

INTERNATIONAL PADDLING

BLIND ADVENTURER ERIK WEIHENMAYER KAYAKS BIGGEST RIVER IN MEXICO

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ROCKY CONTOS

“OK, RIGHT A little. Straight ahead. Forward. You’ve got about two seconds before the fall. Forward. Just about on it now. Now keep it straight!”

Erik Weihenmayer does exactly as I suggest and plops over a six-foot falls! I am pleased to see him hit the foam pile straight on and manage to stay upright after the fall.

“Yeahh!!!” We all cheer. Very cool.

I ask, “Do you want to do it again, maybe run the other line?”

“Yeah,” he replies. “That was super fun!”

I didn’t know what to think, months before, when Rob Raker contacted me about arranging a special expedition down Río Usumacinta in early 2012. He and co-guide Chris Wiegand were interested in the trip as a means to help prepare their friend, Erik Weihenmayer, for kayaking

the Grand Canyon. But Erik is no ordinary paddler. He’s blind! That really caught my attention. I wondered, “How can a person kayak without being able to see?” I always believed that a kayaker has to respond constantly to what’s right in front of his eyes. I didn’t really know if it was possible. I thought, “Maybe he’s not totally blind and can see enough to react to waves, holes, obstacles and banks?” Boy was I in for a surprise.

Doing a bit more research on Erik, I was impressed at how accomplished he was. His main sport for two decades had been rock climbing and mountaineering, something he took to the top—literally! He successfully climbed Denali, Aconcagua, Kilimanjaro, Everest, and eventually the remaining Seven Summits. He authored several books, including “*Touch the Top of the World*,” an inspiring autobiography about his background, blindness, and climbing expeditions. After reading it, I realized that he indeed was completely blind—in fact, both his eyeballs are prosthetics. Erik has been featured in several documentary films, as well as a movie in which he is portrayed by an actor. Erik is also a motivational speaker who delivers a message that everyone

should strive to be the best they can and overcome adversity.

Erik’s passion for adventure and desire to live life to the fullest fueled his desire to take up kayaking. Two years ago his climbing friend Rob—who is also a kayaker—offered to teach him a bit. Since then, Erik has gotten a roll down, paddled a few rivers in the Colorado area, and built skills to a Class II-III level. Last year Erik and Rob brought onto their team Chris Wiegand, an ex-Olympic runner and paddler who is a superb instructor and guide. The team set the goal for Erik to successfully kayak through the Grand Canyon. In preparation for the Grand, Rob and Chris were looking for big, warm-water rivers to paddle in the winter.

The Usumacinta is one such river. Rob was intrigued by the info about the river that I had put up on the SierraRios website [www.SierraRios.org], and especially by how I described the river as “a classic not to be missed.” Indeed, the main Usumacinta was probably the most popular raft trip in all of Mexico and Central America in the 1970s through early 1990s. Eighty-eight miles long and passing through sparsely inhabited jungle along the border between

The amazing Playa Grande near El Cayo reminded some of our group of being on a big tropical Caribbean beach.



Chiapas and Guatemala, the Usumacinta invited large raft expeditions to spend a week plying its warm waters, camping on huge beaches, enjoying amazing wildlife, visiting major Mayan ruins, and navigating a handful of rapids. The river lost popularity by the mid-1990s after a string of armed robberies took place, perpetrated by unscrupulous individuals taking refuge in the jungles along the border. Only a few trips had reportedly occurred in the decade leading up to 2009, when I solo-paddled the river to determine the security situation. I learned that all the banditos had been routed years before and the Guatemalan military was stationed midway downstream to keep the area secure. I was anxious to return to the river again with others, so I had been planning a raft-support trip in December 2011 and was looking for participants.

Rob was particularly curious about the difficulty and suitability of the river for preparing Erik to kayak the Grand Canyon. Although the Usumacinta only has at most half a dozen solid Class III rapids, the innumerable places with shifting eddy lines and whirlpools make the river one of the best places to get comfortable with big water features. Because of this, the river



Despite being completely blind, Erik Weihenmayer has climbed the seven summits and now is turning to kayaking – here on Río Usumacinta in southern Mexico.

was actually the perfect level of challenge for Erik. Rob was also glad to hear about the flexibility that I would allow on the trip. He, Chris, and Erik had done a typical commercial trip through Desolation Canyon in spring, but felt inhibited by raft guides who placed too many restrictions on where and when they could paddle. Rob wrote, "To be honest, we are much less interested in a polished commercial trip

and much more interested in a unique and interesting adventure."

Soon trip plans materialized. We would have three rafts to support a group of up to 14 paddlers. I had told Erik and Rob, "You can invite others along too. The river is easy enough that even novice paddlers can join the trip and paddle most of the river in kayak or inflatable kayak. In the tougher parts, they can hop on the raft." Erik was



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quick to find half a dozen friends and family members to join us. They included Skyler Williams, right-hand man for Erik in most of his business dealings, Erik's brother Eddie Weihenmayer, Erik's friend from college Joe Glynn, and the three "Modern Gypsies," budding kayakers eager for more adventure [John Post, Eric Bach, and Taylor Filasky: www.TheModernGypsies.com].

The Gypsies were an interesting bunch. Their name was coined on the adventure TV show "Expedition Impossible" that took place in Morocco the previous spring, in which they had competed against 12 other three-person teams, including Erik's team, "No Limits." For the television competition, participants trekked through dune-covered deserts, rode camels and horses, climbed snow-capped mountains, and rappelled cliffs. Each week, they could be seen

canyoneering gorges, exploring caves, rafting rivers, and solving puzzles. By the final stage, only three teams remained, including No Limits and the Gypsies. The Gypsies ended up edging out No Limits by a bit, and took home the ultimate prize—three Ford Explorers and \$150,000 cash. As an incredible testament to the personalities on the two teams, despite being in neck-and-neck competition near the end, they came out of it all as friends ready to work together in tackling future adventures. [Each of the episodes can be streamed for free at www.hulu.com]

I watched at the put-in as Rob and Chris shouted directions to Erik on where to steer his kayak. The system seemed to work well. Erik pulled up into an eddy behind a rock and was stable. Chris continued to give him and others kayak instructions throughout

the day as we paddled the 20 kilometers of flatwater to Yaxchilán. This nice warm-up section gave everyone a chance to adjust to their kayaks, practice rolls, and get a little workout. The following morning, my Chiapanecan co-guide Alejandro Quiroga led our group through the classic Maya ruins of a city that reached its zenith in the 8th century. We walked among impressive temples and stelae while hearing about the former kings such as Escudo Jaguar. Yaxchilán is a popular tourist destination, but almost all visitors arrive by motorized lancha from Frontera. An advantage we enjoyed was being at the ruins early enough to have them mostly to ourselves before the typical tourist crowds arrived.

The Usumacinta was running unusually high. Even though we were on the river during the dry season, just before our trip



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atypical storms had sent the flow up to about 200,000 cfs. By the time Erik and his crew arrived and we got on the river at Frontera, the flow had come down to about 100,000 cfs and would slowly drop over the next 7 days to about 60,000 cfs. This still was two to three times the typical January flows and would make for some extra excitement downstream. Although in many ways the river is nicer at the lower levels—more beaches are exposed, the water turns an aqua marine clear color, and additional wave features appear in some of the rapids—the higher water can be fun too, and make the group’s progress downstream a bit faster. I particularly appreciated this last point, as this group was so relaxed and social that the added boost in speed would help us keep our schedule throughout the trip.

As we drifted downstream, we heard loud, raspy, breathy metallic screams in the jungle, which conjured up visions of scary monsters or prehistoric dinosaurs. Actually, the sounds emanated from howler monkeys, small primates with one of the loudest and most unusual calls of any animal in the world. Erik, who has a heightened sense of hearing due to his blindness, was particularly intrigued with this auditory delight. We would continue to hear howlers periodically throughout the trip. In fact, the name “Usumacinta” literally means “Sacred Monkey River,” referring to the howler monkey’s sacred status in Mayan culture and to the river corridor traversing a jungle area with the greatest density of the primates in all of Central America. Howlers weren’t the only



Chris Wiegand and Rob Raker shout instructions to Erik telling him where to paddle on the river.

interesting wildlife we spotted. We also encountered spider monkeys, coatimundis, agoutis, toucans, crested guans, white hawks, giant *Bufo marinus* toads, and American crocodiles on the trip. Eddie even caught some tilapia fishing at one of our camps.

At Chicozapote, the first Class II-III rapid, I waited below in the raft to see how the kayakers fared. The whirlpools and eddy lines were particularly tough at the high flows and would grab kayakers in unpredictable ways, causing flips. I watched and cheered as Chris and Rob guided Erik through without flipping. Then came the Gypsies, two of whom flipped, but fortunately self-rescued by executing beautiful Eskimo rolls. It was getting late and we hadn’t made the intended progress for the day, so I stopped the group at a small beach to discuss. “We can press on into dusk and make it 15 kilometers to the huge amazing beach camp by El Cayo, or we can make do here. There aren’t any more rapids in this next section, so I think we’d all be OK if we continue.” Erik was a little dubious about pushing on, but everyone else in the group wanted to, so Erik

Howler monkeys hang from the trees at the Frontera Corozal put-in for Río Usumacinta.

acquiesced. Someone said, “Erik, it won’t make a difference to you—you’re always paddling in the dark!” He retorted, “Yeah, but this will be like the blind leading the blind!” We all laughed, then continued on as a brilliant full moon rose to light our way. After some beers, a meal of tamales, and a short time by the campfire, we all turned in.

Two days downstream, after we had stopped briefly at the Arroyo Jerusalén village, explored the unrestored ruins of Piedras Negras, and run the Cola del Diablo rapids, we came up to the amazing site of Cascada Busiljá, where a small tributary river enters the Usumacinta in a spectacular travertine 30-foot waterfall. I mentioned to Chris, “I don’t think anyone has ever kayaked over the falls here.” He looked longingly at running the upper falls, and I spotted a potential line over the lower one as well, made safer due to the higher water level in the main river. Even though we didn’t kayak the falls, several of the guys did a 30 ft. jump into the grotto below the upper falls. Unfortunately, Rob twisted his back in the process, reigniting an injury he sustained recently climbing in Cuba. He stretched out on the raft for the rest of the afternoon, and fortunately after some muscle relaxants and ibuprofen his condition improved and he was kayaking again the following day.

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Erik and I paddled an IK down one of the lower Chocoljá falls before Erik tackled it three times in his own hardshell kayak.

The climax whitewater action is packed into the last three days of the trip. We paddled up the Río Chocoljá, a tributary river running with about 2000 cfs of turquoise-colored water, and did a short hike up along the bank to kayak down the final five rapids, including one six-foot travertine waterfall. Hopping in a kayak, it was my turn to guide Erik for a while. First I took him over the falls in the tandem IK so he could get a feel for what a small drop was like. The next three times I guided him over the falls with each of us in hard shell kayaks. He didn't flip at all, and returned to the bank smiling to the cheers of onlookers. In fact, everyone in kayaks had a great time there, though Taylor took an aggressive line on the far left and pitoned hard enough to push his kayak nose in. The other Chocoljá rapids offered more typical Class III challenges with some maneuvering required, which was great practice for everyone.

Soon we were back on the Usumacinta and tackling the biggest rapids in the Gran Cañon de San José. First up was La Linea, a Grand Canyon-like rapid of Class III to III+ difficulty, with huge waves, haystacks, whirlpools and shifting eddylines. Although there were some flipped kayaks, no one

Just past the Class III La Linea rapid, we entered the imposing Gran Cañon de San José, an incredible gorge that Río Usumacinta courses through.

swam here. Suzy Garren, a friend of mine riding along on my raft, commented, "Awww. It that all? I was expecting more action!" She spoke too soon, as we were about to face quite a bit more action in the main gorge, where limestone walls tower thousands of feet straight up from the river and swirling Class II-III water continues for a few kilometers.

This section is particularly dangerous for swimmers at high flows because it's difficult to stop on the side and the whirlpools often suck swimmers down. Although all the newbie kayakers successfully rolled after

flipping in this section, there were some swims. From the rafts, we could help by righting an IK or pulling a swimmer out of the water, but Rob and Chris did the most rescuing. John ended up having the worst swim. Starting at the bottom of La Linea, he swam a long portion of the gorge, in which he was sucked underwater many times despite wearing a PFD. Chris towed his boat to shore while Rob towed John, but it took many attempts to get him there. At one point, when Rob asked John to let go as they approached a whirlpool, John said, "Don't leave me Rob... I don't have much left." John later was very grateful and gave Rob a hug. Rob also rescued Gypsy Eric near the end of the gorge, towing him over to our sandy beach campsite. Three cheers for Rob!

First thing on our final day we tackled "Whirlpool" rapid, another Class III that is named for the enormous whirlpools that form downstream on the right. Erik received instructions via a headset radio system that was also worn by Chris and Rob. They took him over on the right side but didn't cut quickly enough to get into the safety of the eddy, so I watched with dismay as they all drifted down to the big whirlpools. Fortunately, none of the ephemeral whirlpools emerged to suck



Erik down, and he managed to make it over to the calm eddy fine. More cheers to Erik! Joe and Eddie in the IK, however, went round and round several times in the big swirlies, but also managed to make it through without a swim.

The next gorge section of the Gran Cañon featured two back-to-back huge rapids: San José and San Josecito. Erik opted to try catarafting through instead of kayaking. With Lacey Anderson—one of my co-guides—sitting behind him and directing him on how to row her small cat, they managed to make it through, though they did get caught up on the bottom right by swirlies. After the final “White Wall” rapid and its associated whirlpools, we were all enjoying the calm moving final kilometers of river. Suzy made us sandwiches for lunch on the water, and we arrived at the Boca del Cerro take-out that afternoon. Soon we were back in Palenque enjoying a hearty Mexican meal at the restaurant Las Tinajas.

On the following two days, we visited the ruins of Palenque and then did one more day-trip down Río Shumuljá, which passes by the most spectacular part of the Cascadas Agua Azul. Erik kayaked admirably through the Class III-IV rapids there, though unfortunately he did swim. Although he still



Catarafter Lacey Anderson instructs Erik Weihenmayer how to row, successfully making it through the big Class III San Josecito rapid.

has a lot of learning to do with more on-the-water experience before he will be able to comfortably kayak all of the rapids in the Grand Canyon, I am confident he will be able to complete his goal and I look forward to helping out in the endeavor as another member of Team Weihenmayer.

Rocky Contos, Ph.D., is director of the non-profit conservation organization SierraRios, has paddled nearly every river in Mexico,

is author of the guidebook Mexican Whitewater: Norte, holds first descents on over half of all whitewater rivers in Mexico, and arranges raft support and kayak trips in Mexico and Peru. For more photos and information on future trips down Río Usumacinta, please see the website www.SierraRios.org or contact Rocky [rocky@sierrarios.org]. For more info on Erik, see his website www.touchthetop.com.

