

# 340 Horsepower of ADVENTURE



## Jet Boating BC's Chilcotin Plateau

By Feet Banks

"I like checking out maps, looking for boat launches," Eric Pehota says, "but I don't like to do too much research or planning before a big trip." He cranks a right turn, piloting the 21-foot aluminum jet boat off BC's mighty Fraser River and into the choppy, silt-murky waters of the Chilcotin. "It takes some of the adventure out of it."

And it doesn't take long for the real adventure to start. Eric, long-time Whistler local Steve Lang and I have been enjoying a smooth autumn ride but just a few minutes up the Chilcotin the water begins to flow faster and rougher and suddenly we're motoring through some burly class III and IV whitewater. Pehota knows where we're going, and we have a map, but I've never been here, never even been in a jet boat before, although as the roar of the water begins to drown out the rumble of our 340-horsepower Chevy engine I get the feeling that the real fun is about to begin. For me, Ignorance is bliss.

Standing for a better view of the water, one hand constantly working the throttle, Pehota swings the boat to within inches of the canyon wall then, without hesitation, punches through on a standing wave and knifes past a roaring haystack - a submerged boulder that creates a small waterfall as the river plows over it.

"Hang on boys," Pehota barks. BOOOM, raging whitewater hammers the boat's reinforced underside. I bounce in my seat as water sprays over the windshield drenching Steve, also standing and helping with navigation. The opaque water makes hazards much trickier to detect.

"Big rock just under there."

"I see it." Eric dodges us left, slams through another wave and suddenly we're throttled perfectly in a micro-eddy, standing still as the river rushes past. "I'm gonna cut straight through there." Pehota points right, to a thin tongue of water flowing between two huge boulder/wave/sinkholes. The far wall is only 20 feet away. The boat is 21 feet long. He hammers the throttle, carves out around a stack of water the size of a Smartcar, guns it and we slice straight along the sheer cliff and into the calmer, deeper green water beyond.

"That was Farwell Canyon," Eric says. Above us, traffic has stopped on the forest service road bridge, a few people out of their vehicles to watch the show. It isn't unusual to see rafts and kayaks pick their way down this treacherous stretch of river, but I'm sure it's quite rare to see three dudes in a jet boat haul ass up Farwell like we just did.





The rest of the afternoon consists of tamer class II and III water, chasing eagles upriver through steep canyons, past top-heavy hoodoo pillars carved from thousands of years of water flowing over the sandstone, and through the open grasslands of the Chilcotin Plateau, some of BC's most historic gold rush and cattle country. On this trip we're attempting to link the Fraser, Chilcotin and Chilko rivers to Chilko Lake, close to 200 kilometres of water travel.

"I love the different perspective you get from a river," Eric says. "These were once the highways of the province." I take a turn riding on the bow, bouncing along up the smaller rapids as the adventure continues. We're headed west into the afternoon sun and eventually the glare on the water makes it difficult to navigate so we pitch camp on a sandbar and watch the daylight crawl across the just-changing September leaves and down the geologic time of the river walls. That night we feast on elk roast and butter-poached garden vegetables grilled over the open fire. Erik reaches into the flame periodically to spin the roast. "You know you've had a good summer," he says, quickly withdrawing his hand from the heat, "when you've singed all the hair off your hands."

The trick, when you stop to camp, is to push a stick into the sand right at the water's edge. The next morning the stick will indicate if the river is rising or falling.

"The water's down a little," Eric says. Shallower water is more affected by the rocks on the river bottom, but deeper water moves faster. I ask which is worse.

"It depends on the rapid." He calls it hydrology, the technique of reading the surface of the river to understand what is below, and how deep. It's not something you pick up overnight.

"Everything happening on the surface of a river is dictated by what's going on at the bottom and on the banks of the river," he says. "And water reacts a certain way - it slows down when it hits a big boulder and makes a cushion, then flows around or over." Scanning the water takes

intense concentration, a ripple this way means one thing, a certain shade of green means another. The river is a living, flowing roadway, always changing.

Eric Pehota has over 500 days of whitewater kayak and raft trips behind him. He's been driving jet boats commercially for the past 15

**"I like to keep the momentum going when we're in serious waters," Pehota says. "We can eat lunch later."**

years and in 2006 became the first person to run a jet boat up the infamous Thompson River gorge. Few, if any, jet boat pilots in North America have this much whitewater experience. "But I'm still learning things every time I get on the river," Eric says.

We power onwards, spotting Big Horn sheep in the hills and nervous deer on the river's edge. We pass some Tsilhqut'in Natives dip-netting for spawning salmon in the same spots they've fished for generations. They wave and smile as we motor past. This far out in the bush, everyone is friendly.

Soon the Chilcotin merges with the Chilko River, the water still silty-opaque but calmer now that we are out of the canyons and onto the ranchland plateau. Amazingly, the boat can travel in just six inches of water and as we cover the miles signs of civilization become rare - the odd farmhouse, an occasional road or bridge. In two full days of river we've seen three public places where a person could launch or haul in a jet boat; we camp at the third one, the confluence of the Chilko and the Taseko rivers. The natural white noise of the flowing water makes for deep, restful sleep.

Above the junction with the Taseko, the



Chilko runs narrow, fast and shallow, the now crystal-clear river allowing us to see every boulder, pebble and submerged stick on the bottom. There are two main stretches of whitewater - Bidwell Rapids and the White Mile. Although Eric has kayaked the Chilko a few times, the most recent was over 13 years ago and when you're jet-boating up class IV whitewater it's a good idea to know what you're getting into before charging in with a \$50,000 machine that's also Pehota's summer livelihood. We'd be raft-scouting this stretch of water.

Bob Pehota, Eric's father, has boated in BC's wilderness his entire life and the next morning, a grey, drizzling affair, he drives in from Williams Lake with Eric's Suburban and boat trailer.

"What kind of tires you got on here son?" Bob asks. "They drive like baloney skins." The roads are slick but Bob successfully shuttles us upstream to rendezvous with a 17-person crew from Whistler River Adventures who've agreed to take us on board to scope the upper Chilko.

You can tell the whitewater is coming when the raft guide takes off his sunglasses and tucks them inside his life vest. And so we enter the Bidwell Rapids, a dog-legged, 100-metre stretch of roaring water punctuated by the Three Sisters, a trio of huge standing waves that can easily flip a raft or swamp a boat. This is class IV whitewater: rafting down it is wet and exciting, boating up it is unheard of.



OPENING SPREAD: Black Canyon, Thompson River. Photo By Feet Banks. Illustration by Dave Barnes. PREVIOUS PAGE: Main photo by Whistler Jet Boating, River by Feet Banks, Inset by Steve Lang THIS PAGE: Upper shot - Gap Rapids, Chilko River. Photo By Steve Lang MIDDLE: Dusk on the Chilcotin. Photo By Eric Pehota. LOWER: Driver's eye view. Photo by Steve Lang. INSET: Launch into the Fraser. Photo Eric Pehota.

We had pulled ashore before the Three Sisters to take a look and Eric studied the water without saying a word. Now amidst the spray and foam, paddling hard to escape the water's pull, he continues scanning the water, eyes darting through the action looking for a nice tongue of river the boat could blast up. Sitting in the front and completely submerged for parts of the ride, I have no time to do anything but hold on.

The Three Sisters are no joke, but shortly after we escape their chilling spray, floating and rehashing the excitement, the Chilko begins to narrow even more and the White Mile begins. The churning, bashing, raging whitewater of this stretch of river is highly technical, sustained class III-IV river travel. It's not actually a full mile long but still delivers 15 white-knuckled minutes before the Chilko suddenly mellows out into a beautiful calm-watered gorge with 20-foot cliff walls on each side and lodgepole pines lining the banks like sentinels, eagles perched in their high branches, glaring as we drift silently by. We're soaked, smiling, and most importantly Eric has had a good chance to study our route.


"It's doable but we'd need to do some modifications to the boat," Pehota says back at camp. "Bidwell looks good to go but there are some holes in the White Mile that would probably swamp us. We'd need a spray skirt over most of the boat and supports for the windshield so it doesn't collapse when the water comes over the bow." It sounds like Pehota wants to build a jet submarine. He stares out over the river for a moment, as if thinking it over again. "It's a pretty serious stretch of water, the kind of run where you want everything to be perfect. Water could be about a foot higher that's for sure." If he's disappointed, Pehota doesn't show it. A key part of adventure is knowing when to turn back and so we focus on the problem at hand - piling boulders to form a land bridge from steep riverbank to beach in order to get the trailer out into the water. After over 150 kilometres of open river and empty wilderness, our trip up the Chilko has come to an end.

con't on p.26



But the good times have not. We drive off and the next morning launch in the Thompson River where we spend two days blasting through mellow rapids in spots like Dead Man's Creek and Black Canyon. We catch fish and cook them over the fire, unconcerned about contamination from the Kamloops pulp mill less than a hundred kilometres upstream. "I wouldn't eat it every day," Eric says of the slightly pale but plenty tasty rainbow trout, "but everything in moderation, right?"

I agree. And as we sit around the driftwood campfire I think of Chilko Lake, our un-reached destination. It's not going anywhere, and someday, when everything lines up perfectly, I bet Eric will make another run at it. Or maybe not, it doesn't matter – the destination is never the most important part an adventure.

Go to [mountainlifemag.ca](http://mountainlifemag.ca) to check out more photos and videos from the Chilcotin Plateau jet boat trip. 



INSETS BY ERIC PEHOTA.  
RIVER IMAGE BY FEET BANKS.



GREEN RIVER, PEMBERTON BC. PHOTO COURTESY WHISTLER JETBOATING.

## Enjoy your own Jet Boat Adventure

In the Coast Mountains Eric Pehota is a well-known ski mountaineering legend who helped define Canadian extreme skiing in the late 1980s. Less known, although it makes sense since you can't ski in the summer, is his long list of river accomplishments.

"I started whitewater kayaking in 1984," Pehota says. Over the next ten years, in between epic winters, Pehota kayaked and rafted his way around British Columbia, over 500 days in all, and became certified as a whitewater raft guide along the way. Then, in 1994, he started jet boating and everything changed. "This is my passion now," he says.

And Eric takes care of his passion. The 21-foot aluminum boat is immaculately clean and precisely maintained. He does most of his own mechanical work and insists on keeping every working part of the boat "up to aviation safety standards."

Pehota owns and operates Whistler Jet Boating and, from June to September, runs three trips a day leaving Whistler Village. Each adventure is three hours round trip, including an hour and a half of water time on the impressive Green River. Expect splashing waters, steep cliff banks, technical rapids and old-growth forest lining the shores.

The boat seats six passengers but weight is a factor, as when driving a fully loaded car or truck – the response and acceleration get sluggish the heavier you get – but with a nimble, responsive jet boat it's ten times more noticeable. "You don't need to start cutting the tags out of your underwear, though," Pehota says. "I just got a brand new 400hp 383 Chevy Stroker hoarsepower engine for this summer."

A Pehota-powered jet boat adventure up the Green River costs \$109 per adult and \$99 per kid. "I like kids," Eric says with a smile. "They're light."

To experience your own Jet Boat Adventure, call 604 905 9455 or 604 894 5845, email [whistlerjetboating@shaw.ca](mailto:whistlerjetboating@shaw.ca) or visit [whistlerjetboating.com](http://whistlerjetboating.com). 