

RIO GRANDE VOICES: Reading the Rapids

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By Staci Matlock

Taos river guide and storyteller Francisco Guevara knows the secrets of the treacherous white water. "This is way too exciting, way too much fun ... We stare death in face every day." – Francisco Guevara, river guide and owner of Los Rios River Runners in Taos

Rio Grande Gorge – Not long ago, black basalt boulders cracked off of a towering wall in the Rio Grande Gorge and crashed into the river. The jagged rocks created new hazards at Dead Car rapids, one of several already dangerous white-water rapids on the 17-mile stretch of the Rio Grande known as the Lower Taos Box.

Some of the other rapids carry names like Boat Reamer, Upchuck, and Enema, so called for their effects on rafts and rafters.

On a gloriously clear October day, Francisco "Cisco" Guevara, owner of Los Rios River Runners in Taos, backstrokes with his oars to hold his raft in place and surveys the Dead Car rapids. He's been through these rapids thousands of times in the past four decades, but the newly tumbled rocks and the river's flow—just over 1,000 cubic feet per second—make him rethink his strategy for this run.

With a few deft strokes of the oars, Guevara, 54, directs the raft toward a slot between two boulders. The roaring river yanks the raft through the channel with breathtaking force and sends it over a wave. The raft drops, sending up a spray of water, before settling back on the now-gentling water. Guevara adjusts his weathered black cowboy hat and guides the raft toward the next rapid.

"A Class 1 wave is easy. Class 6 is certain death," Guevara says, while giving a steady, methodical pull on the oars. "A Class 3 has one must-make move. A Class 4 has multiple must-make moves."

Failing to make those moves can crash a raft into the rocks and send people headfirst into the river.

After so many years of running the Rio Grande in all kinds of conditions, Guevara reads the rapids well. Reading the river is essential for Guevara and other rafting guides who maneuver thousands of people through treacherous white-water rapids every year. "This is a way-fun job with heavy responsibilities," Guevara says. "You are responsible for people's lives."

Building a river business

Guevara and his guides check the water flows coming across the Colorado-New Mexico state line religiously every day so they know conditions on the river. This day, the water is flowing south at more than 1,000 cubic feet per second. Two years ago, the water was screaming through at almost five times that amount, flipping rafts regularly.

Rafters consider running the Taos Box below 500 cfs unwise, but one of Guevara's favorite trips was taking a family of four through when the water was flowing at 325 cfs. At low-water levels, the rafting is more technical and just as much fun, Guevara says. "All this gooey, green moss is exposed. It lubricates the raft sliding through the narrow slots

between the rocks," he says. "High water makes it like a wet roller-coaster going up and down these big, giant waves. The low water is more like a wet bumper-car ride because you have to squeeze through these two boulders to bounce off of that boulder to miss another boulder."

The trips Guevara would like to forget, but can't, are when he helps retrieve bodies. One incident that haunts him involved an 18-year-old fisherman on the shore who attempted to rescue a little girl after she had fallen in the Rio Grande. "The little girl made it out. The young man drowned," Guevara said.

When Guevara and a couple of partners started Los Rios River Runners Inc. in 1978, they had two boats. They worked seven days a week and ran 800 clients down the river. Today, he's the company's sole owner with 50 rafts, 75 small kayaks, plus a couple of vans and several old school buses for transporting clients. Still working seven days a week—often 14 hours a day—he and more than a dozen experienced guides took 8,000 people down the Rio Grande during this year's nine-month rafting season. In the off-season, many of his guides work as ski instructors and on ski patrol at the Taos Ski Valley. Guevara works on finishing a double-walled adobe home for his family in Des Montes.

Guevara was one of the first rafters to run the Taos Box. He also claims first descents down some river stretches in Mexico's Copper Canyon and on the Lower Rio Costilla. He almost died once when the raft flipped and he was knocked out. "I was in the last throes of the life force. I was slammed on the bottom of the river, and it woke me up."

Still, he can imagine a better way to make a living. "This is way too exciting, way too much fun. And I work with and meet the most interesting people," Guevara says.

The risks are part of the job and what rafting guides train to handle: "We stare death in the face every day," he says.

A hell-raiser takes to the water

A descendant of Spaniards who spread across the Americas with the 1540 Francisco Coronado expedition, Guevara began his life on the river as a boy. He grew up in Los Alamos, the son of a thermonuclear engineer who was forbidden by the government from talking about his job.

Guevara's natural tendency for trouble found him frequently in the hot seat. "I held the record for the most number of times suspended from school," Guevara says. "I believe that record still stands today."

On the days they were suspended, he and his friends often headed to White Rock Canyon with inner tubes and tackled Class 3 white water without life jackets. "We'd pull each other from the river unconscious, bloody and bruised," Guevara says. "The next time, we tried bigger inner tubes. Same result. So we tied the inner tubes together. Same disastrous results."

Their exploits were legendary. School officials finally pulled the boys out of class one day and introduced them to some Boy Scout leaders.

Guevara was 15. "They took us under their wing and taught us to canoe, kayak and row rafts," he recalls. "We loved it. It fit our lifestyle, satisfied our adrenaline addiction and kept us busy."

After barely graduating from Los Alamos High School, Guevara and his buddies were building homes in WhiteRock when they got a call from rafter Doug Murphy, the first

commercial rafter on the Rio Grande, who hired them to guide clients through the Taos Box. Five years later, Murphy left the business to morph into marble sculptor Doug Scott, and Guevara started Los Rios River Runners.

It hasn't always been smooth running. Guevara has seen government policies impact the rafting business. White-water companies, for example, are paying almost 23 cents per dollar for workman's compensation for their guides, he says. "It's killing 50 percent of commercial rafting businesses.; I don't mind paying a fair percentage, but to put an extra-heavy burden on an industry that has such potential is a shame."

And he's watched drought and Colorado farming impact both the river and rafting companies.

Guevara says 90 percent of the Rio Grande's water goes to farmers in Colorado's San Luis Valley, just across the New Mexico border. "Most of it's for alfalfa," Guevara says. "Most of the hay goes to dairy farms in southern New Mexico."

When Guevara isn't running the river and his company, he's a self-described champion two-stepper, passionate fisherman, trick roper, trained emergency medical technician and president of Rio Grande Restoration, a non-profit organization. He also studies flamenco singing, or cante. "It's a passion of mine," he said. "It's very difficult, very mathematical." Guevara is also a natural storyteller. In the last few years, he's joined master Santa Fe storyteller Joe Hayes and others during the annual Taos Storytelling Festival. "The first time I had to face a roomful of people staring at me, it was completely intimidating," Guevara says.

He'll be spinning yarns at this year's festival in Taos, sponsored by the Society of the Muse of the Southwest, on Friday and Saturday.

Answering the call

As he steers the raft, Guevara tells stories about the Rio Grande. He describes how the gorge formed when the earth's crust ripped apart, leaving a rift in the earth hundreds of miles long and thousands of feet deep; how repeated volcanic flows, sand and gravel filled it up through the following millennium; how over the next several million years the river would carve back down through the layers, creating the famous gorge.

"It's natural for rafters to be curious about the geology of rivers. A lot of rafters become good amateur geologists," Guevara says.

Guevara talks about the lichens on the steep gorge walls that take 50 years to grow the size of a quarter, and the broken-down stone walls of a 20th-century riverside stone bathhouse built by Arthur Manby, an English land swindler who later disappeared under mysterious circumstances. He points to a large eagle's nest perched on a stone shelf hundreds of feet above the river and later to two radio-collared bighorn sheep, recently released as part of a recovery project.

Guevara shrugs his shoulders when asked how long he'll keep rafting. "Long as I can," he says with a grin.

"The river energizes you, renews you, not just physically but spiritually," Guevara says. "That's the reason I come back year after year. River running is a calling."