

# Chilean Dreamin'





Beginners get acquainted with small whitewater kayaks before heading to the real rapids (opposite).



*Even beginning kayakers can experience the thrill of international paddling, thanks to programs offered by adventure-travel companies.*

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*Story and Photos by Rob Dunton*

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If you've been waiting until you acquire Class V skills and titanium nerves before venturing onto more remote and exotic rivers, wait no more. Beginning kayakers who want to experience what it's like to paddle on the kinds of rivers featured in first-descent documentaries should consider Chile's Rio Azul. Tucked into the Andes, this secluded, glacier-fed river beckons first-timers and intermediate paddlers alike. The river is ideal, offering an incredible 10-mile stretch of Class II and III whitewater with just a single pitch of Class IV.

Bio Bio Expeditions, a California-based adventure-travel company, has crafted a five-star training camp on Rio Azul. Over the course of a week, a rank beginner can grow into a solid Level 2 kayaker in a hardshell boat, enjoying the variety of three different rivers in the area—Rios Azul, Futaleufu ("Fu"), and Espalon. Add some epic mountain biking, horseback riding, and luxurious R&R, and you have one heck of a week.

"We have an amazing program for the never-paddled-before beginner," explained Marc Goddard, cofounder of Bio Bio and a 17-year Class V paddler. "We start with basic kayak strokes on the flats of nearby Espalon Lake or the lower Fu. Paddlers practice wet exits [exiting when upside down], T-rescues [assisted righting of a capsized kayak], forward and reverse sweeps, and basic kayak orientation and safety. Students spend ample time just paddling around and becoming comfortable with whitewater kayaks.





“We give beginners the highly stable Vanguard or the more maneuverable Arc inflatable kayaks,” Goddard continued. “We also use a tandem inflatable jokingly called the Divorce Boat for couples or nervous beginners who want an experienced guide in the boat with them.”

Before making my trek to Chile, I had spent all of 60 seconds in a hardshell kayak. After a day of hard-core rafting on the Apurimac in Peru, I yearned to learn about whitewater kayaking. I told Jorge Esquivel, one of the safety kayakers, about my years of paddling canoes, sea kayaks, and inflatables.

“Ah, so now you are ready to try ‘real’ kayaking, eh?” he replied. My bravado made him smile. Jorge is the current National Freestyle Kayaking Champion of Costa Rica. After some fundamentals, I squeezed into his hardshell and paddled away toward a glassy eddy. My strokes were smooth. I felt balanced, cocky even. On my fifth stroke the kayak reached the invisible current and rolled like an alligator. My first wet exit washed away my fantasies of instant competence. When I called Bio Bio Expeditions two years later, I challenged Goddard to transform me into a functioning intermediate.

Though many novices start their training on the Azul, I didn’t want any form of whitewater for my introduction, having flipped on a glassy pool in Peru. Others in our group felt the same, so we headed for the scenic flats of the lower Futaleufu. After an hour and a half of fundamentals and safety basics that included practicing wet exits, we spent the morning playing sharks-and-minnows and kayak polo. One team was pitted against the other, paddling and passing a ball while trying to score goals. The combination of playfulness and competitive drive turned skill-work into play.

Over lunch, we discussed how to use the variations in the river’s flow, then moved downstream to practice entering and exiting eddies and working the current. At the take-out, some

students headed for the riverbank to relax and others grabbed fly rods. I opted for private instruction on how to perform an Eskimo roll (flipping and righting an upside-down kayak using paddle strokes) in a calm pool. After 30 minutes of self-imposed dunking, I successfully completed one unassisted roll, an exhilarating end to my day.

Sheep, cattle, and horses grazed in the surrounding fields as we approached Bio Bio’s Futaleufu camp. A red, tin-roofed *quincho* served as the kitchen, dining area, and library. Smoke rose from the camp stove, where tea and coffee were brewing. Happy-hour delights greeted us—meat-and-cheese *empanadas* and fresh-squeezed Pisco sours, both Chilean specialties.

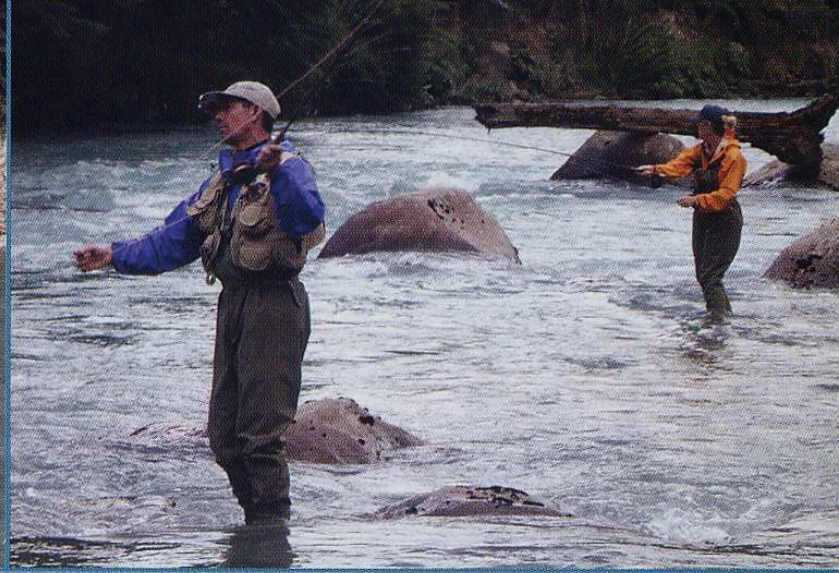
In the morning we were ready for Class II+ waters. Our kayaks and overnight gear were loaded onto an oxen cart and dragged up to Bio Bio’s even more remote Cascada Camp, eight miles from the nearest gravel road.

The first thing a kayaker notices about the Rio Azul (Blue River) is its remarkable color. Two rivers—one glacier gray and the other deep verdant green—meet at the Azul’s headwaters to create its luminous blue hue.

The Azul is a tributary of the Futaleufu. Located less than 40 miles from the border of Argentina, the Azul carves its way through rugged fields, forests, and granite. Homestead shacks dot the hillsides and surrounding mountains. Accessible only by horseback, oxcart, mountain bike, or foot, Bio Bio’s Cascada is the only encampment on the river. Tucked among old-growth coihue and lenga trees, it is almost invisible from the river. The magical *Swiss Family Robinson*-style retreat has an outside bar, a wood-fired hot tub, two hot showers, and a cozy dining cabin. Behind plunges the namesake 300-foot-high waterfall, its water pure enough to drink untreated or filtered.

As we paddled out from camp, the water built into small but





technical Class II rapids where we worked on our fundamentals and expanded our skills. The Rio Azul's natural incline is perfect for this progression: it starts mellow and slowly grows more intense. After a few miles of fun Class II, we pulled over where the canyon narrowed in order to scout the biggest rapid, a Class IV double drop. All but the most experienced paddlers portaged their boats and re-entered below the drop.

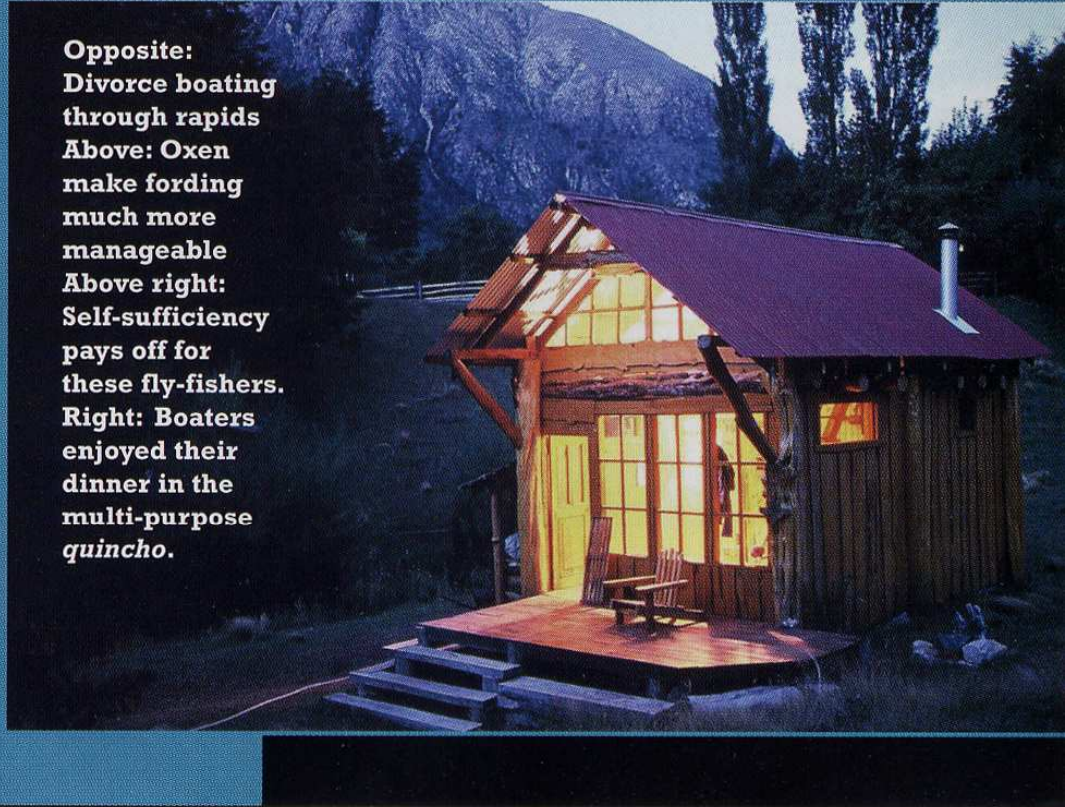
We continued downstream, where the rapids and drops grow bigger and steeper. Yesterday's playful fun had been elevated to raw exhilaration. We were now in Class II+ to III+ rapids, all of us pushing the limits of our abilities. Twice I swam, initially shocked at the glacial chill of the water and thankful for my wet suit and dry top. Each rapid was followed by plenty of calm water for recoveries, and the safety kayakers were quick to assist.

After we paddled beneath two picturesque suspension bridges, the river returned to a placid Class II until its confluence with the Futaleufu. We took out and headed back to the serenity of Cascada Camp for the evening.

As darkness fell, candles were placed on long, rough-hewn tables. Chilean wine flowed, and grilled salmon was served with sautéed potatoes. After dinner we retired to the hot tub, stoking the fire to keep the water hot and staring up at the brilliant star-filled sky. We learned more about the staff who had been training us: Peruvian Piero Vellutino has made numerous first descents around the world. Jessie Stone, one of the world's best women kayakers and a member of Wave Sport's pro team, is an MD and has been a kayak instructor for 10 years.

The next day, we attacked the river with the confidence of familiarity. We knew the drops, eddies, bumps, and rocks. Taking a swim in the chilly water was no longer as harrowing. Some of our group moved up to hardshells, while others pushed

**Opposite:**  
**Divorce boating**  
**through rapids**  
**Above: Oxen**  
**make fording**  
**much more**  
**manageable**  
**Above right:**  
**Self-sufficiency**  
**pays off for**  
**these fly-fishers.**  
**Right: Boaters**  
**enjoyed their**  
**dinner in the**  
**multi-purpose**  
**quincho.**



the limits of their inflatables. Smiles of success abounded.

At the confluence with the Futaleufu, we all beached our boats. The more experienced paddlers, and those whose skill had developed sufficiently, continued on into the Fu to muscle through some powerful Class III trains. After the petite Azul, the Fu felt like the high seas—the extra speed, power, and volume were breathtaking. The water was 10 to 15 degrees warmer, the eddy fences swirled faster, and the river pushed us along like a locomotive until our exit above Terminator, a Class V rapid worthy of its name.

We walked a short distance to Bio Bio's Futaleufu camp, wet and invigorated. Patagonian asado—a traditional barbecue of meats and sausages—was being prepared over an open fire on the river's cobblestone banks. I warmed my hands and inhaled the fragrant meat, slathered in a rich chimichurri sauce of minced garlic, tomatoes, spices, and olive oil. I cut a few chunks right off the grill to sample, and it was mouth-watering. This is the way to savor whitewater kayaking, I thought to myself. Now, where's that hot tub?

For more information, contact Bio Bio Expeditions at (800) 246-7238 or [www.bbrafting.com](http://www.bbrafting.com). □