

TORRENT OF ABUSE



Bandits, bull sharks and blood-sucking fish, not to mention delirium and disease: how Martin Strel defied them all to swim the mighty Amazon



THE AMAZON FLOWS 4,000 MILES FROM THE ANDES TO THE ATLANTIC

49.5

THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF MILES PER DAY SWUM BY MARTIN STREL (OPPOSITE) ON HIS AMAZON ADVENTURE



STREL HAS LEARNT HOW TO DEAL WITH PAIN



Across the Amazon delta came the first sight of a speck splashing in the vast expanse of muddy river. Martin Strel was in the final minutes of his biggest swimming challenge, struggling against the tide as it had begun to turn. By the time he reached the finish at Belém docks after swimming 5,268km, a combination of fatigue, the extreme current and vertigo from a mystery virus meant he had to be hauled out of the water by members of his expedition team.

Unceremoniously plonked into a wheelchair among the hordes of press, he was whisked off through excitable crowds to an ambulance, while paramedics fought to stabilise their hero's critical blood-pressure levels. The next day I was introduced to an amazingly perky Strel by his daughter Nina. Despite being ordered to stay in bed by his doctors, he'd already had a dip in the hotel pool that morning.

"I try to stay in bed, but it is boring. If I was in bed with a nice woman it would be OK," the Slovenian Strel proclaimed, looking worryingly mischievous as he asked if I was keen to go clubbing. His daughter rolled her eyes, "Sorry, he's been in the water too long."

Sixty-six consecutive days to be precise. Covering an average of 80km, ten hours a day,

Dodging piranhas all the way from near the Amazon's source in Atalaya, Perú, to Belém in Brazil. It makes Lewis Gordon Pugh's 325km Thames swim in 2006 look like a tame doggy paddle past a few harmless old trout.

Although not tall, Strel is a colossus of a man with a couple of strapping biceps that are clearly responsible for getting him through his other record-breaking, big river swimming forays: 3,004km down the Danube in 2000, 3,797km down the Mississippi in 2002 and 4,003km down the Yangtze in 2004.

All of these have been swum consecutively from start to finish with just overnight breaks.

EVENT STATS

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| DISTANCE SWAM 5,268km (3,273 miles) – a new world record | NUMBER OF ARMED GUARDS ON THE BOAT Seven |
| DISTANCE PER DAY 79.8km (49.5 miles) | TOTAL COST OF EXPEDITION More than £500,000 |
| CONSECUTIVE DAYS SWIMMING 66 (ten hours a day) | |

Endurance swimming at its most extreme, no one else has ever swum all these rivers, including the Amazon, and although Benoit Lecomte allegedly completed 5,556 km across the Atlantic in 72 days in

1998 (the swim wasn't officially recognised), this included a cosy one-week break in the Azores in the middle. Lecomte was also 31 at the time. Strel is 53.

He said he can cope with pain because his parents and school teachers dealt some regular beatings, and his army days during the Yugoslavian conflict must have added layers of resilience. "When you're swimming you have pain everywhere," Strel explained. "But you have to know what to do. Many people simply have to stop their sport. I know what to do. Because I can swim and sleep in the water. My head doesn't know that I'm swimming. It's almost like meditation. I learnt to do this on the Danube."

Matt Mohlke has accompanied Martin on the Mississippi and Paraná (in South America) rivers by kayak and he's currently writing a book about the swimmer's ballsy assaults on nature. "I've seen him so bad in the Mississippi," said

'I CAN SWIM AND SLEEP IN THE WATER. IT'S LIKE MEDITATION'

Martin Strel

Mohlke, "where he was swimming on his back, unconscious, falling asleep, bouncing his head between mine and two other kayak's while crapping in his wet suit. We'd see little brown puffs of water coming by and smell this awful stench. At the end of the day we'd hoist him out of the water, carry him unconscious to a hotel bed where his daughter spoon-fed him soup while he was comatose. The next day we'd have to guide him into the river. And then he'd just kick on his back and do the same thing for another ten to 12 hours. That's Martin Strel."

Strel's biggest fear on the Amazon expedition was the deadly bull shark, which have been seen as far upstream as Iquitos in Perú, although they're most common in the delta. "If the bull

sharks touch me, no Martin, no swimming. Where is Martin? In bull shark mouth!" he said, deadpan. I laughed, but I noticed Strel doesn't.

And it was the night swims in the final week that had the swimmer freaked, when the film crew shone lights on the water to capture him in nocturnal action. "We were doing night swims to work around the huge tides in the delta that generate massive waves," said Strel's son, Borut. "If you turn on lights, it attracts fish, crocodiles and sharks. So we could only do two minutes filming then turn the lights off. I've never seen him so anxious."

And who wouldn't be at the thought of electric fish that emit 500 volts to kill prey. Or

STREL HAD TO BE HELPED FROM THE RIVER AT THE END OF HIS SWIM



more dangerous than the notorious piranha, the candirú, also known as the vampire fish as it swims into any orifice (including the penis) where it drinks its victim's blood, which is why Strel wore a wetsuit so he could urinate safely. And don't forget the anacondas, snakes, spiders and alligators. On a positive note, he was accompanied by pink dolphins along the way and there were several sightings of the almost extinct manatee.

On the Amazon he contracted a larvae infection, stomach amoebas and dysentery. The team were under constant threat of pirate attack. By the end of the expedition there were seven armed guards on the main boat. Shortly after Strel and his team disembarked for the last time, the crew were assaulted by bandits.

So why does he put himself through this? "My swimming is for peace, friendship and clean water. I swim with this message almost 18 years. I dedicated this project to the protection of the rainforest." Sue Chester
Sue Chester flew from Rio to Belém with BRA Airways (flights throughout Brazil, www.voebra.com.br) and stayed courtesy of Brazil Rooms. 0870 787 9599, www.brazilrooms.com

NUTRITION STATS

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| Calorie intake 8,000-9,000 calories per day | Diet during the swim Soup, salad, chicken, fish, rice, beans, fruit and honey |
| Weight before swim 96kg | Alcohol drunk during the swim One bottle of wine and one beer a day |
| Weight after swim 59kg | |