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ADVENTURE

Croc and bandit bait

Raft-swallowing Class V rapids had defeated all previous attempts to run the Blue Nile, but as Jordan Rane reports, it's hard to say no to history.

By Jordan Rane, Special to The Times

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It was arrest No. 2 on the 3,250-mile, 114-day expedition, and the latest in a series of detours that threatened to abruptly sink it in its interminable tracks.

"They'd been waiting for us for four days. They knew we were coming," recounts expedition leader Pasquale Scaturro. "They'd spread out across the river, and the moment we crossed the 20th parallel, they started up their motors, came right toward us, and one guy goes, 'Welcome to Egypt. Get out of your boat.' They took us straight to the army base and told us we were either turning right around and going back to Sudan or going to jail."



No one takes his own boat across Lake Nasser, the giant reservoir on the Nile created by the Aswan High Dam. It's one of the most highly secured bodies of water on the planet, stretching more than 300 miles to Aswan and the gates of the Egyptian Nile — the journey's final leg. The two-man expedition team had a couple of options. They could deflate their boats and board the weekly ferry to Aswan like everyone else. Or they could grapple with the Egyptian authorities until they lost their minds, and then deflate their boats and board the ferry to Aswan.

Scaturro and cameraman-expedition partner Gordon Brown had come too far. Trying to become the first to descend the Nile from the source of the Blue Nile to the Mediterranean, they'd been attacked by crocs, stalked by hippos, shot at by bandits, feasted on by gnats, baked by the Saharan sun, and beset by infected wounds. They'd blasted down one of the world's most remote canyon systems and survived monster rapids. They'd already been on the Nile for more than 2,000 miles.

At this point in the trip, what was an absurd face-off with Egyptian bureaucracy? They got on the phone. With the Ministry of Defense. Ministry of the Interior. State Security. National Security. Military High Intelligence ...

Everest of rivers

In a day when every other A-list adventure "first" has been climbed, crossed or circumnavigated at least seven or eight different ways, as of early 2004 no one had claimed the first full descent of the Everest of rivers — the Nile and its primary southern leg, the Blue Nile — from its sacred

source at the Springs of Sakala in the Ethiopian Highlands to the Mediterranean.



"There are fewer and fewer of these gems to pluck," says Eugene Buchanan, publisher and editor in chief of Paddler, who's got a few first descents under his own belt. "They're becoming much more obscure or increasingly involved projects like this one."

But how did an oversized trophy like the Nile not get snatched 50 years ago? Most of the credit belongs to the raucous Blue Nile, which provides more than 86% of the Nile's water supply after converging with the longer but hydrologically feeble White Nile at Khartoum. Reported to be the source of the Nile by hard-luck Scotsman James Bruce in 1770, the Blue Nile has been a curse for most visitors who've tangled with it, including Bruce. His claim to

have found the source of the great river was met with ridicule and disbelief (the White Nile got the honors).

Portions of the Blue Nile had been run, but not the whole river. In 1968, Capt. John Blashford-Snell led a British army team that became the first to complete the passage of Ethiopia's raging Blue Nile canyon. Putting in at Lake Tana, they "ghost-boated" (minus people) large sections of the river that were too horrifying to run, and otherwise tried not to drown (one of them did).

Two firefights with bandits ensued before they called it a wrap at the end of the Blue Nile Gorge, about 70 miles south of the Sudanese border. That served as the benchmark Blue Nile voyage. Several attempts since had resulted in fatalities.

Scaturro, a Denver-based guide for the adventure company Mountain Travel-Sobek and a geophysicist whose resume includes a list of major river descents (several in Africa, including some firsts), had designs on doing the whole river, but a venture like this isn't cheap. Enter MacGillivray Freeman Films. The Laguna Beach-based company known for its Imax features had a large-format film about the river, "Mystery of the Nile," in the works. Scaturro already had his own designs on a first Nile descent when he got a call from film company headman Greg MacGillivray about the possibility of running the river. Scaturro was packed and ready in a month. Cameraman-safety kayaker Gordon Brown joined up as his partner on the core expedition team.

"It was amazing to find out that this expedition had never been done, or even attempted," MacGillivray says. "The expedition's main importance was to observe the environment all the way down the river from beginning to end — how the Nile Basin has changed over the 35 years since the British expedition."

Roaring whitewater crashes for hundreds of miles down the upper Blue Nile before spilling out of the Ethiopian highlands to the hot Sudanese plains. A few old bridges along the way provide some token signs of life, and that's it. Scaturro and Brown were on their own. They left supplies in Addis Ababa and had someone deliver them to two spots by the bridges. The rest of the way, they relied on villages for provisions.

Things got off to a splendid start when Scaturro wound up with an oar-lock through his leg before the expedition had begun. They were doing some filming at a Class IV rapid in Ethiopia when there was a sudden big drop-off. "The boat jammed into the rapid, I went flying forward, and my leg smashed into the oar lock and bent all the way down," recalls Scaturro. "It was really one of the most painful things I've had in my life. Then we had to hike the 72 kilometers down from Sakala to start the expedition. I was treating it along the way."



The heavy stuff starts just below Lake Tana, where a series of contiguous Class IV and V rapids end at the Niagara-like 150-foot Tisat Falls. Farther downstream, the aptly named Grand Canyon of the Nile foams for about 60 miles. Below that, the roiling waters of the steep Black Gorge flipped an expedition photographer, who promptly flew home to Chile.

Next up: the most lethal section of all, the Northern Gorge, a deep crack in the black rock boiling with angry rapids for 31 miles. Here, the Blue Nile blows through a hole that in some places is

too narrow to fit a raft, let alone one loaded with a paddler, two armed federal troops from the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) who can't swim and a pile of supplies and Imax equipment. "The Northern Gorge is the crux, the biggest athletic challenge of the trip," Scaturro says. "It's solid whitewater 100 miles from anything."

There they opted not to run three treacherous rapids that Scaturro calls expedition-enders — "10 times bigger than anything in the Grand Canyon." They had to portage. "They were just too big," he says. "Someone may come along and run those rapids, or fling themselves off Tisisat Falls with a 1-in-5 chance of survival. We just couldn't take those sort of chances when there's at least a 50% risk of death and 4,700 kilometers to go."

Dodging bullets

Near the lawless frontier of the Ethiopian-Sudanese border the hazards shift from death by rapids to a variety of potential beast and human-derived demises. The rapids calm and the river widens and flattens as the Blue Nile creeps toward its confluence with the White at Khartoum.

And that's just the way the crocodiles and gun-toting shifta (local bandits) like it. "There were many encounters with crocs," says Brown, a Los Angeles-based adventure cinematographer and extreme kayaker. "A lot of them just brushed my boat to get an idea of what I was. But with the bigger ones, I started charging them and making noise because they're predators, not territorial, and you have a better chance if you charge them."



The rafts were motoring behind Brown's kayak. They raised the alert about another crocodile beelining for him. Brown charged it. "It kept going at me. It arched up, opened its mouth, and was about a meter from my ballast."

Brown brought his paddle down full force on its head. At the last second, the croc slammed its mouth shut, crashed down on the boat and disappeared.

Later that day, the rafts now far ahead of him, Brown paddled around a corner and four guys by the side of the river started screaming to pull over. He didn't. So they started shooting.

"They had these old English, Italian, maybe Chinese rifles," Brown says. "Luckily they missed."

Two days later, the team was woken up at their campsite by the local authorities, 10 men with AK-47s.



"They said, 'You're coming with us,' " Scaturro says. "And I said, 'We ain't going nowhere until morning.' We fought and argued, and the next morning they went ahead and disarmed our two EPRDF guys, took us into town, and put us under lock and key in their room."

Scaturro pulled out his satellite phone ("they didn't know what the heck that was"), and called the minister of defense in Addis Ababa. The local authorities

let them go.

The biggest X factor was what they would encounter over hundreds of miles in the Sudan, Africa's largest country, one plagued by decades of civil war, terrorist affiliations and indelible State Department warnings. But the Blue Nile expedition passed through the border without incident before bumping into their first feared batch of Sudanese military officials at Sennar Dam — who hugged and congratulated them and wished them luck. There were more embraces and warm wishes when the rivermen floated into the capital, Khartoum. And still more when they continued along the Nile's great S-bend, where the river unleashes its shocking treasure trove of tourist-free Nubian pyramids and ancient temples — and constant dinner invitations.



"I thought Sudan would be a dangerous hotbed of Islamic fundamentalists," Scaturro says. "It was the most beautiful, friendly country I've ever been to."

As it turned out, Egypt would be the challenge — home of cruise ships, pollution, forced police escorts and one highly secured reservoir that wasn't the least bit expedition-friendly. Then came the call at 2:30 a.m.

High Intelligence, after days of repeated refusals, was granting permission for the expedition to cross Lake Nasser in its own little boats. Possibly a death sentence on a massive, rough lake like this one, but no matter. Maybe they could add this one to the adventure.

They did, on their way to a final float past assorted Pharaonic antiquities until they hit the sea on April 28.



"Thirty-two hundred miles — that's huge. I definitely think it's quite an accomplishment for those guys," says Paddler's Buchanan.

Scaturro and Brown were in the books. The first full descent of the Blue Nile and Nile. Done.

The second, third, and fourth descents are still anyone's.

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Correction: Pasquale Scaturro is not a professional river guide nor is he associated with Mountain Travel-Sobek