

Down the Rio Urique of Mexico

The Rio Urique rises on the plateau of the Sierra Madre Occidental west of Chihuahua, Mexico. The rivers of this mountain range cut deep canyons in the volcanic cap rock of the plateau forming an intricate maze of canyons called *barrancas*. The canyon of the Rio Urique forms one of the most extensive barranca systems and is often called the Grand Canyon of Mexico. This is the land of the Tarahumara Indians, renowned as cross-country runners. The deep canyons and remote plateaus provide the Tarahumaras with the isolation they desire. Only a few mining endeavors have penetrated the rugged canyons and logging is done on the more accessible regions of the plateau. The canyons are the winter home of the Indians who live on the plateau in the summer.

The Rio Urique begins near the town of Norogachi and flows northwest. Its canyon does not become steep and narrow until it reaches the point where the road from Creel to Guachochi crosses on the Basiquare (Tarahumara for sash) Bridge. Downstream from the bridge the canyon is wild and deep. From the air it looks like a jagged slash in the earth until it reaches the area of La Purissima mine where the canyon widens. This upper portion of the canyon is called the Barranca del Cobre (Copper Canyon). Below the mine the river turns sharply southwest, and its canyon is wide and deep until it narrows for its final run to the mining town of Urique. This portion is called the Barranca del Urique. From Urique the canyon widens again and the river flows across the plains to the Sea of Cortez on the west coast of Mexico.

Our expedition in the spring of 1975 did not have an auspicious history. The previous fall our attempt to follow the river from Divisadero to Urique was abandoned because of flooding after a heavy rain. It did give us a chance to try our rather unique river gear, namely a waterproof (hopefully) pack strapped in the bottom of a one-man vinyl raft. The outfit could be rafted by lying prone and paddling with the arms or could be quickly converted into a heavy, cumbersome backpack for portaging. A crash helmet, windbreaker, windpants, and Vietnam combat boots with wick-dry socks completed our outfit. We hoped that the low river

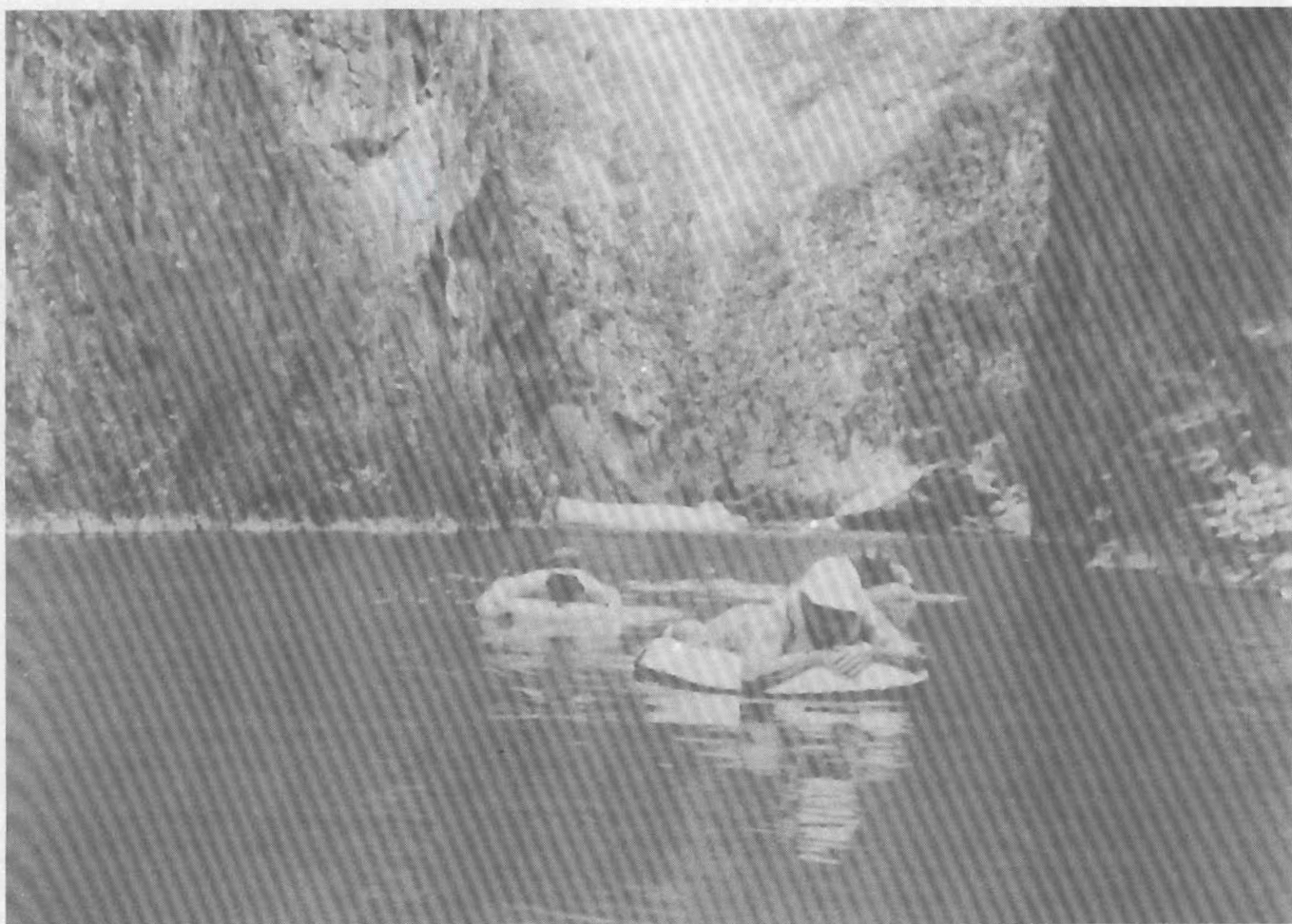
in the spring would allow us to achieve what we had failed to do the previous fall. We planned on a 10-day trip through the 80-mile canyon.

After a rather exciting trip from Albuquerque by car, bus, and flatbed railroad car, we arrived in Creel late at night. The next morning we hired an old logging truck with very bald tires to take the seven of us to the Basiquare bridge. To our knowledge no one had successfully run the river from Basiquare Bridge to Urique in one trip. Several parties had run the river from Divisadero to Urique in small inflatables and one party had tried to run the upper portion of the river in large river rafts. They had had to be rescued.

We reached the bridge at noon and after lunch we launched our rafts and floated down an easy stretch of river. A logging truck on the road above honked a farewell. The river cut deeply into the canyon bed and an easy portage brought us to a waterfall and deep pool. On the canyon wall was a painted sign indicating that Cross tours had passed this way in 1963. That was the river expedition that had had to be rescued. After cavorting in the pool and under the falls, we camped for our first night in the canyon.

The next morning the river was cold (54°F) and the canyon was dark. After a late start we quickly passed through narrow passages which would prevent our return up the river. The expedition then turned into a succession of floats, route finding, and portages over and through great boulder fields which make the river impassable at higher water. The canyon was deep and narrow with no sign of Indian habitation. Occasionally we saw a faint trail.

The water was cold in the morning and we delayed starting as long as possible. In order to warm up, we occasionally stopped to hug rocks warmed by the early morning sun. The going was so slow that we continued on the river as late as we could even though the heavy going was very tiring. Several large side canyons with streams and several hot springs provided variety. Finally, we encountered a manmade dam and we knew that the mine was near. Soon afterwards, while making a portage we surprised several people crushing ore with hammers and pulverizing it using an old Spanish-type



water-driven mill called an *arrastre*. They were after gold, although the ore also contained lead and copper. It had taken us four days to cover the 12–15 river miles from the Basiquare Bridge to La Purissima mine.

At the mine two members of our party decided that they had had enough and they hiked out the mine trail to the rim where they hired horses to take them the 20 miles to the main road. We had lunch at the mine, surrounded by very shy children. Although the layout was elaborate, with several concrete and stone buildings, the miners said that they were only working for themselves and no ore was being packed out.

Below the mine the Urique ran fast and smooth through a broad valley flanked with Indian farms. The Indians live in rock huts and shelters. They farm the land and herd goats which they seldom eat. Two days from the mine we suddenly came to the narrow side canyon—Creel Canyon—where the river turned sharply to the west. We met several parties who had hiked down to the river from Divisadero. They were amazed to see us. Past Divisadero we could see a platform from which the tourists can look down into the canyon and see the river 5,000 feet below. We passed the point where we had been flooded out the previous fall. The river was now so low that we had to hike along on gravel bars for long

distances. The water temperature was now a comfortable 65°F. Late in the day we reached the San Miguel Mine which we had visited the previous fall.

On our previous visit the mine was being run by two Americans. They hired Tarahumara Indians for 30 pesos a day (\$2.40 U.S.) to mine the ore, rich in silver and lead, which then was packed out of the canyon on mules to the railroad. Now the mine was closed with only Juan, the ex-cook, there as caretaker.

From San Miguel the river ran swiftly between narrow cliffs below Picacho del Aguila (Eagle Peak). After several hours we reached the cable crossing to Guageybo, a farming community on the south rim of the canyon. Most of the miners at the San Miguel Mine came from there.

Late in the day we entered “The Narrows” where the Urique is blocked by gigantic boulders and the overhanging walls give the canyon the appearance of a cave. We portaged around the boulders and ran several long rapids where our hard hats were useful. By this time we had stopped trying to survey what was ahead and just ran the rapids, blindly trusting to Lady Luck. The canyon walls were steep and there was no place to camp for what seemed to be a very long time. We spent the night on a small beach and several people had wet sleeping bags.

The next morning the canyon opened up and about noon we passed the Rio Hondo, a deep canyon running to the south. That afternoon an upstream wind made progress difficult, but in the evening we left the narrow canyon and camped in a broad valley which we could see extended far downstream.

The next morning we left most of our rafts on the river's edge to be found by some perplexed Indian and began hiking. An Indian told us that the town of Guadalupe was near and that there would be an Easter celebration there that afternoon. After a spirited game of basketball with some local children at the school we watched a pageant which we later learned depicted the expulsion of Judas from the church. A high trail took us the six miles to Urique just after dark.

In Urique we found that the bar was closed for Easter but we were served behind closed doors. Urique had no hotel or cafe so we ate in a private home. The dirt streets are only for people and animals, but the houses are neat and white-washed. We slept on a sandbar just outside of town and listened to dogs bark all night.

The next day we hiked downstream to the town of Guapalayna where a big Easter celebration was held. A priest from Urique was registering births in front of the church when we arrived. He left before the Easter pageant began at dusk. It consisted of a parade around the town with stops at the stations of the cross. At each station an elaborate flag twirling ceremony was performed. This pageant was accompanied by the famous "Painted Indians" of the Tarahumara. These painted Indians apparently had a license to disrupt without retribution. They were painted white and black and, during the afternoon, had entertained by dancing to the music of the Tarahumara violin. The use of the violin by the Tarahumara Indians extends far into the past, perhaps to the Spanish Conquistadors. The Painted Indians got very drunk and one who liked having his picture taken tried to teach us Tarahumara.

From Guapalayna we hiked back to Urique, then out of



the canyon by the Urique mine to the road on the plateau above. The road led to the lumber town of La Mesa where we met some girls on holiday from Cuauhtemoc. They invited us to dance and then offered to give us a ride in their bus to the railroad station at Bahuichivo the next day. A long day by bus, train, and car got us back to Albuquerque.

The breakdown of our river times was:	
Basiquiare Bridge to La Purissima Mine	4 days
La Purissima Mine to Creel Canyon	2 days
Creel Canyon to San Miguel Mine	1½ days
San Miguel Mine through the narrows to the end of the wild river portion of the canyon	2 days

—Don Mattox

