



BEST NOT TO THINK



ABOUT THE PIRANHAS

Kari Lundgren talks to long-distance swimmer Martin Strel on his swim down the Amazon



Even great explorers have pipe dreams. For Martin Strel - a man who's faced down piranhas in the Amazon, dodged dead bodies in the Yangtze and holds the world record for the globe's longest unbroken swim - it's climbing Mt. Everest. Since jumping into the Danube in 2000 to swim 3,004 kilometres in 58 days, his first world record, Strel has ploughed his way down 3,979 kilometres of the Mississippi, swum over 4,000 kilometres in the Yangtze and spent 66 days in the world's longest river, the Amazon. Time in hospital? His son Borut has lost count.

The story goes - and all of Strel's tales have a slightly mythic, Dr.-Livingstone-I-presume quality to them - that he began swimming around the age of six, as a way to escape an abusive father. At ten, he won his first swimming prize: a pack of beer when he beat three soldiers in a race across a pool in the river near his home. Swimming was sidelined when he went to music academy to study Flamenco guitar, only to crop up again in his mid-twenties when Yugoslavia's long-distance swimming coach discovered him. Thirty-plus years later, I ask Strel if there is a nine-to-five feeling about swimming; does he still enjoy it after so many thousands of miles? 'Swimming is great for the body; I'm working like an engine now,' he says, his voice a deep, rich rumble of Slovenian-accented English. 'Yes, it's my job, but it's not hard to jump in the water, because what I'm doing is not so simple and I enjoy trying something new.'

Amazon, Danube, Yangtze; each feat hints at an athlete with a Michael Phelps physique, Arnold Schwarzenegger determination and Lance Armstrong ability to endure pain. And at 56, Strel is certainly fit, strong-willed and capable of handling stress. That said, he also has a bit of a paunch, cheerfully drinks up to two bottles of Slovenian red wine - Cvček - during a day of swimming and admits that he's never been quite the same since he dragged his near-broken body from the brackish, silty waters of the Amazon at Belém, Brazil. 'It's been four years since I finished, but I'm still not clear,' Strel says. 'If you know every stroke can be your last... I'm very happy now, but there is still a pain. I wake up in the middle of the night sometimes and I'm still in the water.' Given that he lost 19 kilos, was nibbled on by piranhas, risked Bull shark attacks or even worse finding a Candiru (a parasitic freshwater catfish) burrowing its way up his nose, mouth or penis, it's not too surprising that the journey has stayed with him. The silver lining, he says, was the pink Amazon dolphins that kept him

company much of the way.

Strel's 10-hour, 50-mile-a-day saga is the subject of the documentary *Big River Man*; both the film's main character and clever direction by John Maringouin make it well worth watching. 'To swim this many hours a day, you have to be very busy in your head,' he says. 'You have to simply forget because you have so much pain; I have a lot of films in my head and I finish university on these swims.' Far from being haunted or cracked however, Strel is down-to-earth and practical, his approach to planning painstaking and systematic. Wine aside, his swimming meals are Spartan - soup, rice, tea and the occasional piece of chocolate - and his training methodical. For the Amazon, where he was backed by a 25 person-strong team, he spent a year in a medical centre in Slovenia learning about tropical diseases. 'Before you jump in the water, you have to be more of a scientist than swimmer,' he says. 'It looks very simple, but you have to find money and you have to find the right people. I spent years and years with my son planning everything.'

The father-son partnership remains strong, with Borut handling much of Strel's PR. He also manages Strel Swimming Adventures, which organises swim holidays in Slovenia and Croatia, and is planning a U.S. location starting next year. And, like any expedition, Strel's swims need funding, so he spends a lot of time giving interviews, lecturing and raising awareness about river-related environmental issues. In the Amazon it was deforestation, in the Yangtze pollution and he hopes his swim in the Colorado will draw attention to the region's depleting water stocks.

Now based in Arizona, his training includes a 5,600 metre swim first thing in the morning, a day out of the sun and then another afternoon session when the temperature drops. In the evening, he can be found at the local casino - 'I'm a very dangerous poker player' - or strumming a guitar with the Mariachi band at Tuscon's Guadalajara Grill. 'I love Flamenco. I love country. Music is a big part of my life,' he says. One can only imagine what the the Mariachi band think.

And Everest? 'I would like to go to the top of Everest,' he says contemplatively, 'but maybe I'm too young. I can climb Everest later.'

Martin Strel is speaking at the annual swimming dinner at Pall Mall on 17 November. To attend, see the events website or email events@royalautomobileclub.co.uk. For more information on Martin and Borut's swimming holiday company visit www.strel-swimming.com