

# Rivers, ruins and remains



Above: John Blake checking out the ruins and remains.

John and I were coming to the end of our kayaking mission in Peru. We had run some epic whitewater through some of the world's most inaccessible canyons. Now it was time to run a river where we no longer had the feeling that one mistake could cost us our lives!

**Feature by:** Steve Brooks. **Our choice was the Cotahuasi River, which flows through one of the most spectacular canyons on the planet. Twice as deep as the Grand Canyon in the US, the Cotahuasi has continuous rapids all set within pristine Inca ruins.**

We headed to the southern city of Arequipa, Peru's second largest. Arequipa is one of my favourite places to chill out. It has a warm climate, old colonial buildings and the Plaza de Armas in the centre of the city is a great escape to sit down and watch the world go by!

John and I met up with some old friends, Kent Miller had come down to Peru to see for himself why his son, the late great Damon Miller, spent so much of his life here kayaking and exploring. Kent was with his other son Derek, Anita and Crystal. They had just arrived from an exhausting bus journey and I was not too sure of the reception I was going to get! The last time I saw the Millers I sent them tumbling down the Karnali River in Nepal after flipping the raft! Derek was black and blue from a serious amount of downtime and Kent only managed to fair a little better though the swim was just as long.

Luckily 10 years is a long time and as they say, "time is a healer".

## Plan finalised

A plan was hatched: Kent wanted to head to the Colca Canyon for a trek and the rest of the team including Carlos, a local kayaker, were coming with John and myself to the Cotahuasi Canyon.

The next day after our final kebab (that's right El Turko does the best kebabs in South America and is a pleasant change from alpaca steak, chicken and shrimps!) we all jumped into Gustavo's 4x4 and headed on the long journey to Cotahuasi village. The drive is an adventure in itself. We headed out onto the Southern Pan American Highway before driving inland towards the take-out of the Colca Canyon. From here it was seven hours over a 4,800m pass, past the Volcano Coropuna (6,400m) the second highest in Peru and where they discovered mummies frozen in the ice on the summit - a gift from the Incas to their Gods!

We finally arrived in Cotahuasi late at night; the sleepy little village where time stands still had not really changed since the

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Above: Carlos running another sweet rapid on river day two.



Above: John Blake about to go flying off the pillow wave.



Above: Two different ways of transporting kayaks.



Above: Transport Peruvian style!



Above: Camping in Inca terracing deep in the canyon.

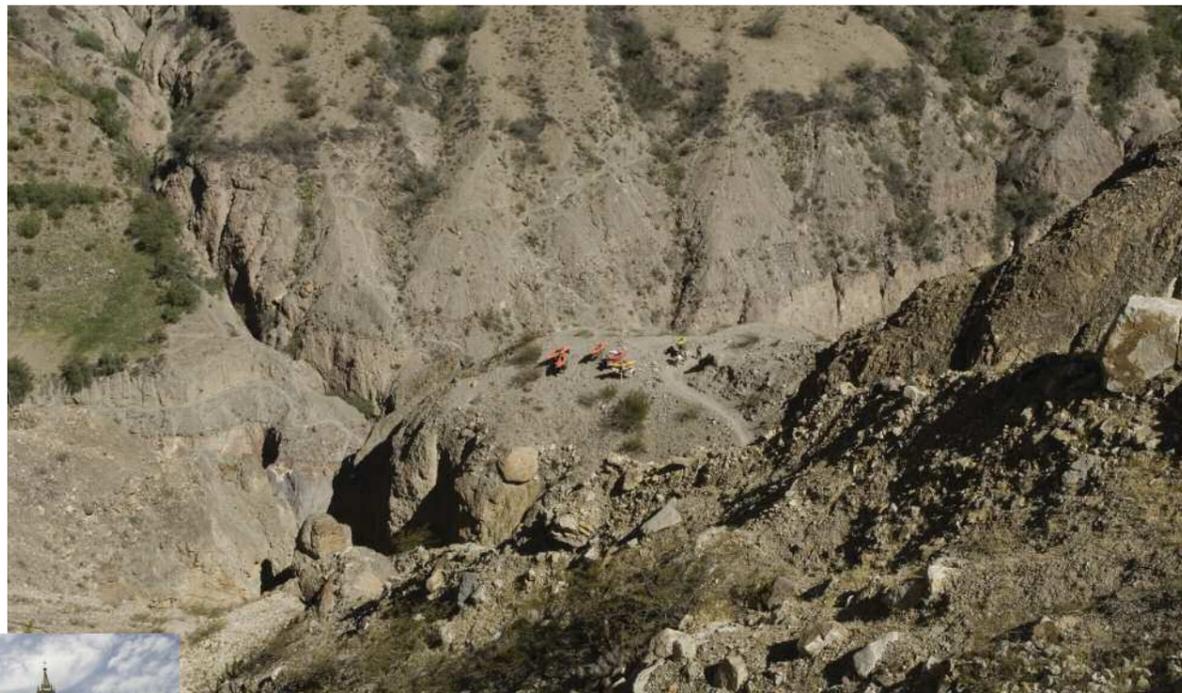
last time I visited some five years ago. At that time we had arrived on Peruvian Independence Day and the place was a huge fiesta. We were invited to a bullfight (do not panic – the bulls were not killed as they had to go back to work in the fields the next day!) and the celebrations went well into the early hours.

After a great night's sleep and with our body parts back to where they should be we found out that we would have to trek to the put-in, the small hamlet of Velinga, via a different route as the Peruvians were building a road/wide track towards Sipia Falls and as they were using dynamite the track was closed to tourists. So an early start and Gustavo was driving us through the tight streets on our way to meet our mules and herders. It is always a relief to see the mules waiting for you and within no time we had the boats secured. Our expedition gear, kayaking kit, food and fuel on another which left us with just our paddles, water and camera kit!

We followed the ridge for a while; the track meandered round and down to a small hamlet where we stopped for lunch. Then it was time to head into the canyon. We were zigzagging our way down some four hours on an old Inca path. The panoramic views of the canyon were something else. The trek was amazing and to think this was just one piece of the Cotahuasi Canyon, the white water still had to come!!

## First morning on the river

The first morning on the river saw us starting nice and early. Some great read and run class II and IV with each rapid heading into the next. It was great to be on the river, the water was removing all the dust and dirt from the drive and trek to the put-in. We were doing well for time and with noises coming from down within our stomachs we stopped for lunch. With our bodies refuelled we went for a short hike to check out the canyon. What we actually stumbled across were a collection of ruins where scattered all around was pottery, textiles and even human remains – the whole canyon is an archaeologist's fantasy. By far the easiest way to really access the canyon is by river, so a lot of the ruins are perfectly preserved.



**Above:** Looking down on the mules while winding our way along an Inca path to the put-in.



**Above:** Plaza de Armas in Arequipa.

It was back into our kayaks for some more read and run before coming to our first major rapid, a big class IV+. We took our time scouting, working out our lines and in which order we would run the rapid. I set the camera up and looked for the killer shot!

A set of Inca terraces played host to us again for the night. We did not have a sandy beach but sleeping in the ruins far made up for it. With no light pollution, it felt like we could touch the stars. Satellites were regularly passing overhead and it was now time to close the eyes and get some rest for the next day! The day brought fantastic whitewater; mainly read and run class II & IV with a couple of bigger rapids requiring scouting. One such rapid was a slide off a rock into the eddy on river right making sure you missed a lovely placed syphon in the middle of the river. The difficult part was the entrance, as long as you hit the line then the slide was nice and smooth, any other line did not require thinking about! Three of the team walked and the others got a few extra heartbeats for the efforts (and the chance to work the camera!). The river was beginning to liven up and the biggest rapid of the trip so far was now awaiting us, which was long with many river markers to remember. We had to navigate between rocks, holes and a couple of big drops, oh and avoid the huge hole that was waiting to munch any kayaker off line! With the line in our heads I dropped in leading the first group. In between sliding over rocks, punching through holes and boofing ledges I was trying to throw glances over my shoulder to see how the rest of the team was going. The first group nailed it, the second led by John were on their way and again everyone nailed it. With big cheesy grins on our faces we ran the second part of the rapid a super fast shoot. We ran a few more big waves and the canyon was starting to close in on us, with Inca terraces dominated the canyon walls again.

### Andean Condors

Between styling the rapids, looking around at the ruins and taking in the immense canyon surroundings behind which was a deep blue sky, you come to realise just how great the Cotahuasi Canyon is! It was now early afternoon, we had run some fantastic

whitewater and it was time to camp and go exploring. As we were scrambling up to another set of ruins two Andean Condors were riding the thermals high above us – whether they were keeping guard or seeing just if the kayakers would make a tasty meal sometime we were not sure. These spectacular birds are something of a legend in Peru and they certainly leave you with your mouth wide open, gaping at these amazing creatures.

Our third day on the river brought a pushy class IV+ to start with. The plan was to aim for the pillow wave being formed by a huge rock on middle right, land in the slack water behind the rock and sort out your angles for the one metre wide gape between the canyon walls! I photographed the team as they each hit the pillow wave before getting into my boat and catching some air miles! More read and run followed through some great little box canyons. The rapids were progressively getting harder. We finally arrived at the main event: the hardest rapid of the trip, aptly known as ‘high-side for you life’. Unfortunately this year it was not to be, the rapid did not have enough water in it. We were running the river in October, which is pretty much the end of the dry season. The previous trip we ran the Cotahuasi in July when everything was runnable. So a quick hop onto the top of the rocks of the box canyon and then a three-metre seal launch back into the river. We were doing well for time, the Maran confluence was only a few hours away, however, Anita suggested we spend our last night in the canyon. Yet another camp where we could explore the ruins, this time we were treated to all sorts of relics, textiles, carvings and again human remains!

Our final day saw us get to the Maran confluence. The Maran is one of the rivers I would like to explore one day. It apparently makes the Cotahuasi something of a class III down the middle trip! The river now changes its name to the Ocoña and after a couple hours of class III the canyon opens up and it is a good day’s boating to the Pacific Ocean. Luckily for us Gustavo was waiting with his 4x4, a cooler full of beers and some Coca Cola for John and myself! We were on our way back to Arequipa after running one of the best rivers in the world. We had made some new friends and caught up with others! Carlos invited us to his house for sushi (yep my first time having sushi and it was in Peru!) and Kent, Derek, Crystal and Anita were headed to Cusco for more adventures. I wish I was joining them but my time was ending in Peru. The snow was calling both John and myself.

Would I go back and run the Cotahuasi again? For sure it is one of the best rivers on Earth! So what are your plans for this year? 🏆



**Above:** John and Derek on day three, yet another set of ruins lining the river side!



**Above:** Warm water, clear blue skies and it does not get any better!



**Above:** John and Crystal running the last part of one of the most difficult rapids.



**Above:** The team catching their breath in an eddy at the end of another rapid.

Steve Brooks has made his base camp in the Austrian Tirol. He spends his spring and summer kayaking around the northern and eastern Alps and has recently opened a kayak school in his hometown. The amazing rivers set in breathtaking surroundings and the South American culture of great friendship and warm hospitality fuel his love for South America! [www.stevebrooks.at](http://www.stevebrooks.at)