



BLIND FAITH

NOTHING INTIMIDATES BLIND ADVENTURER ERIK WEIHENMAYER MORE THAN THE CHAOTIC WHITEWATER OF THE GRAND CANYON. SO WHY CAN'T HE WALK AWAY?

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In the absence of light, the kayaker navigates by hearing and touch. Around him the sound of dipping paddles, voices near and far. Laughter. And, growing ever closer, the murmur of Badger Creek Rapid. The sound soon fills the canyon, ricochets back and forth, trapped between the sheer stone walls. To Erik Weihenmayer's practiced ear, it gives the place shape and scale, a sense of majesty and menace.

Into the Chaos: Erik Weihenmayer charges hermit rapid, with guide Harlan Taney close behind.

In the absence of light, motion comes without warning, a feeling of acceleration as the river takes him in its cool grip and slings him into the meat of first real rapid in the Grand Canyon. Now the movement is violent, abrupt. The water shoves him left, then right, shakes him up and down. Erik leans back in his boat, arms rigid, body tense and defensive. He cocks his head awkwardly. Amid the tumult—the stinging spray, the paint-shaker motion and the directionless barrage of noise—Erik Weihenmayer strains to pick out his lifeline, the voice of his friend and guide, Harlan Taney.

"Easy forward, small left!" Harlan is three boat-lengths behind, speaking into a radio headset, but the transmission fluctuates and cuts out. In Erik's headset the garbled voice doesn't provide him the guidance he needs; it merely adds to the confusion, conveying urgency but no direction. Harlan is shouting "Charge!" as Erik slams into a cold wall of water at the first big pour-over. A powerful lateral lurches him sideways. The world tosses and swells in dizzying darkness. Now the voice in Erik's head is his own: *Don't swim here.*

"Brace left, brace left!" Harlan squawks, and Erik rights himself, thinks he hears "Charge!" again, and digs in, air and spray and sound engulfing him. "You're good, you're good!" Harlan's voice crackles as Erik bounces through the last of the tail waves and eddies out, his shoulders slumping in relief.

Moments later, another pair of paddlers enters Badger. Forward leaning and aggressive, Lonnie Bedwell follows close behind his sighted guide, Iraq War veteran Seth Dahl. They don't use a radio; instead Seth yells over his shoulder, "On me! On me!" Seth shouts all the way through the rapid, craning around to ensure that Lonnie can hear him and is on his line. Lonnie attacks the waves, and when Seth hollers "Gun sights!" he lines up on the voice as if sighting down a rifle barrel. He skips along the waves like a water bug, skittering cleanly out the bottom of the rapid.

The sound of Badger Creek fades slowly away, replaced by laughter and hoots of encouragement from the river party. They number 20, among them filmmakers, a writer and photographer, kayakers and raft guides. Earlier that

morning at Lee's Ferry, director Michael Brown and his camera crew hovered and circled, wading waist-deep to film Erik and Lonnie together, then separately: close-ups, last-minute interviews, hero shots. Guides from the Arizona Raft Company heaved drybags and cargo boxes onto two enormous motorized S-rigs—dubbed the Silver Bullet and the Clampetts—that would carry tons of food and equipment for the three-week journey.

The two leading men pushed off and paddled into the canyon, flanked by eight other kayakers—their guides and safety crew. A hive of onlookers—national media members, corporate sponsors, PR firm representatives—waved and cheered.

The film crew kept its cameras trained on the flotilla of multi-colored kayaks until they disappeared around the first bend in the river. Then they scrambled onto their 37-foot, solar-canopied production raft and motored downstream, cameras rolling.

That afternoon a monsoon squall hammers the party as they set camp at Supai Ledges. The kayakers scramble up to the ledges as sheeting rains cascade down the canyon walls. It feels like a celebration. After years of preparation and a successful first day on the river, most of the paddlers strip down and stand beneath super-heated waterfalls sheering off the cliffs, showering in the warm wash, laughing and downing shots of whiskey.

Erik is distant, quiet. Later, as the boys keep reveling, he hunkers in his tent, stretching his back on a lumbar roll as the sound of pummeling rain fills the shelter. The weight of the entire enterprise bears down on him. He needs to get tweets and dispatches out to his sponsors and media outlets while there's cell and sat coverage. More disconcerting, the waterproof Neptune Bluetooth headsets he's spent years fine-tuning—his communication lifeline—is screwed.

At daybreak, Erik squats on the rocks conferring with Harlan and Rob Raker, who first taught him to roll six years ago. The river rushes past, smelling of earth and hissing with silt. The men fidget with the radios. They swap out different configurations of the units, try various on/off sequences, different headsets—but none work perfectly.

"This is stressful," says Erik, shaking his head. "I need instant information, and it has to be loud and clear, or it's useless." In Badger, he says, Harlan had sounded like Charlie Brown's teacher: "wha whaa wha whaaa." The joke is perfectly in character for Erik, as is his next move—using a satellite phone to call the company in the UK that makes the headsets, and asking them to express-air two working units to Flagstaff. From there, Erik will arrange for someone to drive the radios to the South Rim and hike them down to Phantom Ranch, where the expedition will be in a week's time. If everything comes together, Erik will have his communication lifeline before he reaches Horn Creek, Crystal, and the Canyon's most difficult rapid, Lava Falls.

"I think there's something inside us—a kind of light. But sometimes people get shoved into a dark place, and that light almost goes out," he says. "A lot of times, making hard choices is what feeds that light, and becomes the energy we need to push us forward."

Erik Weihenmayer has been solving difficult problems since losing his eyesight at the age of 14. At first he dealt with his blindness with denial and rebellion. He refused help from others, threw a cane down a sewer grate, balked at learning Braille. His anger bubbled at the surface, then boiled.

For Erik, that difficult choice was accepting his blindness. He decided to stop dwelling on the things he couldn't do, and focused instead on things he *could* do. In high school he excelled at wrestling, competing with sighted athletes in the 1987 junior freestyle national championships. Rock climbing came naturally as well. He graduated from Boston College and became a middle school teacher. And he kept reaching higher, kept climbing, until one day in 2001 he stood on top of Mount Everest. That feat landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine, led to an appearance

on *The Tonight Show*, and made him an adventure celebrity and role model. Today, he's a globally sought inspirational speaker, commanding as much as \$75,000 per appearance. In 2005, Erik cofounded a biennial summit called No Barriers, which aims to help people with disabilities and other adversities to make the hard choices—to break through the boundaries that hold them back. And he kept pushing aside his own boundaries, which eventually brought him to one of the most challenging sports for a blind person: whitewater kayaking. Blind people navigate using mental maps: Six steps to cross the living room, bathroom door on the left, sink on the right, soap dish at one o'clock. On Everest, that mental map is on an incline; in rock climbing it is vertical. In whitewater, though, the map is fluid, constantly changing. "It's sensory overload," says Erik. "You are riding an avalanche of moving water that's shifting course, tossing you side to side and trying to flip you. You're paddling into roaring darkness, into chaos. And you are trying to survive that frenzied environment by the sound of your guide's voice commands, the sound of the river, and



Soul Train: Erik, Harlan and Timmy O'Neil in House Rock Rapid.

THE GUIDES TAKE ERIK AND LONNIE TO THE EDGE OF THE PRECIPICE AND TELL THEM TO JUMP. "YOU JUST MAKE SURE YOU'RE HEADED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION AND GO FOR IT," LONNIE SAYS. "KIND OF LIKE KAYAKING."





River Life: Navigating the slickrock after a storm. At right, Erik jamming in camp with Harlan; paddling Hermit; and sharing a moment with Lonnie.



THE CHALLENGE OF LAVA FALLS HAS CONSUMED ERIK'S THOUGHTS FOR YEARS. HE IS IN NO HURRY TO GET THERE.

than one to demonstrate the No Barriers credo: "What's within you is stronger than what's in your way."

Lonnie didn't hesitate. "I was ecstatic to be asked by Erik—by someone who had accomplished as much as Erik has in his life. And I was honored, humbled. It took me about one second to say yes."

So it was on. They'd do it together.



On the river, Erik wants an unhurried pace to build confidence as the rapids grow in consequence.

Though he doesn't talk about it, Lava Falls is in his head;

the challenge of that particular rapid has consumed his thoughts for years. He's in no hurry to get there.

The expedition finds a natural cadence. The team scrambles up the Carbon Canyon side-drainage, looping to Lava Chuar Canyon. Erik and Lonnie follow their guides between vertical walls, up creek beds and over boulders. They hike to the Nankoweap Granaries, where ancient Pueblo peoples stored seeds and grain. Inside Redwall Cavern—a 300-foot deep alcove—Erik shows Lonnie how to echolocate by clicking his tongue and listening to the sound bounce off the walls and ceilings.

Nearly every night, safety boater Timmy O'Neill orchestrates jam sessions, with Erik and Harlan strumming guitars. Timmy hands out drums and tambourines, cowbells and triangles; he improvises lyrics, and soon the whole crew is jamming under the moonlight, as Lonnie country swing-dances with raft guides Katie and Kelly.

The eighth day brings the Inner Gorge and the most significant

by what you feel under your boat," he says.

"Blind kayaking is hands down the scariest thing I've ever done. And I've done some pretty scary things."

Paddling has always been difficult for Erik. It has always terrified him. But he persisted, drawn to the thrill of whitewater, the teamwork and systems required, and invigorated by being on rivers with friends and family. He was driven, too, by the challenge, the belief that individual growth requires getting out of one's comfort zone. The hard choices fuel the inner light, and for Erik no choice is more difficult than paddling blind into massive whitewater. So he set an ambitious goal for himself, one that would push aside his personal barriers and make a statement: Erik Weihenmayer would become the first blind person ever to kayak the Grand Canyon.

He started on rivers near his home in Colorado, graduated to the artificial course at the U.S. National Whitewater Center in North Carolina, and built up to big river trips: the Usumacinta between Guatemala and Mexico, and the Río Marañón in Peru. He courted sponsors and the media. His Grand Canyon attempt garnered national headlines, hyped even in the *New York Times*.

Then, in early September 2013, driving home from kayaking

Westwater Canyon on the Colorado, Erik learned that a blind Navy veteran named Lonnie Bedwell had just kayaked the Grand Canyon.

He'd been scooped.



Seventeen years ago, while turkey hunting near his home in Indiana, one of Lonnie Bedwell's closest friends accidentally shot him in the face. The 12-gauge blast, from just 30 yards away, blinded him instantly. As his friend raced to summon help, the blood in Lonnie's throat began to clot, threatening to choke him to death. Lonnie clawed at the earth, grasped a snapped-off tree branch, and thrust it down his throat to clear an airway. When rescuers finally arrived, Lonnie was motionless, covered in blood and dirt and leaves, barely alive.

Lonnie tells the story one night on the river. He's a small man, maybe 145 pounds wringing wet, bare-chested under a pair of denim overalls. He speaks in a soft country drawl, pronouncing the word "saw" as "sawl." Someone asks about his friend, the man

whose mistake nearly killed him. "Oh, he's still a really good friend," Lonnie says. "We still hunt together."

A former Navy submariner, Lonnie brings a squared-away military mindset to his paddling. He approaches life, and rapids, without too much worry about what might happen. "There is some fear, sure," he says. "But military training helps that. You drill and you drill and you drill so that you are ready for anything." Lonnie found kayaking through Team River Runner, an organization that uses kayaking to help wounded veterans reclaim their lives. Lonnie learned to roll in less than half an hour, then practiced the maneuver more than 1,500 times in the pond on his small farm. Incredibly, before his first Grand Canyon trip with Team River Runner in 2013, Lonnie had paddled whitewater for a total of only *two weeks*. He was a kayaking savant.

Impressed and inspired, Erik invited Lonnie to join his Grand Canyon expedition. After all, two blind kayakers paddling the Big Ditch would be better



The Natural: Lonnie learned to roll his kayak in 30 minutes.



Team Bedwell: Lonnie follows Seth Dahl's voice through House Rock Rapid, as safety boater Chris Drew looks on.

whitewater yet: Hance, Sockdolager and Grapevine. Erik wakes feeling nauseous. "Could be nerves, he says," looking as if he's about to hurl.

In 2011, running the Usumacinta at flood levels, Erik encountered immense waters in a confined gorge, with hydraulic features bigger than he or his guides had ever experienced. Deep in the chasm, a mammoth wave upended Erik, and he swam. He latched onto Rob Raker's boat, but the river was so high that the water slammed against the vertical walls and recirculated back toward the middle of the river, pushing them away from shore. Erik clung to the bow of Rob's kayak for what seemed an eternity, and then an enormous whirlpool pulled them in. They spun and spiraled, Erik struggling to hang on as the vortex tugged at his legs, threatening to suck him into an unseen abyss. The experience shook Erik so deeply that he lost his nerve to roll. His default reaction, whenever he flipped, became to swim. It took repeated visits to the relative safety of the National Whitewater Center for him to gradually regain his ability to roll, and restore some measure of confidence. But Erik carries the emotional scar tissue of that day with him in the Grand Canyon.

"Erik's biggest nemesis," says Harlan, "has been the mental aspect. The river is so much more powerful than anything we can comprehend—to kayak well you have to give yourself up to that power. At the top of a big rapid, all those tensions and anxieties can overwhelm Erik, making him tight, rigid, and erratic in his actions. His thoughts and reactions get clouded by doubt and fear."

Hance is long, with a boulder-strewn far right line called "the land of giants." No problem. Both Erik and Lonnie paddle it clean, skirting the big rocks and powering past the holes. Next up, Sockdolager, with its powerful wave trains nearly 20 feet high from trough to crest. Again, they both blow right through, upright and unscathed. Erik is gaining confidence, paddling better, responding to Harlan's commands faster and more efficiently.

The journey is coming together. The radios arrive at Phantom. Harlan and Rob discover that river silt has been clogging the microphones, so they seal the mics with latex finger cots. Problem MacGyver-ed, sort of. The headsets still sound scratchy and garbled, but they'll have to do.

Horn Creek, Hermit, a few flips in the monster waves, but no swims. Late in their second week in the Canyon, Erik and Lonnie hike with their guides up a lush creek bed into Elves Chasm. In an elevated grotto, the guides line them up on the edge of the precipice, then yell, "Jump!" They leap 20 feet from a waterfall into a cooling pool. Lonnie jumps twice. "You just make sure you're headed in the right direction and go for it," he says. "Kind of like kayaking."



Erik stands in the sun on time-hardened rocks, river-right above Lava Falls, scouting his dragon. His heart pounds to the rapid's roar. He's anxious, agitated. He has already paddled 14 miles today, and there's been too much waiting around—first for the scout, then for the film crew to get in position to document his run, then for the light to be just right for filming.

Harlan narrates the approach one last time, as Erik listens, visualizing: "Relax. Breathe. Be one with the kayak and at peace with the river. Surrender to it. Ease in river-right; stay relaxed and calm in the first boil line. Avoid the Ledge Hole, then charge the V-wave, paddle hard right, but miss the Cheese Grater—that big rock slab jutting out parallel to the last Big Kahuna waves."

In his boat, Erik slows his breathing, shakes his arms loose, knowing that mental anxiety translates to physical tension. With all his skill and some luck, the wild ride will be over in about 20 seconds and he'll be floating in the tail waters, smiling, victorious, and alive.

A radio squawk breaks the silence. "Film crew is ready," Erik hears over the coms. "Go for it."

Erik paddles into the sound of cascading water, feels the current grip his hull and whisk him into Lava's tongue. Harlan is tucked in close behind. In his headset Erik channels Harlan's voice, calm and assured, repeating the mantra he's composed for Erik: "We're here, right now, in this moment; nothing else matters. Be clear and calm and concise. Surrender yourself to the river."

Seconds later, chaos. Erik enters too far right and flips in a nasty boil line. Harlan, in faster moving water, slingshots past him, spins his bow upstream, sprints to hold station as Erik attempts his roll. Not how they'd visualized the start of the Grand Canyon's most difficult rapid: Erik upside down and Harlan backwards. But Erik sticks his roll, straightens out, charges through the V-wave. He flips and rolls again, and

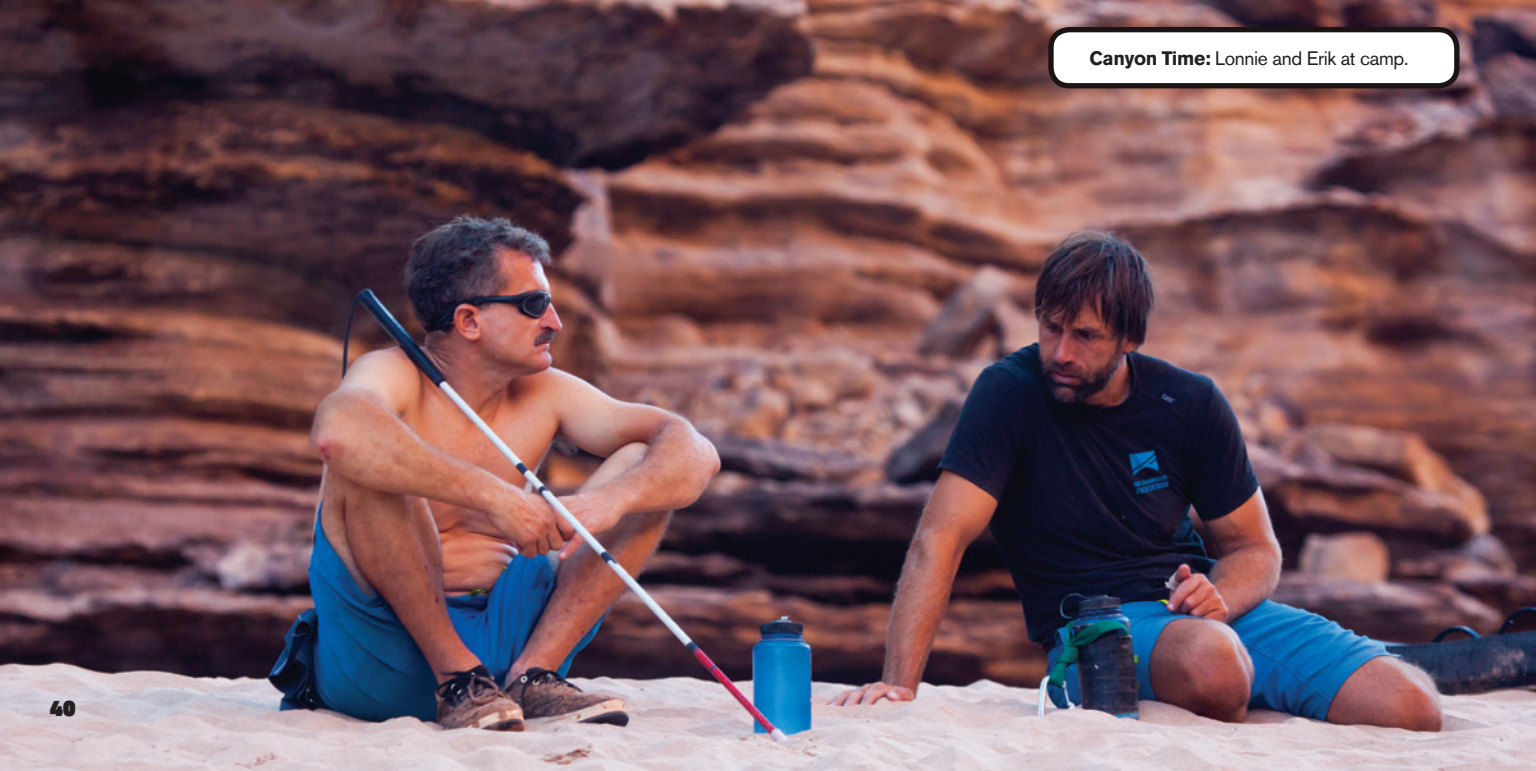
then spirals amid the thunder, now floating backwards into the Big Kahuna tail waves.

Harlan's voice in his ears: "You're good, you're lined up!" Lined up, but backwards. At exactly this moment Harlan punches the meat of the first Big Kahuna wave and it punches back: The force of the water snaps his paddle in two. Suddenly Harlan is upside down in the turbulence, trying to roll up with the remains of his paddle. He's thinking about Erik, hurtling backwards in the roaring darkness, listening for a voice that isn't there.

"My first thoughts," Taney recalled, were "Erik needs me right now. We're a team and I'm gonna let him down."

YOU ARE RIDING AN AVALANCHE OF MOVING WATER INTO ROARING DARKNESS, INTO CHAOS. AND YOU ARE TRYING TO SURVIVE THAT FRENZIED ENVIRONMENT BY THE SOUND OF YOUR GUIDE'S VOICE, THE SOUND OF THE RIVER, AND BY WAHT YOU FEEL UNDER YOUR BOAT."

- ERIK WEIHENMAYER



Canyon Time: Lonnie and Erik at camp.



THE VORTEX TUGGED AT ERIK'S LEGS, PULLING HIM INTO AN UNSEEN ABYSS. THE EXPERIENCE SHOOK HIM SO DEEPLY THAT HE LOST HIS NERVE TO ROLL.

Plan B: Going off-script in Lava Falls.

Holding his paddle together as best he can, nearly out of air, Harlan comes up momentarily, sees that Erik has let the demons of darkness and uncertainty and fear into his head. He's pulled his skirt and is swimming, grasping for a rescue. Harlan slips back under water. Erik somehow finds Harlan's boat and clutches desperately for the grab-loop, preventing his guide from rolling up until he realizes he's groping at the bottom of Harlan's kayak, and lets go. Harlan wills himself up on his second roll, barking, "We're good, we're

good, grab me and hang on!" Harlan flounders with his broken paddle as Timmy, right there in support, whisks over, secures Erik, and paddles him to shore.

Absolute, terrifying carnage.

Erik sits at the bottom of the rapid among friends and teammates. He is okay. Drenched and worked, but safe. This isn't what he had envisioned. As he regroups, Lonnie descends, running almost clean, only overturning at the end.

In camp, Erik is pensive. "On journeys like these, you hope for a storybook ending, but ultimately the river tells the story," he reflects. But this isn't how he wants the story to end—with him swimming and being rescued. He's faced with a dilemma: Is the trip a failure because he swam one rapid? Of course not. His mind whirls like the water that just pummeled him. Part of him thinks it's okay, forget about it.



That night, Erik doesn't sleep well. "Son of Lava is a big rapid just outside my tent door; I can hear its roaring thunder all night, speaking to me, and I'm trying to listen to what it is telling me," he muses. "I toss and turn, mulling it over. It would be so easy to just keep going downstream. I mean, really, Lava Falls is over."

But it isn't over.

Early the next morning, Erik gathers his boys: Harlan Taney, Rob Raker, Steve Mace, Skyler Williams and Timmy O'Neil. They carry their boats upstream toward the top of Lava Falls, wordlessly bushwhacking through the thick tamarisk scrub. This time, without all the scouting and waiting in the heat, Erik feels better. Still scared, but clearer now. They slip into their boats and start ferrying up the eddyline. Instantly the turbulence flips Erik. He rolls right back up, but doubt and fear grip him hard, and he again questions whether he really needs to do this. He summons a mantra he tells his children when they are facing something frightening and uncertain. He calls it his open heart policy. "It's about opening your heart, when trying new or scary things, to trust. Trusting the people around you, trusting that you will emerge on the other side stronger; it's about putting your faith in that trust and then committing, just ... giving it a whirl!" Erik breathes deep, recites his "open heart policy" to himself, aims his kayak downstream, and gives it a whirl.

There is no turning back.

Erik flips in the entrance wave, but rolls back up. He flips again in the exact spot he'd rolled the day before, but this time, instead of succumbing to the demons and pulling his sprayskirt, Erik Weihenmayer hangs on. Upside down in the maelstrom, he remains calm. Surrendering his fear to the river, he conjures everything inside him, and sticks his roll. He paddles out the bottom of Big Kahuna with Harlan's voice in his ears: "You're through it! You're through it!" Then, Erik hears the hoots and yips from his team, those friends in whom he'd put his trust, to whom he had opened his heart.

He has done it.

"What he did right there," says Harlan "was truly impressive. He confronted his biggest fear, and it slapped him down hard; then he came back to confront it again." He gave himself up to the river and transcended fear, overcoming his mental barriers. That act epitomizes what Erik claims and what he stands for—he lived his motto, showing that "what's within you is stronger than what's in your way."

On September 27, 277 miles after putting in at Lee's Ferry, Erik Weihenmayer and Lonnie Bedwell round the final river bend of their journey and approach the beach at Pearce Ferry. At last, there is only the sound of their collective paddle strokes cleaving the smooth water in unison. Calling out Erik's final directions, Harlan's voice breaks with emotion, and the other guides choke up too. They are moved by the totality of the three-week expedition: the bonds of brotherhood created, the team's successful completion of a vision and a dream. Two blind men have kayaked one of the world's great rivers, have fueled each other and learned from each other, their internal lights flaming and igniting those flickering in all of us. And partly the emotion is the unexpected arrival of Erik's wife Ellen and his teenage children Emma and Arjun, who have appeared unannounced to surprise him, and are now rushing barefoot down the beach with their arms outspread to embrace him.



Redemption Ride: Erik in the throat of Lava Falls.