

**W**hen I first read about Martin Strel swimming the Amazon in February 2007, his predicament took me back to a report years ago of an elephant spotted 50 miles out to sea in the Bay of Bengal. It had lost all sense of direction. As a passing ship drew near, the crew noticed blood in the water and realised that the elephant was surrounded by sharks. It could offer no form of resistance and swam on desperately, nor could the sailors save it, and they looked on in helpless silence as the animal was torn apart and devoured in the waves.

There are sharks in the Amazon, too. It is home to the bull shark, widely believed to have killed more humans than any other shark species. But this is only one of a grotesque variety of deadly fish found there. Some are even more lethal than the piranha. Only six inches long, with their pugilists' thick lips, saw-sharp teeth and red-gleaming eyes, piranha live in shoals and attack in concert. But most feared is the candiru, a vicious little fish that penetrates any orifice available, then locks itself into your entrails with a spike and feeds off your blood. Only surgery will remove it. And there are stingrays and anacondas lurking in the shallows, and the muscular undulations of the electric eel that can stun and drown a man in deeper water. Crocodiles cruise in search of prey, as dark specks on the surface. Long, poisonous snakes can appear out of nowhere, while giant catfish have been known to swallow dogs and children.

All the latent violence and mystery of the Amazon are summed up by an incident that occurred when a photographer I know accompanied the band the White Stripes to Manaus in north-west Brazil. As they walked along the river bank one evening, a fisherman waved them into his house, which floated on logs like all the houses there to guard against flooding. They were led through the interior to a veranda beyond, a series of logs tied together, with a railing poised over a metal pen.

As they looked down, they saw nothing at first. Then the fisherman tossed in a bucketful of fish and meat. Soon they could make out a pair of green eyes and a mouth opening wide to swallow down the morsels. The monster's face remained deep in the water, but a series of black muscular coils rose above the surface and endlessly twisted round each other, with

a noise and violence that reverberated through the water. The logs below their feet started moving and turning around, so they were forced to cling to the railing. Then it slowly disappeared. It could have been a python or an eel or a fish, nothing was clear. No one living locally had seen anything like it. 'It's still growing,' murmured the fisherman in broken English, then he added: 'No one knows what lies at the bottom of the Amazon.'

So I thought of the swimmer there in this congested waterway, alone and suspended flat on the surface, a vast hunk of meat surrounded by all these voracious predators, attracting their attention with the splash of his mechanical crawl, in water so black that his hand, stretched out, became invisible, and I wondered what chance there was of his ever making it.

He did survive, and I fly out at the end of October to Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, to meet him. The night I arrive, I walk down to the old part of the city and the riverside. The pace of the river intensifies as it swirls around the pillars supporting the bridge. Waves slam into the brick walls at the edge. Strel swam here early in his career and I look down on the water and concentrate on the scene, as if it offers up a hint of the

challenges he would face in his later, greater swims. It gave me a foretaste of the Danube, the Mississippi, the Yangtze, and the Amazon.

I had arranged to meet Martin Strel and his son Borut at 10 o'clock the next morning at my hotel. At 10 o'clock there are three people waiting by the front door. They certainly look the part – including a middle-aged muscular man in a tracksuit and quite possibly his athletic, computer-minded son. But as they pay me no attention I feel they must be waiting for someone else. Eventually, after 20 minutes, I ask the younger man why they are there. 'To meet someone from *The Observer*,' he replies, so we shake hands and retire to the bar for a drink.

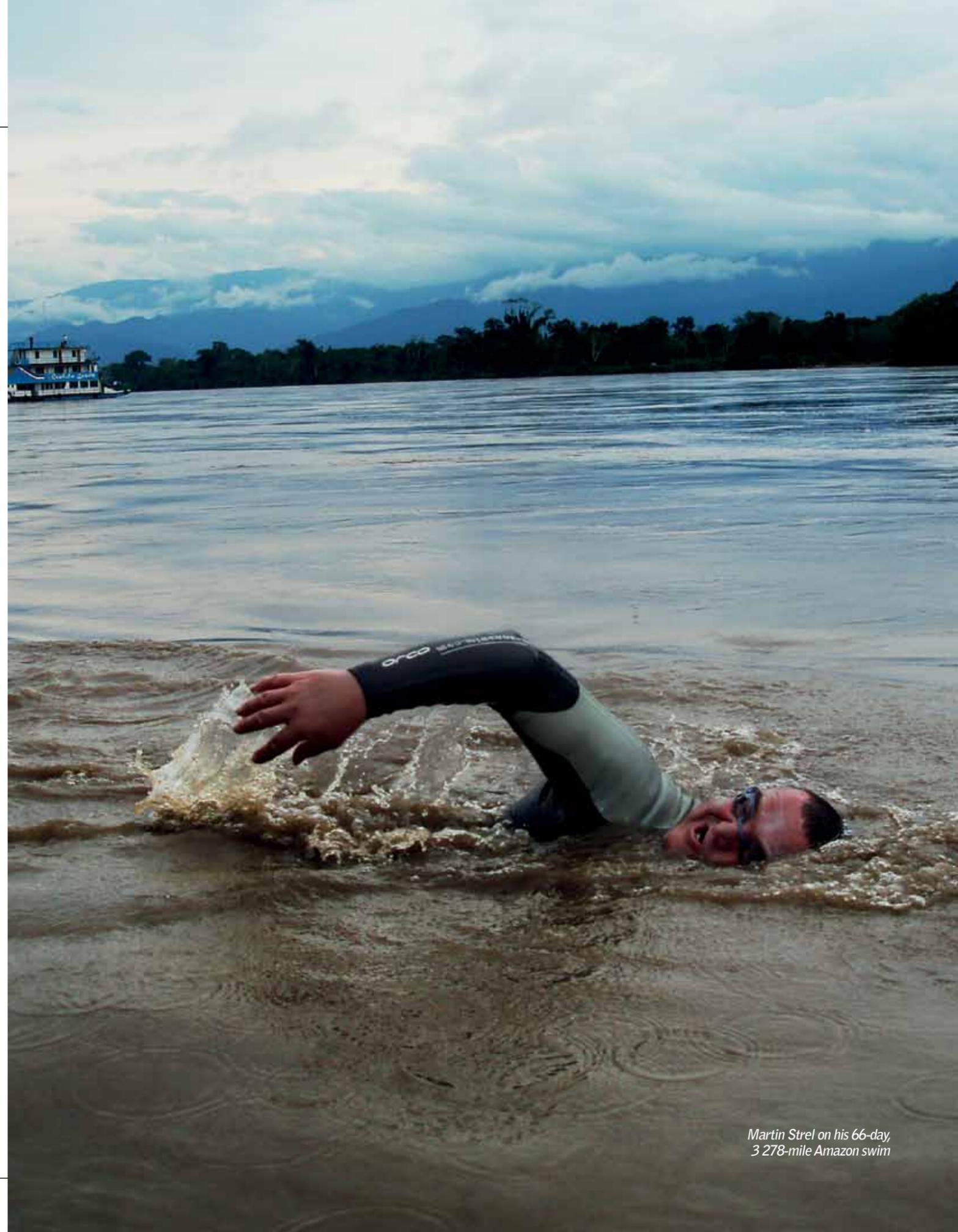
We then drive into the countryside, to an area where the swimmer has always lived, about an hour from the capital. We search for the pond where he learned to swim at age five. A housing estate has grown up around it and, after many inquiries, we finally find the pond tucked away in someone's backyard.

Strel seems to be able to drive at any speed, and park wherever he likes. The police always recognise him, then smile and wave him on. Presidents come and go, but it is Strel's performances as an ►

# SWIMMING WITH SHARKS

Another in the series of timeless sports features. This, from *The Observer* in January 2009, features a Slovenian who devours the world's most dangerous rivers, stopping for red wine at lunchtime

WORDS: CHARLES SPRAWSON MAIN PHOTO: MARTIN STREL SWIMMING



Martin Strel on his 66-day, 3 278-mile Amazon swim

athlete, the embodiment of strength and resolve, that have been embraced as a symbol of hope by so many Slovenians.

Next we drive across to his house, shaped like a Swiss chalet, with a pointed roof and a timbered balcony on the upper floor overlooking long views of the rolling, wooded hills. When recovering from his river swims, he retires here to play guitar and shoot arrows with a long bow at a distant target. His wife lives in a flat in a village nearby.

He shows me his trophies, piled high in boxes behind a locked door. Among them are a blue bowl from Italy, medallions from China with pictures of Mao swimming in the Yangtze, and the gold keys to various American cities he passed through when he swam 2 360 miles down the Mississippi in 2002 – St Louis, Baton Rouge, New Orleans.

Strel is about 6ft tall, with a heavy, handsome head supported on a wrestler's neck and a vast torso coated with fat and muscle. All his pace and power derive from his back and arms, which are relaxed in the air, with the fingers spread apart, then bend below the surface. It is not a style that takes one's breath away, but anyone who dived off the bank on his river swims – and there were many, mostly local reporters – then tried to keep up with him for two or three miles, soon dropped out.

His original ambition was to become a gymnast, but he grew too big. His coach advised him to concentrate on swimming. After he left school he moved to Ljubljana, lived alone, tried his hand at a variety of jobs and as a form of release gambled and taught guitar at the local music academy. But he never forgot the advice of his coach. He swam in the local pools, which he hated, then branched out into the rivers around him.

Eventually in 1978, at 24, Strel turned professional and became part of an elite group of marathon swimmers who were invited to compete for prize money around the world, in races between Capri and Naples, along the Suez Canal, in the rivers of South America and the lakes of the North. He was now earning a living as a swimmer and locked into an arduous sequence of engagements that he could not afford to turn down.

## A loner, Strel preferred to do things his own way. He resists being part of a crowd

Marathon swimmers are a breed apart. Above all, they look different. When compared to the long, sleek, elastic, streamlined bodies of Olympic swimmers, they barely look like athletes at all. Photographs reveal their grizzled faces, their stocky frames and stubby legs, their pendulous breasts and protruding stomachs. Bison rather than gazelles. Some of the best look middle-aged, and often are. Strel swam the Amazon at 52.

And their mentality is different. Their solitary swimming, the long hours spent semi-submerged, induce a lonely, meditative state of mind. Much of their training takes place inside their heads, immersed as they are in a continuous dream of a world underwater. So intense and concentrated are their conditions that they become prey to delusions and neuroses beyond the experience of other athletes.

The conditions they face are extreme. You read of swimmers battling through waves for 30 hours, then ending up in the grip of currents that force them into industrial harbours, streaked with oil, with the ebbing and flooding tides

depositing tons of sewage into the water. They have to swim through sharks, jellyfish, oil slicks, bilge from boats.

Then they emerge from the water with their faces enlarged and transformed into some semblance of fungus, with swollen cheeks and lips and tongue. Some swim for 25 miles, then collapse in the last 30 yards.

Martin Strel is not one to be affected by emotional stress, or fantasies and hallucinations. It did not take him long to become disenchanted with his role as part of a troupe of entertainers. A loner, he preferred to do things his own way. He resists being part of a crowd – he had deserted from the army 37 times. So he broke away and embarked on the series of solo swims that have made him so remarkable.

He swam the Channel in 1997, then became the first man to swim across the Mediterranean, from Tunisia to Italy, the same year. Then, between 2000 and 2004, he swam the Danube, the Mississippi, the Parana river in Argentina and the deep canyons of the Yangtze, each successive swim a new world record. ►



*Strel wears a pillowcase over his face for extra protection against the harsh elements*

He also broke the record for the longest continuous swim, non-stop, 313 miles in the Danube, though he slept occasionally while still revolving his arms. But these swims, fantastic though they were, now seem mere preludes to his attempt on the largest, most dangerous river in the world.

Strel arrived at Atalya in Peru, where the Amazon begins, towards the end of January 2007. No doubt, immediately when he got there, he searched out the river, then stooped down, raised the water to his lips and tested its quality – a ritual

*Strel endures the perils of the Amazon as he swims at night*



he performs whenever he comes to a new town. He watched fishermen bring up in their nets strange, hideous fish he had never seen before and shuddered. After months of preparation he was now ready to start his journey to the Atlantic.

On the morning of 1 February, Strel walked into the water. He would swim for 66 days, 3 278 miles, across Peru and Brazil, with a short break each day for lunch and some red wine, and a few hours' sleep on the boat at night. Every day he would swim twice the length of the Channel. He was wearing a wet suit, principally to keep out the candiru, the 'vampire of the Amazon', whose intrusions he dreaded. But it would offer no protection from the jaws of the bull shark or piranha.

He started in a tropical rainstorm, which did not affect him as he loves swimming in the rain. Besides, it would be to his advantage, as now the current would flow much faster. He set out with a man in a kayak on each side of him. They made for the middle of the channel, about 100ft deep, where the water flowed more powerfully than at the edge. He

also wanted to avoid the stingrays and crocodiles that favoured the shallows.

Strel told me he was always calling out to the fish, insisting he was their friend. Perhaps his sympathy with water extended to the fish in it. Porpoises and dolphins swam around him for most of the way. The natives called him 'arapaima man', because of his resemblance, in his black wetsuit, to the black-scaled fish found only in the Amazon, which, at up to 15ft long, is the largest freshwater fish in the world.

Strel often felt huge shapes brush against his skin, but he would not see what they were. To keep his mind off what lay beneath him, he tried not to look down, he told me, and diverted his imagination from the horrors below with memories of his family – he also has a daughter, Nina – and their life together. Those in the boat could see him mouthing words in the water and often bursting into laughter.

The insects proved more horrifying than anything in the water. The flooding was the worst in the Amazon for 100 years. The swollen waters had caused

## The psychological effects of darkness are terrible. The imagination goes haywire

the banks to cave in, and much of the gloomy, tangled forest was now part of the river. Tarantulas and scorpions dropped off trees and floated down on leaves. He could not see them coming, as the current was with him. Larvae burrowed under his skin. Wasp stings made his head hum for days. Great crawling millipedes hurtled along on logs, as did muniri, the most primitive of ants, which squeak like a mouse and are known to kill dogs. Large black birds flew down to peck at his face. He had to wear a pillowcase over his head, with slits for the eyes and mouth, because he had second-degree burns from the sun.

If the current made him veer to the side, he had to avoid the spikes of palms that lacerate the skin. Vast trees were ripped out of the ground and floated past him downstream.

Around every corner they expected to meet river pirates, who prowl the Amazon in hovercraft that can outpace any patrol boat. The pirates would telephone them most nights, to threaten them and try to break their nerve, but they never materialised. After reaching the official finishing line, Strel decided to swim six miles further, to the port of Belém. To catch the current, he would have to swim at night, the most dangerous time to be in the water. The psychological effects of darkness are terrible. The imagination goes haywire. The lights on the boat attract every type of fish and there are more fish in an estuary than anywhere else, a mixture of freshwater and seawater, and particularly sharks. But he carried on and reached Belém before dawn. He had swum through hell and re-emerged to tell us all about it. ■

**Strel, who is known as the Big River Man, travels the world as a motivational and environmental speaker, and conducts global swimming adventure tours. He competed in the 2012 Midmar Mile.**