

'Fish man' sets off on 3,375-mile swim down Amazon **From The Daily Telegraph - 02/02/2007 (569 words)**

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By Tom Leonard in New York

A LONG-DISTANCE swimmer known as "the fish man" launched his attempt yesterday to become the first person to swim the length of the Amazon.

Martin Strel, 52, has already tackled the Mississippi and Danube, each of which won him a place in the records book.

His previous longest journey, down the Yangtze, was 2,487 miles but he now plans to swim 3,375 miles from Atalaya in Peru to Belem in Brazil.

Mr Strel, a Slovenian, will face a terrifying array of obstacles in the Amazon's notorious waters.

The world's second longest river is home to piranha fish, crocodiles, bull sharks, poisonous freshwater stingrays and the toothpick fish, or candiru.

Also known as the "vampire fish of Brazil", the candiru can swim into a tiny body orifice - the penis is a favourite - where it raises a spine and feeds on blood and body tissue. Other perils include rapids, whirlpools and a 13ft tidal wave called the Pororoca.

A 45-man support team, travelling in three boats, will be armed with buckets of fresh animal blood to pour into the water to distract predators, particularly the piranha.

Mike Horn, the South African adventurer, has previously navigated 4,350 miles of the Amazon but kept himself buoyant with a hydrospeed float.

Mr Strel, who has trained for two years, put on an extra 40 pounds in weight in preparation. He plans to swim 14 hours a day for 70 days. He is wearing a wetsuit and covering himself in large amounts of Vaseline for added protection.

He will sleep on a support boat at night. "I'll sleep around three to four hours each night, then it's massage, doctors working on pains and so on," he said.

The expedition, which will be broadcast live on the internet, is costing more than pounds 500,000, the money coming from sponsors. The three-boat escort includes the main boat once used by the oceanographer Jacques Cousteau.

Mr Strel acknowledged that there were risks but said that it was his dream and that he would achieve it "or die trying".

He said: "I'm concerned of course, but if I think of that stuff I would never jump into the water." When asked about the toothpick fish, he said: "I never urinate straight into the water, I always urinate straight into my wetsuit." His first challenge is likely to come a week into his journey when he reaches the confluence of the Ucayali and Pachitea rivers, where whirlpools have recently overturned many large boats, on one of which 170 people died.

His team plans to send a boat ahead to scout the area to provide him with the least dangerous route. The Amazon basin is just beginning its rainy season and the river is already at flood stage and still rising. Floating debris and unpredictable currents will provide constant problems during the journey, and even his team are having problems with sunburn and heat exhaustion. Mr Strel aims to raise awareness of "universal messages", and stages his expeditions under the slogan of "swimming for peace, friendship and clean waters". He said that he was beaten many times as a child by his parents and teachers. "This no doubt contributed greatly to my ability to ignore pain, and endure," he said.