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Thane Burnett

Wed, April 4, 2007



Gators least of his worries

By THANE BURNETT

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR



This morning at 6 a.m., pudgy, middle-aged dad, Martin Strel, will wake up and know it's back to the endless rhythm and grind of the work he left unfinished yesterday.

He'll grab breakfast at 7 a.m. and, soon after, dive into a hectic commute. For the next 12 hours -- as it's been for the past two months -- Strel will try to keep up with the swift currents and blood-thirsty piranhas in a killer trade. Within days -- possibly as early as Saturday -- Martin, a Slovenian marathon swimmer, is on pace to become the first human to swim the entire length of the Amazon River.

It is not a stunt, but rather an amazing display of strength and perseverance that has seen him cover most of the 5,400 kms from Peru to Brazil -- surviving second degree burns, alligators, pirates as well as the blood chilling and blood sucking toothpick fish.

"I'm just a normal guy," the 53-year-old father of two says, in an exclusive question and answer with Sun Media, from an isolated section of the river that's a particular favourite hunting spot for pirates.

Under the cover of night -- watched only by the glossy stares of alligators which rise from the murk -- the bandits traditionally slip up, and then over, the sides of boats. When Martin and his crew pull into nearby creeks to sleep, armed guards, scan the brown water and thick jungle with search lights.

Among his past accomplishments, he lists Europe's Danube River, China's Yangtze and the Mississippi.

But it's the Amazon that has always waited for him. Though running second in length to the Nile, it's Earth's main artery, dwarfing all other rivers in might and volume.

To swim the length has previously been thought impossible.

Carried along in the fast current -- which at least one time pulled him under -- he is averaging 90 kms each day since starting off from its source, in Peru, on Feb. 1

When he began, even while passing a six-foot alligator, he worried more that it would be heavy rain which might slow him down. But it's been the beating from the equatorial sun which has blistered the skin from his face.

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"I've had second degree burns -- any worse and my face would feel like it was falling off," he explains.

To help, when he's not swimming the front crawl, he wears a mask cut from a pillow case, and jungle hat -- making him look more predatory than the alligators who have watched him from the bank.

He swims in the fastest part of the river, to avoid them and the piranhas who, he's been told, killed a child two years ago.

Sometimes, his support team tosses blood or meat on the opposite side of the boats, to distract them as Martin passes.

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"Every second on the Amazon is potential death, or the last moment of your life," he says. "Every day is a new danger. Today we're worried about pirates, yesterday was piranhas and so on."

To cover his own appetizing human scent, he covers his wet-suit with gasoline and cream.

SUNshine Girl



But even the wet-suit -- which he sometimes ignores -- rubs and bites into his flesh.

When he ends his day, his mouth is usually caked brown with dirt from waves which break against his face. His nose and upper cheeks are raw with scabs. And his eyes often sting from suntan lotion leaking into his goggles.

But it's been the small, circling schools of candiru -- or toothpick fish -- which worry his support team. The bloodsuckers swim up into body orifices and extend sharp barbs. Then they feed. Not even his wet-suit is good protection.

On Canoes:

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"This is a real danger on the river," he agrees. "So far I've been lucky. I pray to God that He stays with me on the river and I think the river will accept me, and not try to kill me."

He says he doesn't often feel fear in the uncertain waters. "A man can't swim the Amazon and have second thoughts," he says. "You have to be ... focused ."

As he swims, he says his mind leaves the wild Amazon behind, and he visits his mother, wife and children. He thinks about his team on their boats and his own childhood.

As he presses toward the end, the "Big River Man" now feels the change in the water from the nearing ocean.

Not everything in the river has been against him. From the start, off and on, as small wooden boats trail him, in the water he's been joined by pink river dolphins.

Amazingly, he has built up such a mechanized routine, that he actually takes short naps, a few minutes at a time, as he goes. His body just keeps swimming, though sometimes in the wrong direction.

He is heading to Belem, in the northern part of Brazil.

He's getting there -- along with the swift current -- by using 30,000 strokes each day.

He likens his mission to an office worker, who toils at a desk for 12 hours each day.

"I'm just a normal guy," he says, whose daily grind is just wilder than most.

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