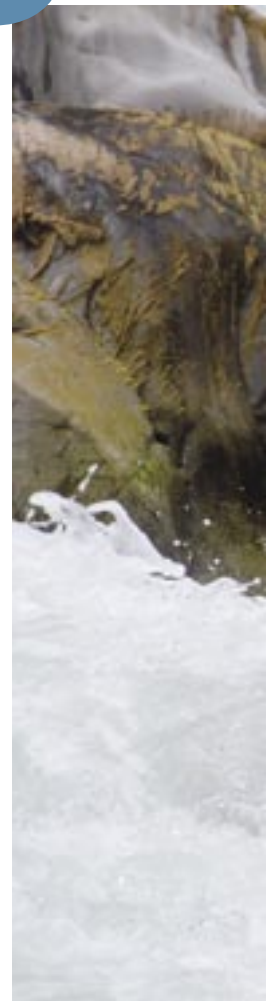


# From the Source Paddling t

Mark Kalch describes an epic adventure down the world's biggest river



AS I SAT AND CRIED FOR THE SECOND TIME IN a day, my mind was numb. I could not control the tears. I was wet, cold, tired and I was beaten. Nathe quietly asked if he could film me. I had to smile. Of course—we couldn't miss such good footage!

We were more than 50 days into Expedition Amazonas, a human-powered, source-to-sea expedition on the world's biggest and, arguably, longest river, the Amazon. This mighty river originates in the high Andes of Peru, slowly growing in size as it falls through deep canyons and meanders through rainforest on its journey to the Atlantic Ocean, some 6500 kilometres away. Our team of three consisted of fellow Australian Nathan Welch, a South African, Phil Swart, and myself. It had taken nearly two months to travel this far, battling fierce snow storms, altitude sickness, unrelenting climbs

and some of the most difficult white water on earth. We still had more than 6000 kilometres remaining. Would we make it?

We had just got back on the water after a five-day portage around an unrunnable section of river to find that the Río Apurímac (as the Amazon is known close to its source) was now an altogether different beast—bigger, faster and a whole lot more dangerous.

More often than not, rapids were now practically impossible to scout and most definitely impossible to portage (portaging involves skirting around impossible rapids by land). We would run rapids, flip the heavy boat and swim. Emerging unharmed, we would get the boat right side up and push on.

One morning, having already notched up multiple flips, Nathe and I scouted the next rapid. Again, huge; again, impossible to portage—a must-make move to river left (river left or right is always looking downstream) and a narrow, steep chute. Unfortunately, most of the river was insisting we go middle right, into a deadly siphon that would eat boats and crews for breakfast! A siphon is a river feature that has a large opening but only a narrow exit. Once you enter one, you do not leave—ever.

# to the Sea: The Amazon



**Clockwise from bottom left, the author showing the strain on a tough day on the Apurimac. Scott Martin. Nathan Welch passing down a duffel bag to the author on a portage on the Apurimac. Martin. The team on the Apurimac running class 5 and 6 rapids. Martin. A photo of the boat after it was converted for rowing; just inside Peru at the Colombia–Brazil–Peru border on New Year's Day 2008.**  
Nathan Welch

*In an instant a big, white monster grabbed the heavy boat, flipping us as if we weighed nothing.*

This was too much for me. We had already flipped twice in a morning—and now this? I went down on one knee and cried. In that instant, I was beaten. If we did not make this move, that was it. I do not mean the expedition was over; I mean our lives were over. Nathe had to do something to pull me out of this depression. He assured me that we were in this together, that we would take each rapid as it came and we would look after each other. I composed myself and off we went. What choice did I have?

We ran it. The strongest and best back-paddle of our lives pulled us from the clutches of the siphon and neatly slotted us through the chute. We nailed it.

After a day of ferocious rafting, we made camp as the sun disappeared behind the mountain walls towering above us, the absolute beauty of our surroundings becoming clear once more. We scouted the rapid we were to face early next morning: massive, multidrop, multihole, with dire consequences when swimming—the usual.

I broke down again. How can I explain the feelings I had? We had flipped so many times, swum so many times, but still made it through unscathed. Was this skill? Awareness? Strength? Or was it luck? Chance?

If it was the latter, then with so many rapids yet to run, so much river yet to negotiate, that luck was sure to run out. I cried with all my heart. Not out of simple sadness, but from fear. Fear of not seeing my family and friends or living my life. Piotr Chmielinski, the first man to ever run the Amazon River from source to sea, had told us that 'the river always wins'. Right there and then, the truth of this was more than evident. But there was an upside. We got some great footage of this big, bearded adventurer crying like a baby!

The next day started on a happy note. While Phil and I were still sleeping, Nathe slipped into the river fully clothed. When we awoke just after 6 am, he was dressed and ready, in wetsuit and all. We both thought how very keen he must be.

Our line was not perfect but it seemed okay. Not good enough. In an instant a big, white monster grabbed the heavy boat, flipping us as if we



weighed nothing. Suddenly, we were swimming at the top of a rapid with three massive holes. Plenty of down time was had by all. I was pulled to river left and swam to a semi-submerged rock. Nathe and Phil took the middle line (not by choice). They swam three big holes and a fourth, smaller one on river right. The boat was still surfing the rapid as the paddles passed by. Phil made it to the river's right bank and Nathe to the same bank, but a bit further downstream. Out popped the boat and, fortunately, wrapped itself around a rock downstream. As was becoming the usual drill, we righted the boat and set off again. We had lost three paddles and snapped a blade clean off the shaft of a spare. We were down to four paddles. Many kilometres

had won. There was no escape and there would be no survival if we passed through the gates of foaming mass ahead. My thoughts—and everyone's—were of our certain demise. It sucked us in. This rapid was class 6: unrunnable, impossible to scout, and there was no way out.

By some miracle we made the first drop. However, the entire river was then pushed to the right of this tiny gap and on to a rock wall. We, of course, went with it, high into the air, and in an instant the boat was over and into the final hole. Our down time broke all our previous records (not one of those records you really like to break). I recall kicking, trying to make the surface, but it was just not happening even though we were wearing the best high-flotation

ders. The boat ran a long rapid and disappeared around the corner to who knows where.

I was still river left on the bank and tried to find a way further downstream—I couldn't. I made the decision to swim across to the river's right bank. I had lost a shoe in the flip. Phil was still in the water and slowly making his way along the base of the cliffs on river right. By the



further on, by some miracle, we found two of the paddles waiting patiently for us in an eddy. What luck!

Soon, the river became much bigger and wider, the sides became less steep and the surroundings resembled a desert—more akin to the Grand Canyon than to Peru. The Río Pachachaca joined us from river left and we camped not far beyond a bridge, Puente Pasaje. We were relieved to have made it through another day.

The entry of the Río Pampas from the left signalled our arrival in so-called 'Sendero country', the region where the notorious Sendero Luminoso or Shining Path guerrillas had once been active. Now we had to worry not only about the river, but also about men with guns. Excellent.

Approaching midday after another week on the river, we came to yet another very long wave train. We scouted from the top, then on we went. It quickly became clear that something was wrong. The long class 3 (class 6 rapids are the most difficult/dangerous, with some of them considered to be unrunnable) rapid quickly dropped and what appeared in front of us was almost beyond belief. The river, which not 100 metres upstream had been large-volume but wide, was being channelled through a chute not more than two boat widths across! It just didn't seem possible. We were running an easy middle line of the wave train and had to do something. We managed to get to river right, but the current was too strong. We were now only 30 or so metres above this monster. We tried to reverse ferry to river left with even less success. This was it. The river had us. The river

PFDs available on the planet. The water grabbed us and took us deep. All the struggling and fighting had no effect. Phil recalls how he eventually became strangely calm. He had done all he could and to no avail. It really seemed to all of us that the game was up. All over.

Then we surfaced. The hole released us. Nathe and me to river left and Phil to river right. The boat popped out behind. I made it into an eddy. Nathe was behind, and the boat followed him. The water was pushing with great force against the sheer cliffs on either side. He made it up on to the boat, but the boat re-entered the main current and began to head around the next corner into the unknown, with Nathe on top.

We knew from previous experience that the boat was too heavy for one of us to flip on his own. Nathe made a quick decision to attach his throw bag to the boat and swim to the river's edge. However, the banks were almost sheer cliffs. He held on by his fingertips. He was slipping. Above him appeared a group of fisherman. They wanted Nathe to grab their rope. He wanted them to grab the throw bag attached to the boat. They couldn't understand. They wanted to rescue the man, not the boat, which was now at the full length of the rope and teetering on an eddy line. A couple more metres of rope and it would have swung into a large eddy, but it was not to be. The boat slipped from Nathe's grasp and took off down the river. The rapids that followed were long, class 4. There was no way the boat could be stopped. Nathe tried to give chase but it was an impossible task. The sides went from sheer cliffs to a myriad of boul-



**From the left to right, the author holding a safety line attached to Welch as he attempts to set up a pulley to pull the boat off a wrap; the boat took a day to free. Martin. Welch and the author sitting on 'Skop Gat', their raft, all a little worse for wear at the end of the expedition. Vera Cordosa. A donkey used to portage the Acobamba Abyss, an almost unrunnable section of the upper river. Philip Swart. The author's hands after four months of paddling. Welch. Cachora, Peru, where the team got back on the Apurimac after portaging the Acobamba Abyss. Mark Kalch**

time I crossed, Nathe and Phil were on the corner where the boat had disappeared. We were all shaken but uninjured.

We couldn't rest. We needed to get around that corner. The only track went inland and then high above the river. By now I had discarded my remaining shoe and was barefoot among the broken branches, cactus and sharp thorns that littered the ground. It took almost an hour to reach a point above the river from where we might see the boat. We were exhausted, but we spotted it. From our vantage point it looked as though it was stuck on a small rock shelf on river right about three kilometres downstream. We were all very emotional and hugged among some tears. Everything might just be okay.

The area we were in was extremely isolated. Problems here meant big problems—there were no phones and almost no people. Back down at the river, we searched for the boat. We needed to get to the other side to get a clear view. Crossing the river and drawing level with the boat, my heart sank. Our view from above had failed to reveal the full scenario. The boat, sure enough, was stuck on a small rock shelf, but what now became clear was its position in the river. Running fast and wide on river left was a long class 4 or class 5 rapid. Then came the long rock shelf, with the boat upside down about two-thirds of the way along its length. What was not possible to see from the cliffs above was the still faster running class 4 rapid separating the rock shelf from the river's edge on the right. We could not reach the boat or retrieve it. I couldn't believe it. I stared for a

long time. It was hard to see how we could get close to the boat in reasonable safety to attempt to free it. Heading back upstream to tell the boys, my lungs heaved and my mind spun.

Phil and Nathe joined me and we spent our time in the day's fading light staring at the boat. We were tired and devastated, but also happy to be alive—and what's more, uninjured. The

Our new friends, however, were adamant that they could reach the boat, even though they had yet to see exactly where the boat lay. After much discussion, we agreed to stay one more night and attempt a retrieval with the help of the fishermen.

Morning arrived, and with the locals' help we were able to get much closer to the boat. No matter—the story was much the same. Massive,

down the rock shelf and straight back on to the eddy line—and almost back into the fast water. With another Herculean effort he hauled himself back up. He was hurt and crawled once more on to the boat. So it continued, shoving, pulling, lifting—Nathe was exhausted. But little by little the boat was moving. Could we allow ourselves the thought that maybe it could be freed? Next



rapid we had flipped on a few kilometres upstream was not one from which three people emerge unscathed. How we did so, we will never know.

We decided to take turns watching the raft. If it freed itself, it was possible we might reach it quickly enough in some slow water below the rapid. However, it soon became clear that this was not going to happen. It was a pitch black night with thunder and lightning rolling in. It began to rain. We had no shelter. Phil was caught in the open and I wedged my upper body under a boulder in a vain attempt to keep at least a part of me dry.

Nathe tried to watch the boat, but this was only possible when lightning flashed. As the lightning became less and less frequent, there was no point in watching. He found a small cave, high up the bank, where we spent the night. We were unable to sleep, but at least we were dry.

Early in the morning we again found ourselves staring at the boat. A retrieval attempt in such an isolated area was just too dangerous. The previous day by some miracle we had escaped with our lives. There was little point in now throwing them away just as quickly. As we walked upstream away from the boat, we kept staring back. This was it. The boat and everything on it was our life. We had the clothes we were wearing and nothing else. No money, no passports, no satellite phone, no cameras... We were in a bad place.

After swimming back across the river, we met two fishermen. They saw our state and took us with them to eat. They fed us massive amounts of fish and yuca along with sweet tea. They may just have saved our lives. They offered to trek with us to the closest village with a telephone—a day's walk away, all uphill. From there it would be an eight-hour drive to Cusco. Our thoughts and emotions were a mess—the thought of starting again with nothing was devastating. I made up my mind to get to Cusco, book a flight to Lima, then a flight home from there. It was just too much. Phil felt the same. Nathe was more guarded with his thoughts, but just as devastated.

fast water separated us from the boat on both sides. The initial look on the fishermen's faces said it all. But quickly they seemed to become convinced they could get their balsa rafts into position above the boat and get to the rock shelf. It was just too risky to let these guys attempt it, without helmets and without PFDs. Regardless, we were right there and Nathe was damned if we were leaving without giving it a shot.


We would approach the attempt with safety foremost in mind and abandon the boat if need be. I swam hard across the river to set up the only safety we would have below the rapid. Our rescue equipment consisted of two throw bags, a large assortment of prusik cord and eight or ten karabiners. It would have to do.

Nathe walked upstream and entered the river. Phil shouted instructions so he would hit the rock shelf and not be pulled into the mad water on each side. After some hairy moments he made it. Sometimes swimming and sometimes jumping from rock to rock, Nathe edged his way down to the boat. Between him and the boat lay two wide, fast-flowing channels. The first he traversed by inching his way across, finding handholds and footholds as best he could. The second was wider and much too fast to do the same. The only way possible was to jump into a small, messy eddy that had formed close by. Off he went. He swam with all his might. He was close to the rock shelf, then it became too much, he was being pulled out of the eddy and straight into the fast water. It looked all over. Then a mighty final burst got him back into the eddy and he flung his hands out to grab the rocks. He made it across the channel and a bit closer to the boat. Not there yet though. Negotiating some widely spaced boulders, Nathe climbed on to the boat's upturned hull and collapsed. He had made it.

We could see Nathe test the extent of the wrap. The boat had some movement. A push here and a pull there managed to shift the angle of the boat somewhat, but it still held fast. Nathe retrieved a throw bag from the boat and used it to pull at the boat. As he did so, he slipped backwards off a rock and took a massive tumble

thing, it was! The boat was pulled down the rock shelf as Nathe threw himself on to it. We were not out of this yet. He had to ride this upside-down boat through the rest of the rapids. I readied my throw bag, but it was clear he would come out far over to river right, out of reach. I grabbed the paddle and dived into the remnants of the rapids to swim to the boat. Fortunately, there was a long stretch of flat water below. I joined Nathe on the boat and with the help of one of the young locals we got it into an eddy. We had our boat, we had our home and we had our lives.

Next we needed to know what was left of our gear. Was there anything to salvage? Was all the electronic gear ruined? We flipped the raft: gear bags, duffels, medical kits, safety bag, Storm Cases—it was all there! Nathe broke down and we hugged each other (in a manly fashion, of course). This was too much. We had gone from losing everything—from the expedition being all but over—to having our boat, our gear, the lot. We quickly checked the Storm Cases. High-definition camera? Not a drop of water. Secondary video camera and still camera? The same. Satellite phone? Ditto. Laptop? Sweet! We were stoked. The show would go on!

And go on it did. The white water subsided, the flat water began—thousands upon thousands of kilometres to row. Phil became ill and left the expedition. Nathe and I pushed on together for the remaining 4500 kilometres, rowing 24 hours a day, nonstop, on a river that at times was 30 kilometres across. At midnight on 21 February 2008, on the coast of Brazil, we reached the lighthouse at Ponte Taipu, our final destination. In doing so we became just the fourth team in history (and the seventh and eighth persons) to successfully navigate the entire length of the Amazon River by human power alone. 

To find out more you can visit [www.expeditionamazonas.com](http://www.expeditionamazonas.com)

Mark Kalch has travelled under various guises to over 40 countries, mostly in developing regions, to live, climb, trek, kayak and raft. This year, he will walk, solo, the entire length of Iran.