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OUTDOORS



Earth River

The Futaleufú River in southern Chile has beautiful scenery and a series of challenging white-water.

Paradise Carved by White Water

The Futaleufú Has Everything Rafters Could Ask For

The white-water outfitter Eric Hertz spent a lifetime searching for the perfect river. In 1990, he finally found it, in Patagonia.

Intrepid kayakers who had ventured into southern Chile the previous year said that the Futaleufú River could not be rafted. But Hertz and Earth River, made an expeditionary first descent in 1990 and figured out how to safely navigate what today is the most intensive stretch of commercially rafted white-water rapids in the world.

They began buying the shoreline, including the river's most desirable campsites and hiking spots, and have turned the Fu into an outstanding adventure destination for rafters.

Several elements combine to make it an incomparable sports adventure: the breathtaking scenery, the series of formidable Class IV and V rapids, the extraordinary fishing, the hospitable climate, the cultural charms of its farm community of homestead pioneers, the campsites and hiking trails, the absence of biting insects and the unusual color and clarity of the water.

In March, I made my third annual trip on the Fu with Earth River Expeditions. This time, I took my 10-year-old daughter, Kyra, who fell in love with the river on her first trip last year, and three of her girlfriends. Among the other guests were Darren Barber, an Olympic gold medalist rower; the "Bay-watch" star David Chokachi and his wife, Susan; and the New York financier Michael Falk and his wife, Anne, and their two daughters, Kayla, 12, and Gigi, 10. The Falks were neophyte rafters, and this was also their first camping trip.

From Santiago, we flew 1,000 miles south to Puerto Montt. A three-hour bus trip on a narrow dirt road introduced us to the stunning landscapes of Andean Patagonia. At the confluence of the Fu and Azul Rivers, we donned wet suits, helmets and life jackets, and paused in a jungle clearing for a safety briefing and a semi-nar on paddling techniques. Class V white-water rafting is inherently risky, but with experienced guides and good safety plans, it is no more dangerous than skiing or touch foot-ball.

After a riverside lunch, we ran a series of Class III's and IV's and finished the day with a run through Mandaca, a Class V with an eight-foot drop that brought us to our first camp, Mapu Leufu. Situated between snow-capped glaciers and rugged saw-tooth mountains reminiscent of the Tetons, Mapu Leufu is a farm of broken forests, orchards and alpine on a cliff overlooking the narrow



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The Futaleufú has been a rafting hot spot since the early 1990's.

Futaleufú Valley. Chattering ibis, spoonbills and plovers flocked over grazing sheep, spooked by a pair of oxen yoked to a wooden wag-on delivering our gear.

Beside the oxen stood Gremilda Zapata, deftly spinning yarn. One of the remote valley's original homesteaders, Zapata has a sheep farm and spends the winter knitting gifts for rafters. She presented each of us with a woolen hat. Rafters and kayakers are welcome in the valley, where they have brought work and opportunity for the colonists.

The following morning we ran Inferno Canyon, a string of four Class V rapids in a narrow gorge that compresses the vast energy of the Fu over a three-mile stretch of ledges, holes and wave trains.

We eddied out above Inferno to scout the first rapid with a breaking hole at its entrance, followed by a wave train that could plow a raft against a hoary granite wall. At the bottom on river right, a 10-foot ledge could flip a raft. Roberto, our guide, plotted a line with four moves, which we executed to perfection. First, we dropped a tube into the breaking hole at the top, turned the raft left for a ride down the center of the wave train, charging right just in time to miss a central hole, and then sneaked in past a ledge hole on river right.

The smaller children rode horses around the rapids. As we entered Purgatory rapid, they waved to us from atop a string of sturdy palominos, 500 feet above the river on a narrow trail, led by Patagonian gauchos sporting sheepskin chaps trimmed with heavy fur.

Between the rapids, we took in the scenery and I fished. On each cast, I watched big fish follow my spinner back to the boat. I've fished in most of the states, including Alaska, and in most of the provinces of Canada, and in Latin America from Costa Rica to Tierra del Fuego. But I've rarely seen a waterway with consistently large trout in such abundance, where you can pull in respectable salmonids with nearly every cast for mile after mile of river.

The small bays and pockets of still water along the Fu's banks and below each rapid almost always yield trout. Using a brass spoon and a collapsible rod, I pulled them, voracious and aggressive, from their hiding places under the branches of willows and osiers and from beneath the granite walls that rise from the banks, or, by casting to the river's center. It was pure joy to watch them following the lure in the clean water.

The next day, we ran a steady succession of rapids before making camp, bracing for the grand finale. All of our white-water encounters to that point were preparation for our final day, when we faced Terminator, as challenging as any rapid rafted by a commercial outfitter anywhere in the world.

After scouting the rapid from its boulder-strewn shore, we entered on river right, driving between two offset holes — an important move, because missing that line puts you on a disastrous trajectory down the rapid's unraftable center. Then we ran a series of chutes and slides through a busy boneyard of boulders and ledges.

We drove the raft powerfully through a green slot over a pillow rock dropping 10 feet from the first major ledge, then back-paddled furiously in the ledge hole to slow the raft down and allow the bow to slide left along a diagonal wave in a type-writer move. We charged right and back-paddled off a pyramid rock, then turned hard toward the center, digging to get momentum in the current, drove the boat perfectly into the final chute and eased the raft into an eddy.

"There's Terminator," Roberto said, with a grin. "That was so much fun."

As we sat around a roaring campfire that night, Michael Falk told me that the expedition had been transforming for him and his family.

"We've never done anything like this before," he said. "People told us we were crazy to try Class V white water, but once we got here, we felt as comfortable and safe as we do backhome. The children loved it, and they are already planning to come back next year."