

THE ESCAPE ARTISTS Joshua Piven

Chapter 7

REBELS, HEADHUNTERS, PIGLETS, AND OTHER ADVENTURES DOWNRIVER

Escape Artist: Bridget Crocker

Great Escape: Into the Rapids

Rice and Rapids

The Cagayan River in Luzon, in the northern Philippines, is the country's longest and widest river. Sometimes called the "Rio Grande de Cagayan," the river originates in the countless mountain streams and steep terrain of the Sierra Madre in Nueva Vizcaya Province, then traverses three more provinces—Quirino, Isabela, and Cagayan—as it heads toward the China Sea.

The river passes through the country's "rice bowl," a fertile valley that produces much of the Philippines' rice crop (along with tobacco and corn) year-round. The Cagayan also wends its way through the last remnants of the country's old growth forests, and it supports a number of endemic and endangered species, including the *lurung* fish, the Philippine eagle, and the bleeding heart pigeon. The Cagayan is also a river runner's paradise. The terrain features dramatic changes in elevation, and sections of the river shoot through towering gorges, hitting steep rock walls and making sudden 90-degree turns and drops. Many sections of the Cagayan feature Class 4 rapids, where white water is particularly dangerous and unpredictable, even for experts.

The trip to the Cagayan had been a long time coming. Bridget Crocker and her husband Greg, along with their Filipino partners, were to take a team on a multiday trip down the upper Cagayan. It would be an exploratory descent, this remote northern section of the river having never featured a descent by raft. Running the river during the day, the cosmopolitan group—featuring a soap opera actor, a graduate student making a movie, a Michigan ad executive, a schizophrenic (who had signed up for two different trips under two different names and had two distinct personalities), and a writer and photographer from *Outside*—would camp along the remote banks at night, eating salted squid fried in bacon grease over a campfire. The months of planning had been filled with logistical challenges, including figuring out how to get all their equipment to this remote wilderness area, as well as political hurdles, not the least of which was coordination with locals familiar with the rough terrain and the somewhat suspect security situation in the country.

It was upon their arrival in Manila that things started to fall apart. Word quickly came down from the north that a group of Marxist guerrillas had attacked a local police station in Nueva Ecija, a large province at the southern end of the Cagayan. The bold raid had netted the bandits a large cache of automatic weapons. Worse, rumor had it that the guerrillas had been tipped off about the rafters and their trip north, and

kill them. Regardless, they could not risk the team's safety, so they quickly began discussing alternative rivers to run. Unfortunately, most of the put-ins in the region were remote, and they needed a river that was both suitable for rafting and at least moderately accessible by Jeep—and preferably that was not overrun with rebels. They finally agreed upon the Chico, a river in the heavily jungled, mountainous Cordillera Central range, in North Luzon province. Bridget was not totally unfamiliar with the area. She knew, for example, that the indigenous people in the remote Kalinga province had been at odds with the country's central government over plans to dam the Chico and that these conflicts had given rise to armed struggle over the years and many people had been killed. But as she and Greg tried to tackle the challenges of changing rivers at this late date, she recalled something else she had heard about the region. Toward the end of World War II, the Allies had driven the retreating Japanese army deep into the fearsome Cordillera mountains. Many Japanese soldiers had starved. Others were captured and killed—not by the Americans, however, but by the Kalinga themselves. And in particularly gruesome fashion. The word *Kalinga*, Bridget knew, was derived from an Ibanag and Gaddang word. Loosely translated, it means “headhunters.”