

*Remember Maciej Tarasin? The low-profile, Polish canoe-tripping explorer extraordinaire has been quietly notching a slew of bold and interesting descents over the last few years. After a canoe descent of Ethiopia's (since-dammed) Omo River in 2008, Tarasin and Natasza Szalajska ran Bolivia's Rio Tuichi on a self-made raft in 2009, and then the duo returned the next year for a first descent of Bolivia's Rio Altamachi. In 2011, he popped up on a few more radar screens after a canoe/rafting expedition down Colombia's Rio Yari "in the heart of guerillas land" ended on Day 18 with a Colombian military rescue. Media outlets on multiple continents picked up the footage, photos, and story of the rescue after he and Tomasz Jedrys became separated from their SOAR 14 inflatable canoe. "When the helicopter picked me up I had on me only shorts, sandals and rescue vest," Tarasin told C&K. "Knife and waterproof GPS in the pockets—that is it. Lost the boat, camera and everything."*

*That didn't stop him from heading back to canoe through the jungles of the Amazon basin. In this exclusive translation, Tarasin recounts his recent 2013 expedition paddling with Jaime Gomez down Colombia's remote Rio Tunia, Rio Apaporis and Rio San Jorge plus 20 miles of the Rio Cunare. This journey includes the first documented descent of the Rio San Jorge, plus the first north-to-south passage of the Serrania de Chiribiquete mountains.*

*Click [HERE](#) to follow Tarasin's adventures on his website, [GreenHell.org](#).*

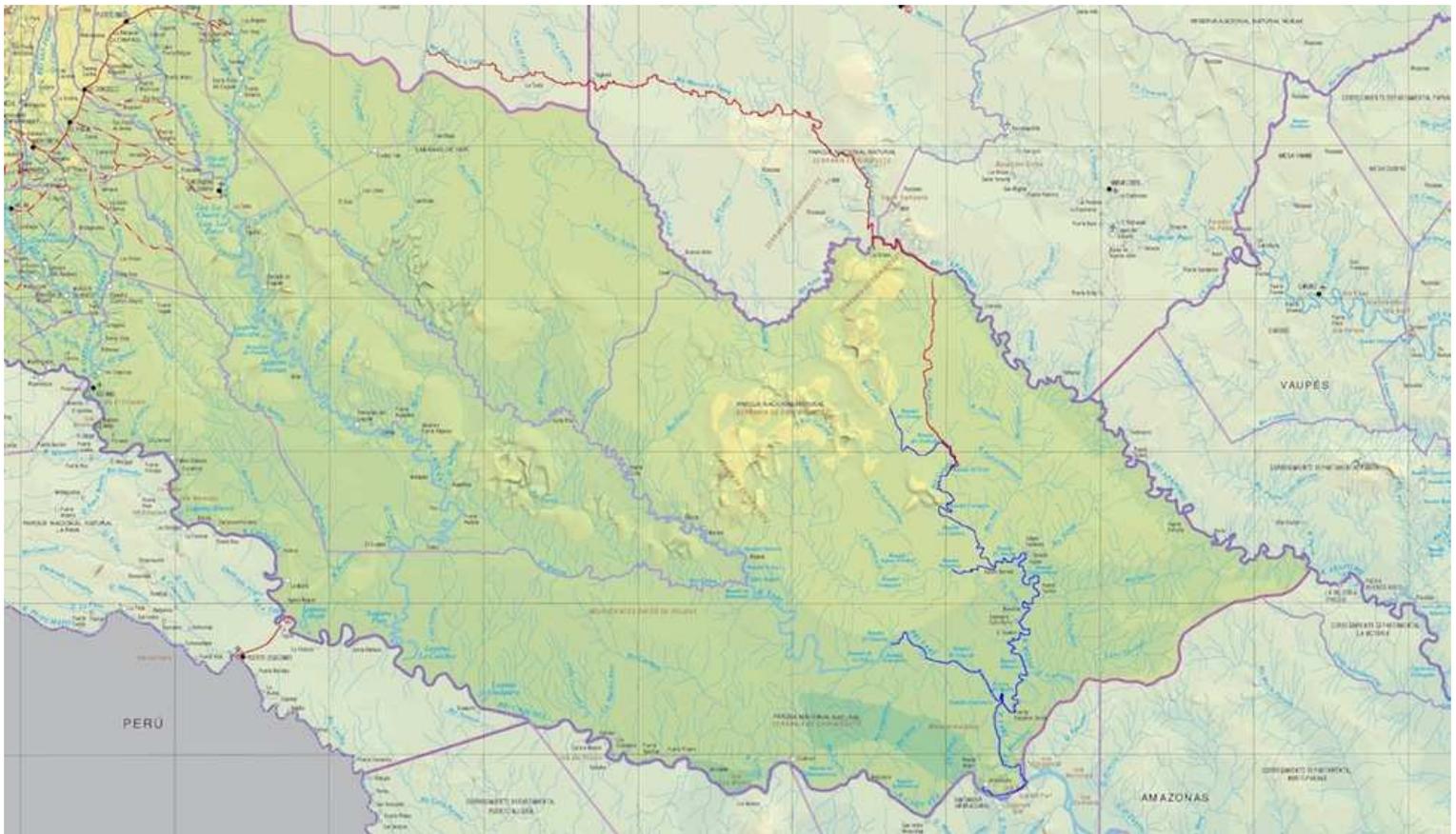


The table-top tepui mountains cover Colombia's remote Chiribiquete National Park.

Colombia's Chiribiquete National Park is one of the most inaccessible places on Earth, period. The size of Massachusetts and covered by the Pre-Cambrian tabletop (tepui) mountains, surrounded by dense rainforest and crisscrossed by the rivers whose black waters rumble over their rapids and numerous falls. The park is home to jaguar, giant otters and tapir; it also hosts an array of endemic plants.

Chiribiquete is the largest archeological concentration of prehistoric rock paintings in northern South America. The late Thomas van der Hammen, a Dutch-Colombian biologist, was so struck by these illustrations that he termed Chiribiquete "the Sistine Chapel of the Amazon." However, archeological expeditions researching the paintings in the early 1990s were abandoned due to the conflict with the cocaine-business guerillas.

At the turn of November and December 2013, I organized a pioneer expedition from the north to the south of Serrania de Chiribiquete. The goal: to run the rivers of Tunia and San Jorge as well as some parts of the Apaporis. It was to be the first documented paddling expedition down the Rio San Jorge. The territories on the Yari, the Cunare and the San Jorge used to be inhabited by the native Karijona people. They were known to have rowed their canoes standing and might have been the first to square off against the canyons and waterfalls of Rio San Jorge, though no information about their feats survived. It is also believed that it was the members of the Karijona tribe who painted the rock masterpieces. Apart from going down the so-far-unexplored Rio San Jorge, I really wanted to see this "Sistine Chapel of Amazonia."



The red line follows Tarasin and Gomez's north-to-south route; the blue line follows their motorboat exit route to Araracuara.

*After all my unusual adventures on the Rio Yari in 2011, I was intent on making sure this expedition went according to the original plan. I contracted an experienced indigenous guide, Jaime Gomez, and amassed all the maps and equipment, including a SOAR Pro Pioneer. On Nov. 8, we set off from Bogota, reaching San Jose de Caquetania three days later. The Tunia proved to be a fast-flowing river with rapids and waterfalls. Its rapids needed plenty of good scouting. Our first four-day leg ran across the savannah. In a straight line we made about 12 miles a day until reaching the Jaguara village. We passed the village of La Tunia with its agricultural farms; farther down we saw some coca plantations and a few deserted FARC camps.*



Camp at the put-in on the Rio Tunia.

*On the Day Six we reached the canyon, which took us two days to pass. Halfway through the gorge we encountered a big boulder blocking Class IV+ rapids behind it; we had also left our machetes in camp. Without machetes we couldn't make our way through the rainforest from Rio Apaporis to the upper Rio San Jorge. There was no choice but to struggle over a mile along the rocky bank.*

*Three days later, after carrying around a few rapids and running others in good time, we reached the Rio Apaporis. I wanted to avoid spending too much time on the Apaporis with the threat of running into guerillas. After passing through two dangerous Class IV drops, we set camp. Our intention was to change the river basin, which required walking 12 miles through the forest carrying all our equipment. It took us almost a week. First, in a place hardly visible on satellite maps, we had to clear the passage with the machetes just to find the upper Rio San Jorge. Then we'd return for the inflatable canoe, food and the paddles.*



One of the FARC guerilla camps along the Rio Apaporis.

*The next day we started down the pristine Rio San Jorge, though it was more like cutting our way through the lush greenery and fallen trees. Initially the river was 30 feet wide; only on the second day it widened enough for us to enjoy the full view over the river. On the last day of November we reached the first waterfalls. I might have easily been the first or one of the first white men who ever reached this place. We lowered the canoes on the ropes and went down the runnable section. The following cataracts did not pose a problem as the water was low.*



Tarasin paddling on the Rio San Jorge.

*Rio San Jorge was incredibly beautiful. It abounded in many drops easy to slip off without getting out of the canoe. The river's black water reflected lush rainforest vegetation and the sun's rays, making it emerald. Every now and again we would have a chance to steal a glance at the majestic tepui called by native inhabitants the "houses of the gods."*



One of the many rapids on the Rio Cunare.

*Early on the Rio Cunare we got a surprise. The low water revealed an aircraft sunk in the river. I dived a couple of times to check out the plane's identification numbers and we carried on.*



Tarasin (stern) and Gomez paddling out on the Rio El Tubo.

*In Raudal El Tubo, we rounded out the expedition by joining a Dutch expedition as planned in order to share a motorboat ride upriver to return to Araracuara. Even after all the close calls Jaime and I had paddling down the Rio San Jorge, it was right before we finally were finished with our inflatable canoe that we had the most dangerous adventure of our expedition. Jaime wished to go over the last drop of the Rio El Tubo, the backwash of which stopped the canoe with so much power that Jaime was thrown overboard into the tumbling water.*



The Dutchmen captured the action of Jaime's harrowing swim on the Rio El Tubo.

*We could not see him for half a minute, then he surfaced far downriver. It was a relief. I was told later that Jaime, who was the fruit of the romance between his native mother and a white man, had been dropped into the river as a baby. After he was saved by his grandmother, his tribesmen prophesized that he would not die by water. Luckily, this time, and on this expedition, the prophesy was true.*



Tarasin and Gomez