

INFLATED HOPES

Paddling an I-SUP from Guatemala to Belize sure sounded like a good idea ...

Edgar Guillén hadn't seen a standup board in his country until a week ago. The 33-year-old Guatemala City native was surfing his go-to beach-break, on the country's west coast near El Paredon, when he noticed a group of Americans out paddling. Their charismatic ringleader, Victor Myers, enthusiastically paddled over to explain his plan to donate a fleet of SUPs to a riverside orphanage in Rio Dulce. Then he said they'd be paddling the pristine jungle river to the Caribbean. He should come along.

That's about all I new about Victor's plans, too. In 2011, he toured Central America on a pair of dirt bikes with his brother and a couple friends, looking for rivers and waves to paddle the inflatable SUPs strapped to the back of the motorcycles (*SUP* magazine, Winter 2011). Victor had contacted me about his return orphanage trip, and how it would be a more meaningful, philanthropic finale to his film project documenting an otherwise beer- and petrol-fueled adventure. When he hinted he might try to paddle back home to Belize—where he'd been spending his winters working as a paddling instructor at an island resort in the cayes—I took him up on his invitation. It sounded like real adventure. What an ending, I figured.



By Dave Shively | Photos by Pete McDermott





GUAT THRUST: AARON BOMB-DROPS THE RIO DULCE AT HOTEL BACKPACKERS. BELOW, PUMPING UP THE ORPHANS AT CASA GUATEMALA.



WE PADDLE UNDER THE KIDS
AND THEY SCREAM WITH JOY.
SOME OF US ARE TEARING UP



Edgar picks me up at the Guatemala City airport in his two-door hatchback with a spare rear tire and an SUP board strapped to the dented roof (who needs racks?). We wind northeast, across the country's rugged drainages, immersed in the distinct burnt smell of rural farm communities. Roads are crowded with pedestrians, helmet-less motorcyclists and kids on bikes. Melon vendors hawk their goods at construction stops. Scooters and three-wheel taxis crowd onto the highway shoulders. Big trucks pass us filled with military troops as do small trucks filled with cows. Jetlagged, I sleepily nod forward, but I'm jolted awake by an 18-wheeler that's flipped over and still smoking. Soon, we hit the green rolling hills of the Lake Izabal region. Palm trees greet us as we arrive under the arcing Highway 13 bridge over the Rio Dulce.

This is how Victor found Hotel Backpackers. Stopping on the second leg of his moto-SUP tour for a few cold Gallos, he noticed the fine print of the restaurant menu that all proceeds went to Casa Guatemala. So he struck up a conversation

with Heather Graham, the orphanage's director of communications and fund development.

"We were saying how awesome it would be to get boards to rent out, keep them at the hotel to use as a sustainable revenue stream, teach the kids to use them and maybe get them interested in guiding and adventure ecotourism," Graham says. "We stayed in touch and it just stayed in Victor's head."

And Victor was stoked to pick up a fresh concept and start making moves. Having spent a decade organizing guided adventures and turning on the charm for tips, he had no trouble planting the cause in a lot of key heads—the guy gets people to follow his lead. He introduces Edgar and I to "the team" of seven friends and acquaintances that he's recruited. They've just finished a week volunteering at the orphanage three miles downriver. And though their efforts involved a lot of painting, the volunteers look back most fondly on the first day, taking the small fleet of boards and paddles donated by C4 Waterman to the riverside orphanage. The

group gets animated telling us about how the elated children rushed to help pump the boards, then scrambled to try them on the water, "nine at time."

Victor's project is also snowballing with more moving pieces and bodies. He's recruited Brooklyn filmmaker Nick LaClair, and the sheer weight of his presence (and equipment) is raising logistical questions about how to document tomorrow's 18-mile downriver paddle out to the Caribbean. It's also clear that this distance is daunting for many of the volunteers, the majority of which have little paddling experience. Some group members are already huddled around laptops sorting out their various departures. The paddling plan seems to be fraying.

And I just got here. I need some reassurance they'll be a substantive paddling plan for the story I flew down here to get. "I don't really know how it'll all work out," Victor tells me, noting that we'll likely have to return here after the paddle-out to sort everyone's travel plans. He knows I'm frustrated, abandoning the gameplan to paddle to Belize, but he reframes it with optimism and laughs. What does he know that I don't?

Best to keep drinking Gallo. As the empty beers stack up and sun goes down, Aaron, one of the recruits who guides SUP trips with his girlfriend, Mariela, in north-central Mexico, instigates a "bomb drop" contest from the docks. We're flailing around in the warm water beneath the towering bridge, not a care in the world. Just as I'm thinking that Victor, like his inflatable armada, is full of hot air, I catch a glimpse of him downstream, showing one of the local kids how to paddle. There's no cameras rolling. Maybe his cause is genuine. Maybe he'll turn the Rio Dulce into Guatemala's SUP hotbed. Or maybe I'm just drinking the Gallo-flavored Kool-Aid like everyone else. Whatever. I'm here, committed.

A rooster shriek wakes me and the rain begins. It's 3 a.m., and the cock blares until sunrise, when Victor rouses the bunked crew with news that he and Heather lined up a boat to carry Nick and his assistant Abbey. As one of the Caribbean's safest hurricane havens, the Rio Dulce's lower reaches have no shortage of creepy American expats willing to lend their sailing yachts to groups with bikini-clad volunteers. The rain lets up as the current whisks our group of seven I-SUPers out of town.



Monkeys howl when we approach Casa Guatemala, which hosts 80 full-time kids and another hundred that arrive daily to the boat- and SUP-access-only island. Heather explained how kids come here from remote villages with nothing and get meals, education, medical care, and life skills to “get out of the jungle bubble.” But as we approach, I realize this is, indeed, not your typical orphanage. “They fall over, cut their knee, tap it, ‘Oh, it’s okay,’ and run off,” Mariela tells me. “We’re talking about stuff that would hospitalize a kid in the U.S.,” Victor adds of the real jungle gym where 3-year-olds can swim, kids catch fish for lunch, and girls skipped Double Dutch using vines before this group donated a rope. “And they see the look of concern in your eye and just smile.”

It’s clear these kids aren’t afraid of strangers as we paddle by the dining room deck and the docks off the clinic building, where the children are lined up, ecstatically waving and shouting to the volunteers. Aaron paddles under the kids and they scream with joy. Some paddlers are tearing up and I ask Victor how’s he’s feeling. “Stoked,” he says gravely. “It would’ve all been worth it, even if we just did the one day with the boards.”

After the emotional paddle-by, the river widens into the broad, lake-like Golfete. The current dies, and the sun burns overhead. One by one, the group winnows off onto the sailboat. We joked that this would be a “solidarity paddle,” but soon it’s just Aaron, Victor and I plodding across the flatwater in the heat. We’re thrown a few cold beers as the boat cruises by with a fleshy spring break party unfolding on the deck. So much for solidarity.

Starting to burn, and burn out, we meet up with the boat, regrouping for macheted coconuts at a remote riverside hostel. Refreshed from the flatwater paddle, the jungle walls thankfully constrict as we return to current. I share a glance with a fisherman paddling upstream in his dugout. Egrets take flight from the rock walls of this gorged-in stretch, which also provides shade that lures the other paddlers back to the boards.

Finally, the river opens to the Bay of Honduras. Having made the miles, I feel more connected to the group, and everyone’s in good spirits. My frustration at bouncing along, paddling a not-so-rigid 10’6 disappears. I realize that if not for such a versatile craft—and a group motivated to bring them to this corner of the

world—I’d never be paddling to a new port city in the jungle, buzzed by seabirds and boat traffic alike into the ocean chop.

The vibe in Livingston adds to the euphoria. The Afro-Guatemalan community is only accessible by boat and has a *no-problem-mon* Caribbean feel that’s evident the minute we hit the busy ferry dock. We collapse at a swampy hostel, and as we stuff ourselves on mashed potatoes and mixed drinks, I get discouraged that this is the end. Kate, the Philadelphia resident physician responsible for the donated medical supplies, offers consolation: “You can’t go to Central America and expect things to go as planned—it just doesn’t happen.” It reminds me how I need to let go, and that adventure means dealing with the unexpected.

But then the next morning, things veer even further off-plan, which as far as I can tell, involves a film ending where we paddle to some approximation of Belizean land or water. No one sees a reason in continuing to paddle anywhere. Aaron and Mariela need to start the long drive home and will head back upriver. Nick doesn’t have the footage he needs. The sailboat is leaving, it’s hot, everyone’s tired, hung over,



hungry and sunburnt.

All eyes are on Vic, who points out, to little effect, that he had budgeted another five days to finish filming the paddle that everyone signed on for. Now he has to get eight people to different places, which doesn't do much for the film. "How can we just paddle to the ocean and fake the idea of paddling home?" Nick asks through a tug on his cigarette. I offer Victor an alternative: "Why don't you and I just take the two 12'6's and paddle to Belize ourselves?" We look at Nick. "That's an ending," he says.



We say our goodbyes and the USS Expat heads upriver with the group. We're left to figure our exit strategy to Punta Gorda, the first Belizean community up the coast. But we can't hug the shore, which would double the 20-mile distance, as the egret flies. We're too under-gear'd to overnight somewhere on the undeveloped, protected coast. We have two boards—a pair of C4 12'6 Trekkers. Plus Pete McDermott, who's stuck behind to shoot the ordeal somehow. We need a compass and a shady *lancha* driver to carry Pete out of the country, which proves easy in Livingston. The compass however, is another matter.

Sure enough, we find Daniel. Who arrives, just as he said he would, beaching his motorboat outside our rooms around 4:30 a.m. His faded polo shirt stays dry under the boat's fiberglass top from the quiet rain. Pete loads up our food and they putter into the dark.

"If you're gonna be dumb, you better be tough" Vic jokes as we paddle off slowly over a shoal. The sparse lights of Livingston shrink behind us. The rain falls straight down and cools us as we get back into rhythm with our strokes. Five pelicans case over the glassy water as dark slowly morphs to gray and Livingston disappears.

We push on to open water and the pre-dawn horizon blends gray into gray, and disappears. Vic veers off to the left and the boat continues north out of sight. At least I think north—who knows—we can't see a thing in any direction. Tremors of panic shake off the serene cruising. Vic yells to Daniel, then snaps to me, "We need a heading!"

The night before, Vic told me more of his story. I get the life mantra of a guy at 30, divorced, who left small-town Missouri and went down to the Belizean island cayes for work a decade ago: "You think something's cool and maybe you bite off more than you can chew, but it's fun and you go with it, and then you've learned something new." He lives how he wants and figures the rest out along the way, from shaping boards to making films.

I hope the same goes for ocean crossings, especially without a clear heading. Yet Vic's headstrong, go-do-learn logic makes sense as I consider our predicament. My longest SUP paddle ever? The 10-mile distance race at the Battle of the Paddle. But I grasp Vic's advice to use my earlobes to tell the direction of the wind rolling in from the couple thousand miles of open water to our right. It's coming from the northeast, faintly as the rain dies. I assume Daniel has some innate local take on the straightest route, so I focus on his boat, making circles around it with my top hand on either side. And as the day breaks, the clouds shrouding the mountains behind Punta Gorda appear as reassurance. We pull alongside the boat and ransack the food—coconut bread, bananas and chorizo—and then keep paddling.

"Did you hear that?" I yell to Vic, "Maybe it was a whale?"



“I don’t know what you’re talking about, I’m listening to Danger Mouse,” he says, putting his earbud back in before paddling away.

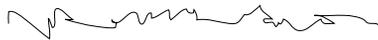
But the subtle steam-whistle-like hoots grow louder and the pitch sharper, turning to flute chirps. *Am I going mad?* I realize then that it coincides with my strokes—it’s the wind, now gusting in at a perfect 1 o’clock angle across the holes in my adjustable paddle. Holding the northern route is simple: Instead of looking for the hills in the distance, it’s head down, whistling straight into the wind.

I can only stare at the deck, thinking about my stroke, how to keep switching up little things—leaning shoulders forward and reaching for another, through the hunger, through the blister. Thinking ahead to the ideal burger and cold beer, anything to get out of the painful present. I take a step back to keep balance as the rolling waves start to form whitecaps. I glance forlornly back over my left shoulder to see the lines of a perfect downwinder—the opposite direction.

Daniel pleads with Victor to come on board.

“No passa nada!” he shouts back.

The clockwise hand-circles around the boat are over—there’s no more paddling on the



WE MADE IT—DONE, VICTORY,
CHEERS. THEN I REALIZE HOW
SPECIAL THAT MOMENT WAS. ONE I
WANTED OUT OF SO BADLY.



right side. It’s all left to maintain angle into the windswell. The first houses appear, but we’re miles from the dock, there’s no celebrating. The support boat is long gone, waiting there. The GoPros are off, there’s nothing to film, nothing left to talk about, just pushing through whitecaps that want to turn us back, cursing, wishing to be somewhere else. Wanting to be done. Nope.

At 1:30 p.m. we’re there, nine hours split by two five-minute calorie binges. After stilted pay

negotiations with Daniel, the Belizean customs agents promptly confiscate our stashed victory Gallos. *PSSSSSHT*, we hit the board valves, roll them up and find the nearest food.

We slam the rolled boards on the restaurant floor, collapse before Belikins, burgers and conch fajitas. There, sitting under a fan, waiting for our check, everything slows down, protected and painful in its own way. We made it—done, victory, cheers. It’s then I realize how special that moment was. One I wanted out of so badly, not knowing how things would end.

There’s one last \$100 flight out that day and we arrive five minutes prior to departure, hand the boards to the pilot, walk onto the 12-seat Cessna and lay the paddles in the aisle. It’s a bumpy takeoff and an amazing view, but I’m asleep in five minutes.

Back at Belize City municipal airport, the runway guy asks about our paddles. Oh, we explain, we paddled from Rio Dulce to Punta Gorda.

“Why,” he asks. We all start laughing. Nobody has a good answer.

