

Report from Bolivia II

Wet and Wild

Swamped - Swimming - Waiting for Sun

May 2, 2011 near Oromono

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Day 5/6 - Pluma Camp

"Mierda!!!" shouted Alfonzo. He snapped his head to the left and right over his shoulder looking for a place to jump.

The dugout was taking water fast on the way down the rapids of Rio Itirisana. The Tsimane native in the front gave a two handed thrust of his pole against the midstream boulder to push the bow toward the shallower water as Alfonso cartwheeled into the swirling waist deep water. The dugout was now completely under the rushing water and our packs, extra rod cases, lunch cooler, seat cushions, and emergency supplies began bobbing toward freedom down the rapids. Fred and I both spilled out to the shallow side and started frantically grabbing floating objects with our free hand. The fingers of our right hands were instinctively locked around our fly rods either from dedication to the sport or because our exhausted claws couldn't unclench even if we wanted them to.

Miraculously noting but a blue bottle of drinking water drifted out of the tail of the rapid.

Even a dunking in waist deep water could not dampen our water soaked spirits. We'd been wet to the skin since the torrential rains had penetrated our gore-tex 10 minutes out from the lodge. That was 6 hours ago. In the meantime, Fred had landed 4 fish far below his expectations and I'd landed 3 nice fish. Actually, I was trying to get away with claiming I'd had 5 fish.

Alfonzo, like guides all over the world, knew exactly where the best fish were likely to lie and gave specific directions in broken Argentinian dialect Spanish on where to put the bushy black and orange Andino Deceiver tied by Charlie Craven.

"Pud dit nest to da benk."

Easy for him to say. Knee deep in the clear Pluma river, standing among basketball size boulders, I started putting my Sharkskin clear tip intermediate sinking 8 weight line in the air. If Fred is watching, he starts chuckling on my 4th false cast. Too bad;

I just can't shoot 65 feet on a single back cast. Next time I'll practice with the line-rod combination at home before trekking all the way to Bolivia.

But this cast was one of my lucky ones and it hit just under the bushes on the far shore and triggered a savage splash. The Dorado jumped, I strip set a full arms length pointing the rod tip at the fish. He pulled to the center of the 800 cfs current and jumped twisting three fish lengths above the white caps exposing his bright yellow belly. I pulled another hard strip set and cranked furiously getting him on the reel just in time for him to make a hard run down stream. The screaming reel handle whacked my left thumb three times before I could get it out of the way. (Do they make artificial thumbs?). I stumbled down stream keeping pressure on for two more jumps when all of a sudden, his beach ball size form was TRIPLED. Two more monster Dorado were attacking my fish !!!

Alfonzo screamed, "CAST FRED, CAST!!!!"

Calmly, Fred said, "I can't. I'm tangled."

"CAST.. CAST"

I pulled my fish close to shore. Alfonzo said, "Look, his tails almost completely off."

Sadly, my Dorado was probably hurt beyond survival. We released him gently and he hobbled away, probably to become lunch.

"Well, what do you think? Go back? Go on? Have lunch?"

Is he kidding? Fred and John go back because of a little rain? Of course we went on. The native Tsimane guides continued poling and pulling the dugout up through the rapids like they've been doing for hundreds of years. We fished the rapids and pools. The village leader decides which four dugout guides will be provided each day. Each is paid and the village gets a fee for each flyfishing tourist at the Tsimane camp. The village, one of dozens within the huge Isidoro National Park and Native Peoples Preserve, was screwed by a logging venture some years ago and decided that ecotourism in the form of fly fishing on an exclusive basis would give them the control, low impact, and some constant flow of revenue. Three years into this Tsimane project, the village has not yet begun to spend funds on "improvements."

Fishing slowed as the rain continued to vary between torrent and mist. Some Pacu splashed while we ate lunch under the trees. Fred stood up to munch his meatloaf sandwich, presenting a smaller profile to the rain. Hot showers back at the lodge were looking better and better.

The fishing remained slow but the scenery became more and more spectacular as we tramped upstream over large boulders and sculpted sand stone. The water was starting to discolor slightly from its crystal clear natural state. The clear water made these Dorado very spooky. We got one shot at many of these moody monsters. At the end of the upstream trek, we hit a canyon wall. Alfonzo spotted three nice Dorado in midstream about a 40 foot roll cast away. I tried twice and got a follow. Alfonzo asked permission to try and on his first cast, letting my beat-up deceiver drift just a little deeper, teased the largest Dorado into striking by twitching the fly just the right way.

We started back, fishing the rapids while the Tsimane dugout handlers poled down through the rapids. Oh, bring on the hot showers. We can't get any wetter. We are wet wadding but usually there is one tiny spot on your body that is dry. Not today. I started out with rain pants that are now as soaked as the pants under them. My rain jacket is stuck to my shirt that is stuck to my undershirt. My teeth aren't chattering but I'm getting close. It was only a moderate rapid we were traversing when Alfonzo was caught unaware and we were swamped. Immersion does make you wetter (and even colder).

Fred finally, landed a big fish at five o'clock. Whew. Now bring on those hot showers. Fred claimed he, risking life and limb, had first dibs since he'd saved Mike Hobbs's rod during the swamping. Whatever.

Fred jumped in the shower. "IT'S COLD !!!!".

What dummies. Two ingredients are needed for a solar hot water heater to work. Water and SUN.

