

A 3,375-mile swim up the Amazon

From The Sunday Times - 28/01/2007 (730 words)

Overseas news

Harold Emert, Rio de Janeiro

A LONG-DISTANCE swimmer known as "the Fish Man" will start a daring 3,375-mile journey along the entire length of the Amazon this week, a feat that has never been attempted before because of its extraordinary dangers.

Martin Strel, 52, a Slovenian who has already swum the lengths of the Danube (1,877 miles), the Mississippi (2,360 miles) and the Yangtze (2,487 miles), was completing preparations this weekend for his toughest challenge by far.

On his way from Atalaya in Peru to Belem in Brazil -a marathon equivalent to swimming the Atlantic -he is expected to encounter venomous snakes, crocodiles, rapids, whirlpools and a 13ft tidal wave called the Pororoca.

His support team, travelling in three boats and filming a documentary on his progress, will carry buckets of fresh animal blood to pour into the water in order to distract potentially lethal predators, particularly the flesh-eating piranha.

"I'm a little afraid because the Amazon is a huge river filled with ferocious creatures, fish and insects," Strel said last week. "I'm going to swim that river or die trying -but I'm hoping for a happy ending."

Among the perils he faces is the candiru, or toothpick fish -otherwise known as the "vampire fish of Brazil" -which is said to swim up the penis and deep into the urethra where it raises a spine and feeds on blood and tissue. Only surgery will remove it.

Strel, who plans to swim 14 hours a day for 70 days, will wear a wetsuit and use copious quantities of Vaseline to protect himself. His support team includes two doctors, who will carry several pints of his blood in case he needs a transfusion.

The expedition, which will be broadcast live on the internet, will draw on advice from doctors and scientists around the world who will monitor his health.

A grizzled bear of a man, Strel, who is a national hero in Slovenia, may also come across poisonous fresh-water stingrays and aggressive bull sharks, which travel far up the river from the Atlantic and frequently attack swimmers. Other hazards range from tarantulas to malaria, dengue fever and rabies spread by bites from vampire bats.

Many experts on the river have expressed their fears for his safety. Sergio Bringel, a researcher at Brazil's National Institute for Amazon Research, said: "Anything is possible but the Amazon is far more treacherous than the Mississippi or the Yangtze.

"I wouldn't try and stop him but the risks are there -from being eaten by piranhas, drowning in the rapids or being attacked by cannibal tribes."

Strel, who will sleep on a support boat at night, has been training for two years, swimming three to four hours a day, deliberately putting on weight to guard against emaciation during his adventure. He boasts of a diet that allows him to eat anything he wants, washed down with copious quantities of red wine and Slovenian beer.

He told one interviewer about his fears during long river expeditions. "On a bad day you're fighting currents and big waves. Sometimes you're hungry and tired," he said.

"Other times you're swimming through polluted waters, dodging electrical storms and desperately trying not to think what else might be swimming alongside or under you. Water snakes are the things I hate most."

He will dive into the Amazon on Thursday at least 40lb overweight but if all goes according to schedule on the \$1m (Pounds 510,000) expedition, he will arrive at the coast on April 11. "I want to achieve the impossible," he said.

Born in the former communist Yugoslavia, Strel was a guitar student before becoming a professional marathon swimmer in 1978. He swam the Channel in 1997, a modest effort by comparison with what was to follow. In 2001 he broke the world record for an uninterrupted swim, covering 313 miles in a time of 84 hours 10 minutes.

He is also the only man to have swum from Tunisia to Italy, completing the 49 miles in less than 30 hours.

"As a young boy I was beaten a lot by my parents and schoolmasters," he confessed.

"This no doubt contributed greatly to my ability to ignore pain and endure."