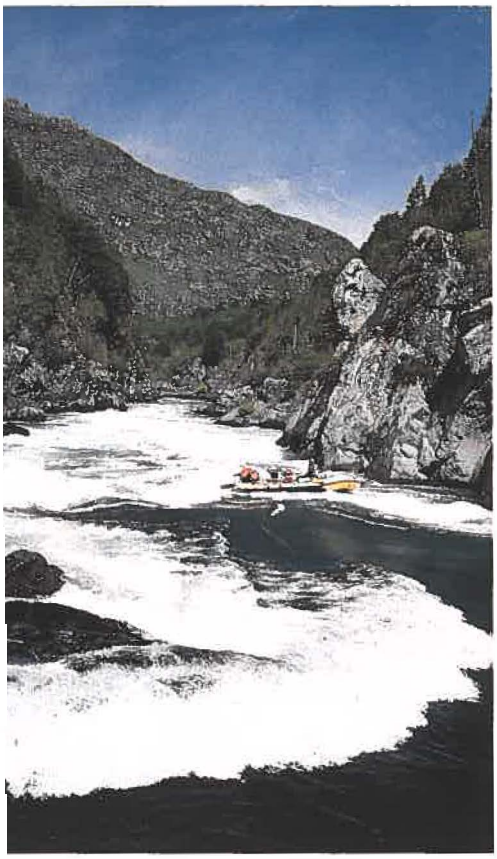
A River Too Far?

Caution is the key when rafting Chile's brawny white water

THE 100-MILE-LONG Futaleufú River begins as an icy trickle high in the Argentine Andes and picks up speed and volume as it roars across the Chilean border toward the Pacific, cutting through high canyons and zigzagging through steep granite cliffs. Majestic, translucent and little known outside southern Chile, the Fu is, at any level, in any season, considered by knowledgeable kayakers and white-water rafters to be among the toughest, most powerful and potentially most dangerous rivers in the world. Successfully navigated by raft only a few times and possibly fated to be dammed for hydroelectric power, the Fu guarantees adventure seekers a twentieth-century rarity. To a certain clientele and the companies that cater to them, that makes a river like this almost irresistible. Caveat emptor.



Right: The Futaleufú. Above: The author's descent.

During the Pinochet years, Chile's vast and extraordinary wilderness was largely abandoned by tourists, and for nearly two decades casual travelers were discouraged from visiting most of this 2700-mile-long land of volcanoes and ice, desert and sea. Consequently, Chile's remote areas are still largely unsullied, its back country and parkland comparatively unexplored. But now the big rivers that crosshatch the southern part of the country face a threat: Chile's recently elected democrats, buoyed by the strongest economy in South America, are as enthusiastic about big dams as the country's dictators ever were. Under a master energy plan developed during the Pinochet years, many of Chile's rivers — the Baker, the Bío-Bío, the Futaleufú, the Petrohué and others — are eligible to be dammed to create hydroelectric power. Preserving them is unlikely, as Chile's nascent environmental movement is largely ignored, by both government and the masses.

The Bío-Bío, long regarded as one of the two or three toughest commercially rafted rivers in the world, is the most threatened. A $465 million dam is already under construction on the river, and there may be as many as five more built in the coming decades. The project, potentially the biggest in the country's history, has spawned protests from Chile's small band of environmentalists. But for several years — and especially since the World Bank approved a $74.7 million loan in December to jump-start the first dam —

The first rafting attempt, however, ended in failure. In 1985, a team of four rafts and 15 passengers tried a descent. They were fine on the upper stretches, where the big boats were able to power through the tight gorges, but midway down the river, one boat got stuck in the tumult and was literally torn apart — what was left of it was found a week later in Lake Yelcho, 30 miles away. The trip was abandoned.

Electrifying Turbulence

My trip, with Earth River Expeditions, began in February 1991, after the rain and melt had subsided some, dropping the river's flow to 6000 to 8000 cubic feet per second, still on the edge of raftability. To reach the put-in, we loaded our boats onto a cattle truck in the town of Futaleufú and followed a pocked dirt road toward the Argentine border. Along the way the river made spot appearances, its turbulence and beauty electrifying even from a distance. The Fu's tributaries, which run down from the glacier-laden Andean hills, tint the river a deep azure. Its banks are lined by thick, temperate rain forest or high rock walls, marbleized granite — like swirls of chocolate and vanilla — rising 200 feet on either side.

We were ten, in two 18-foot oared rafts, accompanied by five safety kayakers. (To prepare for the Fu, we had run the Bío-Bío, a few of us twice.) Forty-five minutes after we put the boats in the water, we reached the Inferno gorge, where the river slashes through a narrow gap studded with exposed boulders, creating back-to-back Class V rapids named Wall Shot, and Exit (Class VI rapids are waterfalls). The kayakers went first; they would wait below each rapid to fish out the rafters we expected to be launched from their boats by the surging whitecaps. As we waited for them to run, the roar of the river grew louder, more ominous. Sweat dripped under our wet suits as we watched the kayakers' first two boats, each 12 feet long, disappear in the thundering crash of waves. I glanced at my raft mates, and we passed a shared look of terror. "Deceptive, eh?" muttered one pof the guides, tugging on his helmet strap.

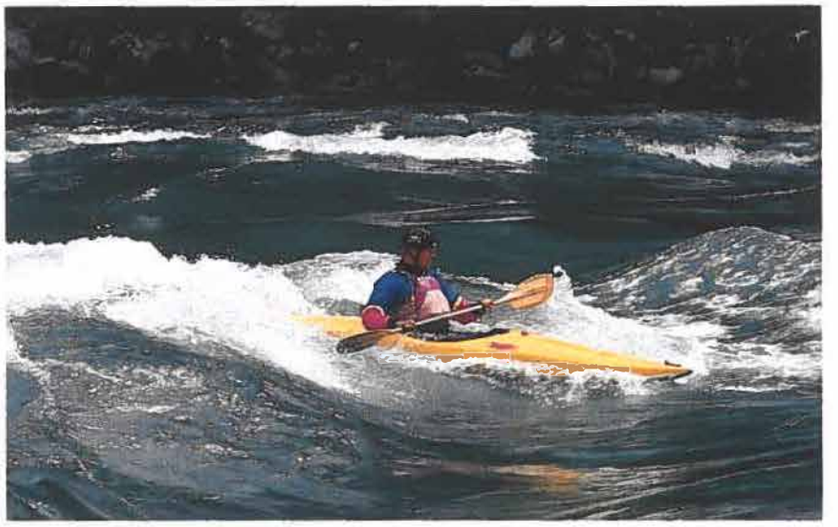
In the six years since that ill-fated 1985 try, only an Earth River group the year before had attempte a top-to-bottom raft descent of the Fu. This would be the second. Learning from that 1985 effort, Earth River had taken extra precautions, including twice the normal number of experienced hands and safety kayakers. We hoped our light, oar-paddle rafts would be able to withstand the monstrous rapids in the narrow Inferno gorge ("Big enough to swallow a rail car," warned lead kayaker Chris Spelius) and yet be maneuverable enough to allow us to sneak around the even bigger rapids, like Terminator.

After the kayakers made their heart-pounding descent, we followed, paddling desperately to

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JON BOWERMASTER (LEFT), GALEN ROWELL

hug the granite wall in order to avoid the hairiest rapids. We were pushed sideways into the middle of the river and a string of 12-foot waves. As we dropped into the first and were about to be crushed by a wall of water, the paddler in front of me, a veteran of 20 years of river running, flashed a quick look back, his gray eyes filled with fear. He could see what was coming and instinctively went to his knees and quit paddling as one titanic wave after another pounded over the rubber bow, standing the one-ton raft on end.

The rest of the morning was spent in similar fashion: bashing through one tough rapid after another, holding on for our lives, inevitably stopping after each to pick up a paddler or two who had been launched from the rafts.



Early in the afternoon we pulled out at Zeta, a Z-shaped tumult judged too tough even to attempt. The sun was high, fierce on our faces; the granite blazed like hot iron. From the cliffs above, we watched the kayakers thread a fine line through the Z, with varying degrees of success. The pair of big rafts were sent through empty and ended up banging like corks against the rocks, the Fu bubbling around them like spilled champagne.

Just past Zeta we scouted a monstrous rapid dubbed the Throne Room A rock as big as a house (the Throne) splits the river, and 15-foot waves pounded around it, forcing surges of water wide to the left and through a narrow chute to the right. The concern was that the power of the river would force our boats to the right through the narrows, flipping or pinning them and sending all paddlers on a bad swim. Again we opted to push the boats through empty.

After Throne we ran every rapid below, dozens of them with names like Más o Menos ("more or less") and Big Stuffer, where one of the one-ton rafts nearly flipped, tossing out three paddlers. When we got to Terminator, the river-wide rapid that had eaten a much bigger raft in 1985, we plotted a course that sneaked along the rocks down its left side. We knew if we strayed into the middle, we'd be swallowed, flogged and spit out. This time our conservative efforts prevailed Successfully past Terminator, we relaxed, only to find ourselves immediately in the teeth of the Himalayas, the biggest waves on the river.

Two days later we scouted the last rapid, Casa Piedra (House Rock). We pushed off and snaked and blasted past the half-dozen big boulders that give the rapid its name.

Our own safe descent came as a result of seemingly obvious choices: We were careful, if not downright conservative. We had more than enough safety kayakers. We swallowed our pride and walked around a couple of big rapids. The lesson is that before you go on any kind of exploratory or cutting-edge adventure, make sure you know who you're traveling with. Don't base your decision on pretty pictures in a brochure. Ask questions. We did. And we lived to tell about our adventure.

> **Jon Bowermaster**