

## Report on Sabac Swim in Serbia

Nick Adams (5<sup>th</sup> August 2002)

Dear All,

I got back this morning from my little jaunt to Serbia. Here is my story:

It all came as a bit of a shock really, as I sent in a tentative yes to join the race and it all sort of happened from there! First I thought the exorbitant cost of the flights, and the lack of availability would have been sufficient excuse, but the organiser rings the head of Air Yugoslavia and gets me on, so it looked like I was going!

As most people are aware I have done very little training this season, my longest session being a monstrous 25 mins in Dover Harbour! So I was due to fly out on Friday, so I devise a cunning training programme that I felt I could complete. I trained for 1 hour on Thursday morning in the Serpentine lake in Hyde Park, and then did cheeky taper to 30 minutes on Friday morning! I got painful chaff marks from Thursday's swim! Maybe I over did it! However I felt pretty confident about completing the 18.8km swim!

Along with the arduous training I did my mental training by ringing Ali, Freda and Cliff. There was a lot of laughing from them, one tip: "Swim your own race", and very little sympathy for me over the situation I had got myself into!

Flight uneventful; no fat or talkative people to sit next to.

Manage to get a visa at Belgrade airport and filter out into the awaiting crowd. Am met by 2 chaps, one speaks no English, but grins a lot with his 3 front teeth. The other speaks a very little bit of English. They lead me out to where they had left their car, it had gone! Naturally they suspected the police, I thought local villains, but I was very wrong! In most places if your parking ticket expires you get a ticket, but here the police had somehow managed to get into the car, and then driven it away! After a heated discussion with, I suspect a lot of naughty swear words, and the handing over of money we were off towards Sabac, pronounced Shab-atz.

The trip to the town (80km way) was fairly uneventful, the countryside was very pleasant, very flat and there were fields of corn and sunflowers. I did however get very excited when I saw a TANK, you don't see many of them in the streets of London! They didn't seem to share my enthusiasm for military hardware!

Arrive at Hotel Sloboda, the best in town, a 3\* place. Very rundown. My bath had many holes in it, not the bog-standard 1, it was quite interesting having a shower in it, but I didn't risk having a bath!

I Got given my ticket at reception allowing me my free supper. I went into the restaurant, no menu, this chap just comes out with a big tray with main plate, bowl of boiled cabbage (I think) and quarter of a water melon. The meat on the main dish was flat and tough, I

tried to identify it with no luck, even with the aid of animal impressions and an unimpressed waiter! This was the last time I went to the hotel restaurant.

Food did become an issue for me. I had taken out a bag of chocolate bars, many milky-ways etc. As it was very hot they became rather liquid so I drank a Mars Bar and then went to bed!

I did try one more attempt at local food during the weekend. I went to a restaurant that looked fairly decent and was presented with a menu which was completely indecipherable. Not only was it in a foreign language, but it was in Cyrillic script! The waiter duly arrived back at my table expectantly, I had not had sufficient time to choose a local delicacy, this would have taken months of intensive Yugoslavian lessons, so I point to half way down the left hand column and wait to see what arrives! I was not in luck, it was once again a flat piece of meat! I still couldn't identify it! I ate enough to satisfy the waiter and left. The golden arches of McDonalds were going to have to feed Gold Card Nick during his stay!

I must comment on the quality of the Serbian women. They are splendid. You might think the contrary after seeing footage of refugee camps, war victims, or the plethora of Serbians begging in London. But take it from me, they are stunning!

Saturday involved many meetings and press conferences. I understood nothing in any of them. I just sat there and stood up occasionally and waved when everyone was looking at me and clapping, thankfully I was following someone else's lead on this one! We all had to have medicals, which made me laugh as they were done by 2 medical personnel that could easily have been from some dirty adult movie! The girl was tall, blonde and very attractive and dressed in small black leather miniskirt with a small red top. She also had a white coat loosely covering her outfit, I suspect to give the medical image. The chap, perhaps a doctor, well he did have a stethoscope, was in black jeans and grey t-shirt. The medical involved the taking of our names, ages and home town, and the chap listened to our breathing for a couple of seconds. I was thankfully given the all clear!

Saturday evening we had to go to a civic reception in another town, this involved more speeches that I didn't understand. During the entire speech routine, the Bulgarian camp chatted away very noisily! Maybe I am just a very anal teacher, but I thought this was rude! We also had the drawing of lots for boats; I'd no idea what was going on!

Morning of the swim. We all get bussed to the start. I have no idea about the mechanism of the start, so do the only sensible thing and lie down for a snooze in the shade. I also had not seen a map of the course, but I did know which way down the river we were meant to be swimming. I was woken up with 10mins until the start. Quickly drink a warm milky-way and one more warm mars bar, grab two hands of grease, one for under each arm, grab my goggles and hat and follow the rest of the swimmers. I realised I was in a bit of trouble when I saw that they were all in full-body gimp suits (Speedo Shark Suits), and hear that most had been at the European Championships the week before doing the 25km! I feared my training would not put me amongst the medals! We all had to wait on the banks of the river, they were all chatting away (nothing I could understand or eavesdrop on), all I was doing was grinning stupidly at a rather pretty Macedonian girl!

Jump in, water too hot: 26C. Was having a quick pee, and then suddenly they all start swimming, so I stop what I was doing and get swimming. I have to admit I was not prepared, I got a chronic stitch after 10 mins of swimming with the lead pack, and almost died, so I slowed down and start to bumble along to the annoyance to my support team. They soon realise that whatever they do, I was going to swim at my own pace. As people had told me "Swim your own race".

I have to comment that my support vessel was the smallest out of the 30 or so boats! 2 hours in, major disaster, my boat has engine problems and we have to stop! I was quite thankful for the rest, but did not let on! I decided that I was going to wait for the next swimmer to catch up and swim with them until my boat could catch up. Wonderfully the next swimmer happened to be the lovely Macedonian girl. Swam with her for 15 mins and then my boat meets up with me.

Rest of race fairly uneventful. Quite a nice little swim really. At the finish there were literally thousands of people, and I am not exaggerating. It was amazing. I pottered home in 3hrs 36mins, don't for one minute think I was shifting it down the river, the river had a current of about 1km per hour, so it wasn't an 18.8km swim.

I was one place away from getting some prize money, the first 5 got some but not me! There was a big prize giving ceremony, and then we were allowed back to the hotel. I must admit that it was all a bit of a shock to my body!

This email is getting far too long, I must stop soon. As you might expect there was more Golden Arches action for me, and a couple of beers.

The whole experience was excellent fun and they did really appreciate someone coming all the way from the UK. I would be very keen to go again next year and this time it would be cool if a few of us could go for a good weekend out.

It was run by a chap called Mitch, who is a legend in his own right. He has done all sorts of swims around the world, including one 160km swim down the Danube! It is always nice to meet such people around the world that have such a passion for sport and have such a healthy outlook on life. He is someone I would like to keep in touch with, and would like to support by going again. The feeling of being part of a huge swimming family is apparent, and is a pleasure.

Hope this email has not bored too many of you. By the way I was gutted on the trip back to the airport by lack of naughty police or tanks!

Your intrepid reporter,

Nick