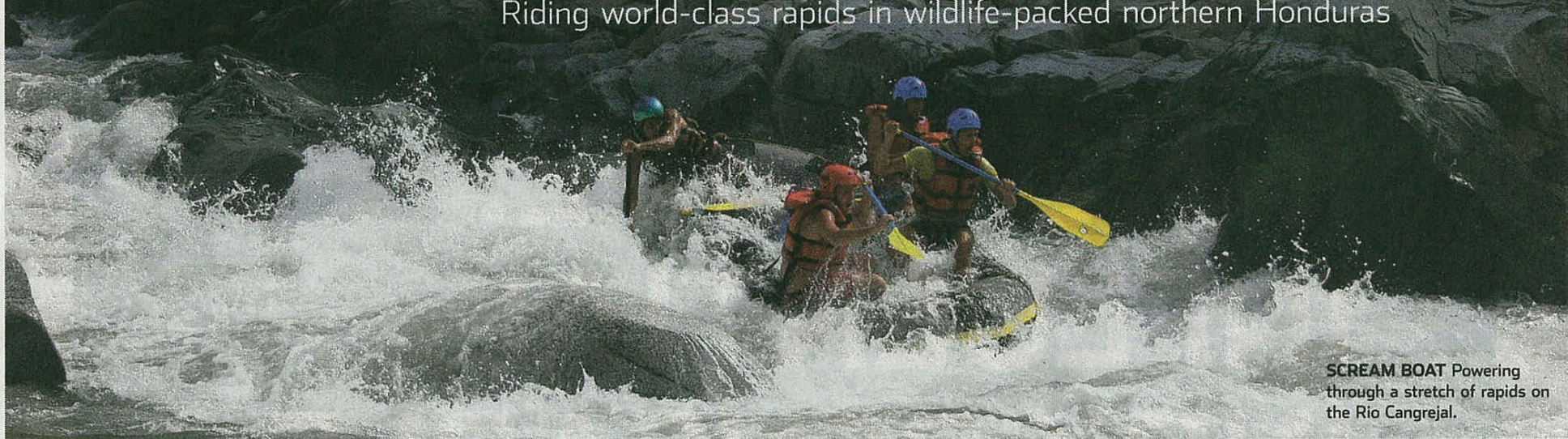


## ADVENTURE &amp; TRAVEL

## A RIO RUNS THROUGH IT

Riding world-class rapids in wildlife-packed northern Honduras



**SCREAM BOAT** Powering through a stretch of rapids on the Rio Cangrejal.

From top: Omega Tours; Nicholas Gill

BY NICHOLAS GILL

**WE HIKED OUR WAY** over a dry section of riverbed until we reached a boulder the size of a small house, which looked to be the largest of the hundreds around us. We scrambled and scraped our way 25 or 30 feet up to the top. On the opposite bank, where human-high ferns blanketed a nearly vertical slope, was the edge of Pico Bonito National Park. Below us was a clear expanse of warm, fast-moving water. There was nowhere left to go but in.

Honduras's Rio Cangrejal, which runs from high in the Cordillera Nombre de Dios mountains to the Caribbean Sea, is one of the world's great white-water experiences. In the wet season, from September to January, it offers 20 boulder-choked miles to paddle—dozens of different rapids, from Class II to Class V.

The 265,000-acre Pico Bonito, meanwhile, is one of the most biodiverse places on earth, encompassing a variety of microclimates, from tropical lowlands to cloud forests. Situated on Honduras's northern coast, it is a 20-minute drive from La Ceiba, one of the country's most important cities and a hub for trips to the Bay Islands.

Yet the park—and the river—remain relatively undiscovered because of a lack of marketing and Honduras's image crisis after the ouster of president José Manuel Zelaya in 2009. Visitors who were scared off have missed out. Pico Bonito is Costa Rica's Monteverde



**TROPIC WONDER** A thatched, elevated two-bedroom lodge at Villas Pico Bonito.

of 15 years ago: pristine wilderness, adventure at every turn, low prices and no chain hotels or big tour groups.

I visited in the dry season, when the river is lower and rafting is primarily limited to what is known as the commercial stretch, in the lower and middle sections. The lack of rain has its advantages: half-day white-water trips become mixed rainforest adventures. After our leap off of the boulder into the river, our guide took us sliding down a small waterfall, floating through a rock gorge and swimming into the surging current—all before we reached our rafts.

The Cangrejal can also change drastically if there is rain—a single heavy downpour, which may amount to as much as 10 inches, can cause a 30-foot

rise in water levels overnight. The river can toss around boulders to such an extent that guides claim each trip is a completely different experience.

It rained the night before I took on the Cangrejal, but not enough to roll the river too much. Once we put our rafts in the water, my group (two Canadians, an Italian and an American, plus certified rafting guides) started off in relative calm near the bank so we could learn safety procedures.

We began slowly; the water was so still we needed to paddle in order to move forward. But the speed picked up quickly. As the current grabbed us and dragged us downstream, the mountains and jungle seemed to become wilder as well, to creep closer. The wildlife became more concentrated. Long-beaked

green kingfishers flew across our path and bright blue morpho butterflies fluttered above our heads, more than once landing on one of our helmets.

The animals offered brief breaks of delight in a journey that otherwise required great focus. We paddled over madcap drop-offs that appeared out of nowhere and through passages so narrow that rock walls blocked out the sun, leaving us in near darkness. There were moments when the bouncing raft left me flailing around like a puppet, unable to control my body or oar. Only my foot, jammed underneath the seat in front of me, kept me from going overboard—and in fact, nobody fell out, even in Class III and IV cascades.

We passed under a Temple of Doom-like hanging bridge that led to the national park. After a final rapid we found ourselves in a maze of boulders and pools of crème de menthe-colored water. Everyone flipped off the boats and into the river to celebrate surviving, as well as the setting. We could hear howler monkeys chanting up on the nearby mountain, somewhere near the El Bejuco waterfall.

The next morning, I heard croaking outside my tree-house-like cabin at the Omega Jungle Lodge. Peering out my screen window I noticed lime-green-beaked keel-billed toucans, a half-dozen bouncing around in a tree. Next came a few oropendolas, a tropical cousin to the oriole, then a rufous-tailed hummingbird buzzing by, and finally a black squirrel crawling up a trunk. The adventure wasn't over.

## THE LOWDOWN



●**When to Go:** Pico Bonito National Park is a year-round destination. For rafting, most come during the rainy season (September to January), though rain can occur during the dry season.

●**Where to Stay:** There are about a half-dozen lodging options on the Rio Cangrejal side of Pico Bonito National Park, including the air-conditioned rooms at Villas Pico Bonito (from \$65 per night; [villaspicobonito.com](http://villaspicobonito.com)). Casa Verde (from \$165 per person per night; [wendygreenyoga.com](http://wendygreenyoga.com)) rents out rooms when its raw food and yoga retreats are not in session.

●**What to Do:** Omega Tours leads rafting and kayaking trips on the Rio Cangrejal (from \$59; [omegatours.info](http://omegatours.info)), horseback riding treks to mountain villages (from \$76) and hikes to El Bejuco waterfall (from \$44). La Moskitia Ecoaventuras ([lamoskitia.hn](http://lamoskitia.hn)) and Jungle River ([jungleriverlodge.com](http://jungleriverlodge.com)) run similar trips. Entrance to the national park is about \$6.50.