

Futaleufucked

Airport Mishaps and an Accidental Whirlwind Tour of Santiago



Left to Right: Allison crosses unrunnable Zeta via Tyrolean traverse; unrunnable Termindor; wonderfully runnable Santiago

During this interesting but ultimately disappointing trip, references to "Deliverance" mounted to the point that Allison and I had to rent said movie upon returning home. Early on, we both doubled over laughing at the following line (paraphrased): "What the hell you wanna go fuck around with that river for?" Anyone considering this trip needs to seriously ask themselves this question. The Futaleufu River (the Americanized pronunciation is footle-ee-foo) is located in northern Patagonia. For the purposes of this report, it will be shortened to Fu. Originating in the Argentine Andes, the Fu is dam(ned) high within that country but then runs free to the Pacific via Chile. The Fu is said to boast some of the largest commercially-run whitewater in the world - with Inferno Canyon and Terminador being the most noteworthy (both V/V+). I first learned about the Fu via my outstanding leader on the Asek, who guided the Fu several years ago (although not even he was sure it was my cup of tea). Anyone who searches on-line for the Fu will be mesmerized by tantalizing websites about the exceedingly small handful of companies who run it (serving 300-500/year between December and March). For obvious reasons, we are not naming the company we went with. Writing this report, however, is troubling because - like the river in Deliverance - the lower Fu is being considered for hydroelectric development. Given this great quandary, my sincere advice would be: spend your money on a direct donation to a legitimate non-profit group in Chile that is working to save the river for the sake of its many local farmers.

For many reasons, this was not a trip Allison and I entered into lightly. Indeed, my second brush with the Fu was on the John Muir Trail in 2004; our trip leader had been fly-fishing the Fu earlier that year when there had been a rafting accident/fatality. His advice: it's gorgeous but I wouldn't get into that water. Although accurate death statistics are difficult to assess, there have been 6-8 Fu fatalities... which doesn't sound bad until you think about how few people do it. For example, the Fu has only been widely/commercially rafted since the early 1990's. Unlike the Selway (1/2000 people die - nearly all privates), most Fu rafting is commercial (4-5 fatalities were commercial trips). The other complicating factor is that most companies offer the option of skipping the class V's (not that this matters - as a couple fatalities were in IV's at high water). Also, children under 16 are not allowed to run V's and, as was a difficult fact on this trip, many companies do a lot of business with families and kids (which, honestly, I think is insane). Given these variables, I estimate the death rate on the Fu as 1/700-1500 clients - easily, Allison and my most dangerous river. But this company had a clean death record and, given the V-option, Allison and I knew the Fu would drive us nuts until we experienced it. Even so, we undertook serious discussions about the V-option, mostly because I had just paddled monstrous Lava Canyon in August (the first rapid that truly scared me), and our dad passed away in July (leaving our mom with separation issues). Although we agreed it was unlikely we would run V's (out of respect for mommy), we left open the possibility if the following criteria were met: great confidence in the team (i.e. as good as ARTA/Selway), great confidence in the guides (i.e. as good as ARTA/Selway), and the river level being acceptable (i.e. not very high water). Unlike the Fu/company, though, ARTA/Selway required demonstrated river/paddling experience for all participants and accepted no one under 16. Given our unsatisfying experience on the Fu, Allison and I will now require the ARTA/Selway model whenever we do any more serious whitewater paddling trips in the future.

December 22-4, 2006

A key reason this trip was so fucked was that our flight from Dallas to Santiago was 5 hours delayed (a result of snowstorms in Denver). Needless to say, this wreaked havoc down the line - screwing up our flights from Santiago to Puerto Montt and then Chaiten, and our van-ride to the Fu. This also came on the heels of an already fucky 24 hours: nobody at American or LAN could confirm our flights during a 3-hour waste of phone time the night before; traffic jam en route to PDX; a 2-hour check-in line at PDX, most related to weather-induced cancellation problems (ah - the sign of things to come). Fortunately, when we finally checked in, the attendant knew who we were and where we were going. She did not, however, like that we had only allowed 40 minutes between landing and take-off in Dallas - insisting she could not guarantee our luggage would make it to Chile. Given that we were heading to Patagonia (which had been ruthlessly cold and rainy the last 3 weeks straight), this information did not sit well. After a short line getting through security, I called the company contact to alert them of the potential luggage problem... thinking they could at least be prepared with some extra gear (ha ha). The flight to Dallas proceeded without incident until we landed; as is par for the course in Dallas - we spent 30 minutes sitting on the tarmac waiting for the plane at our arrival gate to leave (obviously late). Thinking we now had only 10 minutes, we ran to our next gate (fortunately 4 gates away). There, we were greeted by a big sign indicating our flight to Chile would not be leaving until 11 p.m. Within 30 minutes, this time was changed to 12:30... within the hour, 1:30. Needless to say, the company received 3

additional phone messages from us apprising them of our situation. Originally, we were to land in Santiago around 9:30 a.m. and then catch a flight to Puerto Montt at 12:30. Within 30 minutes of arriving in Dallas, I accurately predicted we would miss the Puerto Montt flight and, fortunately, approached the American gate attendant about getting us onto the next available flight (not until 7:30 p.m.). As we would later learn, a family of 5 also bound for the Fu was in our midst; unfortunately, by the time they thought to reschedule the Puerto Montt flight, only a 12:30 a.m. departure was available. Indeed - this entire trip often felt like an insane episode of "Amazing Race" (which I love to watch... but you couldn't PAY me to do).

Finally sitting down to a VERY late and expensive dinner, Allison and I discussed how bummed we were about missing the first day's trip activities. Less than 24 hours before, the company emailed us an extensive revision of said plans. In the usual itinerary, we all were to meet in Puerto Montt at 3 p.m. for a charter flight to Chaiten. We then were to enjoy a night/welcome dinner at a local hotel. Early the next morning, we would drive 3 hours to the Fu proper, at which point we would be on the river doing safety stuff (including a swim/flip test) and a bunch of class IV's. Had this remained the itinerary, our flight problems wouldn't have mattered much because we would have just missed the welcome dinner. Unfortunately, the company had just started testing this new itinerary: going straight from the charter flight in Chaiten to the river (i.e. camping night 1) and then using the next morning for a warm-up kayak trip on the Espolon, a smaller river that feeds into the Fu, followed by the usual afternoon activities. So, yes, losing the Espolon option was extremely difficult to swallow and we hoped, given the large number of daily options the trip literature advertised (kayaking, hiking, and horseback riding), that we could kayak the Espolon on a later day. That there was another party in our midst would hopefully add some incentive. But, as with several advertised aspects of this trip, flexible options never really emerged - so don't expect any stories about Allison and I kayaking the Espolon. By 1:30 a.m., we were finally boarding the otherwise-gorgeous 767, our seats in the center section. The crew was anxious to get us dinner and put us to bed; they requested we all pull down the window shades now because we'd be seeing daylight in 2 hours (in Chile, it was already 5 a.m., with our scheduled landing time 2:30 p.m.). Unfortunately, a couple of French sisters hacked wet and croupy coughs regularly throughout the first and last hours of the flight. At the start of the flight, both were seated next to each other 2 aisles back - their parents directly behind Allison and I. By the end, the girls had begun audibly fighting and were separated. I got the especially delinquent one directly behind me; despite several glares back, she kicked my seat deliberately the last 2 hours of the flight (her mother and the term "discipline" representing non-overlapping Venn diagram entities). Unfortunately, these were not the only rude children/parents on board - just the worst. Outside, the glorious Andes were amazing - textured hues of orange, yellow, brown intermixed with snowfields and glaciers (of course, flying over the Andes always makes me skittish after reading "Alive" and, more recently, "Miracle in the Andes"). Although Allison and I each slept 3-4 hours, we rated the flight as "overall sucky" and discussed the merits of paying for first class should we ever choose to endure another international flight.

We landed in Santiago around 2:30 p.m. Despite everything so far, we agreed that the Santiago Airport was the best of its kind (at least, that we'd flown through) - not overwhelmingly large, easy to navigate, extremely clean and new. After passing through customs, paying our \$100 reciprocity tax (good for all trips to Chile for the duration of a given passport), and picking up our baggage (achieved via 90 minutes of standing in lines), we made our way to the domestic ticket counter to re-check-in for the flight to Puerto Montt. Oh - Allison will be upset if I fail to mention that the customs agent flirted with her and (seriously) drew a big heart on her claims paperwork (we were later told this was highly unusual behavior). I also (sort of) made a credit card-based call to the company contact in Puerto Montt, this being what our company contact in the US told us to do once we arrived. To this day, I'm not sure to whom I was talking; I was just assured that someone obvious would be at the airport to pick us up and take us to a hotel once we landed in Puerto Montt. We quickly ascertained who the other delayed family was, being that they were the only ones at the ticket counter: mom, dad, and 3 kids (age 11-16). Given that they seemed just as frazzled as us, we didn't spend much time beyond basic introductions. At the time, they were pleading with the desk attendant for seats on our 7:30 flight to Puerto Montt. Alas, though, they were stuck with a nearly midnight departure. Allison and I proceeded to the quiet domestic departure gate for our 2-hour wait. Outside, a slightly purple haze partly obscured the huge surrounding mountains - reminiscent of my impressions of the Himalayas from Katmandu. For the first hour, we lounged and/or slept. We also paid about \$20 for a strange beef strip sandwich and good juice. Indeed, such was my recollection of Chilean food during my last trip: the meat (in contrast with that in Argentina) sucks... but the fruit drinks are great. As the boarding time approached, the gate filled: about a third were bound for Puerto Montt, the rest Punta Arenas (jump-off for places like Torres del Paine). The most interesting non-local was an Asian (or Asian-American) woman on mission for the Mormon Church. Although Chile is obviously dominated by traditional Catholics, we learned there are growing numbers of Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists. The LAN flight was orderly and on time, with snack service featuring a half-sandwich made with turkey and guacamole, a white cake with chocolate frosting, and a Tang-like drink. Although I had a window seat, I was facing the Pacific (i.e. no Andes) - but the sunny farmlands, green space, rivers, and clouds were spectacular. After landing in a tiny airport (the size of that in Rio Gallegos, Argentina back 1997), we found the company representative.

Outside, the brisk wind and cold air were on the bracing side - the company representative explaining that the weather on the last 2 Fu trips had been extremely cold and wet. Fortunately, we didn't feel guilty for all the trouble we thought we were causing; there was also a 16-member family/group from New York who had chartered a Fu trip overlapping with ours (but starting a day later). As this trip progressed, many of us were very frustrated by the company's decision to simultaneously book 2 HUGE parties (ours was 21) because it over-taxed the guides, the resources, and satisfaction because there was too much waiting around for logistical things (e.g. gear shuttling between groups). But I am ahead of myself... the Puerto Montt airport was about 15 km from the city center. There, the company graciously and thankfully booked us in a very nice hotel right by the water. We were also given gear bags - each, the size of a standard synthetic sleeping bag duffel. Unfortunately, this is where I have to describe another serious issue with this trip: in my 7 years of doing rafting trips, I have NEVER been given so little space for stuff. I can understand MAYBE for a short desert trip... but Patagonia!?!?! Contrary to perceptions about South American in the summer (including, among members of this group), Chilean Patagonia is fucking cold and wet (possibly worse than Alaska, based on my experience). Although the company's packing list was 90% appropriate, there was absolutely NO WAY that everything they required/listed would fit into the gear bag provided. Complicating matters as well, we

had been told over and over again to pack as much as we could in our carry-on pack... which, for Allison and I, meant substantial daypacks. My Lowe daypack would not physical fit into the provided gear bag because it was too tall. But the company representative assured us that there would be no problem bringing the daypack separately. Thus, Allison and I brought ALL of our warm gear, some in the company bags and some in our daypacks. Once we got to the river, though, we were - like - the only ones with separate packs (a burden in terms of extra things for the guides and porters to deal with). Frankly, I hesitate to imagine what would have happened had we landed on time and been picked up by the actual guides... lord knows, we would have probably been made to jettison half our gear and, as a result, suffered even more. After being given bags that I, personally, could fit into on the last 4 river trips I've done, this company needs to be more generous with the gear space, particularly given claims about running the most comfortable and luxurious camping trips in the world. Tiny gear bags in hand, Allison and I were not up in the room until 10 p.m. Sleep-deprived for over 48 hours, we enjoyed showers and packed before 11. Even with the extra daypack, though, we were still fussing with gear issues because this trip required 2 costly new purchases: river shoes (they actually wanted a specific brand that was no longer made) and a splash jacket (this was in addition to raingear, tops and bottoms). Although the company did supply wetsuits, Allison and I brought our own.



Left to Right: Puerto Montt - harbor, waterfront street (by hotel), from the air/charter flight

The 8 hours of hotel sleep were good, although the noise outside was pretty nuts (across the street was a nudie bar called something like "Pretty Woman... Featuring Many Spectacles"). Thank god for earplugs. Even though missing the Espolon was frustrating (at the time), Allison and I relished our emergency night in the hotel. We had been told to be downstairs and ready to go at 8 a.m. (in fact, we/the family were on time, but the driver was almost an hour late). Outside, it was beautiful - the sunny skies and placid water promising. After a European-style breakfast buffet (almost identical to that in Chamonix), my first order of business was to find a toothbrush (yes, as usual - I left mine by the sink at home... and none of the airport gift shops in Dallas or Santiago had one). Being that it was Christmas Eve, though, everything in town was closed... so, yes, I endured the week using Q-tips, toothpaste, and floss). Given the driver delay, Allison and I also enjoyed a beautiful stroll along the waterfront where several friendly older men were doing the same. Allison also claimed she was hit on by a sketchy younger guy possibly selling drugs (while I was photographing this statue about a quarter mile away). By 9, the van/driver arrived and we made our way up from the city center, through an industrial area, to the small charter airport (not where we landed yesterday). Upon seeing our 10-seater, Allison reminded me she hadn't been in a small plane since flying across Canyonlands with me. Soon, we were in the air for a 30-minute flight due south - over the Golfo de Ancud - the mainland to our right, the Isla de Chiloe to our left, and small islands or fjords variously. The immediate weather was mostly good (which made for a smooth ride) but large clouds obscured the Andes. As we neared Chaiten, we started flying over amazing landscapes: pristine river deltas, amazing rainforests, an occasional farm plot or road (carved out of the impenetrable flora). One of my now-retired colleagues (Lowell) was particularly excited about my seeing this part of the world as it apparently hosts some of the most unique hardwood rainforest ecosystems; and so I attempted, throughout this trip, to enjoy the ecology. In contrast with all other river trips I've done, guides spent virtually no time talking about the local history - natural or otherwise.



Left to Right: Pristine river delta near Chaiten, Chaiten airstrip, park/monkey puzzle tree in the town of Futaleufu

Appropriately, it also began to rain as we approached Chaiten. Apparently, the key reason the company decided to forego the old itinerary was because the perpetually bad weather there cast a negative introduction to this trip. Although I would not say the Fu was in a real rainshadow, it was less frightening than the coastal climate. Unfortunately, we never got close to the town. The airport consisted of an empty, somewhat run-down building with available bathrooms. Rodrigo, our envoy/driver, was also there with a slightly run-down company van. The 3-hour drive was bumpy and would have been annoying had I been fully conscious. But mostly, I will still be exhausted. The drive took us around extensive Lake Yelcho, up this curvy pass of sorts, and then along more lakes; eventually, we began seeing what resembled the Fu... and Rodrigo affirmed our suspicions, identifying several major rapids we would be doing (or so we thought). At the time, though, I wasn't thrilled: I didn't like that the river was right along a road; I've never been into trips that involve such access, such overt lack of wilderness. Comparatively speaking, the Fu looked like the Chilko - although it was definitely high, with no beaches and the water lapping well up to the

dense foliage along the banks. The views of the rapids were limited but they resembled my impression of those on the Grand Canyon/Colorado - big, wide whitewater messes. In general, I would probably best describe the Fu as a perfect cross between the Colorado and the Chilko... but only 30 miles long. For reasons none of us understood, we were first taken to the small town of Futaleufu proper (population - about 800). Fortunately, it was sunny. The town reminded me of a smaller version of Calafate, with a little central park, several bars/restaurants, and a small residential area. Monkey puzzle trees and flowers were all over, the former forming whole forests nearby. After being encouraged to get out of the van, I was 5 minutes away walking in the park when Allison started yelling; apparently - it was time to go. Alas, we would never return to the town - something that would have been sort of nice. We were then driven down to the Espolon, where we met up with everyone else (finishing their kayaking trip) and had lunch. Upon seeing said river, I was less disappointed about missing the morning kayak; it just seemed like a big wide river that went through farmlands. The place where we were dropped off had some run-down guide houses and cabins - possibly affiliated with this company, as they own several pieces of riverside property. Several vehicles, including a truck with all the rafts and catamarans, were standing by. Although the rest of the party arrived within 10 minutes and several guides passed through (not all introducing themselves), we were not given directions on what was going on or who was in charge. Honestly, I think it speaks volumes that I did not even know who the trip leader was for 24 hours.

Eventually, we were told to get dressed and join everyone else for lunch down by the river. Seeing 19 people (excluding the guides) en masse was overwhelming - made worse by the fact that there was no beach and lunch was eaten standing along a crowded riverside trail (parts of which were actually in the water). All food on this trip was fine - but I would not rate it outstanding. In many ways, the food often reminded of that in Nepal: lots and lots of eggs. Having worked hard the last 3 months to get my cholesterol down (and noting this in my pre-trip questionnaire), this trip didn't help in that regard. As was typical most days, lunch included omelet-like things with peppers, sausage slices, sliced fruits and vegetables, and these little hard/flat rolls that looked homemade. As we stood eating, 5-6 guides were bringing down 6 boats: 2 rafts and 3-4 catarafts. Sadly, I never got a single picture of the boats in the water, testimony to the fact that they were whisked immediately away for use by the charter team. This company is - how shall I put this - involved in innovative boat modification. In other words, all boats were altered into these funky monster paddle-assist contraptions. Rowing frames (usually in the middle of boats) were lashed to the absolute rear, with 6 forward positions open for paddlers (and no gear). All the rowing frames, though, were not standard in that the oarsman did not sit level and center; rather, a large piece of lumber (literally, a 5-foot 10X2-inch board) was affixed at a 45° angle to the frame. Adding comfort to the "ghetto board" (Allison's term for said modification), a foam pad was duct-taped down at the ass position. Admittedly, this set-up did not look very sea-worthy. The other modification was the construction of the "paddle-cat." In my several years of doing rivers, I have seen catarafts - typically manned by 1 central rower and maybe 1 passenger, usually holding onto the gear in the front of the boat. But I had, prior to this trip, never been in one. Well - hold on to your wigs and keys (in the words of Letterman) - I got in one on this trip and in big water. In addition to the aforementioned rowing frame adjustment, the company also stitched 4 footholds into the usual heavy vinyl/rubber flooring - creating paddling positions in the front of the boat. Although some people claimed the cataraft tubes were bigger than those on standard rafts, I didn't notice much of a difference. I remain curious - from a legal perspective - what these modifications do to things like warranties or liability. Anyway - after lunch, we were given a brief safety speech and then turned loose to pick our boat. In retrospect, said speech was given by our leader, a soft-spoken man who I liked as a person but thought needed to be more assertive given some very strong personalities on this trip. Not surprisingly, most people avoided the paddle-cat's (maybe because they looked totally scary?). Having gotten stuck rafting what I did on the Fu in these contraptions, I will say that they were not bad; they did feel more stable than a full-floored raft - which are psychological barriers to the whitewater underneath you (i.e. you're deceiving yourself in a raft because you think it looks and feels safer). Having said that, of course, I'm not sure I'd willingly pick a cataraft over a raft again; there is something fairly threatening to sitting on a big banana and having whitewater on BOTH sides of you (i.e. coming over the outside rim as well as up through the inside/middle). After the dust settled that first afternoon, Allison and I were on a paddle-cat with this young but really good Peruvian who I instantly liked; he was assertive, clear, and a type A detail freak. We later learned that this guy was, like, a world-class/competitive whitewater kayaking champion. Allison and I paddled our usual positions just behind the front folks. Finally, it should be noted that this company does all Fu whitewater with 1 "safety cat" in the front position (i.e. a single oarsman paddling an empty cataraft, the role of which was purely rescue/scoop-up in nature).

Paddling down the lower Espolon was pretty, the river basically as large as the lower Middle Fork of the Salmon. Although we were never given any specific values for the Fu level, I know when we left that it was running about 14,000 cfs; 15,000 is considered extreme, and the river rose 2-3 feet higher 2 days into our trip. Given that a number of major rapids were canceled or delayed, I would suspect it was running 17,000-22,000 cfs. Given the tenor of the guides' comments about the river even that first afternoon, I knew that none of the big rapids (e.g. Inferno or Terminador) would be deemed safe enough to run. What I hadn't really considered was that this also meant that many of the IV's (which we had been looking forward to) were now V's, which obviously complicated Allison and my decisions a great deal... not to mention, confounded the activities given 2 large parties starting tomorrow. But, for the time being, the Espolon was great: class II-III rapids, the water big and fast-moving. After 45 minutes, we pulled over on river right (near the confluence with the Fu) and basically hiked to a big bus - the guides hauling the boats up and onto a truck. A couple miles below this point, the mighty Inferno Canyon raged (unbeknownst to us at the time). After a 40-minute transfer, we were now along the Rio Azul - our goal being to paddle to its confluence with the Fu (now, about 15 miles downstream from Inferno). We would then continue for a few miles down to just above Terminador (our camp for the night). En route, we would be paddling "Asleep at the Wheel" (rated anywhere from III+ to IV+, depending on your source). In theory, too, we did something called "Frailes" (class III-IV). But most of the time, there was just big, fast, flat water. One of the things I had been really looking forward to on this trip was the swim and flip tests, both of which were presumably going to happen on this stretch. In the end, ONLY some people in the paddle rafts that afternoon did these. Although we were never told why, my impression was that flipping a paddle-cat (which had a more substantial metal rim, including where the paddlers were seated) was more dangerous. Although I can't say I was itching to get in the water once I saw it, this breach of protocol did bother me in ways that would gathered more inertia as the trip progressed. As had been my impression from the van, the Fu rapids were Colorado-sized in nature: both the size of the waves and the wideness of the

river. Although Asleep at the Wheel (the only memorable rapid that day) felt daunting because you were definitely up and down on a lot of HUGE oceanic waves, the water seemed more forgiving: more room for maneuvering because the river was so wide and there were not exposed rocks. This is not meant to imply that the Fu seemed easier to cheat because nearly all holes and waves were boat-flippers, and the skill required to read and maneuver that kind of water was great. Nevertheless, the river's difficulty definitely did not feel like the Selway or the Middle Fork - their more tangible margins of error defined by visible rocks or the relatively narrow sides of the river. Interestingly, we would run Asleep at the Wheel a second time a few days later; owing to the water level having gone up, our second route was completely different (more center, with several previous holes/waves washed out). Shortly after this rapid, we pulled over and took-out on river left, stumbling up an embankment through trees and brush. At the top, we hiked 10 minutes through cow pastures to the camp along Terminador. En route, one of the many cows began to give birth; given that it was Christmas Eve, some good heathen (not Allison or I) noted that this must be the Jesus Cow. Unfortunately, the group (perhaps rightfully) spooked the new mother to the point she ambled away. In general, much of the lower Fu (i.e. from Rio Azul down) was fairly developed farmland, most owners Argentines who had migrated over the border during various disputes (indeed, the road on which we came in went all the way through to Argentina - the border an hour from the town of Futaleufu). I am not sure what kinds of arrangements the company had made with the locals, but we either drove or hiked through many farms/homesteads. In general, the region reminded me of my perceptions of the farm valleys near Bergen, Norway - where my mother's parents both grew up. Even so, most of the primary homes in the valley seemed to have satellite dishes and monkey puzzle trees.



Left to Right: Various views of the shanty cabins along Terminador

To avert dam(n)ing projects and promote tourism, this company acquired riverside land alongside Terminador rapid several years ago. This camp represented one of several company-owned camps. At each location, the company has obviously made great efforts to hand-build these 3-sided huts (which Allison named "shanties") that measure about 8X7 feet, plus or minus a variably-present small deck extension. Allison and I were fortunate in that all our shanty huts had 3 sides; some huts were missing part or all of their sidewalls. From the trail/entry side, each shanty had a door made of bamboo (which, remarkably, grew wild everywhere). The river-facing side was always fully open. Inside the shanty, 2 sleeping platforms were built on either side of the door. Unfortunately, this is another situation where my expectations/perceptions were very different than the adjectives this company used to describe its camps. Perhaps to someone who has limited camping or wilderness experience, these facilities might come across as luxurious and comfortable. Unfortunately, I would rather have been in a high-quality tent, in a high-quality sleeping bag... and that's just the beginning. Of course, I did consider the extra thick sleeping mattresses (3-5 inches and full vinyl) to be luxurious. However, the sleeping bags (cotton/flannel rectangular bags that looked like what my dad used until the 1970's) were downright scary. We were also given a flannel pillowcase and liner (that were also fit into our tiny gear sack), the idea being that these would provide a hygienic surface as we moved through the camps. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that the actual sleeping bags were not washed between parties. After YEARS of renting clean, high-quality gear from several different rafting companies, this company does NOT earn any positive adjectives for its sleeping bags or accessories. Years ago, a personal friend of mine came back from a short sabbatical at some kind of upstate New York art commune with comparable bedding and promptly succumbed to scabies... thus, I thought about Suellen every time I woke up without my liner (having descended, owing to my regular rotations). So far, no scabies. The more immediate problem with the bags, though, was that they just were not efficient at keeping people warm. Heavy rectangular bags cannot be cinched up around the neck, they provide no warmth around the head - there is a reason that mummy bags are shaped the way they are. After the rain and wind began, entering madly through the front of the shanty (or, in my case, through a roof leak), the bags also did get wet. Being cotton/flannel, they did not dry quickly or efficiently. In general, too, the shanties were colder than a tent, letting all the warmth out - all the cold in. Indeed, several people said nothing but frightful things about the extreme cold their first night in camp (i.e. while we were sleeping in a hotel in Puerto Montt, which suddenly was seeming WAY luxurious).

The other thing about all the camps that drove me nuts was the distance between everything. That first night we were lead down to our shanty, the trail going on and on and on. At first, I thought I was nuts - but, over dinner, several single female travelers (shacked up near our shanty) remarked that they had been timing how long it took to travel one-way from their shanty to the bathroom and it was - seriously - 10 minutes. EVERY camp was like this - hiking, climbing serious switchbacks, navigating crazy terrain... a quarter to a half mile between major features. It really was insane, particularly after I developed GI distress on days 2-3 (hotel water in Puerto Montt??). I estimate that I logged several miles of hiking just in the context of making my way around each camp. Nevertheless, Terminador was partly in view from pretty much the whole camp. I can't say it was satisfying, though - because the dense forest prevented a comprehensive view of the whole rapid. There were a couple nice vantage points that provided partial perspectives on it... and it definitely was beautiful, not runnable, and intimidating. I will say that being near such amazing whitewater - even if we couldn't get into it - was exciting and memorable. After unpacking and changing into dry, warm clothes, Allison and I set out to find the bathrooms and showers. I have come to

the conclusion that part of the reason this company thinks it has such license to use words like luxury and comfortable is that they have also obviously spent a lot of effort to pipe and heat water for things like flush toilets, showers, and hot tubs. As most people who read about my trips know, I have no issues with not showering for 10-12 days. Although I always appreciate a sit-down can, I will gladly accept a damn groover ANY day... especially if I don't have to hike 10 minutes to use it. Although I did enjoy the hot tubs, they do not make up for the poor sleeping bags and cold shanties. I also did use the showers twice near the end of the trip - mostly because I figured I better get SOME of my money's worth. Unfortunately, the water was lukewarm the first time, the water pressure minimal. Allison used the showers more regularly and had less trouble, it should be noted.



Left to Right: Terminador Rapid (close, looking down); camp clearing and surrounding hills (looking for the bathroom)

As with most days, dinner seemed late (served 8-9 p.m.). Since we were in the southern hemisphere during their summer solstice equivalent, though, we had light until 10:30 or 11, which was VERY nice after Oregon's hellish fall/winter. My favorite food item on this trip was served each night at dinner: soup. Whoever is in charge of soups down there deserves a BIG raise (interestingly, too, the other place where soups were also the best was Nepal). Dinners typically featured meat or fish, a salad spread, some kind of cooked vegetable or vegetable stew, bread rolls (like at lunch), and some kind of dessert. Unfortunately, I didn't enjoy that we were never privy to food preparation. Each camp had its own cook cabin that was far from the dining area (i.e. not meant to be seen); the cooking staff was seldom introduced to us... and the guides basically wheel-barrowed meals to us. Indeed, I felt disconnected to the most staff on this trip - in a way that was not positive. As stated previously, I also felt the food was only fair - in large part because this company, given established facilities, should have been able to seriously out-do meals on, say, insanely-remote arctic rivers (but they did not). However, they were fairly generous with the alcohol (mostly Chilean wines and beers) but they could not compete with ROAM - who will likely forever hold the award for best, most, and most diverse beverages. By 11, Allison and I made our long way back to bed, guiding a couple of other clients who had forgotten their headlamps. Halfway back, my batteries died, leaving us stumbling down the narrow trail - the massive roar of Terminador to our right, just through the trees. Once in our shanty, I noticed 2 green buckets under each of our bunks. Allison still does not believe me - but I was quite certain that these were for peeing at night. Consequently, that is what I used them for throughout this trip (and, eventually, Allison too). Because that we had been given ZERO instructions about cabin/bucket use, we elected to basically broadcast the contents from the cabin each morning. After changing clothes and breaking in the bucket, I finally retired (with Allison reading by headlamp for some time thereafter). Even with earplugs, the roar of Terminador was not completely diminished - which made for yet another poor night of sleep. In contrast to several statements during dinner, though, the night wasn't THAT cold. This is not to say, however, that I wasn't fighting the sleeping bag at times - trying to plug the gaping shoulder and neck holes.

December 25, 2006

The next day was supposed to be the big Inferno Canyon day. At some point the night before, we had asked whether we would be able to hike the scenic canyon trail (given that pre-trip literature stated IV-only participants would do this). Indeed, other companies (e.g. Wilderness Travel) actually do all hiking trips along the Fu's extensive trail - from near Futaleufu to the final major bridge below all the lower rapids. But the guides seemed reluctant to commit any clear answer to our question... and the next day, there was no hiking option whatsoever. Instead, we had a fairly early wake-up that included packing all our gear into a full-on dry bag (the same size as the small gear bag we had been issued - to be transported on a small gear-only cataraft to the next camp). Given that Allison and I couldn't fit our daypacks into said bag, today marked the beginning of our frustration with moving extra gear. After rising and packing early, we were also disappointed to see everything (bag pick-up, our eventual departure) running a full hour behind. After hiking 30 minutes through farmland back to the main road, we were all loaded into 2 vans that took us upstream towards the town. Just before Futaleufu, we left the main road (near a bed and breakfast) and began driving up into this low set of hills. At this pass area, the quality of the road became extremely poor (class V, in the words of the guides) and we had to break into 2 sub-parties, riding in a jeep (i.e. sitting or standing in the back). As would be the case with all transfers on this trip, there was a lot of sitting and waiting around yet again. Allison and I, being in the second party, estimated we waited 80-90 minutes for the single jeep to return. We then proceeded to drive 30-45 minutes down an indeed-crazy winding, super-steep hill and then through some muddy flat areas before finally arriving at a steep embankment that was about 100 feet above the river. Although we agreed the jeep ride was exciting, it did not justify the loss of the Inferno hike. At the river, we changed into our wetsuits under sunny and warm skies. Some tantalizing glimpses of pretty, snow-covered mountains were seen upstream, albeit partly eclipsed by the thicket of foliage along the river. Adjacent to the put-in, there was an extensive farm; apparently, the owners rely solely on horses to get around (i.e. that's why the roads are not developed). Unfortunately, this company does not assign life jackets or helmets to passengers for the duration of a given trip (standard operating procedure on every other trip I have ever done). Frankly, this is a safety issue because changing things out means making serious adjustments every day. But, of course, the reason this company does not do this (or did not on our trip) was because of the charter group (i.e. someone else was using it when we weren't). As with the day

before, other passengers had gobbled up all regular raft positions. And so we rode in the paddle-cat with 1 of 2 American oarsmen (the other 4 being Chilean, Argentine, or Peruvian). Relatively speaking, the American guides both seemed young and more junior in status. Looking at this company's website, none of the guides from our trip can even be found among the featured leaders; problematically, my Alsek leader is still featured prominently - even though he hasn't guided the Fu in years. I'm not sure why I mention that - except that I was sort of expecting to see someone featured on the website.



Left to Right: climbing into/onto the jeep to pu-in, view from put-in (across farm pastures); riverside granite near Zeta

Given that we were now officially floating the upper Fu, the river did seem a little smaller. There was also a lot more obvious granite along the river: big walls, giant boulders (indicative of the more rock-dominated technical features of Inferno, just upstream). At some point, we were told that a significant rockfall had recently occurred in Inferno, creating what appears to be an unrunnable new rapid. SO anyone thinking about the Fu with their hearts set on Inferno will be disappointed for awhile... because if that is the case, there will be no commercial running in there for some time. We did run a couple short sections of whitewater, including a narrow section between major granite sidewalls. One of the maps I have actually indicates we did a short class IV (Hijo de Zeta). Although the river size and hydraulics may justify that rating, I would be hard-pressed to call anything we did a IV. Shortly thereafter, we were all watching this obvious line of whitewater in the distance - anticipating some excitement. Unfortunately, what we were seeing was the beginning of Zeta rapid (an unrunnable class VI) and, thus, we pulled promptly over on river left: our camp home for (in Allison and my case) the next 3 nights. After a muddy, ugly slog hauling all gear between take-out and camp, we dumped our bags in the dining area. Our leader then began what we thought was going to be a brief tour of camp (in fact, this lasted 60-90 minutes and involved at least a mile of hiking). The final area of the tour took us out to this stunning granite formation (I mean - like - the size of 3 football fields) that fully spanned the valley floor. The rock reminded me of something between Utah and the Sierras: rolling, globular slickrock-like. Where the river ran, it cut this miraculous Z-shape (hence, the name Zeta rapid) into the gigantic rock... slamming into the first face, becoming channeled 90° down this long slot, and then rushing 90° again downstream. Easily surpassing Terminador, Zeta was one of the most beautiful and stunning sections of river I've ever seen in the world. In contrast with a lot of mediocre scenery on this trip (in terms of big mountains), the scenery around Zeta was competitive with, say, things you'd see in classic southern Patagonia. This may, in fact, explain why Allison and I stayed here for the next 3 nights... but more on that decision later. Allison and I also chose the shanty with the closest access to this area, our deck/front basically a few hundred feet from the entrance to Zeta proper. Given that it was probably around 2-3, we were promptly summoned to lunch.



Left to Right: Zeta camp - bridge to cave, bamboo grotto, "natural" (not) granite hot tub

The rest of the day was unscheduled and most people seemed content to laze around. Based on pre-trip literature, Allison and I had been looking forward to kayaking what was described as a deep blue lake near the camp. I'm not sure this description is fair, however; although the water was clear and blue, the body was more like a narrow side-channel of Fu overflow that looked more like a swamp in terms of the encroaching trees and brush (hence, our first reference to "Deliverance"). In the words of another passenger, you could paddle the whole thing in 10 minutes. There were also no horses at camp that day, and the guides were all committed to lining the boats through Zeta, a task that took several hours. Given that it was sunny and almost warm, though, everyone enjoyed watching the empty boats get moved down Zeta. Basically, half the guides paddled across the river above Zeta and, working with the others on the camp side, set up several ropes and rope/pulley systems that spanned the river (and which, in 2 days, would serve as a Tyrolean traverse). Using these lines and tossing throw-ropes variously, they lined each of the 7 boats down the slot... the most difficult part seeming to be half-way down the slot, where many boats hung up in this little cave-like eddy. The most disconcerting thing, though, was watching the guides leaping on the rock edges in cheap flip-flops, mostly watching the boats - not their feet. Several of us were convinced one of them was going to fall into Zeta, a 20-30 drop. Later, I enjoyed a soak in the hot tub down by the river.

It was heavenly - although there was more wind and less sun. We began dinner at the outside dining area (a commanding view of the entrance to Zeta). Unfortunately, rain began to fall during the appetizers and so we moved to this cave-like shelter. Said cave was sort of in the center of the camp, 5-10 minutes from our shanty via a wild trail: up/down, interesting slickrock sections, lots of log sections, and crazy wooden bridges between several HUGE boulders with big drop-offs. After dinner, as many of us were leaving the cave in the dark rain (some folks obviously drunk), the guides gave us some firm words about being extremely careful as there apparently had been accidents at this camp (although they would not elaborate).



Left to Right: lining the boats through Zeta rapid - entry, first main turn, difficult cave-like eddy mid-rapid

The cave reminded me a little of Redwall Canyon/Colorado: this low, undercut space beneath a GIGANTIC rock formation... same size and dimensions. Although the cave sounded interesting, it was often a big smoky mess. The fireplace in the back only sucked smoke up if the air was basically close to freezing - so your choice was: in the cave suffocating in smoke or just outside the cave in the pouring rain. The more serious problem, though: increasingly negative things were being verbalized louder and louder (partly as a function of alcohol intake) among a few passengers who were displeased with the lack of whitewater on the trip so far... not to mention concern that the river level was not coming down, meaning more canceled whitewater sections. These issues would only become more pronounced over the next few days. Dinner featured grilled steaks; although I had been looking forward to these (despite my diet), they were tough and chewy... reminding me of leathery meat in Puerto Natales, Chile back in 1997. Again, it's sad when seriously good steaks can be cooked in the arctic... and here we are on a luxury camping trip, and the food is just ok. Of course, the dessert (a lemon meringue cake-pie hybrid) was tasty. Unfortunately, I was unable to enjoy dinner long - as GI distress twice interrupted my evening. A couple other notable events also took place during dinner: first, an ill-defined male/female couple joined the group - in what seemed a complete surprise even to our leader; they would be with us for just the next 3 days. So as not to unnecessarily labor this story more, they would - over the next 48 hours - become known as the porn couple (for obvious reasons). After 2 days of class IV groping, there was some kind of fight (reminiscent of my last trip leading students in Utah... don't get me started). It was then we learned that, just prior to joining us, they had been involved in a major bar fight in Futaleufu (again - reminiscent of my last trip leading students in Utah... don't get me started). Having this couple join our group was irksome, exacerbating my mounting dislike for this company. Indeed, there were many times (this being one) where I felt this company was more motivated by business and making money - pathetic and hypocritical given their Fu-saving public image. Indeed, in all the years I've done commercial rafting, this has been the ONLY trip where I felt like my presence was mostly about a profit margin.

Anyway - the second thing that happened during dinner: our leader explained tomorrow's itinerary (for the first time - doing the stated plan): crossing the Fu via the aforementioned Tyrolean traverse, and hiking 2000 feet straight up through the dense forest to a higher forest camp. I had always felt ambivalent about this hike, having heard about it (in gory detail) from a fellow rafter on the Hulahula/Arctic trip: a steep, rotting trail leading to a small lake (all in dense forest). Although there were some broad views over the valley, there were no big glaciated peaks or rugged alpine terrain under foot or by eye. Given that the trip literature had stated hiking there was an option (i.e. you were welcome to stay at Zeta), Allison and I were prepared to make such a decision tomorrow - contingent on many things (both social and climatic). Adding to the negative balance of this equation, there began louder rumblings from the aforementioned clients who, from here on out, will be called the WF's (for whitewater freaks). Upon hearing the leader's summary, the WF's agitation level went up a logarithm or two: how could we be sacrificing a WHOLE day to not being on the water? What constantly surprised me on this trip was how uninformed so many clients were about this trip (I recall at least 8 people who either stated they had never received the trip itinerary or had ZERO idea that there were many non-rafting activities on this trip). Of course, Allison and I were very informed but it's not like the pre-trip literature really mattered. Feeling exhausted and annoyed, Allison and I trudged back through the pouring rain - up and down roots and rocks and puddles of mud - to our shanty where we slept variously through the night.

December 26, 2006

The next morning, we awoke to POURING rain. After gearing up and hiking back to the cave for breakfast, we were informed that direct complaints had been made about the lack of whitewater. Consequently, we would be rafting downstream for an hour (including a serious portage around Throne Room), paddling several major rapids, and then hiking up a different trail to the camp. My response: are you fucking insane? Over night, the river had risen 2-3 feet; if the rapids had been scaled up on day 1, they had to be off the charts today. Given that nobody had ever discussed the class IV-only option, I publicly pulled the leader over and discussed the fact that I needed him to know that that Allison and I were only willing to do class IV's, that we were not interested in being blindly taken down the river, finding out we were about to hit some class V around the bend. I was completely pissed off at the WF's for asserting their will on the first day we were actually following some semblance of the itinerary. My trust and confidence in basic safety decisions was also being further eroded - to the point that I felt I had to take active responsibility for Allison and my personal well-being. Allison and I returned to the shanty, cussing all the rainy and muddy way about the horrible situation. Not surprisingly, we opted to separate from the group by staying at this camp. The next problem, however, was that the last 15 hours of incessant rain had found its way through my side of the cabin roof; this

had rendered a 20-inch circle of my upper sleeping bag SOAKING wet. A couple feet of raindrops further splattered the bottoms of both our bags, owing to the shanty's wall-less front. Given that all we wanted to do was catch up on sleep, I stuffed my washcloth along the inner roof/wall junction where the water was wicking down - and this temporarily stopped the dripping. Within 20 minutes, though, one of the American guides came knocking - insisting we reconsider joining the group. But Allison and I were firm, explaining the leaky roof and wet sleeping bag problem. The guide suggested I steal a neighbor's bag and have the camp staff dry mine over the course of today/tomorrow. He would also alert the camp staff to fix the roof ASAP.



Left to Right: first 2 shots show same spot 15 hours apart - note river level; Rodrigo and his fans, morning 2 at Zeta camp

And then Allison and I engaged in very needed class V napping - briefly interrupted by camp staffers fixing the roof (i.e. moving shingles and adding a plastic garbage bag). By around 2 - the rain still pouring - we decided it was time to visit the cave and eat. As promised, the cooking staff was more than obliging in terms of preparing far more than we could eat. And thus began our great and momentary friendship with Rodrigo. To this day, I don't think Allison and I know what Rodrigo's exact position was, despite 6 hours of talking with him that afternoon. He appeared to be a full-time camp manager who filled in as needed on all sorts of odd jobs. Rodrigo remains the only person with whom Allison and I felt we bonded with in any meaningful way on the rafting portion of this trip. Relatively speaking, Rodrigo's English was great. He was good-looking, highly educated, and well-traveled, having worked as a computer engineer in Santiago until recently. Although he still maintained a home and several pet dogs in that city, he appeared to have suffered a mid-life crisis 2 years ago, quitting his job and separating from a long-term girlfriend. I'm not sure how he wound up working the Fu, other than he was a very serious climber - which somehow put him in touch with the company owner. Like I said to Rodrigo that afternoon, I hoped he would think about becoming a math and science teacher someday (a career option he apparently never thought about); his warm personality and wonderful laugh just said Rodrigo = teacher (and the vacation schedule seemed more suited to his lifestyle). According to Allison, I shared obvious chemistry with Rodrigo. Although she seldom makes such grand observations and/or statements about me, I'm not sure I agree with her; I think she - like a fair number of men I meet on these trips - was simply mesmerized by the depth of our discourse. Nevertheless, there was an admitted sparkle that overcame us whenever we finally communicated some word or concept that initially evaded our common vocabulary (and there were many of those moments, given our partial language barrier). In any event, Allison and I loved Rodrigo and were thrilled to talk about so many great things. My tour de force conversation topics included HIV/AIDS in Chile (which entailed a longer discussion of religion), explaining my research (which extended into a longer discussion of the Atacama Desert and its geothermal features), and the usual discussion of politics, emphasizing the usual American issues and Chile's recently elected female president (which actually turned into a longer discussion about economics). Given the incessant rain, we eventually took our conversation into the cooking shack with the other staff members (none of whom spoke English). For dinner, we enjoyed a simple rice-based casserole with a few vegetables and canned mussels - plus the BEST dessert on the whole trip (crepe-like pancakes rolled with caramel-like dulce de leche). Sadly, Allison and I then stumbled back in the dark rain to our shanty.



Left to Right: Allison hating horseback, Allison loving the crazy Deliverance swamp raft, rappelling (which we did not do)

December 27, 2006

Temperatures the next morning felt nearly freezing, as had been the case much of the night (the snowline having lowered to 1500-2000 above us). Fresh snow was visible on the mountainsides, correlating with the approximate elevation at which the others were camped. We both heartily agreed that a day talking with Rodrigo was worth a thousand times whatever the others had been doing. Needless to say, we slept in - knowing that today's activities (barring weather problems) included horseback riding and/or vertical rock-climbing. By midday, we could hear whooping by Zeta - and correctly gathered that the others were

returning via the Tyrolean traverse. By this point, it had stopped raining and the sun was making a serious effort at bursting through the thin, foggy clouds. Allison and I ventured down to see some of the show. Most people seemed surprised we had skipped out on the forest camp hike. Noting everyone's drenched, muddy, and haggard clothing, we assured them we were glad to have skipped out. Sensing that some folks were teasing and/or trying to egg us on about the Tyrolean, Allison made herself scarce. But I was committed and made my interest known to the guides. Some of the WF's were surprised I had no issues with the Tyrolean traverse; like I said at the time, I've done enough climbing to understand that they were using a good harness (full waist plus figure-8 chest webbing) and 3 main lines plus a safety rope... what was not to trust? For me, my safety on the rope wasn't the issue; it was the stumbling down to the roping-up platform while watching the massive river rush by/below. Fortunately, my favorite Peruvian guide escorted me down and promptly tied me onto a safety line - which put me at ease during the final wait for my ultimate turn. The other thing that saved me was that I had been wearing my regular glasses (which lack a safety strap); we all agreed that those needed to go because they could slip off and into Zeta. Thus, I handed them to a teammate before proceeding. Not seeing the raging river in perfect focus distracted me and/or messed with my usual vertigo. The guides' attention to detail with all climbing gear and safety systems was top-notch and I had done enough work with ropes to understand and operate the system without any issues. We were attached to a 2-rope pulley system, responsible for manually pulling ourselves across. If there had been some kind of problem (i.e. someone freaking and losing bodily function), we were on a safety line that the guides could have operated. Halfway across, I actually stopped for a reasonable stare down the main Zeta slot and - as evidenced by a picture in the series below - was smiling. Indeed, the Tyrolean traverse was extremely exciting. Only one person seemed genuinely afraid and not interested in ever doing anything like that again. Even Allison, who realized I was actually doing the traverse (I'm not sure she believed I was going to do it until she saw me dangling over Zeta), decided she could not be the only person not to have done it... and so she succumbed. Although I felt mildly guilty that Allison and I got to do the traverse twice (where everyone else, returning from the hike on the other side, only crossed once), we waited until nearly everyone was across and we helped the guides separate and carry life-jackets, harnesses, and webbing after everyone else had dispersed. This was also an activity where, once you were done, you could head back to your shanty - so it was not like our choice added any wait onto a step that affected everyone else.

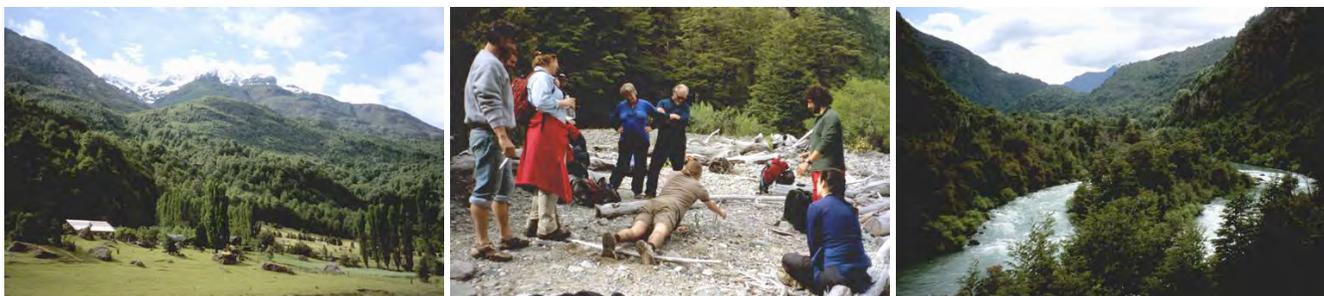


Self-Explanatory: Sarah's Tyrolean traverse, in order.

Within an hour, we were enjoying a lunch, the sun appearing to be making a full show. Everyone was in good spirits and the day's planned activities all appeared to be on target. Given the success of the Tyrolean traverse, Allison was now amenable to joining me for the horseback riding option. Our team separated into people who wanted to ride and climb, just ride, just climb, or do nothing. Allison and I were in the "just ride" group and proceeded up the hill to a major trail where our cowboy and several docile horses were waiting. I was surprised to hear the main trail was, like, right here (i.e. continuous with that along the entire river); we had been told that hiking options were limited at this camp - and thus made no effort to undertake any hiking the day before. Had the weather been more promising yesterday, it would have been nice to - say - follow this trail up and maybe see Inferno Canyon. Like middle sister Ellen, Allison was one of those little girls who loved horses but, when actually faced with them, balked. Unlike Ellen (who didn't get near a saddle until her late-20's), though, Allison had been spooked during a childhood pony ride when the horse took off running. Needless to say, Allison was skittish and difficult during this horseback ride. I had no issues, other than my large feet falling out of the wood stirrups (they resembled the fronts of wooden shoes and were clearly made for the small Chilean cowboys and their pointy boots). Our cowboy spoke no English and gave no instruction, which left Allison - in particular - frustrated. Allison was never able to master the art of making her horse move and so the cowboy, likely equally frustrated, had to pull them along much of the way. We were out maybe 45 minutes, riding on a variety of surfaces: wide trails, open fields, rocky streams, and sketchy narrow tracks through the very muddy forest - much on moderately steep hillsides. There were no particularly new or impressive or views. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the ride. People interested in riding options on this trip should have some experience, should not expect mind-blowing scenery or trails, and should not assume horses are always available. Probably because of the charter group, horses were only available twice during our trip - with the total riding time less than 2 hours over the course of the week. We were dropped off in the middle of the woods, just under the main face of the climbing wall (down which people would be rappelling shortly)

and given simple directions about getting back to camp. This included what may be Allison's favorite activity from the entire week: the Huck Finn raft that you manually pulled across the Deliverance swamp - taking you back to somewhere in the trail network of the camp proper. Once back, we relaxed on a big rock in the finally-warm sun. And now for the brief interlude to describe what Allison (and her friends) think is the funniest event from this entire trip: Allison left at some point to retrieve her books and change clothes back at the shanty. When she returned, she said she noticed that my swimming suit (worn a few days before and hung above the deck) had fallen into this rocky cleft (probably in the windy rain). On its own, this information wouldn't have been so bad; the problem - we had been throwing our buckets of pee down there, not to mention broadcasting our toothpaste spit. Although Allison figured I would chock the suit up to a total loss, she did not realize how much I loved the suit (my "fat-lady one-piece"). Also, as a microbiologist, I accept that urine is a mostly sterile solution, and we were brushing our teeth with antimicrobial products. Thus, she seemed surprised when I managed to climb under the shanty and reach the suit. For the next hour, I washed and rinsed it down by the river - much to Allison's disgust. I even donned it later in the hot tub, hoping the heat would do some magic. Unfortunately - even after several washings at home - it still bears an ever-so-slight scent of ammonia.

Given decent weather, we dined outside by the Zeta overlook (as opposed to inside the smoky cave). Here, we enjoyed what I thought was the best combined meal on the whole trip: roast chicken, the usual array of sides, and some kind of layered apple dessert. As with lunch, spirits were high. Tomorrow's itinerary was discussed: we would repeat much of the WF complaint-inspired section that Allison and I opted out of, as well as the Fu section from our first day on the river (i.e. Asleep at the Wheel). To avoid the Throne Room portage, though, we would be hiking to a point below this rapid and meeting up with the boats and gear (the latter of which would be carried on horseback and/or ox-cart). The hiking part of tomorrow would be moderate - 2 hours. Not to soapbox excessively, but Allison and I did roll our eyes at the notion that all we were doing was repeating rapids at this point... it seemed sort of silly that the WF's had made such a stink and here we were, 2 days later, repeating it again. I can't speak for them (lord knows, they may have been satisfied with this), but this was NOT my idea of a river trip. A river trip begins at upstream point A and travels down to downstream point B over the course of several days - at least the wild rivers where I come from. I had the sense that several people - either because they were rafting virgins or because they were from places where river trips are one-day affairs with road access - thought this trip format was acceptable. If I wanted to just go over and over the same stretch of whitewater, I'd go to a damn theme park. I don't go on river trips because I am into the thrill of some short whitewater section; people who feel like I do will not like the Fu for the same reason.



Left to Right: views from the hike - pastoral farm and mountains, man-game during rest-stop, just before descending to put-in

December 28, 2006

We awoke to mixed skies, ultimately enjoying a rain-free day. We had been asked to have our bags packed and carried to the cave by 8 a.m. so that they could be transferred down to where we would be meeting the boats. After breakfast (around 10), we commenced with the hike. Although the first 20 minutes were on a narrow, rough path through thick forest, the rest of the hike was along a fairly wide trail; I suspect the first part was just a linker path between the main trail and the camp - and the second was the main trail that runs alongside the entire Fu. Said trail was not, however, marked in any way - and we did get confused by the moderate numbers of side-trails/roads leading off to farms/dwellings if our guides were not present (which happened to those of us in the middle of the spread-out hiking pack). The hiking temperatures were sunny but cool and the scenery was very European (modest snowy mountains and green farmlands). About mid-way through the hike, we came to an actual beach (I believe, the first and only that we saw on this whole trip). Here, for unexplained reasons, we basically took this long rest on the rocks. The men (only) engaged in these strange games all focused on physical abilities (e.g. stretching as far as possible in a one-handed push-up to place a stick in the rocky sand). In retrospect, I wonder if the length of this break had something to do with the fact that the guides knew the gear was running WAY behind and they were trying to stall. After this stop, we continued and the trail was a bit wilder, climbing up and down on these rocky, cliffy ledges that offered some decent views up and out over the river. As we climbed, too, we were able to look back and actually see Throne Room rapid, which basically represented this spot where the river pinched down 70% into another granite narrows. The rest of the river, though, looked completely placid. Like I've said a few times, the Fu is definitely not the consistently fast Selway or Middle Fork of the Salmon (which I prefer); it is much more like the Grand/Colorado - a lot of very wide placid water interrupted by short moments of insanity. Our last high view of the river featured a big spot where an island split the Fu into 2 braids (shown above); this actually gave me the reference point on the map I have been using to write up this report (given that, in general, I seldom knew where the hell we were along the river at any time). We then descended to obvious grazing land that had some kind of rough jeep/road access. Here, we were made to sit for 2 hours (and, given that it was lunch time, many of us were hungry). While Allison and I had all our river gear in our backpacks (which we carried during the hike), the charter group was using all the wetsuits that morning - and so what we were most likely waiting for was them to finish. Alternatively, it was just more stupid planning and here we all were twiddling our thumbs. EITHER scenario is unacceptable and, again, reflects serious logistics problems - not uncontrollable acts of god or nature - that should have been worked out years ago. When the gear did arrive, everything felt chaotic - particularly because, since our last day on the river, we'd added 2 more and negative

cliques had formed. Allison and I felt, once again, like we were left with the scraps. Initially, we thought we had our Peruvian guide... but, at the last second, he went to a full raft (with a clique who seemed to have been pestering him) and we wound up with one of the older Chileans. For better or worse, he was excitingly aggressive with the water, and more daring when it came to running us into bigger features. He wasn't as talkative as the Peruvian, though - and, consequently, he intimidated me more. Unfortunately, I was standing next to porn man and noticed his life vest was not tight (there was, literally, an inch of open air between his wetsuit and the vest). His oarsman - in raft with 6 others - seemed completely preoccupied. Thus, I felt the need to tell porn guy to fix his gear. His response - as he physically moved it up and down - was that he didn't like it tight... then he just walked away, completely ignoring me. Although I was furious, I didn't chase down his guide because (a) I had the sense that even if his guide tightened it, he would loosen it later; and (b) he'd resent me for tattling and we'd have even more group issues. To this day, I don't know what the outcome was; I just know I wondered - seriously - whether I was going to see someone killed or maimed before the end of this trip. Meanwhile, our guide did carefully check Allison and my life vests, etc.

Having alluded to my Fu map, I have to state upfront that it was never clear exactly which rapids we did today. The only ones our guide mentioned were Chaos and Asleep at the Wheel. Chaos, though, was definitely the second rapid of the day. Based on map interpretations after returning home, Allison and I were amused to find out that we did (in order) Kilun (a IV+), Chaos (a IV+), Casa Salvage (a IV+), then had a break (including some washed out II-III's), before finishing with Frailes (a IV) and Asleep at the Wheel (a IV+). Although it is tempting to say the extreme water level rendered all of these V's, I would only commit to rating lower Chaos/Casa as a V. Allison and I remember Kilun as 1 distinct rapid - but Chaos and Casa were sort of like a "white mile" thing (i.e. they may have been 2 rapids at low water but they blended when we did it). In any event, had you asked Allison and I immediately after the trip whether we did any significant whitewater, we'd have wrinkled our faces and chuckled "not really." In reviewing the map, we were both - like - you have GOT to be kidding: we did, like, 7-8 class IV/IV+ (nearly as many IV's as are on the Selway). Honestly, the Selway felt more substantial; it felt like we actually did the river - probably because we were on it 6 hours a day and went top to bottom (in contrast, we were all over the board on the Fu, but for only 6 hours total over week - seriously). Anyway - the guides seemed excited but nervous. And the river, which had come down a little, was still much higher than it was on day 1. For most of the guides, they had only rafted the river at this level a couple times with passengers. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you much about Kilun because any recollections of that brief rapid were eaten by my big impressions of Chaos/Casa. Chaos began with what this substantial falls-like drop (6-8 feet) across the majority of the river; this doesn't sound like a lot until you think about the volume and velocity of the water pouring over it, in conjunction with the technical features below the drop. At high water, the trick was not pouring directly over the drop but, rather, sneaking down this easier channel on river right. This allowed you to stop in a few eddies before planning a more controlled route down the technical features of the lower sections. From above Chaos, the sound of the pour-over was massive - the visual image of the drop frightening (because the line of the river was very clear, and we could see the lower part of the LONG rapid waiting). We edged over to river right and our relative movement seemed slow, as compared to the majority of the river to our left. The boats went down single file, pulling up against a jumble of rocks in what was a narrow series of eddies. From this position, we were 200-300 feet from the pour-over (now behind us); the sound was insane, as was the sight of all this whitewater RIGHT there. The leader and our guide discussed the proposed line for 5 minutes. The whole time, I was fixated on the pour-over and rapid - filled with fear, intimidation, and awe (indeed, there was never any joyous screaming on this trip during the whitewater). Eventually, the guides agreed we would shoot for a middle line. Given my fear level, I kept my eyes in my little paddle zone and focused fully on executing every command perfectly. All I can say with certainty: everything was white and big for some time. Even though we were jostled a fair bit, I never felt like we were on the edge of flipping or that I was close to slipping out of the boat. Meanwhile, Allison reported that she had to hold on the whole time (Ms. "PUT THAT PADDLE IN THE WATER NOW!!" - see Selway report). Although the waves and holes were bigger, the lower part of the rapid scared me less than Lava Canyon. Sitting by the pour-over, though, definitely psyched me out a lot. I don't remember much until we hit Asleep at the Wheel again. This time, the big waves were everywhere and we did more of a middle run; it was definitely wetter and crazier than the first run.



Left to Right: last nights' camp view, horseback ride views and cowboy

As with the first day, we pulled over on river right - albeit a little more upstream. Then we hiked to the main company base camp high on a bluff with impressive views over the river valley. Less time was spent on a camp tour, probably because we were running behind and there were still afternoon activities on the itinerary: canyoneering or horseback riding. Shanties were quickly doled out, the majority down what most people called a cliff-side (indeed, going from shanty to anything like

bathrooms or eating facilities required a 200-foot ascent up several switchbacks and crazy log structures). After more sound consideration, I opted out of canyoneering and went horseback riding instead. Allison - who was not about to get on another horse - stayed with canyoneering. She will narrate her insane afternoon in her own words shortly. My ride was leisurely, beginning with a 15-minute hike back to the road and a 30-minute van ride back to the Rio Espolon where the cowboys were waiting. We rode on wide dirt roads the whole time, basically going down the Espolon (high up through farmlands - seldom in view of the river), crossing the river on a wooden bridge, and then going back up the other side (again - high up through farmlands). Several distant new mountains came into view during the ride back. My only excitement was that my horse hated all the other horses - except that of our lead cowboy and this mother from Washington, with whom I shared a nice conversation. My horse constantly kept its eyes peeled backwards, looking for signs of other horses getting too close; if any did, she would try to nip them. Thus, I spent most of the ride vigilant of her antics, pulling the reins dozens of times to avert her attempts to harass or become excited by the other animals. Surprisingly, though, I was never concerned by the situation. My horse was responsive to my commands and I probably identified with her a little.

As for Allison, here is my transcription of her hand-written report (alas, there are no accompanying pictures): While Sarah was off horseback riding, I opted to try "canyoneering" - after all, I'd bought special river shoes just for the event. The lead guide was in charge of the expedition, the safety cat guide assisting. First, in order to get to the canyon, we all had to cross the Fu. The device we used to achieve this end was a little, 2-person cart (reminiscent of a ski-lift chair) strung across the river on cables. The weight of the passengers propelled the cart halfway across; to finish the journey, 1 of the passengers used a wrench-like crank to haul the cart to a landing station of the other bank. At least 2 passenger loads (i.e. the family with the youngest kids) had difficulties with this system (physical/strength or following directions), causing long and frustrating delays in this obvious bottleneck. From the landing station, we hiked about half a mile to the Rio Blanco, a Fu tributary which, given the high water, was now a fully raging river. We then proceeded - in wetsuits, helmets, life vests, and river shoes - to wade, scramble, jump, and occasionally swim up the river canyon. This was probably the craziest and most dangerous activity in which I was a participant during the entire Fu trip. Not only was the stream raging - but we made several crossings by holding onto a throw rope while the leader pulled us 1-by-1 through swift water. I won't even go into all the major rock-to-rock jumping that was expected of us. When we were about 5 minutes from the end of the upstream trek (i.e. an alleged waterfall), 1 of the WF's and I defected and chose to sit on a boulder, huddled behind some driftwood - rather than to be dragged across another swift, icy pool. Neither of us could feel our feet and we believed that the waterfall probably wasn't worth exacerbating this state. We spent the next 15-20 minutes waiting for the group to return, fantasizing about hiking on the ground (not canyoneering in the water) back to the Fu. When we asked the guide about this option, he initially said this wasn't possible. After we whined, however, he said we could pick a trail through the woods if we really wanted to... but we'd have to do the last stretch in the river because there was a huge hill we could not easily get over. So, the WF and I pieced our way through the forest and farmland, regaining most feeling in our feet along the way. When we arrived at the obvious hill, we first decided to see if we could make it over. As there was no trail, we zigzagged through loose dirt and shrubs - using tree limbs to haul ourselves up, where possible. The last 10-20 feet were completely dicey - tons of loose rocks. The WF (clearly more determined than me) crawled on her hands and feet to the top. Meanwhile, I tried several different approaches but found all too dangerous. Thus, I elected to scoot back down on my ass and shamefully rejoin the group in the river. So much for my great escape attempt. The rest of the trip was uneventful: we re-crossed the Fu, shoveled fondue into our faces, and reheated in the hot tub before dinner. And back to Sarah: After returning from the ride, I enjoyed a brief hot tub that was interrupted by the return of several wet canyoneers (Allison not among the first group up) who were shaking with cold. Still in their wetsuits, they jumped right into the hot water to recover. Unfortunately, I don't remember much about dinner or the rest of the evening. Our leader presented a moderately uncertain picture of the next day - albeit hopeful that we could run the Himalayas (a class V wave-oriented rapid just below Terminator) to the end. Of all the rapids I'd read about on this river, Himalayas were of great interest - and thus I was excited (at least the night before) about the possibility of doing that section.

December 29-30, 2006

I can only refer to this day as the day the trip report title was spawned (by yours truly, of course) because it remains THE most frustratingly fucked up day in my 10 years of rafting. Although it had rained a little overnight, the morning skies were overcast but promising. Unfortunately, all hell was breaking out with regards to other issues (as revealed by our leader during breakfast). First, the river had not dropped at all (meaning the Himalayas were out). According to our leader, the company had NEVER taken passengers through the lower section in such high water. Now, I am certain the WF's had a little orgasm when they heard this news - but I was not inspired by this information. The lower Fu rapids - known en masse as Puente a Puente (or bridge to bridge) - consisted of continuous big and serious whitewater, including (most significantly): Puente Colgante (IV+, probably a V today), Alfombra Magica/Magic Carpet (IV, probably a V today), Mundaca (V, probably a V+ today), a long string of low IV's (probably all IV+), and the finale Mas or Menos (a V, definitely a V+ today). At least 2 serious and recent deaths had occurred in this section in high water (notably not as high as today). Second (and adding to the level of ominous stress), the leader of the charter group had fallen seriously ill (like, "sought medical attention" sick). After an all-guide discussion, the following plan was hatched: all boats and some of our guides would spend the morning running the charter group down Puente/Puente (this was already in motion as our leader was speaking). In about an hour (i.e. 10-11), they would be take half our group down, with the second half going around 1. We were all asked to make decisions about which run(s) we'd prefer (and I say runs because at least 6 people in our group could do it twice). Allison and I quickly committed to a second run - a decision I cannot retrospectively judge as right or wrong (although most readers will probably say was wrong). Meanwhile, serious negative discussions were being had by several cliques, most involving what was widespread contempt for and/or questioning of the family with the young kids (e.g. most people did not want to share a boat with them because they felt their safety could be jeopardized; people wondered whether the guides were finally going to split them up and/or tell a few of them they had no business being on the river today). In the end, the leader actually grew some balls by (a) splitting the family up for safety reasons (despite their insistence otherwise); (b) saying the boy was not allowed on several rapids and would be left on the shore by himself for a later pick-up (he would also not be allowed to paddle); and (c) making an effort to not mix a few key personalities on the same boat (i.e. the leader had finally figured out who hated whom the most). Third - and most

Our sunny flight back to Santiago was on time, the farmlands and distant ocean gorgeous. In what was a prophetic and supremely ironic moment, Allison remarked that it was a shame we weren't going to spend any time in Santiago. As the proverb goes: be careful what you wish for... We landed in Santiago at 8 p.m., our theoretical departure 3 hours away. Because we were heading back to the US, we had to pick up our luggage and haul it back to the ticket counter for a formal check-in. Well - everything stopped here when we noticed a very big "cancelado" sign under the word Dallas. This was the day that freak hurricanes in Texas messed up all flights in the area, including ours. Passengers booked through Florida or Los Angeles were unaffected. So as to avoid belaboring what happened next, I will briefly summarize: we were in line for 3 solid hours (no air conditioning, outside temperatures still in the 80's), each party taking an average of 10-20 minutes to deal with rebooking (i.e. arguing with the staff about why they HAD to be placed on an outgoing flight NOW). Fortunately, Allison and I had some flexibility in our schedules and so we were not as freaky as most others... and, in many ways, we were sort of looking forward to a free day in Santiago - provided that American Airlines picked up the tab (which they truly did). We also befriended this AMAZING father/son pair from Mississippi (hence, more Deliverance references) who had just been trying to kayak the Fu (with limited success); they will come up again as we spent our free day in Santiago enjoying their company. Standing in line that night, father/son were especially conspicuous because they were carrying gigantic wooden paddles in this tropical-print fabric bag. Both were also totally charming, great-looking, river-guides in the off-season (although it should be noted that dad was married and son was jail-bait, much to Allison's surprise and chagrin). In the end, we were re-booked on a flight tomorrow; unfortunately, it landed in Miami - meaning a LONG series of flights home (that ultimately included stops in St. Louis and San Francisco). But we were given first class seats for the Miami to San Francisco run and they let us fly into Seattle, so we could visit mommy.

By 11 p.m., we had been processed and told to wait in this designated area for rides into the city and our hotel. Over the next hour, we definitely saw the darker side of humanity: desperate travelers - sleep-deprived, food-deprived... screaming, fighting, nastiness. Shortly after a big bus left with much of the crowd (accompanied by violent and/or abusive behavior on the part of many Americans), an airline representative arrived with news that the bus had broken down so it would be a little longer while they hired a fleet of vans (I truly thought the representative's personal safety could be in limbo given this crowd). But the vans arrived within 15 minutes and we were at the hotel by midnight. The various transport problems had created enough lags in the system so we were not in another monster line at the check-in desk. They put us up at the swanky \$200-night Sheraton, paying for 5 minutes of free international calling time, and full meal vouchers for the next 24 hours. Best of all, Allison and I each got our own private rooms with luxury bathtubs and king-sized beds. As we checked in, we were directed to the dinner buffet that they had set up for us - recommending we take advantage of this promptly. Indeed, Allison and I ditched our luggage in our rooms and made our way down to a big, great meal - joining, again, the Mississippians. The only sad and shameful thing: our emergency group was plopped down adjacent to what was a very posh wedding party (i.e. we - speaking for the majority of sweaty/smelly, poorly-dressed, crazy Americans - received some unpleasant stares from the locals). Despite everything, American Airlines came through big-time and, honestly, our time in Santiago remains a serious highlight of this whole trip. After stuffing my face with all kinds of chicken, bread, salad, and dessert, I crashed; Allison was up drinking with the Mississippians for another hour. We briefly discussed the possibility of seeing some of the city tomorrow.



Left to Right: Allison and the Mississippians, downtown Santiago, great bulls at base of statue near art museum

December 31, 2006 and Mostly Getting Home

When Allison and I met for breakfast around 10:30, I was concerned I was feeling run-down (in retrospect, it was shocking I never got sick on this crazy trip). Although we were not leaving until tonight, I felt it would be most prudent if I just rested today. Allison seemed disappointed, but did sign up for a hotel-organized bus tour at 3. After tossing and turning 30 minutes, I decided I wasn't going to waste a perfectly good day in Santiago. So I went looking for Allison, first finding the Mississippians (who were interested in joining us) and then Allison. Within 30 minutes, we had hailed a cab and were on our way to the Plaza d'Armas. From this historic square, we set out foot for 4 hours - passing many landmarks (none of which were open, being that it was Sunday/New Year's Eve). These included walking into a service at a prominent Catholic church (as we left the building, Mississippi dad whispered, "that didn't count"), a bustling shopping area (several stands selling yellow bra/panty sets, some weird New Year's tradition in this otherwise conservative city), an art museum, and a microscope shop (its large sign featuring gigantic bacteria). Temperatures reached 90°F, which, in conjunction with the intense sunlight, messed up whatever circadian rhythm my body had been used to in dimly dark and wet Oregon (i.e. it took a month for my normal sleeping patterns to settle). Consequently, we stopped at a shady café/bar for some refreshing drinks. Eventually, we continued on to the river - this boiling channel of mud that looked like the Colorado, pre-damnation. Being industrious engineers, the Chileans had, of course, channeled the river into a concrete canal over the underground freeway through the city. At first, we assumed the color was due to fecal material and other questionable pollution. In fact, it is all silt - straight from the Andes (which towered visibly on the horizon - thousands of feet higher). Mississippi dad (who liked to tease his well-adjusted son) goaded

him to take his kayak in there and do some rolls. From this point, we walked along a tree-lined riverside public park that was surprisingly quiet and clean. In general, Santiago seemed much cleaner than Buenos Aires... although we were panhandled more/several times. Eventually, we turned right on some prominent road - our goal another other park on a hill. At the park entrance, several friendly Chilean police required that we sign in (we were never certain why). After slogging up this steep, cobblestone trail, we had to buy and drink more water, and sit down for a long spell - admiring the flowers, tropical plants, and distant snowy peaks visible through the trees.



Left to Right: art museum, silty river above underground freeway, park promenade along silty river

We then made our way back to the Plaza d'Armas - where we decided to take a cab to some other parts of town (specifically, a decrepit basilica in a more sketchy area) and a restaurant en route back to the hotel. This establishment (the name of which I don't recall and didn't record) mostly featured pizza (which we enjoyed) and 80's music videos playing on multiple TV screens (indeed, I should have known we were in trouble when we walked in to Duran Duran's "Save a Prayer"). Its other serious flaw: atrociously filthy restrooms. Our final hailed taxi turned out to be a class V cab-ride, our driver flooring the vehicle upwards of 50 mph down potholed city streets. Amusingly, Allison accidentally paid the guy \$20 bucks (for a \$2 fare), having confused her peso conversion. We figured it was New Year's and he deserved it, having not killed us. After, in my case, showering and packing, I was down in the lobby - a moderate crowd having gathered for the planned shuttle back to the airport. Incidentally, I have neglected to mention that - during our stay - the hotel staff had been quite involved in preparing for tonight's big party, most of which revolved around this crazy pirate theme out by the pool. A group a celebrities (the term used by the front desk) were apparently among the stranded - but they had elected to party in Santiago, extending their stay until the mad rush home had subsided. No actual names were dropped, however. By 7, we were boarding the bus and - sadly - leaving for the airport. Once there, we stood in some more long lines - but, mostly, our flight back to Florida was good. Our eager pilot, who knew he had a plane-load of very tired people who were running late, amicably spoke with us as we taxied out onto the runway: "let's get this show on the road and take you all home!" After a surprisingly good dinner, we also celebrated New Year's a few times as we crossed a couple time-zone lines. Indeed, this was my first time in the air on this holiday. And somewhere in there, I enjoyed about 3 hours of sleep - good because we were landing in Miami at 4 a.m. Of course, I neglected to mention that our return flight plan included a 10-hour layover in Miami. After a hellish customs line (featuring this RUDE airport security guard who made ZERO attempt at speaking slowly or simply for the many non-English speaking passengers), we located our strange but saving grace (for the layover, that is): the in-airport hotel, which someone had recommended. And - thank god - there was one room left. Despite the hideous metallic disco-theme of the lobby/front desk, the rooms were silent (with 2-foot outer concrete walls). Allison and I shared a king-size bed, popped some Nyquil, and were out for over 6 hours. Indeed, that hotel saved our asses and made the flight home almost respectable. First class wasn't too shabby either. But our good fortune was not to last. Although we landed on time in Seattle (around 11:30 p.m.), our luggage never arrived... and we - along with several hundred others - waited, complained, filed claims, and were not on our way home until 2 a.m. Three days later, our especially stinky gear (sweaty, smoky, wet, fungal, and - in some cases - indirectly peed/spit-on) was delivered to Oregon where no amount of pre-rinsing, soaking, washing, hanging outside, or Deliverance-watching rid some of those smells.

Epilogue and Closing Thoughts

So - I'm not going to belabor the obvious: we don't recommend this trip. People who want other information are welcome to contact me. I'm going to close with a meandering anecdote that has been my mind a lot while writing this report: one of our great teammates on the Selway was this sweet guy from the east coast with as much river experience as me. When this guy heard Allison and I were considering the Fu, he seemed skeptical. The reason: he had done 2 North American rivers with this company - who consequently had often bugged him to do the Fu. But he consistently turned it down because he had this sense that it wasn't his thing: too glitzy, too cushy, over-hyped. As he described his 2 other trips with this company, though, I could definitely hear things like: chaotic organization, not enough attention to detail, encouraged/took along people who didn't know what they were getting into and who became difficult... ALL things I felt were major issues on the Fu trip. Sitting there talking with this guy on those idyllic Selway beaches, I wanted to overlook what I was hearing because the North American rivers (which I had read about) were truly out-there expedition-style trips (i.e. no one else does them, there are no established camps). But the most telling observation I can retrospectively make about our conversations did not have anything to do with a specific thing this guy had to say. Rather, it had to do with this guy's response to the Selway team and how friendly and like-minded everyone was... it seemed, honestly, like the Selway and that team represented his first experience connecting with people in this kind of context. After doing the Fu, I feel I have this newfound understanding of why this guy seemed so surprised by the Selway. Consequently, I feel sorry for people who do the Fu and think that's what a river trip is, what wilderness is, and what people who love rivers are all about.