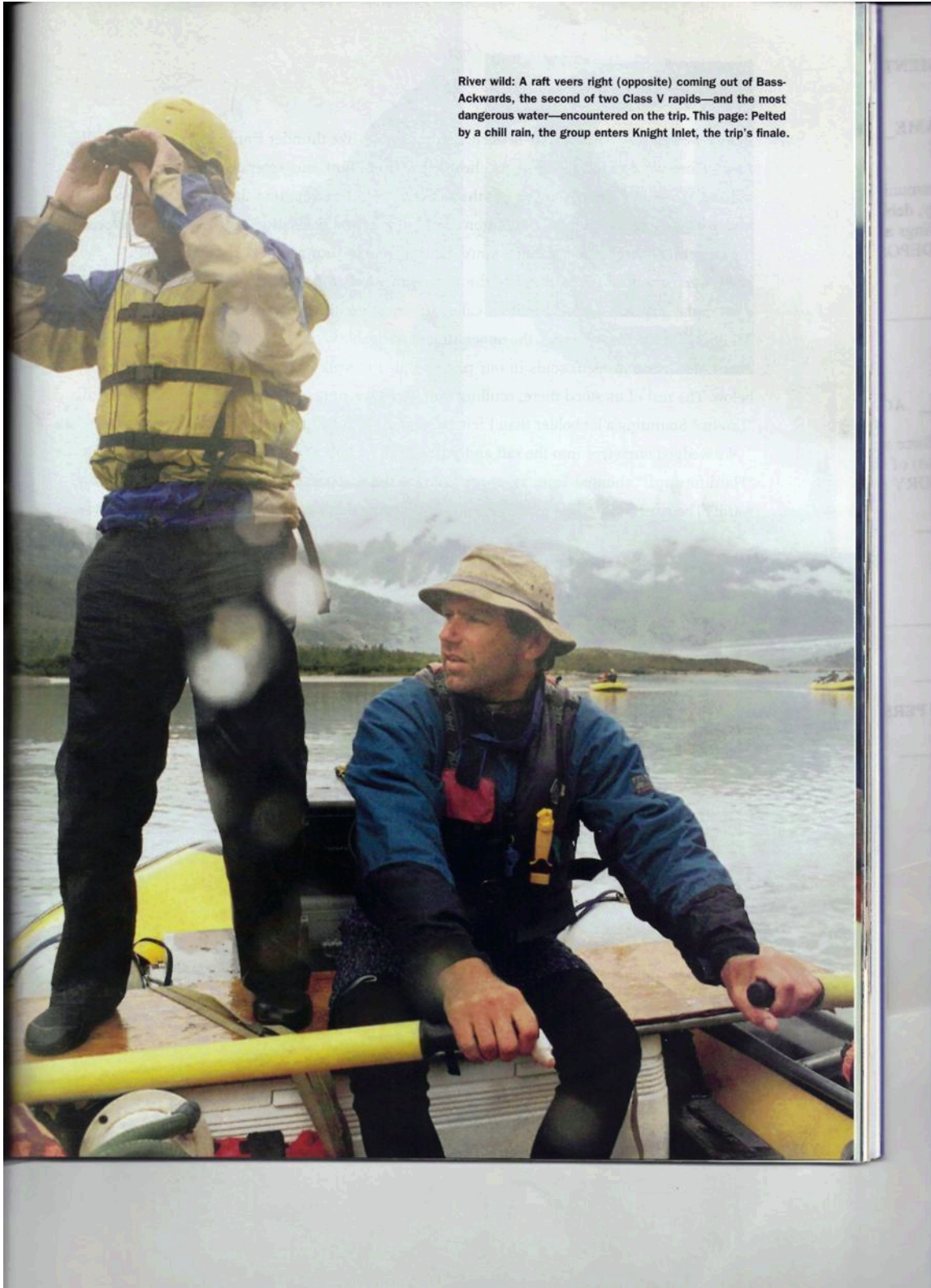


Adrenaline Rush

Braving the Klinaklini, 70 miles of the newest rafting in North America

By Jeff Book Photographs by Michael Matisse

River wild: A raft veers right (opposite) coming out of Bass-Ackwards, the second of two Class V rapids—and the most dangerous water—encountered on the trip. This page: Pelted by a chill rain, the group enters Knight Inlet, the trip's finale.

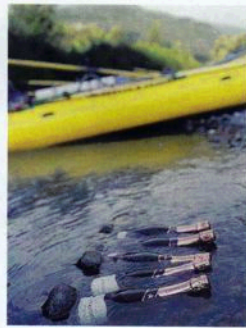
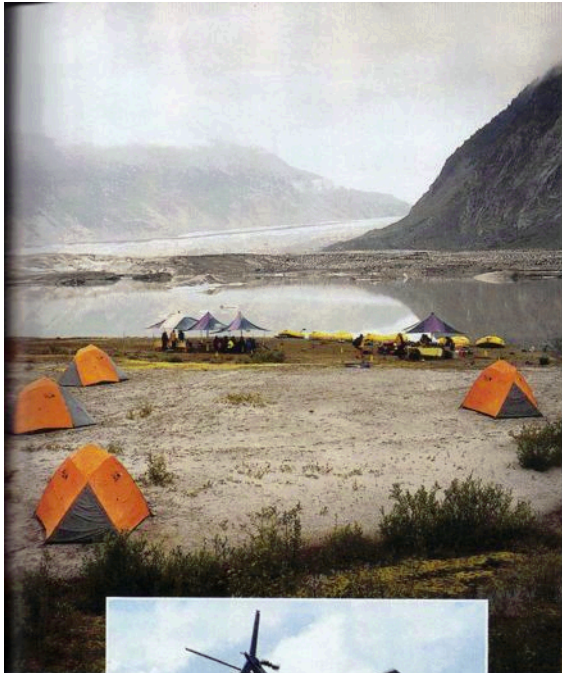


Before we saw 3M, we heard it—a deep, damp rumble, like thunder from an oncoming squall. And before we decided to raft it, we heard this from Tom, our veteran guide who normally radiated quiet confidence: “If you get thrown out, you’ll be swept into that wood, and probably under it,” he said, gesturing at a Gorgon’s head of logs and poles dead in the path of the seething current. “There’s a good chance you’d die. If I were in your position, I wouldn’t do it.”

We were standing on the bank of the Klinaklini River in British Columbia, at the outset of a seven-day trip down what has been called the most exciting new white-water route in North America. 3M is a Class V rapid, the upper limit of navigable white water—in other words, dangerous. Indeed, two prudent souls in our party decided to walk past the rapid and rejoin the raft below. The rest of us stood there, mulling over Tom’s warning, then one by one each of us said, “I’m in.” Sounding a lot bolder than I felt, I declared, “I came here to run this river, not walk it.”

We wedged ourselves into the raft and pushed off, paddling like galley slaves under the lash. “Hard forward!” shouted Tom, as we surged into the maelstrom. “Back paddle right! Left forward!” The river was a white-maned bronco, bucking us this way and that. I paddled for all I was





For much of its course, the Klinaklini is broad and flat (opposite), requiring little rowing on the part of the participants. This page, clockwise from above left: On day four a helicopter portages the group over impassable Klinaklini Canyon; the harsh campsite across from 21-mile-long Klinaklini Glacier; the river does double duty as an ice bucket; and group members savoring dry land.

worth, but once in the rapid it seemed like mere flailing, and I wondered how it could make a difference. We pivoted just short of the bristling logjam, then surged past it and shot through to the bottom of the run, giddy with adrenaline. "Good work!" crowed Tom, seeming as surprised as anyone that we'd made it through unscathed.

"The Klinaklini is our most hard-core adventure trip," Brian McCutcheon, former director of Butterfield & Robinson's new rafting and kayaking division, had told me on the 90-minute flight from Vancouver. McCutcheon pioneered the descent of the Klinaklini in 1997. "The Klinaklini's a magnificent river, but it's unpredictable. We won't know what we're up against until we get to it," he added. That's true. Runoff from a record snowpack kept Butterfield & Robinson from offering the trip in 1999, and snarls of deadwood like

the one we took on thwarted the first attempt to shoot it in 2000. My group was only the sixth ever to run the river.

Our jumping-off point was Klinaklini Lake, an alpine gem about 70 miles inland from the Pacific. From there the river drops 3,100 feet to the sea, winding through soaring slopes of virgin forest and sheer rock cliffs. It races past peaks that include 13,260-foot Mount Waddington, and ends in Knight Inlet, a 60-mile-long fjord. Much of the trip is on fairly flat, albeit fast-flowing, water, but there are two Class V rapids, an airborne portage, and glacial camping with weather to match. The worm in the apple? Narrow Klinaklini Canyon, a 15-mile chute that you would need a raft filled with helium to get through. McCutcheon's solution was to portage everything—rafts, gear, people—by helicopter to the West Klinaklini tributary and resume the trip from there.



The Klinaklini Glacier (above) is a frozen realm of fissures, boulders, and mounds of debris borne along on the back of the ice river. Opposite: The group guides the rafts through a stretch of very shallow water (top). Far right: Happy to see the floatplane.

The Klinaklini trip is a pricey proposition (\$5,250 per person) because of the complex logistics and upper-crust standards of Butterfield & Robinson. Best known for posh biking and walking tours in Europe, the Toronto-based firm aims to refine the wilderness experience with niceties such as a chef and cases of wine, and on this trip cozy mummy bags with silk liners, fiberfill pillows, and self-inflating Therm-a-Rest mattress pads. Of course, you can only put so much cream into the essential raft-trip recipe: take gear, guides, and guests, add white water, and season.

Our guides were stalwart veterans of rivers from the Yukon to New Zealand and Nepal. To them, we must have seemed like hatchery spawn. Ranging in age from almost 30

to pushing 70, the group consisted mostly of affluent, fit, well-traveled city slickers, enamored of the wild. "I live in a metropolis of millions of people," said Terry, a New York hospital executive. "This is an opportunity to go where very few people have gone before." All of us were drawn by the remoteness of a river beyond the reach of roads and cell phones (the latter confirmed by the woman who tried hers daily). The guides carry a satellite phone and can call in a helicopter in an emergency, but otherwise you're in for the duration. (The people who'd recently left midway through another B&R river trip, because of the weather, would probably have had to stay the course on the Klinaklini.)

The raftwear we'd been issued—sleeveless wetsuits, wa-



Rafting the Klinaklini

Butterfield & Robinson's Klinaklini River rafting expedition costs \$5,250 per person, which includes all equipment, meals and beverages, hell-hiking, and floatplane flights to and from Vancouver. For information on this and other rafting and kayaking trips, log on to www.butterfield.com or call 800-678-1147. See www.goretex.com for items made of Gore-Tex that could be useful on the trip, as well as links to outdoor-apparel e-tailers. Consult the website of Out-There (www.out-there.com), an online magazine devoted to adventure travel in Canada, for useful information and links to British Columbia tourism agencies, map sources, and more. To plan a stay in Vancouver before or after the trip, consult the links, listings, and other resources available at www.vancouver-bc.com, www.tourism-vancouver.org, and www.vanmag.com, the *Vancouver* magazine website.



tertight paddling jackets, and brain buckets and bodyfinders (riverspeak for helmets and life jackets)—underscoring McCutcheon's description of the river. We were advised to wear the gear over polypropylene long johns, which had been on the what-to-bring list, along with items like fleece tops and bottoms and waterproof rain pants and jacket. (One of the ironies of modern adventure travel is that it involves experiencing raw nature while clad in synthetic materials.)

At the end of each day it was heartening to arrive at camp and find the roomy orange-and-gray Mountain Hardwear tents already set up by the gear-raft guides, who went on ahead each day. (They'd also take down the tents on request, but most people did this themselves.) The chef would be busy at his burners, whipping up appetizers such as quesadillas (either mango-pear-Brie or spinach-sun-dried tomato), accompanied by wine from our floating cellar (most apt selection: an Italian Primitivo). Dinners featured rib-sticking fare like smoked-salmon risotto, beef fajitas, seafood pasta, and pineapple upside-down cake.

We'd seen fresh grizzly prints on the shore of Lake Klinaklini—not surprising, since British Columbia is home to about 12,000 grizzlies and many more black bears—and early on we got The Bear Briefing. (Continued on page 133)

Klinaklini River

(Continued from page 99) Among the things we learned was that bears love the taste of toothpaste and lipstick—hence the “no food or toiletries in the tents” rule. “There’s never been a bear attack on a group of four or more people,” McCutcheon told us. “If you’re in a smaller group, make sure you’re the fastest.” That, he added, was a joke—grizzlies can easily outrun any human, and they have a chase instinct. “Running from a bear is like throwing a stick for a Labrador retriever,” he explained. “Aggressive behavior is another mistake—your best hope is to play dead in a fetal position, or better yet, to stay at least 50 yards away.”

On the morning of the second day, the sun shone with an eerie orange glow, the result of the miasma of fine soot in the air from a lightning-sparked forest fire, which we’d seen on the flight in. The river had dropped in the last couple of weeks, forcing us to rope-guide the rafts around a gravel bar as we scrambled to maintain our footing in the frigid, fast-flowing water. We rafted to our lunch spot, a bluff overlooking Bass-Ackwards, the second Class V rapids. Over a typical day’s lunch—a buffet-style spread of sandwich fixings, salads, fruit, and cookies—we contemplated the water below. Funneling between boulders, the river plunged into Jenny’s Hole, an eight-foot drop, then careened through a long stretch of roaring, rocky chaos.

As the ancient Greek said, it’s never the same river twice. Every badass rapid is badass in its own way. “3M looks worse, but this one’s actually more dangerous,” warned McCutcheon, explaining that anyone jettisoned on the first drop would have a fast and furious ride to the end of the rapids. Again, we could opt out, but again, most of us chose the river, especially after the first raft went through safely. It was an exhilarating run, time compressed in a blur of bellowed commands, churning paddles, and rebel yells—and over before excitement congealed into fear. And no one became jetsam.

Most of the other rapids we encountered were Class II and III, deftly negotiated by the guides, who seemed completely in sync with the river. (One told me he’d spent so much time in the wild that he had trouble sleeping indoors.) Our second camp was on a broad sandbar backed by densely wooded mountains and a high waterfall—a setting made more dramatic by the great plumes of smoke rising from the forest fire. As night fell, we trained binoculars on a distant ridge and watched the flames, like solar flares, leaping above the tall timber. “If it gets too close, you’ll be getting an early wake-up call,” announced McCutcheon. (It didn’t.)

On what the guides termed a “floaty” day, we had a chance to laze in the sun and savor the passing scenery. The banks were still crowded with pine, spruce, and fir trees, but the river was wider and murkier, the product of fine glacial silt that dulled its previous celadon hue. Snow-capped summits loomed around every bend. To amuse ourselves we staged impromptu raft races on the slower-moving stretches of river. When a strong head wind came up in the afternoon, we paddled to help out the guides. And while we could choose not to paddle, everyone—even the woman who used a quilted Prada scarf as a pillow—pitched in, except our one fish-out-of-water, a New Yorker who’d been seen applying lipstick, even as her raft was rocking through rough water.

Day four was the helicopter portage. We swooped over the gnarly cataracts of Klinaklini Canyon and landed on a 4,000-foot mountain, amid a panorama of high peaks and glacial ice. There followed a day of hiking across trackless alpine meadows dotted with wildflowers, past stands of evergreens and bubbling streams: The only thing lacking was Julie Andrews, twirling with outstretched arms and singing, “The hills are alive...” We picnicked by Lake Sam (warmer than the river, said the hardy few who went in for a swim) while the helicopter ferried the rafts, gear, and

supplies to our new camp at the base of the Klinaklini Glacier, then came back for us.

En route to our new digs, we got a breathtaking view of the glacier, a 21-mile-long river of ice. Our camp suddenly seemed puny, dwarfed by the harsh grandeur of the surroundings. A party paddled over to the glacier and used an ax to bring back ice for evening cocktails, which we sipped around a fire. The weather had turned and the sky was now cloaked in gray. That night it began raining and continued almost nonstop for the next two days. We had a rest day in camp, during which we hiked up to a waterfall, bushwhacked to a bluff downriver, and rafted over to the glacier to explore its pitched surface, an otherworldly topography of debris mounds, stranded boulders, and crevices in which blue ice gleamed like uncut sapphires.

The temperature never dropped below the fifties, but being damp and camping next to a colossal ice cube made it feel colder. (Those without gloves suffered and wondered why they hadn’t been included on the what-to-bring list.) Huddled beneath the tarp canopies the guides had rigged, we conversed over hot chocolate and stronger drink. I discussed the Internet gold rush with a dot-commer from San Francisco, high-altitude training with a periodontist from Colorado, and missile defense with a former national security adviser. A retired builder told me he was happier since he stopped paying so much attention to the news. (After a few days on the river, I began to see his point.) “For me,” he said, “the whole point of this trip is to leave my brain at home and just go with the flow.”

Our descent of the West Klinaklini began with a three-mile run through standing-wave turbulence, which our globe-trotting guides said was the coldest water they had ever rafted. “Fall out and you’d last three minutes, max,” declared one. We paddled fiendishly, as wave after wave broke over the sides, dousing everyone, especially the real

Klinaklini River

estate developer in front of me who hollered, "C'mon, Mother Nature, show us what you got!" Seals popped up to greet us as we paddled into Knight Inlet under a monsoonal rain. "My crotch hasn't been wet this long since I was in diapers," a boatmate said. I was euphoric, even as I hobbled ashore on numb feet.

We had one last obstacle to surmount—a weir that kept logs and debris out of the floatplane landing area. It had to be crossed at high tide, and the original plan was to make camp closer to the mouth of Knight Inlet and go over on the morning tide. But someone had failed to read the tide table. If we didn't go over right away, we would have to wait until the following afternoon—too late for the floatplane rendezvous. The result was that instead of the B&R campsite, we ended up spending the night at a nearby logging camp, some of us in tents, some in a hastily borrowed cabin. Despite the hot showers, it was an oddly dispiriting finale: We felt less like voyagers than refugees. B&R likes to end trips with a bang; this one fizzled out, with a farewell dinner of overcooked lamb. (Henceforth, B&R promises to have a boat meet the rafts in Knight Inlet.)

But this was the only glitch on a trip that won kudos overall. "This was my first vacation in a year or more, and it really recharged my batteries," enthused John, a New York ad executive. When Lipstick Woman compared the experience to "a week in a very expensive amusement park," she meant it as a compliment. Some felt that evening meals should have been prepared earlier, and with more flair; a few said there was much more paddling than they'd expected, but that was due in part to low water levels. This was the first descent with no bear sightings, and I saw more banana slugs than beasts. But we all understood that factors like weather, water levels, and wildlife were beyond anyone's control—and that's one of the reasons we came. As McCutcheon said, "If you don't accept the challenges, you end up with boring, clockwork trips." ■

