





THE ICE SWIM

WRAP UP WARM AS WE HEAD TO LAKE BLEĐ IN SLOVENIA, FOR A WINTER-SWIMMING



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MAN M M E T H

MASTERCLASS FROM MARTIN STREL, THE WORLD'S GREATEST EXTREME SWIMMER





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Martin Strel, 57, holds Guinness World Records for swimming the Danube, the Mississippi, the Yangtze and Amazon rivers

Our writer wades into the chilly water of Lake Bled, followed by more accustomed winter swimmers Borut and Martin Strel



DIPPING MY FOOT into the cold lake, I let out a small involuntary yelp. My first urge is to withdraw immediately – but, resisting this, I slowly wade deeper. Somehow, I manage to submerge myself up to the chest and, as my heart begins to pound, I swim out further into the frosty blue depths. There's a pretty island only a few hundred metres away, with a dark church spire rising from the centre, but there's no chance I'll stay in the near-freezing water long enough to reach it. I'm becoming aware of a sensation gradually penetrating deeper into my body – it started off as tingling and now it's closer to biting.

I swim back to shore as briskly as I can manage, emerging quickly to find that my hands are almost entirely numb. Fumbling and shivering, my only concern is to dry myself and get dressed as quickly as possible: fleece, hat, gloves and coat. They won't be coming off again any time soon.

It may sound like a peculiar type of water torture, but I'm actually doing this out of choice. I'm at Lake Bled, in Slovenia's alpine region, an hour's drive from Ljubljana, to mark the start of the winter-swimming season. Every year, as the temperature drops, a cadre of hardy souls throw off their clothes and hit the water with alarming enthusiasm. It's a practice that is repeated in similar fashion across the continent – from Scandinavia, where the sauna ritual is incomplete without a plunge into an ice pool, to central and eastern Europe, where you'll also find large numbers heading to rivers and mountain lakes to enjoy this most chilling of pastimes – even on New Year's Day, in some spots around the Baltic Sea.

It's not hard to see why. Both winter and ice swimming (where the water is actually frozen) are reputed to boost circulation and the immune system; and the release of adrenalin, alongside endorphins, the



A digital display on the lake's boathouse registers the freezing temperatures

body's natural painkillers, creates a sense of euphoria. Many winter swimmers are even said to develop an addiction. Ultimately, though, you are purposefully immersing your body in painfully cold water, so can't do it unless you really enjoy it, too.

I'm here with someone who, it's fair to say, really does enjoy it. If the name Martin Strel sounds familiar, it's because you may have heard of his superhuman exploits. In 2007, he swam the entire length of the Amazon, the world's longest river. It took him 66 days to cover the 5,268km stretch, all the time avoiding piranhas, bull sharks and all manner of nasty parasites. He did contract dengue fever in the process, though. It may sound like quite a feat, but Strel has form in this department. A professional marathon swimmer, he has swum the whole Danube and the Yangtze in China.

As a Slovenian and hardcore winter swimmer, the burly, slightly grizzled 57-year-old is the obvious person to show me how it's done. Strel recently founded a swimming holiday company with his son, Borut, the third member of today's swimming party. They've already led trips in Slovenia and Croatia, ▶



Our writer, Jonathan Knott, centre, gets a bit of praise from veteran winter swimmers Borut, left, and his father, Martin Strel, right



With a lone swan on an early morning dip in Lake Bled's lido

and this winter they're helping to organise the Bled Winter Swimming Cup in February, a fairly new event where around 100 participants will race short distances (25-50m) in water of around 5°C. Bled also hosted the World Winter Swimming Championships in 2010, welcoming 790 professional swimmers from countries including Latvia and Finland, but the 2012 event will invite amateurs to take part.

Strel himself was an international competitive swimmer in his youth, but abandoned the sport while his children were growing up, earning a living as a guitar teacher. He then re-emerged in his late 30s as a long-distance river swimmer, beginning by tackling the Slovenian river Krka in 1992. Since then, he's never looked back. "I enjoy being on land," he tells me in heavily accented English, "but water is my second home and a place to pursue my challenges."

And what challenges they are – not least the mental ones. Describing his mind as a "busy office" when he swims, he passes the long hours in the water by talking to the river wildlife, imagining stories and even sleeping for a few minutes at a time – a skill which has allowed him to gain the world record for non-stop swimming: an incredible 84 hours. "I spoke with myself in the water a lot," he says of the Amazonian swim, "and my team on the escort boat often thought I was a little crazy – but this is just who I am and it keeps me going."

His team might be forgiven for their suspicion. Weighing in at over 100kg, Strel drank a bottle of Cvicek, a light Slovenian wine, each day while swimming the Amazon and he carries a crystal pendulum, which he uses to measure the "energy" of

places, as well as the drinkability of bottled water.

Such practises are unorthodox, but they evidently work. It's by no means unusual for Strel to train twice a day for several hours each time – and not just in the pool. The day before our swim, he drives us into the mountains to sample another of his favourite pursuits.

With its picturesque, rolling hills and forests, Lake Bled's surrounding countryside is a wonderful destination for many winter activities, including snowshoeing and Nordic walking (not to mention for a hearty meal and mulled wine after a day's exertions). But Strel is taking me cross-country skiing. "Excellent sport," he proclaims from behind the wheel, as we climb the steep road to Pokljuka, a world-class centre for the sport. "Very similar to swimming."

When we arrive, it becomes clear just how similar the sports are: skiing also exercises the whole body while lending most of its practitioners a rare gracefulness. Skiers in bright green suits zip past, nonchalantly wielding fibreglass poles. The sport is notoriously gruelling, but they appear to be expending no effort whatsoever.

It's at this point that I'm handed a small bottle containing a clear liquid. "You drink," says Strel, in a manner that is more of an order than a request. Upon opening, the fumes indicate that this is a potent schnapps rather than water, but at 1,300m, it's certainly chilly, so I take a warming swig. The classic style – skiing along tracks cut into the snow – is straightforward and I pick it up quickly. But later on, when Strel is showing me the free-range (and much cooler looking) skating style, things become slightly more complicated. Despite my best efforts,



It's an experience that is "always a surprise" because of the extreme cold



Martin Strel enjoys a spot of cross-country skiing at the Pokljuka Ski Resort in the Julian Alps



Its picturesque scenery makes Bled a wonderful place for swimming and boating

I find myself waddling around like a drunk penguin. It might look easy, but a lot of practice is required to develop balance and strength.

Much the same can be said of the winter swimming – though it's a pastime that's even less easy to train for. "You can't train long distances in cold water," explains Strel later. Instead, in order to increase your endurance, you need to take frequent short swims, gradually lengthening the amount of time you spend in the water. It's an experience that is "always a surprise", he says, because of the extreme cold. I only lasted a few minutes in the water when I tried it, though regular practitioners can stay submerged for up to 15 minutes.

Yet, despite the difficulties, it's a sport that looks to be taking off: hundreds join in the annual World Winter Swimming World Championships (this year in Latvia), and there are an increasing number of clubs that organise winter swims (including several in the UK), as well as other events, such as the Speedo Ice Swim, a cold-water endurance event in South Africa.

This isn't one for the faint hearted, however – in the competitive events you're not even allowed to wear gloves or boots to stave off the cold, and because the activity makes the heart work particularly hard, it's not suitable for those with cardiac issues. But, if you condition yourself gradually, the benefits are manifest. And, to watch Strel chatting at the shore after the swim is to perceive the powerful sense of well-being that it generates. He throws his head back and guffaws: it's a belly laugh in every sense of the word. *The Bled Winter Swimming Cup is on 11 February. Entry can be booked through Strel Swimming Adventures, strel-swimming.com. For more information, visit slovenia.info or bled.si*

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