rain and hope the rivers last forever.

