

Getting schooled on the world's whitewaters

By Marek Warszawski, Fresno Bee

THREE RIVERS – Chase Hauber's friends from high school just don't understand. Well, except Logan Marlow.

They don't understand how Hauber can just bail from his junior year to go off on some whitewater kayaking adventure.

"A lot of them have asked me, 'So when are you going to come back to school?'" Hauber says while sitting on a bus stop bench across the street from the same rapids where he learned to kayak.

"They don't think I'm taking classes or anything. They think I'm just traveling and kayaking. I explain it to them, but they don't believe me."

In fact, Hauber and Marlow, both 16, are attending school. They're also traveling to exotic locales and kayaking on spectacular rivers. It's all part of the curriculum for students of the World Class Kayak Academy.

Hauber enrolled in September and spent the fall semester in Canada and Nepal. Marlow joined up in January, and together they spent the past two months paddling (and taking classes) in Chile. After spring break back home in Three Rivers, and hitting up their favorite runs on the Kaweah River, they're off to Northern California, Washington and Idaho.

"It's pretty fun," Hauber says. "Traveling around the world in these incredible places with this great group of kids, you make really close friends, friends you'll know the rest of your life. And you go on all these adventures."

The World Class Kayak Academy has 13 students (11 high school-

aged boys and two girls) and five instructors. The typical day begins with P.E. before breakfast, then five hour-long class sessions and lunch followed by an afternoon of kayaking. After dinner, it's time for homework and sleep.

The school generally stays at hostels, all the boys packed into one room, and uses vans with trailers to travel from place to place.

"Just kayak every day, do your homework and see some awesome places," Marlow says. "A lot of the places we've been, all there is to do is school and kayaking – and watching kayaking videos on your computer."

Hauber's father, Mike, taught him to kayak when he was 11, and Marlow began accompanying them soon thereafter. When one of the Sierra's steepest rivers flows through the middle of town, access is not a problem.

Both play other sports – Marlow was a strong safety on the Woodlake football team and is taking a break from baseball and Hauber played JV football – but neither sparks their excitement like kayaking.

"We get to see places that a lot of people don't get to see," Marlow says, "and there's nothing like the adrenaline of getting down a big rapid and realizing you've done it."

Marlow, Hauber and 17-year-old Tristan Gentry, a fellow World Class Kayak Academy student with family in Three Rivers, all pointed to Inferno Canyon on the Futaleufu River in Patagonia, Chile, as the highlight of their semester.

"It's really big water and it all condenses into this walled-out gorge that's a couple hundred feet wide at the most," Hauber says. "And you're in these Class IV or IV+ rapids that you have to run. You can't get out and walk."

"It's fun, but it's also really nerve-racking because you

don't want to screw up."

Classmates paddle as a group and are taught river safety by the instructors. And it's like anything else: If you do something every day for weeks at a time, you improve in a hurry. Same with paddling.

Soon, you'll have confidence enough to huck yourself (and your boat) off a 30-foot waterfall. As all three boys did in Chile.

"I focus on my hips and not landing too flat or not landing over," Marlow says. "Tuck up really tight and make sure nothing's hanging out that can get hurt."

Hauber and Marlow both plan to return home next year and finish high school. It'll be a rough transition because both have been bitten by the kayaking bug. But after that, they want to pursue their whitewater dreams – even if that means roughing it for a while.

"It's super hard to make kayaking a full-time job," Marlow says. "I've met some guys who kayak every day but are living out of their vans. It sounds like fun for a couple years."