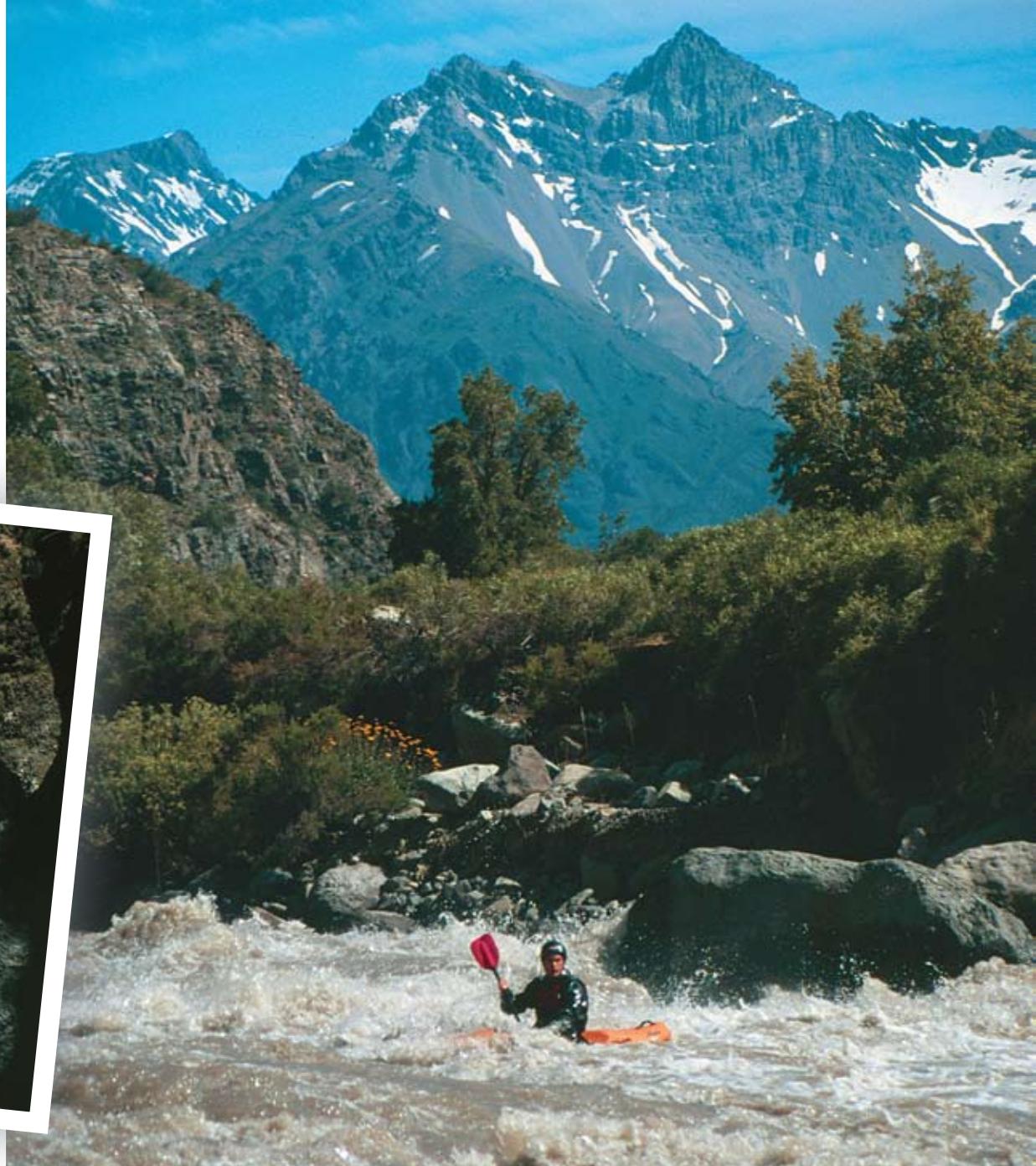


RIGHT, STUNNING SCENERY
AND CONTINUOUS WATER ON
THE RIO MAIPO.

BELOW, ANDY BOATS 'THE
SEVEN TEACUPS' SECTION ON
THE RIO CLARO. ANDY SAW A
SIMILAR PHOTO AS A CHILD,
WHICH INSPIRED HIM TO
PERSIST WITH KAYAKING AND
VISIT CHILE SOME DAY.



CHILE

Antarctica and Africa seem to be the only continents that didn't receive a state visit from Andy Jackson. Bridget has been skiing in Africa and done a bit more there besides so that leaves Antarctica alone for her to visit. Here then is the story of their first visit to South America (joined by Dave Landie and Iain McKendry) written by Bridget and printed in *Playboating* magazine.

Rio Claro

Our ancient guidebook mentioned an upper stretch of the Rio Claro, the 'Veintedos' section or 22 falls. The advice given was that these had been run with 2–4 cumecs of water (a trickle). More water and the river would become impossible to paddle and, with its completely smooth water washed basalt walls, equally impossible to portage or climb out of.

An afternoon spent dicing with death and getting ever hotter, dustier, more thirsty and scratched as we peered into the clear water of the stunningly inviting gorge way below, was enough to convince us that we really wanted to do this run. We hadn't seen any definite portages – just lots of fun drops and one or two that looked kinda tricky – and that was from 200 feet up.

That evening we endlessly discussed the day ahead, and I for one spent the night tossing and turning as glimpses of the river floated through my mind. Had we really managed to see all the drops from the overhanging cliff edge? Was there too much water? Did I really want to run that big fall? How big was it anyway? What about that drop we couldn't quite see, and that river-wide ledge near the end? One thing was certain – once we were in, there was no way out except by boat. This was going to be one of the most committing runs of my life. Was I really ready for it?

Next morning, having chatted up the National Park's head Ranger and gained access to the washed out four wheel drive track that led to the put-in, we rallied our misused pickup through the bush. This process elicited manic grins from Andy and Dave, who took turns in the driver's seat and gasps of terror from those not behind the wheel. A couple of miles later, we surveyed the scratched vehicle and the huge boulders in the track ahead, and admitted that it was time to walk.

Soon we were deep in the gorge, looking around us at a world of brilliant sunlight, sparkling water and deep shadows, the only noise the tumbling of water and the almost audible throb of our hearts. The moment of truth had arrived. A major horizon line in front of us, a knot of fear in my stomach. Andy cheerfully scrambled out on the lip of the fall with his video camera and gave us the thumbs up. Iain was first and then it was my shot. A clean fall, a little over 30 feet. I didn't want to land flat – too many of my friends had hurt themselves that way, but I didn't want to pencil in. Seconds later, I surfaced in the sunshine at the base of the fall, a huge grin, relief, elation, time to relax and watch the others.

Then round the corner to the next horizon line and the next psyche-up. As drop after drop went smoothly, I started to relax and feel less trapped. The river felt so benign, so friendly, and the gorge walls, although completely un-climbable, felt less threatening. And then I realised that we were fast approaching the partially hidden drop that had left me tossing and turning in my sleep the previous night.

From our eddy, the water swirled down a narrow channel over a small drop and then disappeared. Beside us, the cliffs rose in a sheer wall of rock. There was no way to get out, no way to scout, or was there? Attached to a throw line, Andy swam off down the pool to a rock shelf and scrambled out. Dave followed, and the two of them inched along the ledge to the corner and a view. They signalled it was okay and Dave came back to explain the line. I was third to run, but somehow after dreaming of this drop all the previous night, knowing that the other two had made it was small consolation, particularly when there was no choice, no real way to portage. Down the first shoot, over the small drop, spin in the slack water and then over the fall, hard left and moving left to avoid the water slamming into the cliff face opposite. I seemed to be in the air for ages, falling from the light into the dark cave below. And then it was over. Safe once more, my heart still hammering, the adrenaline still surging, as I looked back at the fall. It was twice as high as Dave had said when he had explained the line in our tiny eddy high above – but then again honesty is not always a virtue, what was the point in scaring me beforehand?

We continued on downstream, feeling relaxed and confident but still very alert. Providing we hadn't missed anything on the scout, the biggest drops were now behind us and there were just a couple more bouldery rapids, some more 20 foot shoots and that last river-wide ledge. And sure enough, everything went sweetly. Some four hours after entering the gorge, we emerged, triumphant. Exhausted physically and mentally, we left our boats on the sandy beach at the take-out, and made our way up to the sun loungers on the veranda of the only restaurant for miles around. It was New Year's Eve, and four very happy kayakers swilled cool beer around their glasses and dreamt of the next three weeks and the rivers that were still to come. Boating in Chile was going to be fun.



ABOVE, IN THE LAND OF
THE LILLIPUTIANS
ON THE RIO MAIPO.
RIGHT, ON THE 'SIETE TAZAS'
(SEVEN TEACUPS), RIO CLARO.



Andy was in the habit of noting details of rivers he had paddled or hoped to paddle in a variety of notebooks. Under the Rio Claro he observes: "Fernando, the Park Ranger with a moustache, has a key to the track (river right). Bring him Scotch Whisky!"

Sometimes the notebooks contain details of who owes whom money and occasionally entries were made in somebody else's hand. There is a comment on the Rio Peusco: "... supposed to be a full on grade 5. Put on at the bridge for a 5km run. The police chased us away." This event seems to have inspired observations on the Chilean police and AJ himself, written by fast jet pilot Dave Landie.

Insight into Chilean culture No. 1

With the demise of the Pinochet era picking on the intellectual classes has obviously become unfashionable in Chile.

Being working class themselves, the police are therefore limited to persecuting the lowest social order... kayakers.

To this end, and having taken great care to wait until we had fully unloaded the pickup and were all but ready to throw ourselves headlong into the Peusco, two of Chile's finest sauntered down the road from their border checkpoint looking like a bizarre cross between Mussolini and Sgt Bilko. I say sauntered yet they probably weren't even that fast. Not that that mattered because they were still easily within the time frame Andy required for his habitual pre-river running ritual of whingeing about his back, stretching and pulling it back into alignment with all accompanying creeks and groans, whingeing about his upset stomach, clearing the aforementioned so violently as to put his back out, whingeing about his back, stretching and pulling it... ad nauseum.

You can forgive these guys for not crediting us with the intellectual ability that fifteen years ago would have assured our position at the head of the torture queue at the local football stadium since the ensuing conversation went something like this:

First, from our point of view.

Carabineros: Wild and graphic gesticulations signifying certain death in the canyon below by means of either a smashed face, two broken arms, a severed torso and two broken legs.

A run-in with Zoro.

We were none too sure which but since the end result was the same we decided not to prolong the guys' clearly uncomfortable (but extremely funny) contortionist act. All, that is, except Andy who, having somehow

construed this gruesome portrayal as 'the nod', gave our two carabinieri a winning smile, two big thumbs up and started to drag his boat to the waters' edge.

From the Carabineros' point of view we can only assume that the exchange went something like this:

Son of Pinochet: No

Gormless, lanky, apparently stupid kayaker:
Something unintelligible in a foreign tongue.

Son of Pinochet: No, absolutely not. You will die terribly and I will have to remove your body parts from the "Gorge of a thousand gruesome deaths". So no!

Andy: See above

Son of Pinochet: I am a policeman. In Chile when a policeman says "no" it means no!

Andy: So it's ok then?

Whether smart enough to warrant being shot or stupid enough to be allowed to die in the gorge, even Andy understood our now frustrated policeman's brutal mime of our imminent arrest and what might subsequently happen in custody.

We learned two things from this cultural exchange.

Chilean policemen would probably be very good at charades.

If Chilean policemen spent more time fighting crime and less time amusing tourists we probably would not have had our car broken into.

A number of other themes from Jackson's life are also reprised in the notebook; his awareness of wee tracks up river banks, as sharp as a burglar's eye for an open window; his occasionally strained relations with the 'Polis' and other access incidents.