

Photo: Raph Thiebaut

# JOSH LOWRY

## Whitewater legend

*Josh Lowry is the embodiment of the core kayaker. His needs are few, his equipment worn, his commitment to the sport—unwavering. A fixture of the Chilean paddling scene since the mid-nineties, Lowry is known for his paddling strength and rescue abilities nearly as much as his mumbled speaking style, wild curly hair, and unforgettable laugh. One of the most unique personalities in whitewater, Josh Lowry has left an indelible impression with river communities from the Rocky Mountains to the Grand Canyon, southern Mexico, and his beloved Futaleufu.*

Words: Tyler Williams - Photography: Bernd Sommer, Raph Thiebaut and Josh Lowry

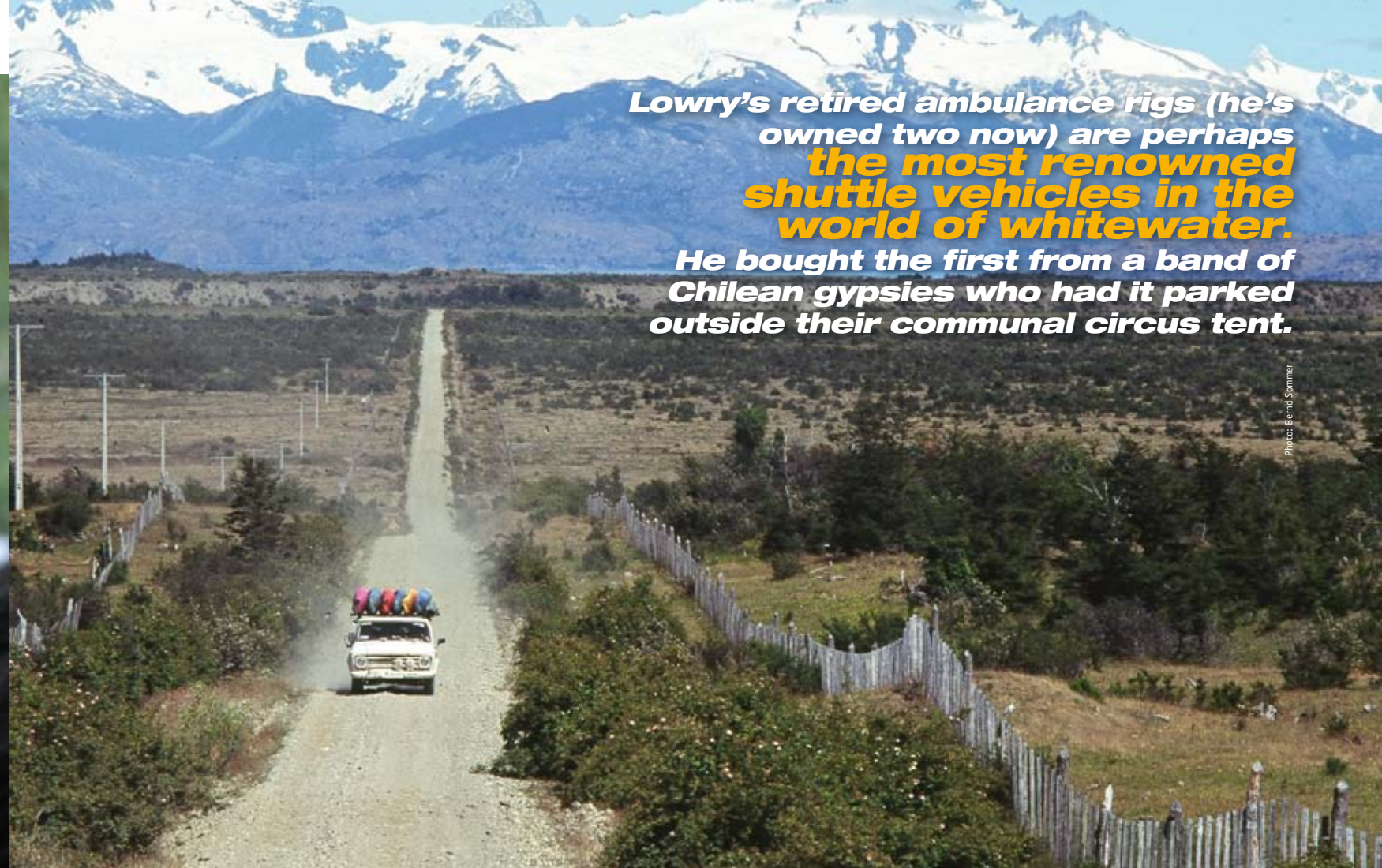


Photo: Bernd Sommer

**Lowry's retired ambulance rigs (he's owned two now) are perhaps the most renowned shuttle vehicles in the world of whitewater. He bought the first from a band of Chilean gypsies who had it parked outside their communal circus tent.**

Sporting a six-pack under the Northern Patagonia Icefield.

The entire creekbed was ensconced in a gorge of undulating, marginally climbable sandstone. Snaking through the cleft was an S-turn rapid with a stout hole at the bottom, backed up by a cliff wall. All three of us agreed that the rapid was a go. Just don't get stuck in the bottom hole. Fully amped, Josh punched the hole so hard that he shot across the backwash and pitoned the cliff on the far side, spun sideways, and lost his paddle in the collision. Tossing erratically on the boil, he reached momentarily for the security of the rock wall, and was over. Seconds passed as the inverted boat tossed and bashed against the wall. Then, using a surge of current combined with some small purchase of underwater cliff, he rolled upright. With two strong pushes he escaped the room of doom and started hand paddling to the middle of the river, where his paddle drifted—mid-current, heading straight for the next horizon line. In one seamless motion, Josh grabbed the paddle, took one very important stroke, and spun into an eddy at the lip of the unknown.

It remains the greatest display of poise I've ever seen on a river. That night in camp, Josh pulled some vegetation from the earth, mumbled "Equisetum, Horsetail, joint grass," and commenced to prepare it for a puff. He scanned vertical rims 500-feet above camp and spoke for all in the group, "We're in here now." With that he broke into a laugh, his laugh, THE laugh; bellowing, genuine, and unmistakable, "Huh huh huh huh...Huh huh huh huh huh" Soon everyone was laughing, and the comedic reverie built until we'd forgotten what started it all.

Josh Lowry is a one of a kind personality from a family of personalities. His mother, ninety-one-year-old Miriam, still hikes the slopes of backyard Mt. Shasta. She was an occupational therapist, stained glass artist, and mother of five. These days, she weaves wool with daughter Joan, working every step of the process from sheep to blanket. Josh's father, Alex Joe, one-quarter Choctaw Indian, played pro football with the Carlisle Indians, an all-native team organized by Olympian Jim Thorpe during the early years of the NFL. During World War II, Alex Joe was an underwater munitions expert, diving into frigid Alaskan waters to defuse bombs. Eventually, he settled down to teach algebra and coach high school football, nurturing his eldest three sons to gridiron stardom.

Josh, the youngest, broke the mold by opting for the wrestling and water polo teams instead. The down-your-opponent mayhem of water polo proved excellent training for Josh, who body-surfed Pacific breakers near their Southern California home. Camping, too, was a regular family activity, and summers were spent in the Sierra Nevada or at a family cabin near Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. There were plenty of interesting opportunities for the Lowry kids, but they were generally on track for a normal American existence. And then dad died.



Josh working on the Grand Canyon. Guides would costume up for Lava Falls to help relieve the peeps (clients) anxiety.



Alex Joe Lowry had hardly taken a single day off work. He had accrued a year of sick leave, and was fifteen months from retirement when he dropped dead from a heart attack at age fifty. "After that, we all pretty much decided that we would take our retirement now and work later," says Josh's brother Dave. But, the Vietnam draft was happening, forcing each Lowry boy to creatively avoid conscription into the controversial war. Eldest Roger joined the Marines, and then found a loophole in the law that secured his release. Dave went to Canada. Mike went into the Army, and was such a conundrum that they sent him to a Louisiana mental hospital where he was forcibly injected with sedatives. He studied his supposed disorder so he could present textbook symptoms to the military doctors, and was finally discharged from the Army with a psychiatric disability, and a regular check in the mail. When it came Josh's time to enlist, he simply disappeared.

He hitchhiked across the country, and landed at a commune near Short Mountain, Tennessee. There was no electricity or indoor plumbing, just a one-hundred-year-old cabin and a smattering of shelters tucked into the forest where seven to twenty American dropouts lived at any one time. There were horses and goats, kerosene lanterns, and plenty of music. Josh played guitar and trumpet, lived with his first serious girlfriend, and grew his hair into a sprawling afro. He spent nearly a decade in those woods, and that is where he learned to paddle.

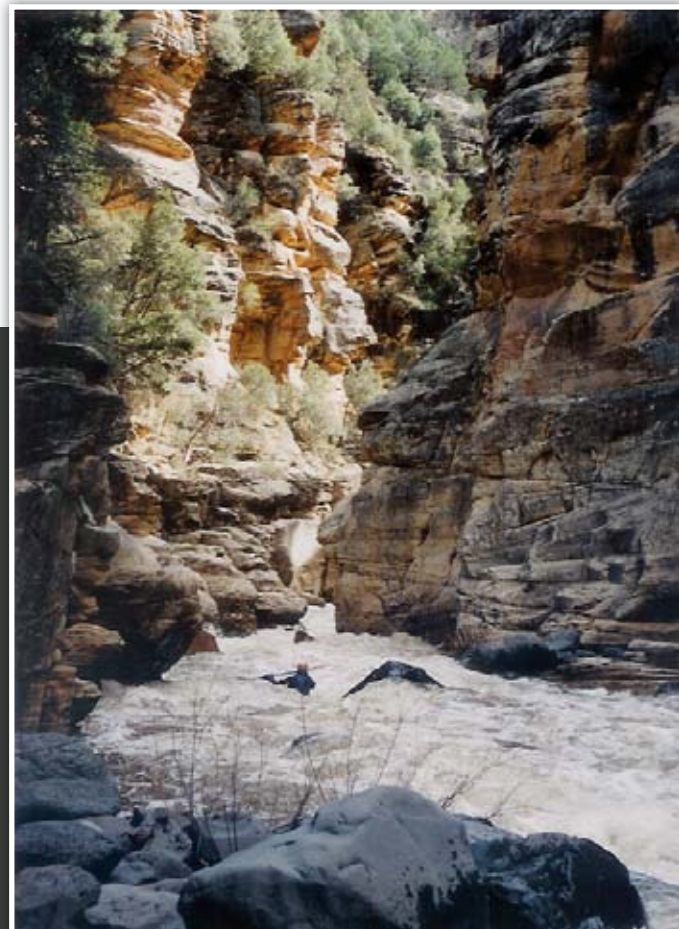
instruction book close at hand. His first attempt naturally failed, but then he discovered the extended paddle roll and—shazam! The extended paddle trick kept Josh in his boat through many an Ocoee run until he refined his technique by season's end.

By now Lowry was no stranger to the river lifestyle. His brother Dave had been guiding in Grand Canyon for several seasons, and Josh occasionally hitchhiked across the country to join the commercial raft trips. He quickly made an impression by appearing randomly at remote beaches just as his brother's trips passed, ready to help with camp dishes for a ride downstream. On better planned excursions, like his mom's charter trip in the spring of 1980, he took the Sea Eagle. On that momentous trip, the river spiked from 1,000 cfs to 60,000 cfs in a single day, and there were raft flips. In his inflatable kayak, Josh soon became the primary safety boater. Years later, when he was a paid safety kayak guide in the Canyon, he began keeping track of his rescues. "On one canoeist's trip," he explains, "I made 156 rescues, so I decided I better start keeping track. Huh huh huh huh huh." His current total stands at just over 700 Canyon rescues.



Photo: Ralph Thibault

"The imaginary slot is right here, trust it!"



The first (and only?) descent on West Clear Creek. The only way to scout this box canyon was to run along narrow ledges 100+ feet above the water for a bird's eye view.

A neighboring farmer who was starting to canoe piqued Lowry's interest. He enrolled in a course with the Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association. The course taught Josh basic technique, but he saw one obvious problem: You couldn't hitchhike with a canoe. Just as he had eschewed football for water polo in high school, Josh again tweaked the dominant paradigm, and instead of a canoe, he bought a duckie. His inflatable Sea Eagle kayak was a different sight at the Obed River put-in, but Josh put doubts to rest by running the BIG rapid, and rescuing a pinned canoe all in his first weekend. "I really liked the rescue part," he says thirty years later.

Josh tried a kayak that first season, but with no roll it proved cumbersome, so he stayed with the Sea Eagle, hitching to rivers throughout Tennessee. He ventured south to the Ocoee, where a broken flume gushed water into a once dry riverbed, drawing paddlers from across the South. Seeing the speed with which hard shell kayakers cut across the water, Josh was inspired to give kayaking another try. This time, he started on a lake, with an Eskimo Roll

His guiding career in the Canyon was set to officially start with a baggage boat assignment in 1983, but high water and a potentially bursting Glen Canyon Dam prompted the park service to close the river. Undaunted, Josh headed upstream with paddler Kevin Padden to Cataract Canyon, a class III-IV section that is notoriously monstrous at high water. With 77,000 cfs in the river, Josh arranged an overflight before launching. Eager to show the daredevil kayaker some of his own tricks, the backcountry pilot flew through two different rock arches, and buzzed the rapids so closely that Josh remembers "looking up at the scout rocks." After the harrowing flight, the run went with relative ease. Still, it was a seminal moment in Lowry's big water development.

He continued to hone his skills over the next couple seasons in Grand Canyon, earning a reputation within the guide community with his stone-mellow countenance, his recognizable laugh, and his off-beat antics. A favorite stunt gathered raft guests beneath the warm turquoise waters of the Little Colorado River, where Josh performed a

brief underwater trumpet concert. When his air ran out and the muffled music stopped, most listeners were already at the surface gulping oxygen through fits of laughter. Josh would pour water from the trumpet—"huh huh huh huh"—and go back down for another round.

Such episodes of river sub-culture play breed close friendships, and thus Josh convinced three of his fellow guides to travel south with him in the winter of 1986. Josh had read an article about Chilean rivers, and with the last of his savings he rallied the trip. There were four people, three boats, one van, and a list of twelve rivers to complete. Josh's party had ticked off much of their list when they bumped into a group of paddlers from Salt Lake City who were en-route to a river called the Futaleufu. A quick scan of the map showed the river to be a week away.



Photo: Ralph Thibault

Let the Futa flow, and the Baker, and the Pascua... Organizing Patagonia Sin Represas.



Photo: Hanna Krum

"Hoping this bridge over the Rio Baker can take the weight!"

Josh had been to the waterfalls of Mexico's Agua Azul during a hitchhiking foray in 1973 when he was twenty-one. Then, the region's stair-stepping travertine rivers were virtually unknown to the paddling world. In 1980, that all changed. With filmmaker Roger Brown, the Rio Jatate was run for the first time by John Wasson, Cathy Hearn, Eric Evans, and Cully Erdman, and the Mexican state of Chiapas was suddenly on the map.

Cully Erdman had been the driving force of whitewater paddling in Chiapas through the early eighties, and he often struggled to find partners for his adventure schemes. When Josh arrived, Erdman knew he'd found his man. He and Josh soon launched near the headwaters of the Agua Azul, following it through a series of remote, semi-inhabited valleys and shrouded tropical gorges until getting stopped just short of their take-out by vertical walls and class VI gnarl. They made a sketchy climb out of the canyon, spent a night away from the river in steamy jungle, and created a mythic reputation that has kept the upper river unexplored since. The easily accessed lower Agua Azul was bound to be simpler.

Josh's old companion Kevin Padden was the third paddler, and German filmmaker Werner Jondraal came to shoot the first descent. Filming from tree limbs on shore, Jondraal followed the team as they slowly made their way among soft travertine ledges and curtains of falling water. They ran everything except an 80-footer, plugging one huge

perfect drop after another. It was the biggest waterfall huck-fest the sport had yet seen, set in a fantasy land of warm liquid turquoise. Everything went well until the final drop, when Josh lost his footing while scouting and bounced down the 45-foot-falls without a boat to protect him. His foot swelled immensely and he thought it had broken. It probably should have, but as he says, "I got my neck x-rayed once, and my vertebrae were too thick for the machine to record clearly. I think I have thick bones."

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The Agua Azul movie was a big hit with outdoor festivals, but Josh never saw his starring role. "You had to go to Germany to see it, and I never made it over there," he laughs. A couple years later Lowry was in front of the cameras again on an initial run of the upper Shumulja River. Gordon Brown, (Roger Brown's son) the director, was searching for new angles on the dream like landscapes. At a 30-foot waterfall, Brown stood on the lip as Josh paddled past, then leaped without warning behind the falling kayak, camera in hand. It was the first point-of-view waterfall sequence ever recorded. The movie, River of the Underworld, won an Emmy award.

Between explorations, Josh found work safety kayaking with the budding commercial rafting scene in Chiapas. He ran the Jatate over fifteen times, nearly as much as anyone. On a weekend-off run with his girlfriend, they came face to face with a scar-faced man toting an ouzi machine gun. Fortunately nothing came of it, and they paddled away. One week later, a commercial trip was held at gunpoint, and two members were shot. The Zapatista rebellion had erupted, banditos were rampant, and the heyday of Chiapas river running was effectively over. It was time to go back to Chile.

On Chilean paddling safari with Josh in 1995 were Clay Wright and the late John Foss. Foss was the man with a plan, an agenda to complete, and a guidebook vision to fulfill. Often, he dropped Lowry and Wright at put-ins while he took the shuttle van to explore nearby drainages, thus doubling his research time. "He would drop us off and say, 'It's just class three,'" remembers Josh, "but he was just guessing from the maps. Usually it was class four-plus." The trio romped southward across the Chilean countryside, paddling a different river almost every day. They made first descents on the narrow gorges of the Maitenes and Cahone, committing runs that are a reflection of Lowry's affinity for sheer-walled gorges. During an extended drive between river basins, the van veered off the road and rolled onto its side. Josh recalls the incident by stating simply, "We rolled it back up and kept driving for six more weeks."



Photo: Ralph Thibault

Inferno Canyon,... more like heaven than hell.



Futa Fest Winners Circle. What a day! Josh's team lost rafting-cross by a hair to take 2nd, but then he recovered enough energy to place 3rd in boatercross.



The end of those six weeks brought them to the Rio Baker, a future huge-water gem that had seen only a single descent, and a perfect pinnacle to Foss' ultimate guidebook tour. The trio spent a day scouting the Baker's first canyon amidst a hatch of biting flies. On day two, they escaped the insect clouds by hitting the water, portaging the first half of famed Salto Neff, and continuing through the swirly second canyon. The third canyon would require more scouting, and thus bug battling. They got back in the van, and headed north.

The next season—1996—Josh returned to complete the Baker's third canyon. With him was fellow Grand Canyon boatman Dave Kashinski, Olli Grau, Bernd Sommer, Manuel Arnu, and Arnd Schaeftlein (see KS#34). Footage of their run appeared in Arnd's movie, *Water of Wisdom*, helping spawn a new style of whitewater video. Yet the Baker was only one part of a paddling onslaught the group made that year, running forty rivers in four months.

Chile was fast becoming Lowry's second home. He was a fixture at the Futaleufu, cooking stacks of pancakes for the seasonal kayak tribe as they prepared for full days on the water. When Autumn arrived, he would make the migration stateside; safety boat a few Canyon trips, paddle in Idaho, and crash at his brother Mike's boat shed in Colorado. Lowry has never needed much to get by, or even thrive. "I am a minimalist," he proclaims, and he adheres to that philosophy with fundamental devotion. His gear is never new, his living quarters—adequate at best. Even his paddling style reflects zen-like quietude. "Many times, I just place my paddle vertically in the river to feel the water, and hold it there without paddling, with short bursts to control angle. I feel that going slower than the current gives me a feeling of timelessness, a chance to look around, scout the run." Lowry's eyes are attuned to practicality, be it a piece of horsetail grass with multiple uses, or an unwanted ambulance that makes a perfect shuttle vehicle.

Lowry's retired ambulance rigs (he's owned two now) are perhaps the most renowned shuttle vehicles in the world of whitewater. He bought the first from a band of Chilean

gypsies who had it parked outside their communal circus tent. When police stopped the cattle-horned, kayak-loaded car to check its registration papers, Josh says, "They would always say, 'Why did you buy a car from the gypsies? They'll rip you off every time.'" Josh didn't reveal that he was part gypsy himself.

The renowned ambulance, however, couldn't get Josh to his greatest exploration in Chile, the Rio Pascua. Draining Patagonia's Southern Ice Field, the Pascua required a

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mountain flight and a ten-hour boat ride just to reach the put-in. This is where Lowry found himself in January, 1999, with Aaron Pruzan, Robby Dastin, and John Hart. It was the culmination of the past decade's research, ever since Josh received a postcard from a trusted local touting the Pascua as "the most difficult river in Chile." With 50,000 cfs, narrow scoured gorges, and a wilderness of coastal forest stretching from its banks, the claim wasn't overblown. Unfortunately, Lowry's team happened to catch the river at an exceptionally high flow following weeks of glacial-melting sunshine. After paddling a series of waterfall-linked lakes, they launched into a canyon of "huge banked turns and powerful whirlpools," Lowry later wrote. "We gained a new respect for the river," he continues, "and began the climb out of the canyon." A day and a half of grueling up-and-over portaging brought them back to the water, which was still big enough to prompt drastic no-fail measures, like lashing paddles to wrists, and waxing cockpit rims to prevent sprayskirt implosions. Two more days of heavy water and another half-day portage nearly had them out of the canyon

when Josh flipped in a diagonal and got tossed wildly for several seconds. He writes, "After four roll attempts, I was still down, running out of breath. I gave one more concerted effort, finishing with a forward sweep, and found myself upright." Three rapids later, they emerged into a broad coastal valley. The run has been repeated twice, always by heady company: the late duo of Russel Kelley and Damon Miller, and Tyler Curtis, Matt Gontram and Marianne Saether.

Three years after the Pascua triumph, Lowry began his own rafting and kayaking company, Futaleufu Explore. He runs the company with partner Marcella Rivas, a Chilena mountain guide, hang-glider, and speed skier. Josh met her in Pucon, Chile. "She was a class III paddler with really good form," he says. Futaleufu Explore catered to traveling backpackers in its first years, but lately they've expanded markets with a comfortable river lodge located conveniently at the put-in. Their clientele might be wealthier than before, but the essence of Lowry's company remains core. Out back is tarp-city, a gathering of meager shelters and duct-taped gear that serves as seasonal home to Lowry disciples from across the oceans.

Elsewhere in the valley Josh is building a house. In vintage Lowry style, the walls are constructed with bags of volcanic ash—a plentiful material since the 2008 eruption of the Chaiten Volcano. When finished, the house will be an earthquake resistant beehive shaped structure, and it will sit adjacent to Josh's barn, already constructed with logs that he acquired through a trade for his used gypsy ambulance. It seems that at fifty-eight, Josh is finally putting down roots. Those who know him, however, would say his roots were dug long ago, anchored in a life lived with unique perspective, a quest for simplicity, and innumerable pure and precise strokes of the paddle.



Cover shot- Dynamita Rapid- A real psycho killer, very intimidating, but not that hard if you can relax into it to hit the imaginary slot. Or... Relaxing into it, aiming for the imaginary slot in this

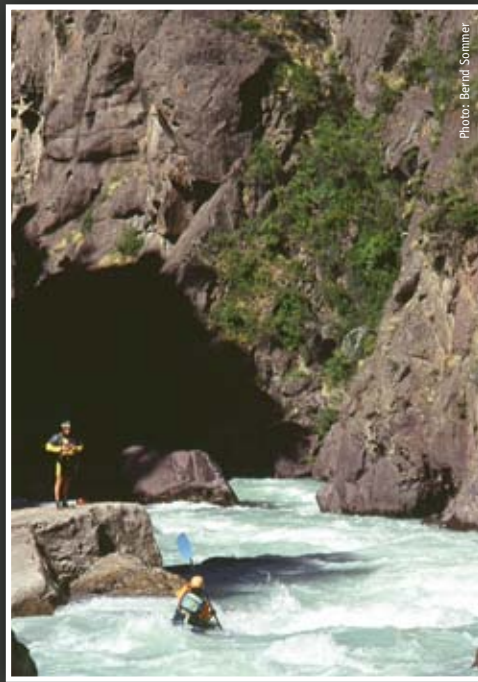


Photo: Bernd Sommer

Approaching a blind entry to a slot canyon on the Rio Aviles. By eddy hopping on whistle blasts Josh led the way with paddlers dropping in one by one. 4 out of 5 paddlers were in the canyon when Josh could see the exit, leaving one outside in case a rescue was needed.



Josh and the Brothers Garcia – Top three in the Futa Fest boatercross.



Would you trust this man to be your guide?



Photo: Bernd Sommer

Help save Patagonia's rivers from unnecessary damming, and the secret project of gold mines, which if allowed will contaminate the last clean water on earth. Water is more valuable than gold! No a la Mina! Boycott gold!