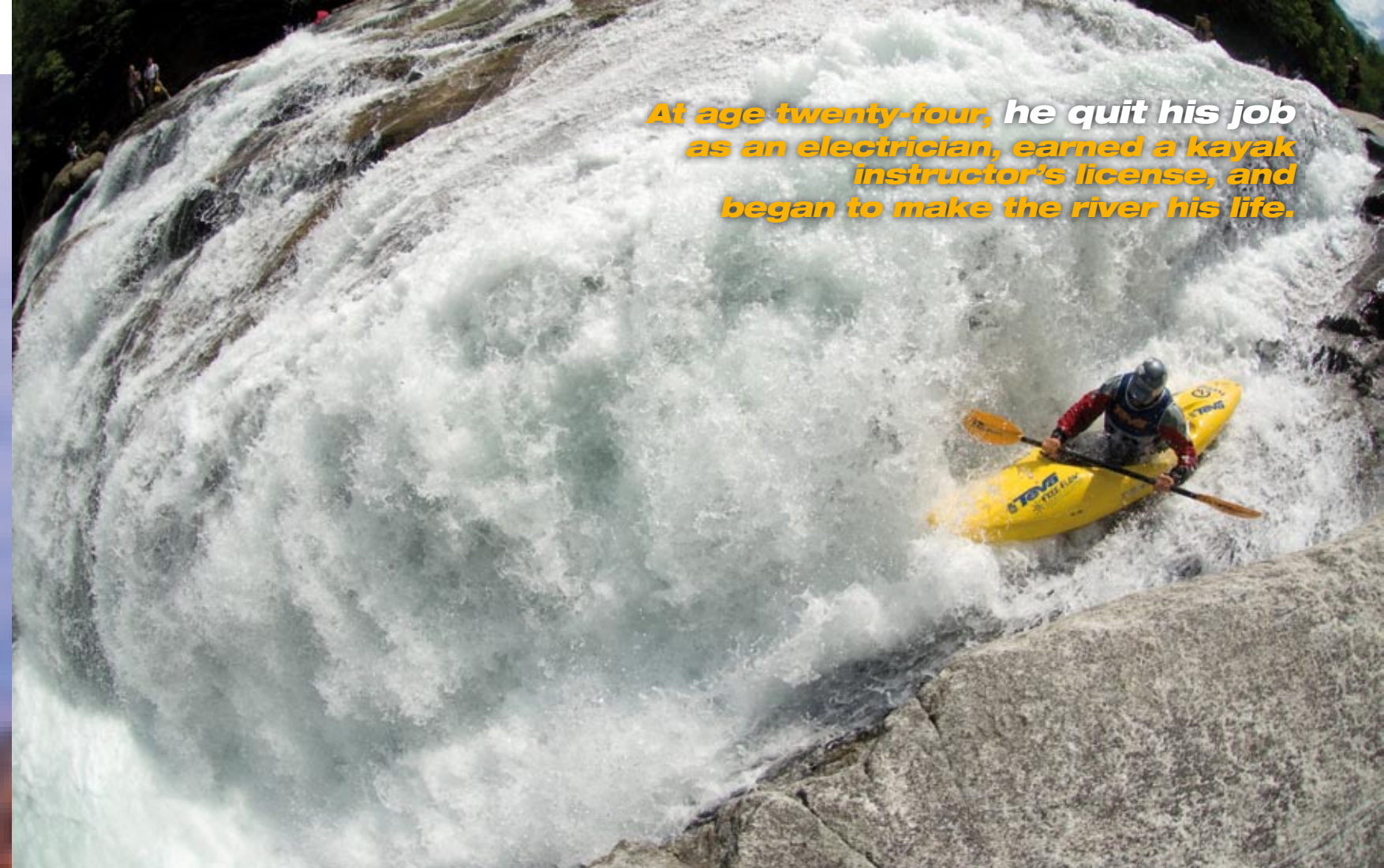


FRANCESCO SALVATO

Italian kayaking legend

Francesco Salvato is an icon of Italian kayaking. For the past quarter-century, his kayak schools have introduced multitudes to the sport, and honed the skills of many. Energetic, open, and proud, his cultural identity is nearly as renowned as his silky smooth paddling style. Yet, his outward demeanor belies an understated man who has made some of the most audacious solo descents in the history of the sport.

Words: Tyler Williams
Photos Courtesy of Peter Sturges



At age twenty-four, he quit his job as an electrician, earned a kayak instructor's license, and began to make the river his life.

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From 20,000 feet overhead, the Himalayan foothills were scored into a ragged web of steep river canyons. Kayaker Francesco Salvato squinted through an airplane porthole, tracing the matrix of drainages below. His eyes stopped at a smooth ribbon of water that wound placidly through Nepali countryside. The river looked perfect for a solo river tour.

Following a quick resupply in Katmandu and eighteen hours on an overcrowded bus, Francesco carried his kayak to water's edge. The river, swirling and boiling as it passed, looked more powerful than it had from the air. Fortunately, Francesco's research told him that it promised only occasional class III whitewater, and he set off, quickly drifting out of sight from a village throng gathered on the bridge. A few kilometers downstream, the river narrowed. Francesco pulled ashore, jumped atop a boulder, and felt the queasiness one feels when they realize that they have made a terrible mistake. Milky blue water roared into a minefield of pulsating waves and violent, mist-producing holes. The rapid was a definite class V, and the river, Francesco now knew without a doubt, was not the one he had seen from the plane.

Many kilometers of winding mountain roads and a Nepali language barrier had conspired to errantly bring him to the wrong river, and now he was committed to the Tamba Kosi—a class IV/V river running flush with high water. He steeled his nerves, returned to his boat, and paddled into the maelstrom.

There was little choice for Francesco but to proceed on his Tamba Kosi run, but perseverance in the face of unexpected problems has always been integral to Francesco Salvato. At age three, his father, Giovanni, died. Francesco's mother Zita was left to care for four children, among them Francesco's older brother Luigino. Twelve years Francesco's senior, Luigino assumed the role of father figure, which included leading his younger brother on ski trips and other adventurous outings near the family home in Padova, Italy. At age nine, Francesco accompanied Luigino on a four-day circumnavigation of Civetta Mountain that proved seminal to Francesco's budding interest in the natural world. He recalls, "That trek was very important to me. It was a big deal for a nine year old." By fifteen, he discovered climbing. It was a period when the "new school" of rock climbing was gaining appeal over the traditional world of Italian mountaineering, and the exposure Francesco had to these diverging generations would serve him years later, when he would bridge the gap between the old school and new in the world of paddling.

His interest in river running was borne at age seventeen, during a lunch break on a climbing route in the Dolomites. Francesco's climbing partner Beniamino told him of a trip he had taken down Italy's Adige River, traveling from the river's source to the Mediterranean Sea—in

a rowboat. The source to sea story immediately filled Francesco's head with possibilities, and he sought to learn more about this notion of navigating wild rivers.

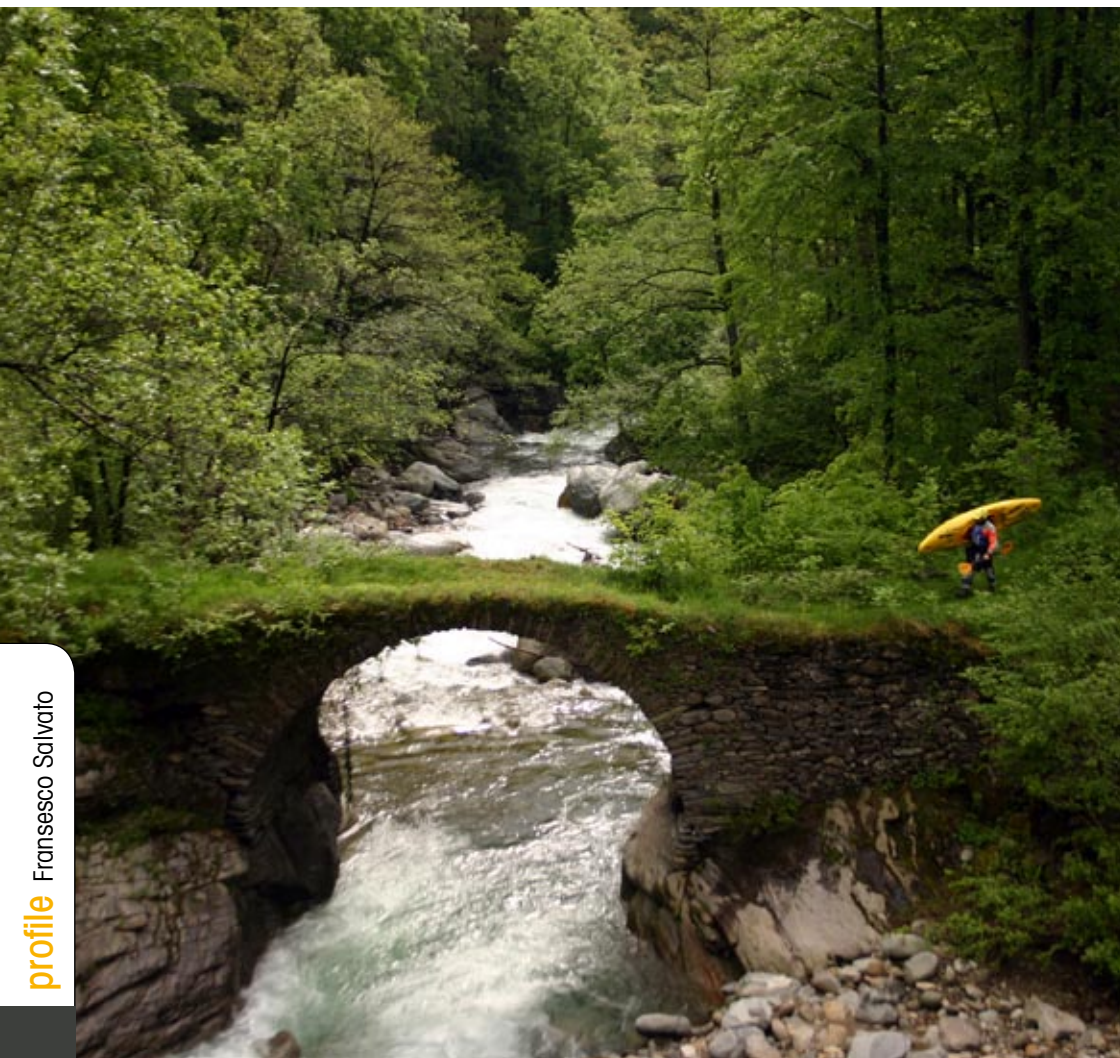
A week later, he was sitting in his first kayak. The boat was over four meters long, and the water beneath him was a placid lake. It was a far cry from the chaotic water he would later paddle, yet his attraction to the sport was immediate. Francesco remembers his first time in a kayak with vivid clarity. "I thought, 'This is my thing.' I was addicted from day one," he says of that first day. His growing interest in climbing was instantly supplanted by paddling, and the interest soon grew into obsession. When unable to get on the water, he would sit in the boat on his backyard lawn, practicing air strokes and grass braces until dark. He took his first new boat into his bedroom with him, and fell asleep to the intoxicating odor of fresh fiberglass. Thirty years later, he still beams about the experience, "It (the boat) was red and blue and shiny. My mother wasn't very pleased when I brought it inside."

Few paddlers have ever taken to the sport as naturally as Francesco Salvato. Within seven months of his first day on the lake, he was teaching kayaking lessons to fellow members of his local paddling club. Says renowned kayak photographer Raphael Thiebaut, "The first time I met Francesco I thought he was a former slalom paddler until he told me that he learned kayaking alone with a couple friends and a book. He has incredible style—smooth with few strokes, and always using the water."

As Francesco entered his twenties, paddling remained a weekend pursuit. He held a day job as an electrician, and that might have been his career for life were it not for a serious car accident that nearly left him paralyzed. During a long slow recovery from back surgery, Francesco had an epiphany. Kayaking, he realized, was the most fulfilling aspect of his life, and the time to pursue it full-time was now. At age twenty-four, he quit his job as an electrician, earned a kayak instructor's license, and began to make the river his life.

Soon after healing, he began paddling his first plastic boat, a Prijon Taifun. Wasting no time in taking advantage of the durable new material, Francesco and friends immediately traveled to Corsica and ran many of the steep classics, including the Rizzanese, Vecchio, and Golo. He recalls the early days of Corsica creek boating with an insight that few possess. "We ran most of the same stuff back then as today, but I sometimes wonder how we did it in those long boats. Now it is an easier style."

Even as he pushed his own paddling boundaries, Francesco was always happy to share a tip with a developing kayaker, or stand waist deep in an eddy to help a beginner learn to roll. To Francesco, teaching the sport of kayaking was nearly as rewarding as paddling a great new run.



Put-in of the backyard run - Angrogna Creek

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He taught kayaking at Val Sesia, Italy, for two seasons before moving to Slovenia to start the Alpin Kayak School with partner Oscar Bolfelli. The varied high quality rivers of Slovenia were a perfect training base for kayaking ventures abroad, and Francesco began a decade of global exploration.

In 1986, the Bio Bio River in Chile was scheduled to be dammed (it is now swallowed by a reservoir behind Pangué Dam), and river runners from around the world were flocking to the threatened canyon before it was gone. Francesco was part of that migration. He and his companions Gianluca Ricci and Emanuele Bemasconi were the first Italians to attempt the renowned Bio Bio, despite warnings that the river was too high. It was December—late spring in Chile—and the river had yet to drop to moderate summer levels. Francesco remembers big rides through legendary rapids like Lava South. “We thought, rafts run this river, so how hard can it be? But it was huge,” he says of the

high level. All other trips had abandoned the high water, except for one posse of American kayakers including Phil DeRiemer and Lars Holbek. They were on their way south to explore a river unknown to the paddling world called the Futaleufu, and they invited Francesco to accompany them. Unfortunately, a return airline ticket kept Francesco from joining the historic first descent, and his premature departure from Chile would come back to haunt him.

Only twenty-four months passed before Francesco returned to South America, this time to run the Amazon headwaters, Peru’s Urubamba and Apurimac. The team capped their Peruvian expedition with a descent of the Colca—touted as the deepest river canyon in the world. The whitewater was stout as promised, but the real excitement came while traveling afterward.

As Francesco and partners waited for entry into Chile at a remote Andean guard post, a customs official pulled a voluminous black logbook from the shelf. Fingering through its pages, the officer suddenly stopped, looked accusingly at Francesco, and ordered his arrest. Apparently the name Salvato, Francesco, was listed in the ominous tome of suspects. Francesco had reason for concern. Augusto Pinochet was still the dictatorial president of Chile. Under his rule, thousands had been detained without trial, many had been tortured and killed. Francesco was immediately handcuffed and whisked away in a patrol car with little notion of his crime. He was treated with the dispassionate roughness afforded to the most common criminal, and was thrown in a stark jail cell overnight with little food and no indication of his chances for release. Sitting there alone, his mind traced backward two years to the last time he was in Chile, when he avoided paying an exit tax on his kayak by claiming it had been lost on the river. Francesco had



Trek to put-in for the Arun River on the back the Kangchenjunga - 1993



Camp on the Colca Canyon with Pietro Berga (Peru) 1989.



Put in of Cellina River with the group of Canoa Club Padova - 1982

returned home then, and everything seemed resolved, until now. Following an unnerving night in jail, he was finally taken to a judge and charged with avoiding an exit tariff. He paid a \$50 dollar fine and was released. It was nearly a decade before he returned to Chile.

By then Francesco had made his impromptu solo run on the Tamba Kosi, survived ten malaria hazed days in an Ethiopian hospital after being misdiagnosed with Dengue fever following a Blue Nile trip, and toured the USA for a year where he ran dozens of Western rivers, including a probable first descent of New Mexico’s Rio Pueblo—solo—and a 54-mile moonlight run on Arizona’s Salt, again on his own. Francesco had developed a taste for solo kayaking.

Solo paddling is not something he has ever done on a lark. Rather, it is a calculated exercise that brings him to a trance-like state, enveloped in the unceasing flow of water. As Francesco puts it, “When you are by yourself, your relationship with the river becomes much more intense. Nothing disturbs that relationship, and any moment can become so rich.”

If hard whitewater has any correlation to those rich moments, Francesco has peaked the scale more than once. In 1996 he ran the first canyon of Chile’s Rio Baker—a powerful big water run of 20,000 to 40,000 cfs—with companion Roberto Chilosi watching from the canyon rim. It was a bold stunt, requiring complete confidence in one’s ability to make moves on the fly, and hit your roll in turbulent water. A solo swim on the Baker would likely be fatal, so Francesco cinched a strap to his sprayskirt rim to insure against implosion. It was a wholly committing act, and he made the run without a mishap. Still, Francesco doesn’t consider his Baker run all that impressive. “My friend Roberto was right there on the canyon rim the



Way to put-in for the Colca Canyon (Peru) - 1989

whole time,” he says, as if to imply that the moral support was equivalent to having another paddler on the water with him. Perhaps Francesco’s understated tone reflects the fact that the Baker just doesn’t rate that high when compared to his other solo descents, like the Zambezi.

After spending several weeks working on a video project there, Francesco had come to know the river well. With just two days left in Zimbabwe, he seized his last chance to experience the Zambezi with no distractions, and launched at Rapid Number One without another soul around. Mesmerized by the river and feeling at one with its awesome flow, he made a quick decision to run Chibongo Falls, a giant cataract that is almost always portaged. Francesco ran a line down the far left, where a side channel offered an 8-meter vertical drop. Upon impact at the bottom, his sprayskirt blew, leaving him swimming in a massive whirlpool below. It was the swim of his life, bringing him to exhaustion before the whims of the River Gods finally spat him to shore. Amazingly, he recovered his boat just downstream, and was able to continue. A poisonous snake struck at him that night at camp, and the following day a crocodile put three tooth holes in his boat as he approached the Kariba Lake take-out.

The Zambezi was a solo run for the ages, but it doesn’t even rank as Francesco’s crowning solo achievement. That would be a nine-day descent of Nepal’s Humla Karnali. He had run the Karnali before, with paddlers Gianluca Ricci and Giorgio Codeluppi in 1993. That trip was the second descent of the now classic Himalayan multi-day, and it lived up to the spectacular billing passed down from first descender Pete Knowles. Francesco’s party had extra challenges from the start. Near the put-in, a porter dropped one of their kayaks down a steep mountainside. While repairing the broken boat, Francesco cut his hand badly, forcing him to carefully manage



Put-in for the Humla Karnali from Simikot Nepal - 1993



During the shooting of technical DVD with Olaf

When unable to get on the water, he would sit in the boat on his backyard lawn, practicing air strokes and grass braces until dark.

He took his first new boat into his bedroom with him, and fell asleep to the intoxicating odor of fresh fiberglass.

a flesh wound for the remainder of the 10-day journey. The morning of day one on the river, his river shoes turned up missing (no doubt snatched up by a needy, stealthy local), leaving him with just flimsy flip flops to make the numerous long and rocky portages of the upper Karnali. Despite the setbacks, Francesco emerged intact, even playing a pivotal role in a rescue at one of the bigger drops.

The place made a lasting impression, and Francesco knew that a repeat expedition could never live up to his first time down. Unless, of course, he did it solo. He had schemed a solo descent immediately after his first run, but it took six years for him to gather the courage to make the trip. He ran every rapid that he had the first time, and moved a good deal faster. What took sixteen days on the first trip, Francesco completed in six, not that a speed run was his goal. “When you are by yourself, you want to get out of that scary place quickly, but when you are finished you want to go back,” he says of the emotionally draining experience.



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It’s ironic that Francesco is renowned for his solo paddling, because he is also known as one of the more gregarious members of the international kayaking community. Francesco, or “Checco” as he is more commonly known, is pure Italian. He greets friends new and old with big hugs and bellowing welcomes, always ready to start a friendly banter. His loyal defense of his country’s food is famous among paddlers worldwide. When asked what first comes to mind about Checco, Corran Addison replies, “Pasta....and gelato.” Raphael Thiebault answers, “His style, he’s Italian.” Cuisine aside, Francesco’s paddling partners all speak of a deeply respectful, optimistic man. German pro paddler Arnd Schaeftlein says “Francesco is a very optimistic person...a true friend who will always be there, not just on the river.” Corran neatly sums up Salvato’s presence, “Francesco has a pure love for the sport. I mean, all top pro paddlers love kayaking, but somewhere fame and money seem to ink their way in. With Francesco, it’s always been about the love of kayaking. No matter how things seem to be going good or bad on a trip, he’s always happy and charging and positive. It’s like life is one giant silver lining. It’s contagious.”

His magnetic personality cast a spell on American-born Carla Decker in 1996. They met on the Noce River in Milano, Italy, where Carla was taking a kayak class. Francesco, of course, was an instructor. The couple started Free Flow Kayak, their own kayak school, two years later. When licensing issues forced them out of the renowned paddling hub of Val Sesia in 2001, they relocated to Torre Pellice, Italy, a quaint town west of Torino in the foothills of the Cozie Alps. Convinced that this was the perfect home base, they renovated an old farmhouse and turned it into a bed and breakfast. Their Cascina del Forte overlooks idyllic countryside with the Pellice and Angrogna Rivers offering class II to IV water nearby—a perfect paddling hub.



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It’s also a perfect place to raise their children, Matteo—five, and Lucca—three. “Life is a little different now,” Francesco says of his by-gone nomadic paddling days. Still, kayaking is a central theme in Francesco’s life.

He has been organizing the Teva Extreme Outdoor Games since 2002, shortly after he and Carla first proposed the idea of an international paddling event in Italy. Francesco has been actively involved with the footwear company since the late 1990s, and he currently adorns the Teva website events page, seen waiting in an eddy to take his turn at a downriver event. Although competitions have always taken a back seat to his expeditions and his teaching, Checco excels whenever he enters the race arena. He was consistently Italy’s extreme racing champion in the early 1990s, and he followed that success with the national freestyle title for three years in a row. The last time Checco traveled to Turkey’s Coruh festival, he won the extreme race in both the mass start and team categories. Although he doesn’t compete full time anymore, he still gets some wins. Prior to 2009 (when the Kiwis pulled

an upset), his team had won the International Downriver race at the Teva Extreme Outdoor Games for four years in a row.

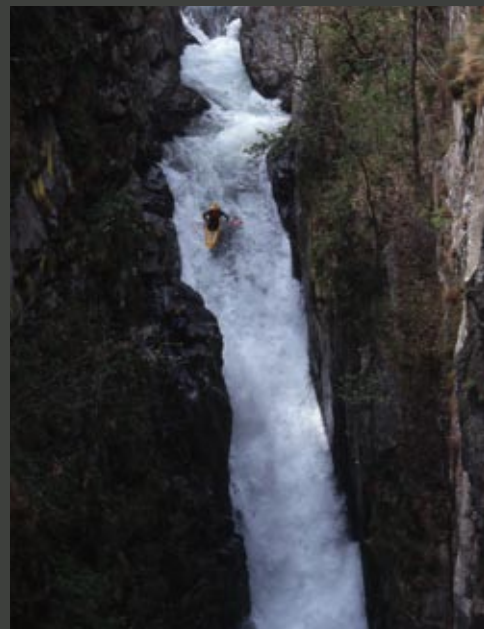
The occasional race event is always a good time, but instruction remains Francesco’s primary focus, and it could well be his greatest kayaking legacy. He literally wrote the book on kayak technique, publishing *In equilibrio sull’acqua*, or *Balance in the Water*, in 2004. Currently he is working with Olaf Obsommer on an instructional DVD. His instructional media is a handy accompaniment to a course at Free Flow, but one thing no book can convey is the energy that Francesco brings to his teaching, his everyday paddling, and his life. It is an energy, a pulse, that has been present in Francesco long before he made his first solo run, taught his first lesson, or even sat in his first kayak. Francesco Salvato is simply infused with a positive life force that is uniquely his, and if you’re lucky you’ll catch it, because as some say—it’s contagious.



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Put-in for the Humla Karnali solo - 1998



On Mondrone Falls (Italy Stura di ala) during Teva Tour - 1998



Blu Nile - Ethiopia - Tisissat Falls - 1995



• **Tyler Williams**

Tyler Williams is an expedition paddler, whitewater historian, and author of four books including *Whitewater Classics—Fifty North American Rivers Picked by the Continent’s Leading Paddlers*. He is a regular contributor to *Kayak Session*. For more information on Tyler, please visit www.funhogpress.com