

The chopper makes one of 10 trips to drop off all the gear.

Rumble in the Jungle

Buckle up for one of the world's wildest rides on Queensland's roaring North Johnstone river

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES McCORMACK

WHAT?

Get your adrenaline surging by heli-rafting Queensland's mighty North Johnstone river. With broiling Class Five rapids and four days of paddling, the river offers one of Australia's most challenging rafting trips. But, between the sections of whitewater mayhem, there are plenty of opportunities for contemplation as you float down the World Heritage-listed gorge, past pristine rainforest and leaping waterfalls.

WHY?

The NJ, as it's known, is consistently ranked in the top 10 rafting trips on the planet. The river is steep and technical, the scenery amazing, and the water is warm, something you won't find at many other rafting destinations. And it's almost guaranteed you'll have the river to yourself, with only a handful of commercial trips running it annually.



Whether or not it would be popular in prison is debatable, but the fact of the matter was that I'd grown a third buttock. Right between the other two, just a little higher, in essence forming a triangulation of buttocks, each of equal proportions. And now the Mushroom – the North Johnstone's final Class Five rapid – had made it worse. It had flung me into the air, sending me crunching back down onto the raft's frame, right in the middle of the lump that had sprouted, bruised and purple,

the day before when I slipped on rocks and fell while running back to the raft. Drew Walton, the lead guide, had warned us specifically of slippery rocks. But in the long list of Drew's dangerous things – spouted off as the bus wound up through the dripping jungle that pressed hard against North Queensland's Palmerston Highway – slipping on rocks seemed minor.

There were, of course, the dangers of the river itself. Recirculating water. Stoppers. Sieves. But there were also snakes: night tigers, red-belly blacks, taipans, death adders. Then there were the leeches and ticks. The spiders. The stinging trees, whose leaves contain more than 20 poisons. The lawyer cane. The scrub typhus. And, on the final day, the "lizards". Somehow, calling crocs lizards made them seem more ominous, and it didn't particularly help when Drew began talking about grabbing onto the croc's snout and poking it in the eye. I assumed he was joking, but Drew was master of the deadpan. You couldn't be sure.



Going, going, gone: the Class Five rapids swallow the rafters. Inset: one of the river's more benign lizards.



The wet bit is right; the area receives Australia's highest rainfall. And nearby Mt Bartle Frere, 30 clicks away as the cassowary runs, averages nearly nine metres of rainfall annually, making it one of the wettest spots on Earth.

I decide to confront any fears about dangerous rapids by warming up with a day trip on the nearby Tully, a river chock-full of Class Four rapids with sexy names like Foreplay, Wet and Moisty and Double D-cup. We drive up a broad valley under clouds and light rain, past cane fields and undulating banana plantations. And then the valley suddenly constricts and jacks up. Waterfalls leap from the high mists, cascading white ribbons that slash into the jungle.

At the end of the valley, the bus grinds to a halt. We make our way down to the river, which runs brown, warm and velvety as it slides through dark, round boulders.

The first rapid is Alarm Clock. It sounds like a wake-up call, but it's not hugely exciting. Nor is the next rapid. But soon we hit a heart-in-mouth drop that's on a different level entirely; a deep, churning stopper that will surely fold up the raft like a taco. Being bucked overboard seems almost inevitable. I brace for the impact, and . . . none comes. The raft slides over it all. Wow! Rafts can do that? I gain an immediate respect for their capabilities.

And that's how the Tully continues: short bursts of wild water out of which we come laughing and cheering, then longer drifting sections, where we pass under waterfalls and have the time for our eyes to linger on

the epiphytes and strangler vines that lace up the kauri forest. Between the – earthy – jokes that Reese, our guide, entertains us with, we jump out for swims, lazily floating down the river, and, where it's deep enough, clambering up rocks to leap five metres or so into the water below.

This rafting gig? It's easy, I tell myself at the end of the day. Almost too easy.

Two days on. I'm on the banks of the NJ and no longer so sure of myself. It's taken roughly 10 chopper trips and half a day to deliver all four rafts, gear and crew up here, and there's been plenty of time to observe the river. With the cocoa-brown water, lush jungle and round boulders, it's not unlike the Tully. But it seems 'roided up: bigger, more muscular, more intimidating.

And noisier. Each time the chopper "whumpwhumpwhumps" away and its blasting down-draught dissipates, it seems at first that all is still and quiet. But the feeling is short-lived. Another wall of sound builds. Nearby rapids thunder, rain pelts down, and there's a raucous cacophony of insects. It doesn't take me long to appreciate where John Dean – telling me a few weeks earlier about his pioneering first descent of the Franklin in the Fifties – was coming from when he described that river's constant roar as "wearying".

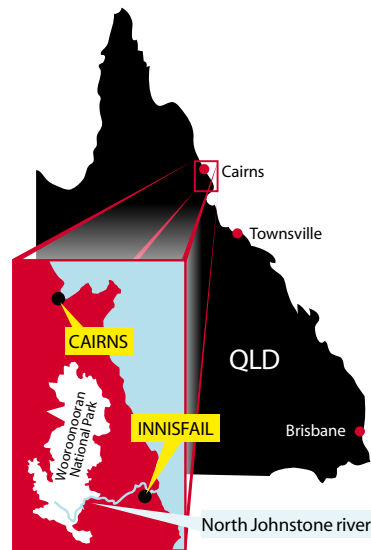
We're sorted into rafts and we set off, floating down a gorge, treacle-coated with jungle – palms, figs, kauri, mahogany, golden penda, red cedars, black beans. We pass vines strangling and constricting some trees, dripping between others like some kind of Tarzan's playground. Meanwhile,

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And there were cassowaries around as well. Drew didn't talk about them, but I'd done my research. Standing at two metres high, they feature in the Guinness Book of Records as the world's most dangerous bird. In 1999, the Journal of Zoology published data on 150 cassowary attacks on humans in Queensland. Victims were charged, chased, pushed, pecked, kicked, jumped on and head butted. Seven of the attacks resulted in severe injuries – puncture wounds, lacerations, broken bones – and one was fatal. Helpfully, the journal added that jogging didn't incite cassowaries to attack.

So what then, with all these dangers, makes the North Johnstone worthwhile? I don't know who actually ranks these things, but the NJ consistently appears in lists of the planet's top 10 rafting trips. Steep and technical, the river offers four days of Class Five rapids as it plunges off the Atherton Tablelands and scythes through an ancient volcanic gorge. The jungle – so dense the only way in is by chopper – is primeval and pristine, protected within Queensland's Wet Tropics World Heritage Area.





Top: the rafters brace for more. Far left: a well-earned break for a swim. Left: calmer water offers a chance to take in the surroundings.

we make our introductions: on board is Gab, a Sydneysider like myself, and two Brisbanites, Scott and Kev. Kev has run the NJ before. And there's our guide, Julian Dick, who during lulls between rapids regales us with stories of his days guiding the Zambezi and the Nile. He's also rafted in Canada, South America, NZ and has just returned from a 22-day trip down the Colorado River.

The Colorado must be a fair step up from this, I suggest.

"Sure, it hasn't got its reputation for nothing," says Julian. "But I'd suggest that NJ's rapids – for technical and consequence value – are more intimidating. Most rapids [on the Colorado] were one-hit wonders; you might flip your boat, but it wouldn't be consequential. Any rapid can have consequence, I suppose, but it's the certainty of consequence. You go down Mine Shaft here on the NJ, and you fuck it up, it's pretty obvious to see there'll be consequences."

We find that out for ourselves the next day when we finally reach Mine Shaft. In between, we've run Misjudgment, our first Class Five rapid, which flipped the first raft to

go through; Snake Bite, an impressive drop with a monstrous tongue of water; Wrap City, with no major drops but rather a long, flowing rock garden of playful smaller rapids; and Berlin Wall, which we actually portaged – it would have been near-suicidal to run given the low water levels. It's quite obvious all these are a fair step up from anything on the Tully.

But Mine Shaft, the NJ's king-daddy rapid, is not just another step up – it is a new world. Drew had decided the day before we weren't going to run it. The levels were too low. But because the NJ is a natural-flow river with a smallish drainage, the water levels go up and down like a yo-yo. With Cyclone Ului loitering off the coast, rain has hammered down overnight and the river has risen.

We pull in just above Mine Shaft and are told to stay put, waiting while the guides scope it out.

What none of us knows at this stage, is that neither Julian nor Drew has ever run it before. But I just want to get down it, get it over with before the wait freaks me out. We can see a mist rising at the point where the water plunges out of sight. It is as if the river

is breathing smoke like a dragon and it's not particularly reassuring.

By the time the guides return and we paddle out, I am absolutely pumped. So, too, is Scott in front of me. I can tell because, once we start paddling, he rips ferociously into each stroke as though his life depends on it. Even Julian – who usually breaks into a set of staccato chuckles each time he encounter a wall of water – is ominously stern. What we're facing is three pour-overs running over the main drop: the left pour-over is horribly, horribly nasty; the right pour-over, which leads you straight into a chunk of lava before sucking you into a sieve, makes the left look as harmless as a labrador puppy; and the middle, the line we want, is not easy to get into, requiring precise negotiation.

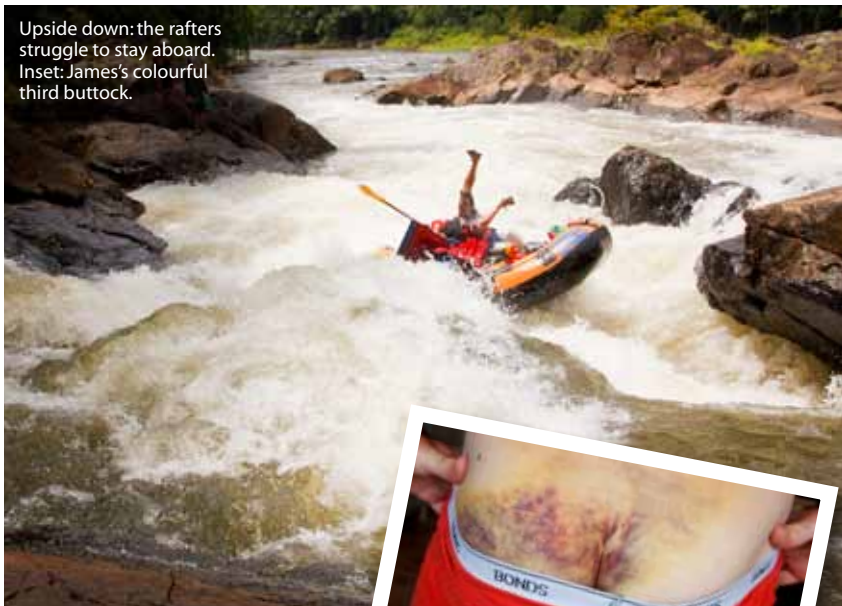
Forward paddle. STOP! Back paddle! STOP! We pull up in an eddy just above the Mine Shaft itself. It occurs to me, briefly, how much trust I've placed in Julian. But the thought is only there for an instant, because then he's screaming, "Paddle! HARD!", and we're charging straight at the drop. A few metres out, we drop into brace positions. We slide down the smooth three mere tongue of water. And then the North Johnstone erupts around me.

It's fascinating, later, to hear Julian describe our descent. He details each feature – each rock and pillow wave, each eddy and lateral current – with such astounding precision it seems he possesses a Matrix-like ability to slo-mo all the mayhem around him. For me, on the other hand, identifying any one feature is simply impossible. After being smashed by the first wall of water, the raft is engulfed in a series of broiling waves and we

“*The raft is engulfed in a series of broiling waves and we pop up for air only briefly before being swallowed again*”



Upside down: the rafters struggle to stay aboard. Inset: James's colourful third buttock.



pop up for air only briefly before being swallowed again. All I'm aware of is the tumultuous water, the fact that I'm hanging on for dear life, that we are going to run Mine Shaft successfully, and that, inside, I'm almost bursting from the joy of it all.

We come out of it laughing, cheering, ecstatic. Scott bubbles that it was the most adrenaline-pumping thing he's ever done. More so, even, than skydiving. What strikes me, though, about Mine Shaft, is the way I could utterly lose myself in it, in the anticipation, in the paddling, in the way the river becomes everything.

Mushroom, the last of the Class Fives, following Mordor and Junction, drives the point home. It ends up giving us the hardest, most thumping hit on the trip. Kev is flung clean out of the raft, and I'm tossed into the air to land on my newly formed buttock. Not that I really notice it at the time. The maelstrom, and the joy of Mushroom, grips me entirely, enough for the pain of my (it turns out) hairline-fractured sacrum to vanish.

The NJ trip is like that. At our campsite the night before, with waterfalls plunging from the heavens and fireflies dancing about, Gab asked us to describe the NJ in one word. I asked for three, but she wouldn't budge.

It's a difficult proposition and it takes me a day to come up with my answer: enveloping. I'll explain. The river wholly surrounds you in every sense – emotionally and physically. It consumes your entire aural perception. The visual beauty, the lushness, the primeval nature of the rainforest is nearly overwhelming.



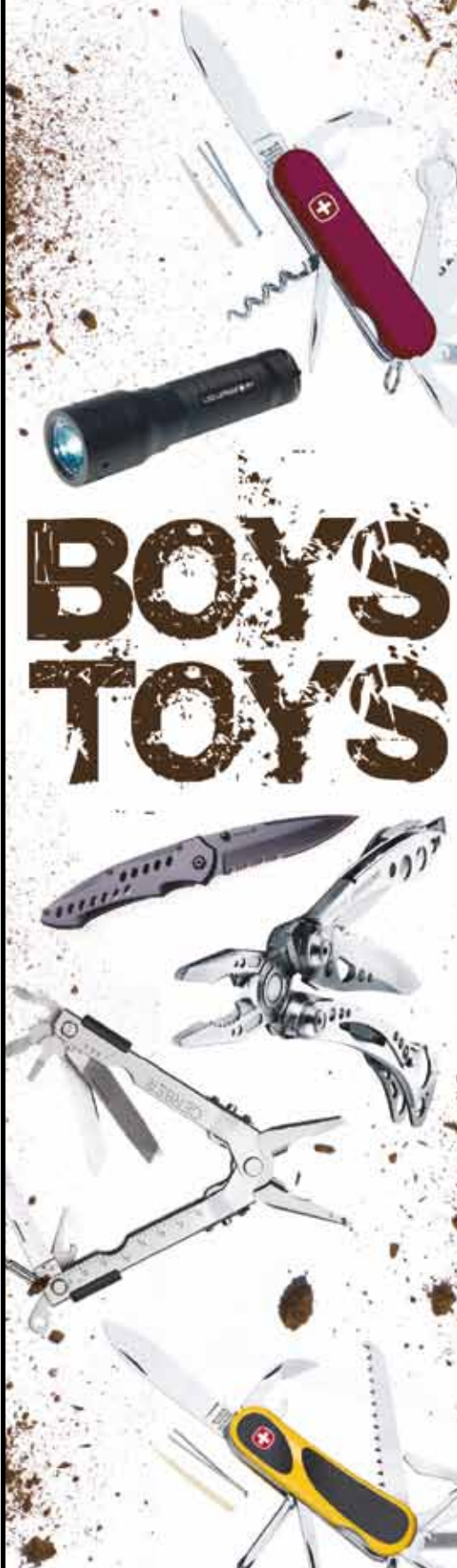
As is the contemplative calm of the sections between stretches of whitewater, when you float on the current and drift beneath blue skies and massing clouds, when you look up as you glide under overhanging trees or watch the lazy flap of a heron. Then there's the way the solitude makes you feel as though you own the river. And the camping and the camaraderie. All of it. It envelops you entirely, so much that you forget about the outside world. You forget the shit and the struggles, even the third buttocks, and you just focus on adventure, on beauty, on now. **MR**

↓ WHEN?

The North Johnstone is a natural-flow river, and as water levels are dependent on rainfall, March-June is the only period when the river is consistently runnable. The Tully, further south, relies on dam-released water and can be run year-round.

↓ HOW?

RnR (raft.com.au) offers the only commercial trips down the NJ. They also run day trips down the Tully, handy if you're short on time or would prefer its moderate Class Four rapids. Cairns has loads of other adventure options that you can tack onto your rafting trip. For ideas, check out cairnsgreatbarrierreef.org.au.



BOYS TOYS