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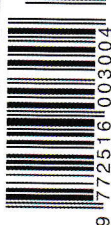
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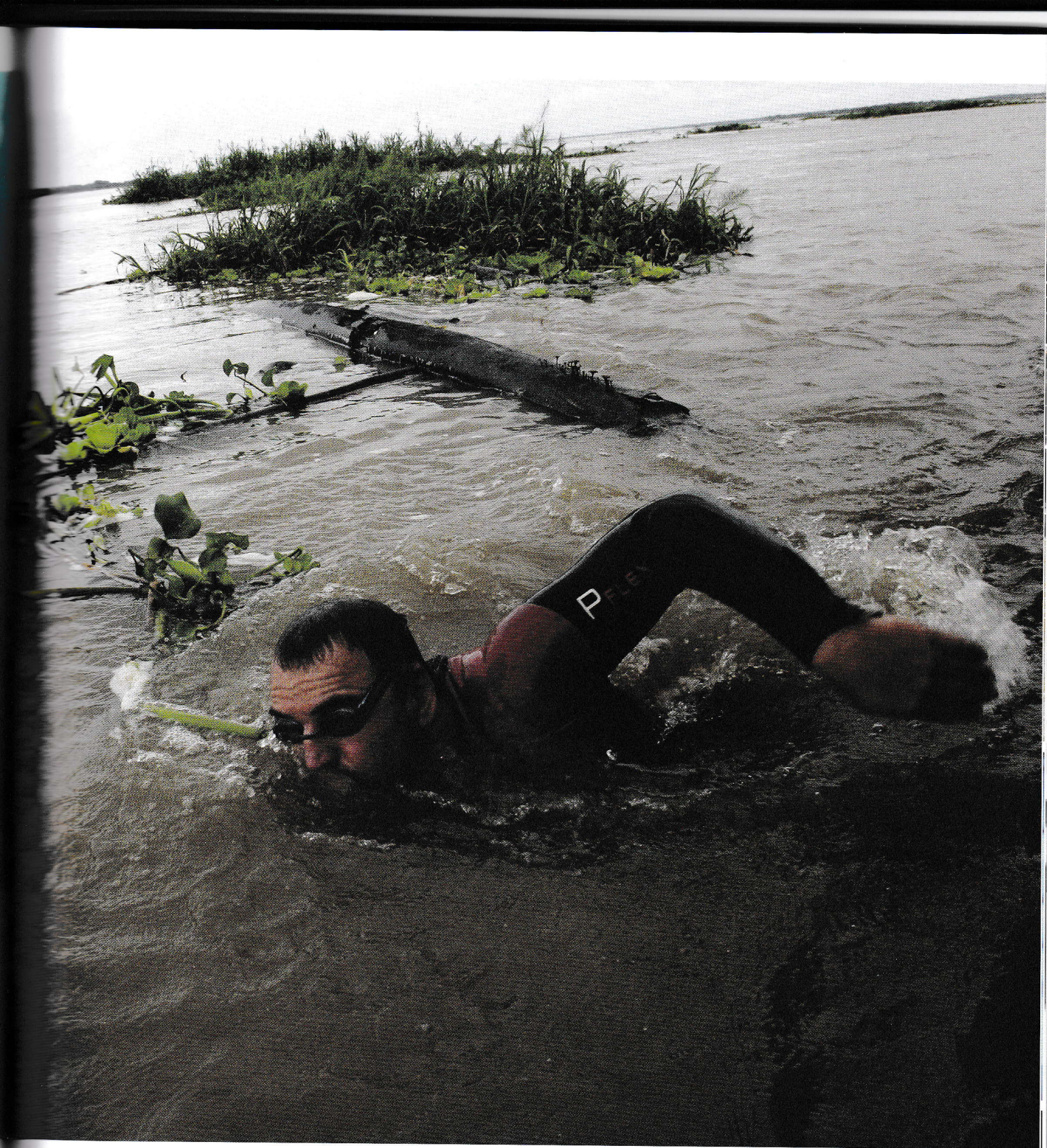


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BIG OCEAN MAN

He has swum the Yangtze, the Mississippi and, most famously, the entire Amazon River, but Martin Strel's next challenge will be his greatest by far



There are infinite ways in which a swimmer can motivate themselves to produce their best possible performance, be it an endurance event first-timer or a 50m freestyle world champion, but the sight of Martin Strel attaching jumpstart cables to his scalp in swimming documentary *Big River Man* redefined the concept of finding a spark.

In parts resembling the nightmarish river journey in *Apocalypse Now*, *Big River Man* (2009) chronicles Martin's

incredible world-record swim of the length of the Amazon, 5,268km from Atalaya in Peru to Belém in Brazil, highlighting the destruction of the Amazon rainforest and perils faced by the indigenous communities along the way.

Now 69, Martin recalls the harrowing scene with the car battery: 'For me it was so hard. How to swim every day, not sleeping, not eating so much... I thought, I'm losing my power. I was talking to the Moon, to the sky, to everyone, to please





'If you compare marathon swimming and other extreme endurance sports... they all go through similar things: hallucinating, illusions...'

try and find a little. Then when I came on the boat I found these cables...'

The rest is history, Guinness World Record history. The Slovenian superstar became the holder of the longest ever open-water swimming journey, adding to his world record for the longest ever continuous swim (505km over 84hrs in the River Danube in 2001).

Incidentally, the Amazon is also home to the world's largest fresh-water predator, the alligator-esque black caiman, but more on the dangers he faced later.

Family ties

Despite having previously swum the length of the Danube, the Yangtze and the Mississippi rivers, Martin's Amazon swim was on a higher plane and changed the life of both himself and his son, Borut, his manager. Borut narrates *Big River Man* and his mixture of exasperation and compassion for his dad as he descends into near madness betrays the manner of someone who knows to expect the unexpected.

Borut, now in his early 40s and a family man living in the Midlands, runs Strel Swimming Adventure Holidays with

Martin. He says: 'We're still here, we're still talking about it 16 years later, so we are still happy.'

In 2007, Borut was 26 and happy to take a hiatus from his computer studies to accompany his father and try to keep him safe on the adventure: 'I was exactly the right age that I could do with my life what I want, so it was an excellent time to just let it go and see what happens, but obviously there were a lot of opportunities.'

Big River Man was one of those. Directed by American John Maringouin, the Strels had to trust in his vision and how he told the story. Endurance swimming in itself can be a monotonous activity, especially to watch, so the question became how to make it dramatic.

'I think for a swimmer it's very important to try to present his psychological aspect, which I think is very strong in marathon swimming and other extreme endurance sports,' says Borut. 'If you compare it with running, climbing, rowing, they all go through similar things, you know: seeing things, hallucinating, illusions, the fourth dimension. This is not uncommon. But how do you present this in a motion picture?'



'It's mentally hard, you know, swimming with bull sharks, crocodiles, snakes. It's murky water, you don't see anything. What is in the water?'

Fortunately, in Martin the film-makers had a larger-than-life, bear of a man who had character and willpower beyond the imagination of normal people. He also drank alcohol on his journey in the way others take in gels and high carbs.

Martin explains why he chose to do the swim: 'We need the Amazon, the Amazon River, the Amazon rainforest. Everyone knows it's not so simple swimming the Amazon. This is a very, very risky swim.'

'Mentally, this is a little different, because it's mentally hard, you know, swimming with bull sharks, crocodiles, snakes. It's murky water, you don't see anything. What is in the water? Lots of piranha, candiru (better known as the 'penis fish'), electric fish. With lots of parasites and tropical diseases, thieves, pirates...

'So, everything is against you. We have to fight every day against everything and then, by the end of the day, you have to be healthy to get ready for the next day.'

Bitter sweet

The elation of reaching Belém after 66 days of hell are tempered by Martin's collapse. The thousands who wait to

greet him and thank him for the publicity he has given the Amazon's plight instead watch as he's rushed to hospital with blood pressure so high he is in imminent danger of a heart attack. He is in a very bad way, and for a time you wonder if he will survive.

'I was one of the happiest people even though there was a tough situation,' he says, in total understatement, as he recalls his physical and psychological recovery. His blood was contaminated with parasites and he was so weak it took him almost seven months to fully recover.

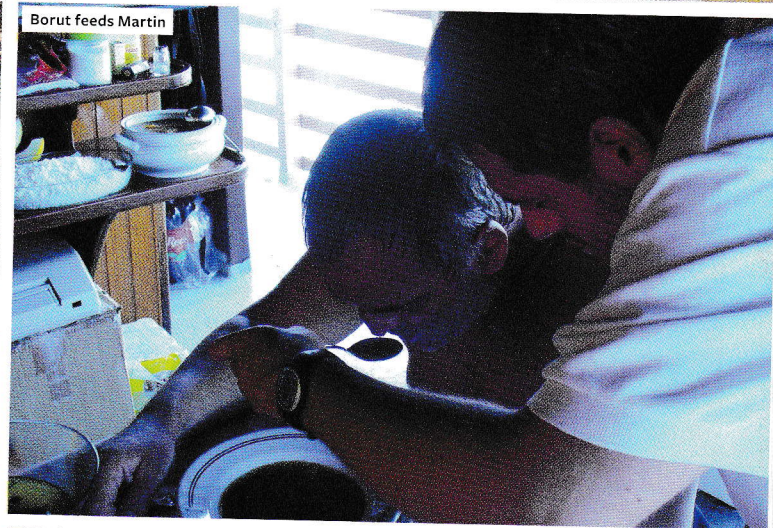
But it was worth it. 'The book [*The Man Who Swam the Amazon*] is all around the world, lots of people read the book, that makes me very happy,' he says. 'And then we have a very successful movie too. It's not just like other movies, swimming the Amazon – it's a psychological story.'

Big River Man won the cinematography award at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival and helped catapult Martin to global fame, where he was able to push his environmental message to friends in high places.

Martin believes his feat helped inspire the Amazon Fund, a Brazilian government fund aimed at reducing emissions



After 66 days Martin makes it to Belém!





from deforestation and forest degradation and sustainable management of forests, which was launched in 2009, but was later axed by Brazil's right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro. His successor, Lula da Silva, has reactivated it.

Going the extra mile

Now, Martin has a new mission – saving the oceans from microplastics and other destructive human by-products. To do it, he plans to embark on what he calls the World Swim. Over 18 months, he hopes to circumnavigate the planet, swimming up to 18,000km, if sponsors can be found and the estimated £35-40million budget is raised.

His mission statement is 'swimming for peace, friendship and clean waters', a sentiment that is easy to get behind. The focus will be as much on the state of the world's oceans as his epic swim, so his team will be monitoring, sampling and analysing the waterways as they go.

'I have swum now over 150 different countries,' he says. 'I understand what's going on and the biggest problem with the whole world today is pollution. We have to stop doing this pollution because we are destroying ourselves.'

Borut adds: 'It will be more than just a swim. It will be an environmental research expedition that will be tied into his swimming... But because it has such a large scale, it has several elements that need putting together before Martin actually starts swimming.' The swimming element is the last

piece of the puzzle. Unlike his river swims, where it was just a single boat accompanying him, the World Swim will be a feat of logistics, with a much larger escort, several teams and everyone contracted and compensated.

'The idea is to have several smaller projects inside the greater project,' says Borut.

The current route for the World Swim is mind-boggling. Martin will start from Los Angeles, swim south to Mexico, though the Panama Canal, the Caribbean, across the Atlantic to west Africa, north to the UK and Scandinavia, then back through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal to the Red Sea, then onto India, southeast Asia, China and Japan, then down to Australia, Polynesia and back across the Pacific to the US, finishing with the Catalina Channel swim back to LA.

If you think it is fanciful, a pipe dream, remember this is the man who has swum the entire length of the greatest rivers of the world.

The problem is, however, he will start the swim aged 70. Which begs an obvious question – how?

'Even though I'm 69, I'm still ready, no mistake. I am totally, completely healthy,' he declares. 'And I swim twice a day, every single day, like 30 to 40 years ago, the same speed, so I'm ready. Only what we need now is money.'

Find out more about World Swim at martin-strel.com and worldswim.global.