

Sent Packing

Vacation to Hell ends in epic portage

> IT'S LATE AUGUST IN THE PERUVIAN Andes, and kayakers Todd Gillman and Piero Vellutino are on a knife-thin ridge looking down at the Rio Huallaga, a remote whitewater puzzle their five-man team has spent the last three days trying to solve. The paddlers have deciphered 18 miles of technical, relentless Class V whitewater, but there is no answer to what confronted them this morning: An impenetrable jumble of boulders Gillman describes as "an unrunnable junkshow," beyond which lay a 19-mile sheer-walled gorge full of unseen hazards.

The paddlers spent the rest of the day searching for options. While Andrew Oberhardt, Bryan Smith, and Shane Robinson dragged the boats up steep slopes so choked with vegetation it required a machete to move through, Gillman and Vellutino climbed ahead. They were looking for a trail around the gorge, or failing that, an escape route. But now, with the cliff falling away precipitously on both sides, even that modest goal seems beyond them. Vellutino, a Peruvian who joined the others in the provincial capital Huanuco, turns nervously to Gillman.

"One of you guys has insurance, right?" he asks.

"Yeah, a couple of us do."

"Well, we might need it to call in a helicopter."

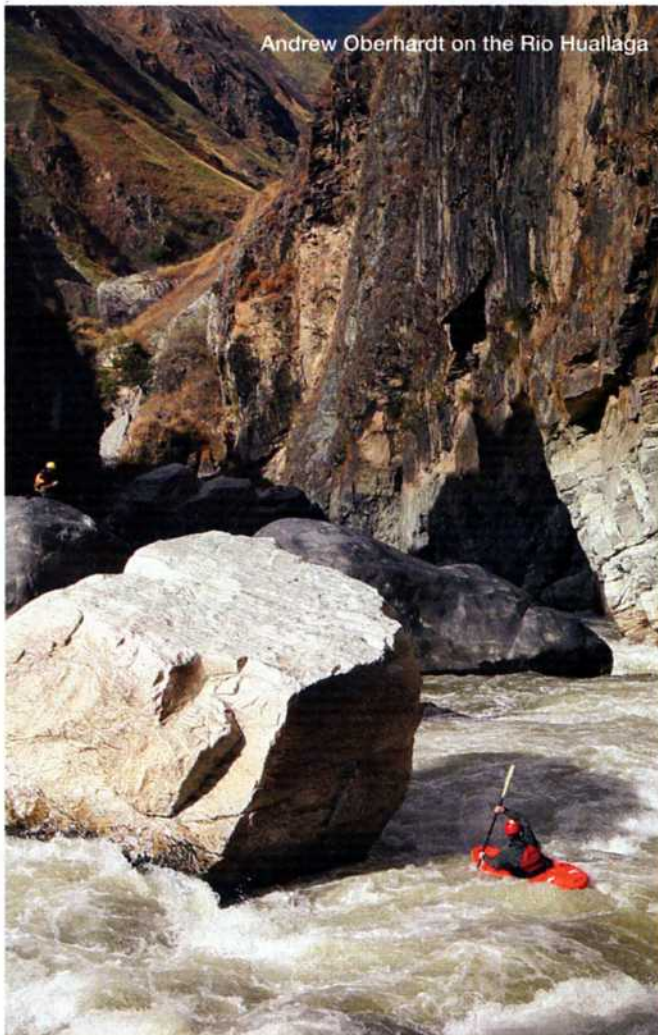
At that moment, perched on a dead-end ridge deep in the Peruvian Andes, it seemed absurd that these guys had actually won this trip, like some kind of extreme-sports showcase on *The Price Is Right*. But no one could quibble with the name of the marketing promotion-slash-expedition grant that put them there. Vacation to Hell pretty much summed it up.

The winners call themselves The Range Life, a crew of regular-Joe kayakers from Seattle, Washington and Squamish, British Columbia. Gillman, 34, is a sales representative for New Belgium Brewing, Oberhardt, 27, is a computer programmer at Microsoft, Robinson, 34, is a law school student, and Smith, 32, is a carpenter and adventure filmmaker. They invited Vellutino, 27, to join them after they won the contest and learned that they would be going to Peru.

That's another VTH hallmark: The team doesn't decide the mission. Sponsor Immersion Research does. For this inaugural expedition, IR chose the Rio Huallaga, the last un-run tributary of the Amazon. An American team had paddled the upper reaches in 1999; the Range Life's mission was to finish the first descent. Immersion Research gave them airfare and \$6,000 to complete the trip, an entirely self-supported effort they expected to last up to 10 days.

The sun was setting on the fourth day as Gillman and Vellutino down-climbed to join the others on a narrow ledge, where they would camp and settle on a plan: The next morning they would hike out without the boats, and without calling a helicopter. They were prepared to hike for a week, but reached a road by nightfall.

The team hadn't finished the first descent, but they paddled farther on the Huallaga than anyone



Andrew Oberhardt on the Rio Huallaga

PHOTO: TODD GILLMAN

**WE'RE NOT OFFERING
FUN-AND-GAMES TRIPS, WE'RE
SHOWCASING EXPLORATION**

had before, and escaped unharmed. Besides, the sponsors are happy. "We're not offering fun-and-games trips," says Vacation to Hell organizer John Grace, "We're showcasing exploration, and there are two types of kayaks fundamental to exploration—creek boats and sea kayaks. So next year, we're sending the winners on a sea kayaking trip."

But not just any trip. The winners, Team Sweetwater of Florida, will explore the Canadian high arctic, including a pair of dicey crossings (45 and 60 miles, respectively), and a 45-mile portage across Devon Island, the world's largest uninhabited island. Welcome to hell.