



Big
river
man



THIS IS MARTIN STREL, THE SUPERHUMAN
ENDURANCE SWIMMER FROM SLOVENIA. HE'S
JUST LAUNCHED A **WATERY BOOTCAMP AT LAKE
BLED**. KEEN PADDLER KATE HAMILTON SIGNS UP,
BUT WILL SHE MAKE THE BIG MAN PROUD?

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES CANNON



Martin Strel doesn't look like an elite athlete. When I meet him on the shores of Lake Bled, he's wearing blue neoprene shorts, a black lycra shirt and a barrel-shaped belly. If we're talking in terms of characters, then he's somewhere between Paddington Bear and a Bond villain. "Welcome to Slovenia," he says, greeting the group who have come to spend a few days swimming across his native land.

Martin is the Big River Man, a superhuman who has conquered some of the world's greatest waterways, including the Mississippi (really long), the Yangtze (full of pollution) and the Rhine (colder than a cast-iron bath on the shady side of an iceberg). Strel's 66-day journey down the Amazon has been recorded in a Sundance-nominated documentary that details him confronting piranhas, first-degree sunburn and delirium. With the support of his son, Borut, Martin has started an outdoor swimming company which leads guided swims across some of the world's most epic lakes and rivers. I've risen

to the (hopefully piranha-free) challenge and signed up for the Slovenia-based course.

Did you know that open-water swimming is the second-fastest-growing sport in the UK? In the past year, Nike launched its first swim range as Instagram exploded with 'swimfluencers'. Until now, I've been happy pootling around the local leisure centre, but I've started to feel a bit, well, caged. With warmer weather just around the corner, I figure it's time to get away from the horrors of chlorine, verrucas and tiled floors – to break out of the lanes and into the lakes. >

POND LIFE

Our writer enjoys the beauty of Lake Bohinj, Slovenia

“Martin Strel is a superhuman who has conquered the world's greatest waterways... Until now I've been happy pootling around the local leisure centre”



I'm feeling confident as our group line up on day one. I'm no Rebecca Adlington, but I'm a reasonable swimmer with a decent amount of stamina, and I've just bought a new cossie and a snazzy pair of mirrored goggles. The programme will average 6km of swimming each day – broken into two batches – and on the last we'll cover a mammoth 4km straight. When I'm told we should

feel comfortable travelling 2.2km in one go, I worry I haven't ever done that, but then figure it's more of a guideline than a rule – a bit like when you're told to absorb the summer reading list at school, but you know you'll scrape by if you don't.

And then we're off! Our first swim with Martin will take us to the island in the middle of Lake Bled, through cobalt crystal water which (along with Melania Trump) is the most gawped-at Slovenian view in the world. The only problem is that my goggles are leaking and I keep having to stop to fix them to my face. I achieve some sort of suction by the 1km mark, but by that point I feel done. Perhaps this is going to be more difficult than I had thought...

Swimming is by and large a solitary sport, so it feels good to have a gang, especially one as supportive as mine. One woman lends me some goggles as we set off across the length of the lake that afternoon (she must have heard me cursing my own). The water has become choppy and I find myself having to stop every five minutes or so to look where I'm going, which leaves me way behind everyone else. Eventually, I collapse onto the >



shore. Over a feast of various carbohydrates that night (the exercise makes us all obnoxiously hungry) I find out that many of our group have swum triathlons, are part of teams or have been on a holiday like this before. “Water is a real leveller,” one of them remarks.

On our second day, we cross the border into Italy to Lake Predil, passing mountains and perfect piles of logs as we go. The water is cooler here – maybe 21°C compared to Lake Bled’s 25°C – and I opt for a wetsuit to keep me warm and buoyant. That must have been my problem yesterday. I peel it on. It’s far too big, but it will do.

To swim is essentially to regulate one’s breath, but on Lake Predil, I find I can’t breathe and I certainly can’t swim. My whole body feels heavy, as though I’m dragging it through mud, and I’m only halfway across by the time everyone else has reached the other side. Anya, one of the instructors in a support boat, gives me pointers. Turns out there’s a whole technique for keeping yourself on track in the water. The practice of ‘sighting’ involves breathing forwards rather than



to one side, so that swimmers can look where they’re going without stopping dead, like I do.

That’s part of the joy of coming on a holiday like this – picking up tips to hone back home. While walking to an Alpine waterfall on the second afternoon, Martin’s son, Borut, lets me in on a swimming secret. “You need to create your >

“I think about my obsession with goggles and wetsuits and equipment – what I really need to do is settle my mind”



own stories,” he says. “Martin hypnotises his own body to push through.” I think about my obsession with goggles and wetsuits and equipment – ahead of our big swim, what I really need to do is settle my mind, to breathe.

The water is green on Lake Bohinj the next – our final – day: a long stretch of emerald under a denim-blue sky. On Martin’s instruction (“Your body must be like a Mercedes engine”) I fuel up on eggs, toast and fruit at breakfast before the 4km haul. “You don’t need to be afraid,” he says. “Just

enjoy it – take time to think about the nature.” I slide in and dip my head like a duck under the water’s glassy surface – my goggles are still leaking, but I ignore it.

A few strokes in and I begin to relax. Without worrying about time, I feel like I’m lost in the landscape, like the smooth sweep of bank belongs to just me for a bit. My senses are heightened – all I can taste is a faint tang of earth; all I can hear is the rhythm of my breath and the reassuring splashes of my limbs pushing through. >



“I get why outdoor swimming is the next big thing: the feeling of relaxation and energy is all-encompassing”

SINK OR SWIM?

Martin 'Big River' Strel joins in. Right: Our writer attempts the swim across Lake Predil, Italy

That's not to say that it's easy. After 45 minutes, my arms feel leaden, like they're moving because they have to and not because they want to. And, as a newbie to sighting, I find it near impossible to follow a straight line. I think back to Martin and his practice of telling himself stories, and I start to build paragraphs of this very article in my head. I know I could never achieve this clarity in a pool, when I find myself obsessively counting laps.

“Kate, this is a new day for you.” Martin greets me with open arms as I reach the group on the other side. He practically has to pull me out of the water and onto my legs, which have reliably turned to jelly. In that moment, I get why outdoor

swimming is the next big thing. The feeling of both relaxation and energy – of hunger and satisfaction – is all-encompassing, rising inside me like bubbles. And the best part is that anyone can have access to this – there's no need for fancy memberships or flashy equipment. Just a costume, a body of water and an average pair of goggles will do. 🐡

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