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Yangtze's distance lures Slovenian swimmer's plunge

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Martin Strel may not know much about the Yangtze River, but he thinks he knows to how to beat it.

The professional marathon swimmer from Slovenia is about to launch his latest bid to conquer another of the world's famous rivers. This time in China.

Strel, who will turn 50 this summer, plans to spend about two months swimming the majority of the 4,600-kilometre river that in many ways is a symbol for China.

He will swim during the day and break at night to sleep in a boat, only to start again the next morning from the spot where he finished the day before.

The aquatic journey - organized in co-operation with China International Sport Travel Company - will likely start at the beginning of June in Batang in Southwest China's Sichuan Province and end in China's financial hub Shanghai.

"Ni hao, wo shi Ma Ding, wo xiang yao you chang jiang (Hi, I am Martin and I want to swim Yangtze River)," Strel declared yesterday in Beijing in hesitant Chinese.

The bulky Slovenian has a rich experience in marathon swimming.

He conquered the Danube River in Europe in 2000, and set the Guinness world record by swimming 3004 kilometres in 58 days. He beat his own record two years later with another mighty challenge - swimming the 3,797 kilometres from the Mississippi's source to its estuary in 68 days.

He also holds the non-stop swimming record - finishing 504.5 kilometres in 84 hours and 10 minutes in the Danube in 2001.

His treks have also taken him to South America where he swam 1,765 kilometres in 23 days in the Parana River.

But the Slovenian, a former guitarist, confessed that the swim along the Yangtze will be "one of the most dangerous ones of my life."

He has to skip the source section where the river is fuelled by the chilly melting ice water from Qingzang Plateau.

Although safety is given top priority, the courageous Slovenian said he will take some risks that may endanger his life during the lengthy swim.

Among them will be the hazardous gorges and even the dams crammed with boats.

The unexpected rapid flows of the river and the traffic could pose another big obstacle to Martin's success.

Despite the difficulties, Strel has no plans to back out.

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He swims for peace, friendship and clean waters and maintains an optimistic mood.

"I have tasted the water in the river. It's good. I want more people to know it so I swim," he said half-jokingly.

He is looking for Chinese partners who can swim part or the full length of the river with him.

Although the starting time is yet to be decided, Strel said he plans to reach Wuhan on July 16, the anniversary of the day China's former leader Chairman Mao Zedong swam across 38 years earlier.

"I know little about Chairman Mao, but I am surprised that so many people have swum across the river," said Strel who won a competition at the International Yangtze River Crossing Swimming Festival in 1993 in Wuhan.

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