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Pirates, piranhas: the joy of swimming the Amazon

Martin Strel is nearing the halfway point of his mighty swim, Matthew Mohlke reports from the team boat

It's been 27 days since we left the relative safety of Atalaya, near the source of the world's greatest river, from where we began our attempt to navigate the length of the Amazon — all 3,375 miles of it. Nothing new in that, you say. Well yes, except that one of us, Martin Strel, would be swimming.

On that day none of us, least of all Martin — a man who has made a living from swimming everything from the Danube to the Mississippi — knew what lay in store for us. We all have some idea now.

As I write, sitting on the sweltering deck accompanied by the constant whine of mosquitos, we are about halfway to achieving the aim. But we have had more shaves with disaster than any of us could have imagined: attacked by machete-wielding locals, boat failures, whirlpools the size of tractor tyres and a run-in with armed drug smugglers. Spirits are still high, however, and Martin is ahead of schedule: he has covered 1,500 miles and if we continue at this pace will reach the Atlantic well within the 70 days we had initially set. Our aim is to arrive by April 11.

But the worry among everyone is that one more unexpected surprise could sink us permanently. "The jungle is crying because you are leaving," sang the locals as we paddled away from Atalaya, but at times over the past four weeks it's us that have been close to tears.

Our day aboard the main support boat begins early. We wake up at 5am and Martin likes to begin swimming about an hour later, before the heat of sun becomes too strong. A group of two or three of us, usually including me, Martin's 25-year-old son Borut and a Peruvian guide, board a smaller 14ft flat-bottomed dinghy to paddle alongside him while the main support boat lags some miles behind.

Martin will generally swim until mid-morning when we will moor up on the bank and wait for the larger boat to arrive. Lunch is simple: usually fish, chicken, rice and fruit (Martin has developed a craving for papaya foraged from the jungle). After resting he continues his swim from mid-afternoon until dusk. So far he has managed about 55 miles a day. That seems like a huge distance but much of the work is done by the current that is carrying him towards the ocean.

The risks are ever present. On the first day Martin, swimming close to the bank, disturbed a 6ft alligator resting beneath a giant lupuna tree. It quickly disappeared beneath the silty waters but for the next half hour no one on board the dinghy could relax.

Before the expedition we all ticked off the biggest threats with male bravado: piranhas — overrated; bull sharks — big softies; and so on. The only creature we were really afraid of was the candiru, a parasitic fish a couple of inches long that swims up the penis and locks itself into place with fins. The only way to remove it is by surgery. "It's the thing I'm most afraid of," Martin said. "On this journey, God needs to help us."

Creatures are not the only hazard. During the first week on the river high waters had eroded so much of the bank that giant trees were prone to come crashing down into the river. Dozens came down as we meandered downstream and heavy fog meant that dodging the minefield of branches of half-submerged trees slowed progress to a crawl.

The main support boat, which carries 22 people including a doctor and a documentary crew, is where we spend each evening dancing around to avoid the mosquitos. Every night we must check our beds for snakes and spiders. Last night we stupidly moored beneath an overhanging tree that must have been infested with fire ants. In the morning the ants had covered almost every inch of the boat and all of us had stinging welts over our bodies. It is not uncommon for snakes to drop from overhanging branches onto the deck, too, although our guides seem adept at slinging them overboard with sticks.

Martin's health is our main concern. At the end of every day his heart rate is checked by the doctor, who also clears his ears of mud from the river. He has also taken to swimming with a white pillowcase on his head with eyes and mouth cut out to avoid the sunburn that affected him badly in the first week. It gives him the appearance of a swimming ghost but thankfully that is the only real problem he has had apart from a bout of dehydration three days ago.

There is no doubt we are in one of the world's last great wildernesses, at the frontier of the modern world. Last week we met a police checkpoint (Martin showed them his passport from the river and they waved him through) but our only links with the outside world are by satellite phone and sporadic contact through e-mail. Every morning at 5.30am before the day's swim begins we gather around Borut's laptop and hope for news of home and our families — then invariably let out a groan when the satellite signal is lost.

The only other human contact we have is with the settlements dotted along the banks of the mighty river. These are towns booming and busting as seams of gold are discovered and then exhausted, or a new government-sponsored settlement is established and then, almost inevitably, fails.

We are welcomed like heroes most of the time with singing and dancing but the rule of law is patchy at best. Pirates are a real threat here, especially between Suspiro and Contamana in Peru, and our guide knows all about them: he had been the guide for Sir Peter Blake during his expedition to the Amazon in 2001 — at the end of that trip the yachtsman was murdered by river pirates as he prepared to leave Brazil.

Our expedition has already had one close shave. Three weeks ago near Iparia the main support vessel found what looked like a nice open stretch of shoreline against which to tie up. Everyone went on shore to explore — and then came running back a couple of minutes later pursued by a man with a gun and three women waving machetes. The women ran back into the forest — presumably to get reinforcements — while the man stood on the bank as the boat sped away, and made it abundantly clear we should never come back.

Our most frightening encounter came only a few days into the journey. It was dusk and we spotted two boats up ahead on the river. "Shhh!" hissed our Peruvian guide. "Everyone quiet. Narcos. If they see us, big problem. Please turn off the lights."

We did as we were told, and sat bobbing in the darkness, unsure of what to do next. Before the start of the trip there'd been talk of the Narcos — drug traffickers who work the stretch of the river around the town of Pucallpa. They take coca paste from Peru and deliver it to the

cartels of Colombia to be processed into cocaine, and they don't like anybody to get in their way. We caught up with Martin and together drifted past the boats on the other side of the river, with him hanging onto the other side of the boat, unseen.

Sometimes I wonder what we are doing here. And I wish I could swap the fire ants and mosquitos, the snakes and the constant noise of the river for a comfy bed in a proper house. But then I see Martin slipping into the water every morning and think: "I've got it pretty easy."

Martin Strel is now on the 32nd day of his swim, and at the time of going to press had already covered 1,590 miles.

Record-breaking run of the 'fish man'

As a mark of respect, the people living on the banks of the Amazon are now calling Martin Strel "El Hombre Paiche".

The Paiche is a local fish that can grow up to 14ft 6in long — the largest freshwater fish in the world. But this isn't the first time the 52-year-old Slovenian has swum one of the great rivers. He already has four record-breaking swims to his name:

Danube 2000 Strel was the first man to swim the Danube from near its source in the Black Forest to its estuary in the Black Sea: 1,867 miles in 58 days

Danube 2001 He returned to the Danube to set a new record for the longest continuous swim: 315 miles in 84 hours, 10 minutes

Mississippi 2002 Strel swam from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico: 2,360 miles in 68 days

Yangtze 2004 In China he broke his own distance-swimming record for the second time: 2,488 miles in 50 days