

THE MAN WHO SWAM THE AMAZON

3,274 MILES
ON THE WORLD'S
DEADLIEST RIVER

BY MATTHEW MOHLKE AND MARTIN STREL



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PROLOGUE

Is Martin Strel crazy? Does he have a death wish?

OK, I'll be honest. When I signed on as a kayaker to help navigate Martin Strel 3,272 miles down the Amazon River, I gave him about a 50 percent chance of survival. Myself, I gave a 90 percent chance. One thing was certain though. Martin Strel would either swim the entire Amazon River, or die trying.

The man had the whole country of Slovenia on his back, and he had too much pride to return to his homeland having failed in doing what he'd set out to do. Martin isn't the type of man who will be content riding out his waning years in some swank condo on the beach, peacefully watching the tide ebb and flow. Martin is a man of adventure. I've personally watched the man swim every mile of the Mississippi and the Paraná, and closely followed his exploits on the Danube, Yangtze, and other large rivers. But this is the Amazon. I gave him some credit for swimming those other big rivers. But still, I set the over/under at 50 percent. Is he crazy? Well, read the book and decide for yourself.





January 26, 2007—Lima

The huge, sticky, shirtless man to my immediate left is Slovenian ultramarathon swimmer Martin Strel. Beads of water drip from his forehead down his enormous frame, yet he gazes out the window, unaffected. It's already nearly a hundred degrees, but Martin doesn't allow air conditioning and won't allow us to roll down the windows. He thinks it might make him sick.

If you've ever watched Sumo wrestling, there's always that one "little guy" who charges the other fatties like a bolt of energy and ends up beating all the giants with his quickness. Well, that's the build Martin possesses, he's like the little Sumo guy. Still, as his sweaty shoulders nudge me to the edge of the bench seat and nearer to the window in the crowded van, I'm reminded he outweighs me by a hundred pounds.

I met Martin on July 1, 2002, three days before he began swimming the Mississippi River. I watched as the "world-class athlete" lazied in a lawn chair and pounded eight beers and at least six bratwurst. He was nearly fifty years old and weighed 250 pounds. His son, Borut, then a twenty-year-old pup, now expedition leader, explained to me that Martin is like a bear; he must fatten

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up before the swim. He'd end up shedding fifty pounds over the course of that swim.

Martin had first contacted me in 2001 because he'd read my book, *Floating Down the Country*, in which I detailed my journey down the Mississippi River on a three-dollar-per-day budget, looking for girls and a good buzz. Martin needed a few kayakers who knew the river, could give up three months of their lives, were physically capable of spending fourteen hours a day in a kayak, and would do the work for free. I guess there were only a few of us who qualified.

I wasn't informed until two weeks before we left that I'd be out of the kayak on the Amazon expedition. Instead, I'd been given the task of navigating and journal writing. Why me? For one, I'm lucky; at least Martin thinks I'm lucky. Second, and most important, I can find current. When I don't find current, Martin tears into me. It's not a pleasant experience to have Martin Strel yelling at me while boring a hole into the bridge of my nose with his eyes, so I've become pretty good at finding him current.

Lima flies by us out the window in a whir of colors and strange billboards. We'd arrived in Peru just a few hours earlier after twenty-four stressful hours of travel. Bleary-eyed and jet-lagged, we trudged forward purely on adrenaline from the lure of the Amazon. I pick up fragmented pieces of people's lives out the window to my right. Girls in skintight blue skirts vigorously pump gas. Small brown men sell fresh bananas at every street corner.

Pedestrians constantly jump out in front of us, and the rule of intersections *seems* to be that whatever car is bigger and moving faster gets the right of way. In the small town in Wisconsin where

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I live, everyone stops at an intersection and is afraid to be the first to go. Here, they all go at once, then honk. A frantically crying woman with wildly frizzled hair and demon eyes waves her hands at each car as she walks in the lane against incoming traffic. I have a strong premonition she won't survive the day.

"Smell today," Martin tells us as we reenter the Lima airport. "Tomorrow will be different smell. Tomorrow will be jungle." We'd landed at this same airport just four hours ago and transferred thousands of pounds of equipment across town to a hotel, only to bring it all back again to catch another flight to Pucallpa.

Martin is beaming. He enjoys strutting around with his entourage, all of us in matching team uniforms loaded with European team sponsors. We're a pretty fierce bunch, ready to take on the jungle. At the airport, Martin has two goals: beer and food.

Martin's a fun guy when he's not swimming a river. He likes music, he enjoys the sight of a pretty woman, he likes to laugh, and he loves to have a beer or glass of wine with his friends. On the other hand, when he's in the midst of a swimming expedition, Martin is, for the most part, unapproachable. His mind goes somewhere else, and he turns into a machine that just eats, sleeps, and swims.

Personally, I enjoy those rare moments before and after a swim when I can spend time with the real Martin Strel, before he puts his mind away into some far-off compartment, locks the door, and becomes Martin Strel the swimming robot.

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February 11—Victoria, Peru

Martin has acquired some sort of stomach complication. He's not one to admit illness, but for those of us who know him, it's obvious when he's ill. He spends more time on his back, rarely talks, and never drinks anything when we offer it to him. Back on the Mississippi in 2002, he became so ill that he'd lose consciousness while kicking and bouncing back and forth between our kayaks for minutes at a time. We'd pad his head with the palms of our hands to lessen the impact and redirect him to the other side. Occasionally, we'd smell something and notice a cloud of brown trailing him in the water. At the end of each day we'd lift him out of the water, carry him to the van, he'd pass out, we'd carry him to his hotel bed, and his daughter, Nina, would feed him soup by hand. Then he'd get up the next day and do it all over again.

"How do you feel?" I ask him during lunch.

"I'm terrible," he returns. Stomach problems and parasites scare me more than anacondas and piranhas. I'm not sure what bugs are dangerous, but we all have little blood dots on our forearms and ankles. The thought of being impregnated with some sort of little worm that will cause problems for us up to years in the future is sobering.

Martin isn't the only one who isn't feeling well. Half the crew has been experiencing stomach problems over the last two weeks, and I blame it on the presence of the buckets of blood. The stuff is completely rancid from being out in the hot sun for so many days and although it's kept covered, the putrid smell still escapes, especially when the wind is right. It must be filled with all sorts of nasty bacteria. Although we know that these are piranha-infested waters, we also know piranhas are only reputed to hit a target

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that is already bleeding. I recommend to Borut that we ditch the blood completely. We finally compromise on acquiring fresh blood every few weeks and getting rid of the rotten stuff.

We've heard that we should always stay close to our larger support boat. There are small bands of pirates in the area around Tierra Blanco who will rob us if they feel we're an easy mark. We're still in narco territory. In the early afternoon, a boat with three tough looking hombres approaches swiftly. I warn Martin to stay near the boat, and the soldier stands up in ready position. I'm not sure if it's the presence of the soldier or just my paranoia playing with me, but the boat turns sharply and veers off toward a nearby village.

Martin is usually fearless to such situations. When swimming the Danube from source to sea, he was warned to bypass an area known for being inhabited by some dangerous gypsies. Rather than follow the advice, he instead found a small snake, put it into his mouth, and swam to shore with the live serpent squirming to free itself. The feared gypsies were in awe, backed off like they'd seen a ghost, and he instantly won their respect and adoration.

Near dusk, a small pink dolphin surfaces within five yards of Martin. "Look, dolphin," the backstroking swimmer exclaims, pointing behind us like a little kid. He's been in a very quiet mood over his last few days of illness, and it's nice to see the dolphin cheer him up a bit.

Dinner is pretty quiet. When Martin is in a foul mood, we all tend to give him plenty of space. When someone asks him if he's feeling sick, he responds "We're all a little sick here. Now just God can help us." I'm not sure if he's joking or not, but his cynical half laugh gives me a chill, especially considering that he'd only uttered about ten words all day. Amazingly, he was able to cover sixty-five miles. It's the lowest total he's had in days, but awesome nonetheless.

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Jamie, big mistake for you.” Jamie promptly checks in to a motel in Colombia and is robbed of his cell phone and digital camera that same day.

Borut learns that the exchange rate for Brazilian reais (pronounced hay-ICE) was better in nearby Leticia, Colombia. He insists I go with him for the trade. He had \$15,000—150 crisp hundreds in a wad—and would save almost \$2,000 at the better rate. Great, we were going into the belly of the cocaine and counterfeit money world with fifteen large wadded up in a fanny pack.

We hire two motorcycle drivers to take us on the seemingly endless two-mile ride. The first two cambio windows do not have nearly enough reais to make the exchange. The motorcycle drivers are getting impatient and already know we’re carrying a large sum. What would stop them from driving us out to a remote location, machete-slicing us, taking our cash and leaving us to decompose in the jungle? Only the jaguars and slime molds would know where we were as we transformed into Amazonian soil.

The small, shifty looking man at the second window tells us to wait a few minutes while his friend goes to get the money. He leads us through a doorway, then under two blankets that serve as room dividers. He invites us to sit in a cramped, well-lit room on some plastic lawn chairs. I duck back outside to give the drivers a few bills for their waiting time, gripping my motorcycle helmet tightly the whole time.

After fifteen minutes, a bearded man in his forties comes into the room. He has a small blue case and appears very nervous. A small fan cools the room a little. A cat and mouse game begins over who will pull their money out first. Borut throws the entire sum on the table, 150 \$100-bills. How do we know that the money they’ll give us is real? How do we know they won’t storm

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March 21—Obidos, Brazil

With all of the heat and bugs, some of us have been having a hard time sleeping lately, and when Igor overheard a few of us talking about it at dinner last night, he showed us a pressure point near the left nipple that he says controls sleeping functions. I went into my room for the night, placed my thumb on the pressure point, and was zonked out in five minutes, sleeping soundly until morning.

It's one of those perfect, dead calm days on the water, a little hot, but the type I love nonetheless. I think the sky here is more beautiful than in North America, maybe due to all the moisture in the air. It's a softer blue with shades of indigo, yellow, pink, and purple with little dreamy clouds that float by so close it looks like you could touch them.

At another horizonless spot on the river, approximately six miles wide, Martin starts reminiscing about some of the lakes along the Mississippi River.

"Ah, Matthew, big lake here. Makes Pepin look small, even makes Winniebigoshish look tiny. Lake Bemidji was a nice lake, small but very beautiful." He goes on to name off several of the towns he swam through along the upper Mississippi, counting on his fingers as he names them off. "Bemidji, Grand Rapids, Brainerd, St. Cloud, Minneapolis, Red Wing, Winona, La Crosse, nice towns, but Mississippi not so big now, huh?"

As we approach Obidos, the tranquil day is threatened by a storm approaching from upstream. Martin points out some red rock cliffs near the town and tells me, "There near those cliffs is the deepest place on the whole Amazon. 100 meters." The storm is closing in on us fast, and the *Cassiquiari* radios to us that they're going to shore to anchor and seek shelter. I can see sheets of rain and dark clouds on the horizon and am a bit concerned about our

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safety, but Martin waves one hand away and says confidently, "Don't worry Matthew, the storm will miss us." I disagree, bet him a beer, and spend the next two hours hoping the sheet of rain will catch up to us as it slides off to the South and we continue downstream at approximately six miles per hour. At one point I can see the *Cassiquiari* about three miles away, getting pummeled, yet we're dry, always staying just a mile out ahead of the storm front. Martin arrives at the beautiful town of Obidos after swimming fifty miles on the day. The rain finally catches us as we anchor near a lush green hillside for the night.

Igor continues to impress all of us with his knowledge and unorthodox techniques. He points out the place on the chest cavity that he says houses the soul, and tells us a story of saving the life of a man that had been left for dead by modern medicine, merely by caressing his soul for one hour. He also shows us some stress relief pressure points, and I can immediately feel the difference when he presses on the spot.

Igor tells us he also has an ability to mentally prepare water, or change it into any substance he wants. He tells us a story of a time when he and four friends went out for a friendly dinner. Four of them were drinking a beer, while the fifth had an orange pop. As a joke, he says, he transformed the pop into whisky. The man finished the pop, ordered another one, and was soon dancing and singing and carrying on to such a degree that he began to disturb the other patrons of the restaurant. Another time, he tells us, he and Martin were driving when Martin suggested they stop for a glass of wine. Not wanting to stop, Igor merely turned the bottled water Martin was drinking into a substance consistent with red wine. We all guard our water a little closer now that Igor's on the boat.

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March 25—Curua, Brazil

I wake to the hum of the *Cassiquari's* motor as we leave port. It's a relief to finally leave the modern city of Santarem and get back into the jungle. Coming upstairs, I see some new faces. Three husky dudes in red paratrooper uniforms are standing around rigidly in the mess hall. Although I sense a lot of negative buzz about the space, food, and money issues, I am secretly quite relieved.

Martin is admittedly tired today, even after his day and a half of rest. "I ate too much in Santarem," he tells me while holding his gut. "My mistake. Santarem is a good town, but too much rest and too much food. Now it's hard to swim today." I am a little shocked to hear Martin complain about being tired. Martin never complains, so I figure he must REALLY be tired.

At lunch, Miguel points out a giant Iguana in a tree. It takes three of us five minutes of scanning the tree with binoculars and digital cameras to find it, even though he spotted it easily with the naked eye. The thing is huge, maybe four feet long, but its green and black body match perfectly with the tree, and if you look away for a moment it's harder to find it. Many other team members come up to get a glimpse but become dismayed when they can't locate the reptile. Some of them don't even believe we'd seen it.

When Martin is tired like he is today, he doesn't say much in the water. He tells himself stories. I watch him swimming on his back, his lips moving all the time and sometimes he even uses hand gestures. He's not here on the Amazon today, not even close.

*He's eight years old, at his family's small chicken farm
in the village of Mokronog in old Yugoslavia. He's hop-
ing to get his chores done early so he can ride on his
new bicycle, as his mother had promised him. She's in*

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the field with him. He wonders when his father will come home. He wants to go visit his friends down the road on his bicycle, but first he has to feed all these chickens.

A series of sudden, sharp blasts from my whistle steal this pleasant daydream away as Martin narrowly misses swimming into a half-submerged log. I try to use the whistle sparingly, because I realize that when Martin is swimming, he can't think about swimming. It's impossible to swim twelve hours a day and think about swimming twelve hours a day. You've got to go to another place. My whistle is a teleportation device and time machine all rolled into one. It brings him twelve thousand miles over the Atlantic and forty-five years into the future back into the present moment. . . and at times he hates me for it. He goes from basking in the joys of his youth to having his entire body burning with pain as he swims hour after hour, mile after mile, day after day, engaged in one of the most challenging feats in history.

Martin's progress is notably slower today. He grimaces more and talks less, always a bad sign. The more vocal Martin is, the better he feels, even if his vocalizations seem hostile, it's just his way of blowing off steam.

The wind and waves are relentless again today, but the tired swimmer is still able to battle through another forty miles. There aren't a lot of towns left on the map between here and Belem. We should reach Monte Allegre tomorrow. Martin and Borut have put April seventh down now as their new target date to reach the Atlantic, but there is a lot of rough water between here and there.

EPilogue

Martin Strel is a little fat. Martin Strel is a little old. Martin Strel likes to drink a little beer and wine. When Martin Strel walks around in his Speedo, some people actually laugh. “Where’s the swimmer?” they ask. What those doubters don’t understand is that the moment Martin Strel changes into his wetsuit, he changes from a slightly old, slightly fat man into a superhero. He sits in his room gazing out the window, conjuring up visions of big rivers, then slips on a Speedo, pulls his wetsuit over the top, makes his way across the globe to the start of that river, and jumps in.

There are millions of people throughout the world gazing out that same window. Occasionally a crazy thought comes into their head from somewhere so far away they can’t even fathom its source, but they quickly discard it and return to the surface to deal with the seemingly important aspects of everyday life that crowd their inbox. Years pass, their children have children, and every time they gaze out that window, those old dreams flood their minds again. Big dreams. Dreams they’re afraid to try to reach,

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but yet linger. They may think they're too fat or too old or whatever their excuse is, they all have an excuse that prevents them from reaching those dreams. If a fifty-two year old, slightly fat man can swim the Amazon, what can you do? Those last two hours before sunset can often be the best swimming of the day.