

Expedition Amazonas:

An Epic Journey on a Mighty River

By Kevin Jackson

It's 3 a.m. on February 21, 2008, and the Expedition Amazonas Team is dragging their raft through knee-deep mud, water up to their necks, a raging headwind and zero flow on the largest river in the world, the mighty Amazon River. After nearly six months and 7,000 kilometers, this epic journey has spanned across several countries, beginning at the river's source on the high altitude Andean mountain of Nevado Mismi in Peru and culminating at the river's delta, Ponte Taipu, Brazil.

Lead by Mark Kalch of Brisbane, Australia and joined by Nathan Welch and Philip Swart, the team battled severe illnesses, were shot at by both narco-terrorists and the government in Peru, and endured swarming mosquitoes and some of the most treacherous white water on the planet — all to reach their goal: rafting the Amazon River.

Partnered with an environmental and indigenous rights action group, this adventure was set forth by a team of experienced professionals to highlight the absolute need for a balance between global, sustainable development and the protection of Earth's natural environment, along with its most vulnerable populations.

Attempting this arduous expedition is something many of us would never even consider, but according to Kalch, "This is what I do; adventure is my life."

As an experienced river guide leading trips all over the world — including South Africa, Ethiopia and Australia — Kalch felt his skills on the river would prepare him for this test of endurance. As the trip progressed, Kalch would argue that the most valuable preparation came not from his many hours in the gym or the trips on the rivers but rather from a desert crossing in the remote regions of Ethiopia and North Africa.

"These weren't all river-based activities," says Kalch, "but certainly the best way to prepare for the Amazon is by placing yourself in a remote area for several days at a time to test your mental fortitude."

After several months of preparation, the journey began on September 16, 2007, when the team landed in Lima, Peru, preparing to trek to the summit of Nevado Mismi and the ultimate source of the Amazon. The team had to trek into the high altitude of the Peruvian Andes battling snow storms, acute mountain sickness and the remote dangers of this unexplored region to reach the river's source at 5,200 meters. This was just the beginning of a six-month endurance challenge that was constantly testing the team physically, mentally and technically.

After navigating a section of the river known as Rio Apurimac, a solid month of class 5 and class 6 rapids,

"On the 21st of February 2008 at pretty much the stroke of midnight, we realized our goal of navigating the entire length of the longest and biggest river on the planet under our own power — Rio Amazonas. The final two kilometers was in pouring rain, howling wind and knee-deep stinking mud as the river gods threw one last angry fireball at us. We dragged our ARK raft Skop Gat to a light beacon on a muddy outcropping called Ponte Taipu, marking the point where the mighty River finally meets the Atlantic Ocean. Ponte Taipu: S 00 39.708' W 48 02.633"
— Mark Kalch, Blog Spot 2/21/08 - Completion



First day on the river with the The Expedition Amazonas Team: Nathan Welch, Philip Swart & Mark Kalch

one of the team members, Philip Swart, the team medic, was struck with what was expected to be malaria. After multiple blood transfusions and several tests, the actual illness was never identified; however, Swart was forced to bow out of the expedition leaving Kalch and Welch to continue.

As the journey progressed, the two encountered a variety of wildlife that included spiders of all sizes, crickets, butterflies, frogs and grasshoppers that had all hitched a ride on their boat for the journey. Most notably, though, were the dolphins.

"Some of my most memorable experiences on the journey came during the night shifts at 2 a.m. when the wind was calm," recalls Kalch. "You're struggling to stay awake and one of our mates (the dolphins) would surface with a snort right beside us. It was magic. It gave such a true sense of being in the wilderness."

The challenges the team faced transformed their lives forever. The endurance, both physically and mentally, required to complete this expedition is a statement of commitment and perseverance to achieve a lifelong goal.

"Out there, there was no such thing as filing it away for later," explains Kalch. "If we didn't like the look of the

rapids ahead, or if the size of a cliff was too big, we could always sleep on it. But when you open your eyes in the morning it's still going to be there."

Of all the things gained from this experience, the most valuable lesson the team learned was that with persistence and hard work anything can be achieved.

"That feeling cannot be bought," remarks Kalch. "It cannot be summoned from just thin air, you must earn it, and I believe I have."

This was an epic adventure that began with a dream and ended with a team of dedicated individuals accomplishing one of the most spectacular feats ever drawn up. With a goal of inspiring others to follow their passions and play a part in creating a planet that will allow others to do the same, Kalch sums up the experience with a very profound and powerful expression, "I can do anything." 🦋

Jackson is the owner of TST Adventures, an adventure guiding and training company in San Diego, California. To learn more about their global adventures or corporate development programs, call (858) 309-2311 or e-mail info@tstadventures.com.



Amazon Watch

"The mission of Amazon Watch is to work with indigenous and environmental organizations in the Amazon Basin, to defend the environment and advance indigenous people's rights in the face of large scale industrial development. Throughout the journey, we have documented the large and small scale attacks on the Amazon Basin primarily through logging. For thousands upon thousands of kilometers, we saw acres and acres of pristine jungle being torn down to make way for roads, new settlements and to make sure 'we,' in developed regions of the world, can buy that lovely wooden desk, dresser or wardrobe. It was mind blowing. It appears as though the Peruvian, Brazilian and, unfortunately, the U.S. Government have gone wholesale on the Amazon granting massive concessions to the oil and mining giants. Through continued encroachment, the indigenous people are being killed off and that is a harsh reality we saw."

— Mark Kalch Expedition Amazonas Team Leader

For more information on Amazon Watch, visit www.amazonwatch.org and take the time to assist in fighting against this tough battle.

Whitewater Within Reach- Great Southeastern rafting options

By Allison Weiss Entekin

Okay, so maybe a trip to the Amazon isn't in your immediate future. No worries — there are some terrific companies nearby that offer awesome whitewater trips. Here are a few of them:

•**Endless River Adventures** - Offers rafting on the Cheoah, Nantahala and Ocoee Rivers in North Carolina and Tennessee.

www.endlessriveradventures.com

•**Nantahala Outdoor Center** - Offers rafting on the Chattooga, Cheoah, French Broad, Nantahala, Nolichucky, Ocoee and Pigeon Rivers in North Carolina and Tennessee. Also offers a full range of lodging and dining options. www.noc.com

•**Rolling Thunder River Company**- Offers rafting on the Nantahala, Ocoee and Toccoa Rivers in Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee. www.rollingthunderriverco.com

***Wildwater Rafting** - Offers rafting on the Chattooga, Nantahala, Ocoee and Pigeon Rivers in North Carolina and Tennessee. www.wildwaterrafting.com

Not sure which river is best for you? Here's a brief synopsis on each of them:

•**Chattooga River** - Can you hear the banjo tune from Deliverance? Perhaps that's because the movie was shot along the Chattooga River, and today, Southerners flock to it for its wide variety of rapids, from class II to VI (not raftable but pretty scary-looking).

•**Cheoah River** - A class IV/V river that offers the newest (and, arguably, the most difficult) whitewater in the Southeast.

•**French Broad River** - The world's third-oldest river, the French Broad's gentle class II/III rapids attract families and those looking for a relaxing trip.

•**Nantahala River** - This class II/III river offers big fun for the entire family.

•**Nolichucky River** - Experience class III/IV rapids from within one of the deepest gorges in the Southeast.

•**Ocoee River** - A class III/IV river, this was the site of the 1996 Olympics Whitewater Slalom Events.

•**Pigeon River** - The rapids on this class III/IV river are controlled by dams, which means you can expect a consistently good ride every time.

•**Toccoa River** - When the Ocoee River reaches Georgia, it slows down considerably and is known as the Toccoa River. Its gentle waters are perfect for kayakers, canoers and those looking for a quiet trip.

THE EQUIPMENT - What the Team Says About It

ARK Custom-Built White Water Raft

We could not have asked for a better boat. Throughout the trip, it was wrapped around rocks multiple times, deliberately cut open to free it from logs, and received several holes from branches and razor-sharp rocks — and it still made it the entire distance. This raft was a top performer on the whitewater as well as on the flats.



Kokatat Ronin Pro Rescue PFD

This has got to be the most comfortable life vest we have ever worn. Perfect fit and cut. Most important, it works! We had plenty of quality down time on the whitewater (being recirculated and generally held down underwater by the rapids) and without a high flotation vest like the Ronin Pro, we don't want to even think about it.



Garmin 60CSx GPS

This nifty piece of work has been our constant companion from high in the Andes through the whitewater and onto the flat. It pinpoints our exact location down to +/-2 or better. We have some excellent maps, and using the GPS means we know exactly where we are on the river. Not bad when the river is more than 20 kilometers across and scattered throughout with islands.



First Ascent Blade Runner Long-Sleeve T

It's not electronic and it's not built for safety, but it has been one of the most used and abused items of gear on the journey. The Blade Runner is a quick-wick tee that is perfect for all day trekking, as well as on the river. It protects us from the sun and cold. When it gets dirty, you drop it in the water and rinse it out — good as new.



Suunto Vector Wristop Computer

At 5,200 meters, it kept us informed of our rate of ascent and descent, and the digital compass supplemented our other navigation aids perfectly. On an 8-kilometer river crossing and racing the clock, the barometer gave us exactly what the weather was up to. And the multiple alarms meant there was never an excuse for not waking up for a 2 a.m. shift on the oars!

