





OVERCOMING *adversity*

Jaimen Hudson's stunning drone footage of marine life is known around the world. Having been confined to a wheelchair since a motorbike accident, his story is one of overcoming adversity and reconnecting with the ocean.

Words by Nane Steinhoff

Photographs by Jaimen Hudson

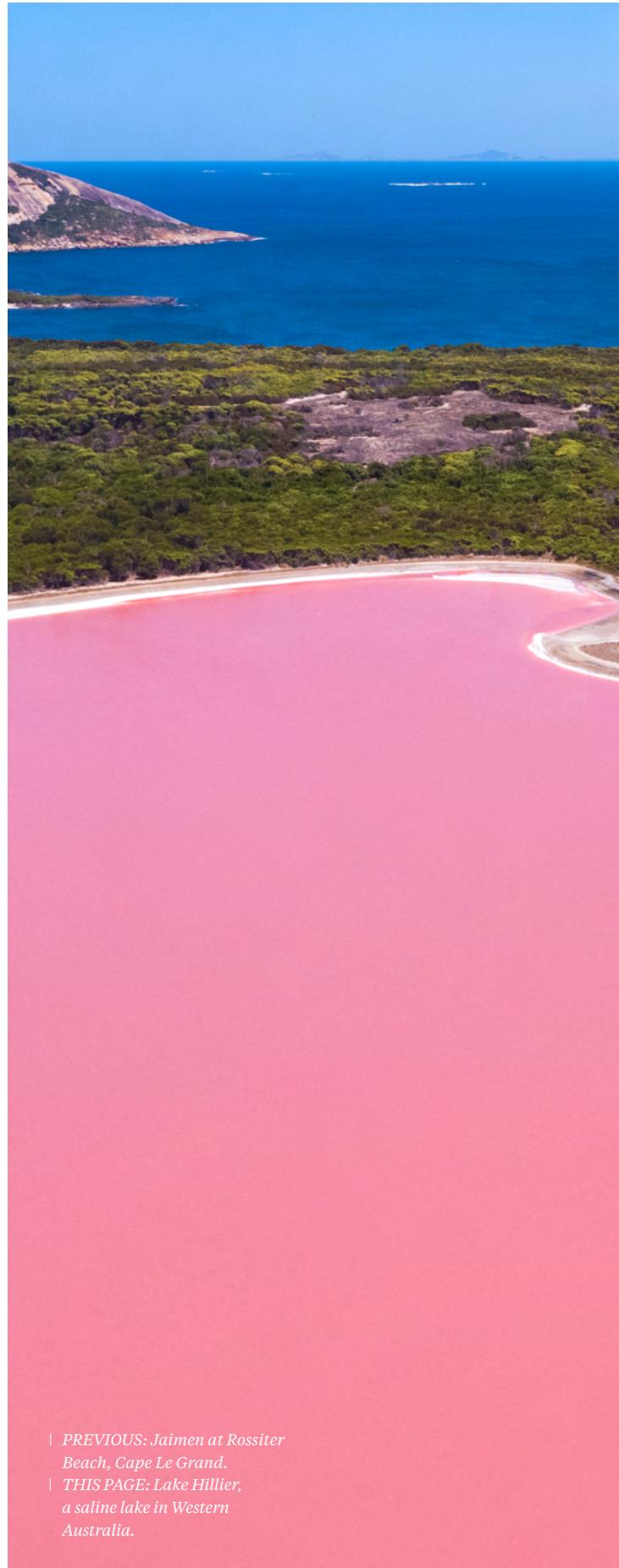
A soon as my lips touched the saltwater, all the memories of being in the ocean came flooding back to me. I felt at ease almost instantly.”

Turquoise, crystal-clear waters teeming with life, rugged coastlines and lonely beaches, raw deserts and empty dirt roads – Western Australia is a dramatic place with unprecedented natural beauty; a dream for divers, surfers, beach lovers and nature enthusiasts alike. While seeing the region from the ground is a visual treat that leaves most speechless, experiencing it from the air goes far beyond that. Jaimen Hudson, a pioneering drone cinematographer from Esperance in Western Australia, is doing exactly that. He is showing the region from above to millions of people around the world, communicating its beauty in a very special way.

Known as one of the first professional drone operators showcasing whales, dolphins, surfers and Western Australia from the air, Jaimen's stunning images and videos sport vivid colours and rare and intimate wildlife sightings. Since he started operating drones, he has accumulated more than 250 million views on his social media channels by capturing breathtaking drone footage of the region's beaches and remote, crystal-clear seascapes. Constantly patrolling the coastline near Esperance, he searches for seasonal whale populations, dolphins and many other species from above, while seeking to connect people through the power of photography and videography. “I love to capture magical moments that not many people get to see, especially those from landlocked countries. It makes you realise how lucky you are having all of this on your doorstep. I want to bring the ocean to everyone,” Jaimen says with a smile.

What millions of viewers of his content might not immediately realise is that Jaimen has been quadriplegic since a motorbike accident in 2008. He has been confined to a wheelchair since the age of 17. On 27 January, 2008, like so many times before, Jaimen set out on his Honda dirt bike to drive and jump around the sand dunes of Wylie Bay east of Esperance with his friends. But when he tried to jump over a dune, he fell awkwardly on his head. He remembers: “When I was lying on the sand, part of me knew that my life was never going to be the same again.” Jaimen was in intensive care for 17 days, after which he slowly learned to come to terms with his new reality. “I tried to focus on the good. Obviously, I had damned days but I wanted to make something out of my life. I kept saying to myself that what is done is done, it can't be changed no matter how much you feel sorry for yourself. You just have to try to move forward, and I did that with the help of my friends and family.”

After the accident, the once passionate surfer and scuba diver was looking for an activity that would bring him close to the ocean again. Little did he know that he would soon soar to new heights. “People know me as the ocean guy. It's in my blood,” he says. “Aerial photography came in my life by chance. I was at work one day and a guy came into our shop – we own a retail store doing



| PREVIOUS: Jaimen at Rossiter Beach, Cape Le Grand.

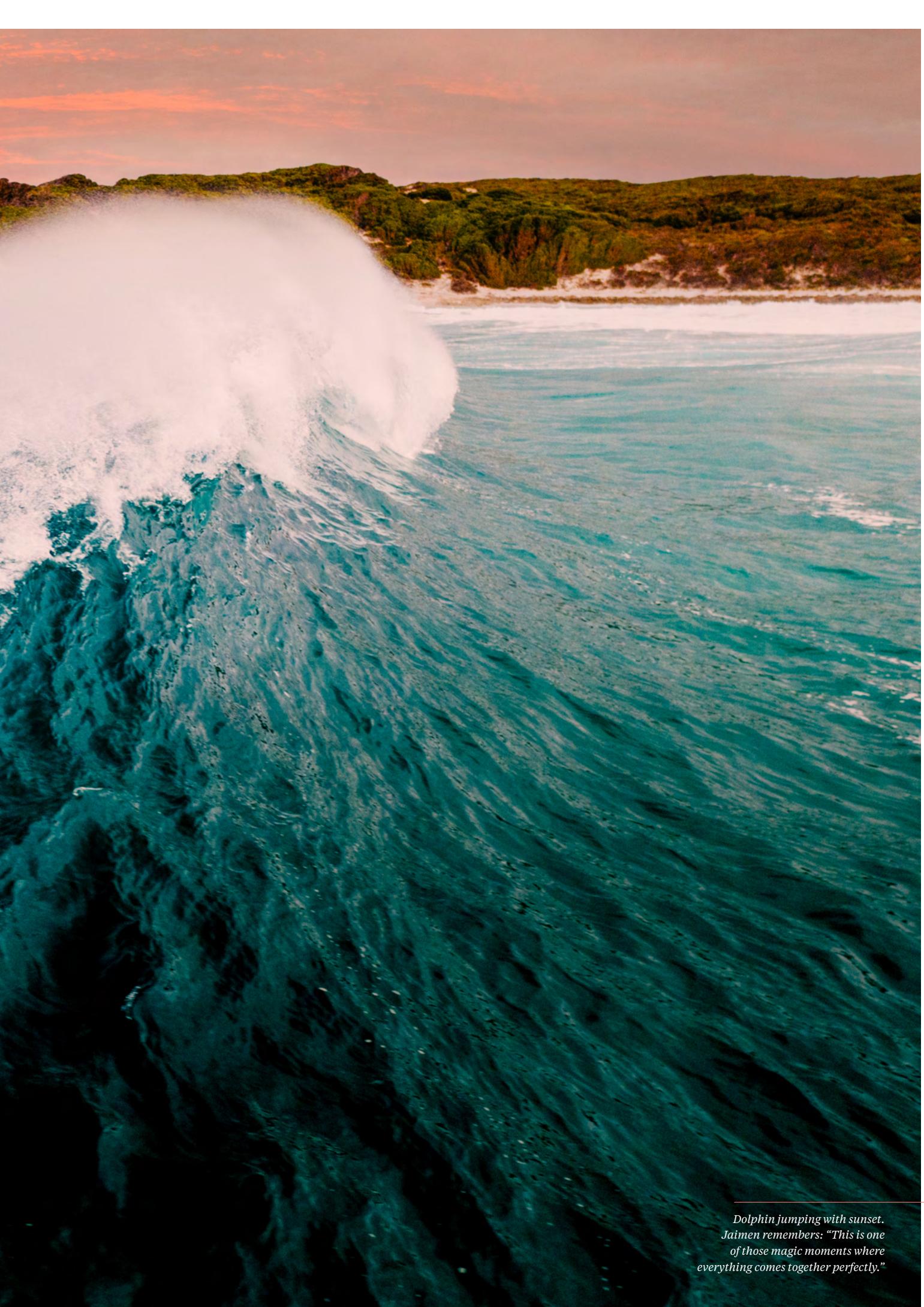
| THIS PAGE: Lake Hillier, a saline lake in Western Australia.



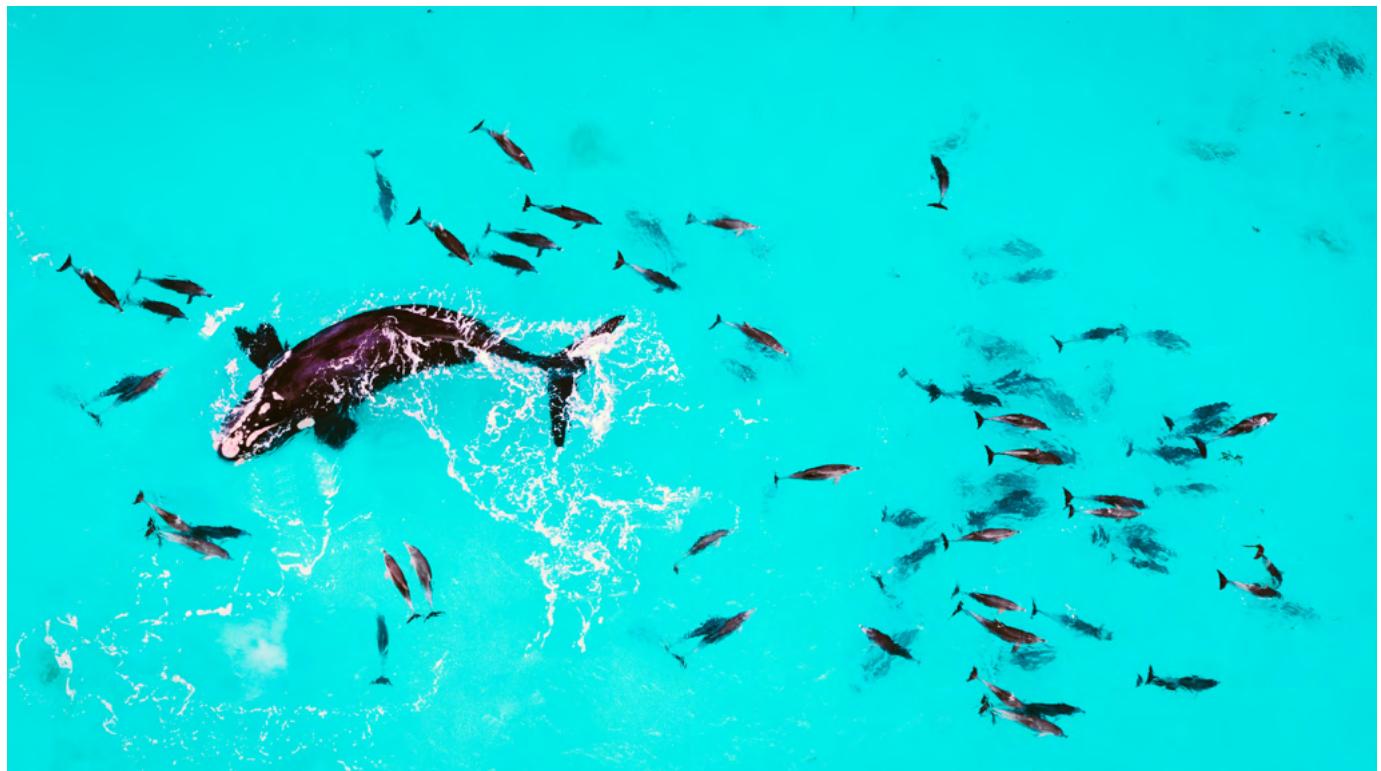
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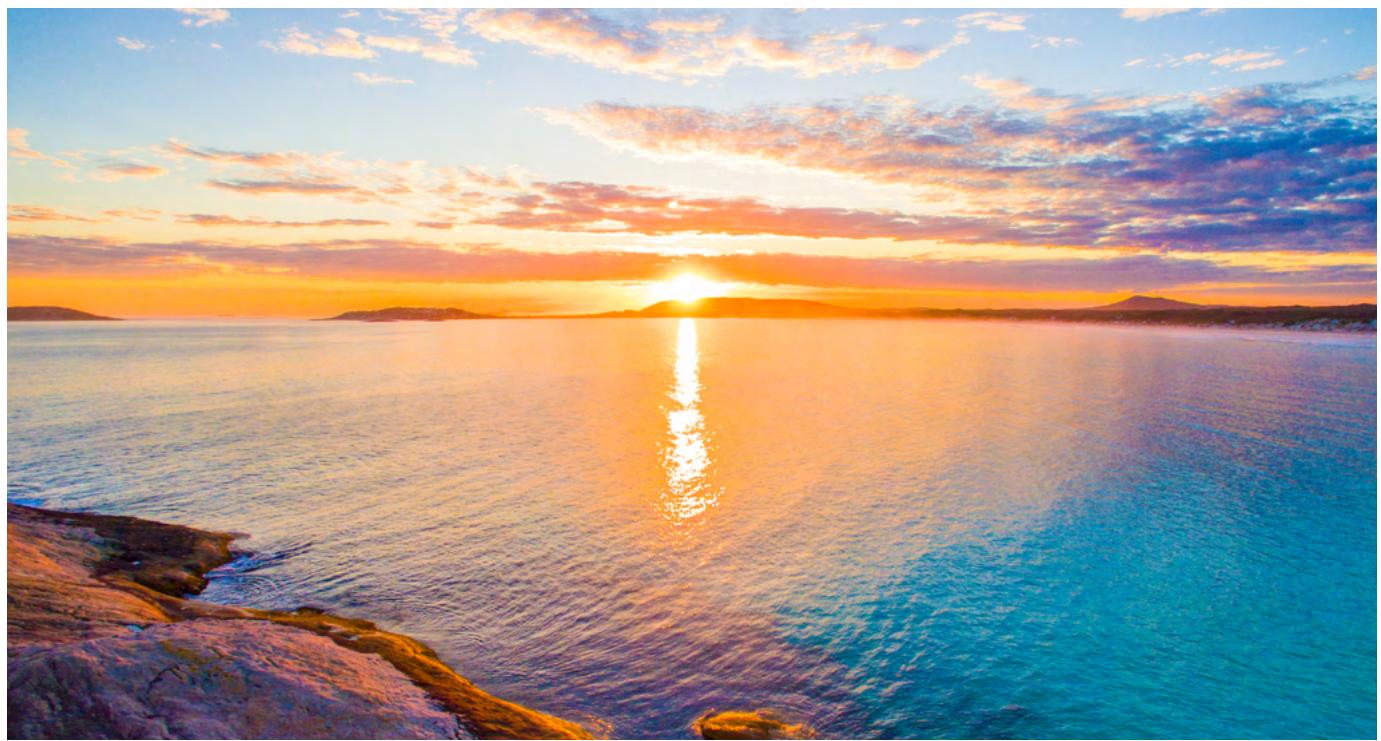
“That was probably the first time a drone ever captured something like that. The sheer size difference between the whale and the paddle board really astounded people.”



*Dolphin jumping with sunset.
Jaime remembers: "This is one
of those magic moments where
everything comes together perfectly."*



*“Being back in the water was amazing.
Floating around, I had that special
feeling of weightlessness again that
I’d lost for so long.”*



TOP: A rare sight – whales and dolphins swimming together.
BOTTOM: The sun setting over magnificent Wharton Beach, Esperance.

island cruises and charters – and the guy wanted to go to Lake Hillier, that beautiful pink lake you may have seen in some of my footage. It turned out he was the chief marketing officer for DJI and he was getting some promotional footage for the soon-to-be-released Phantom 3 drone. That was before many people had drones; they were really rare. He sent me some of the footage and, immediately upon seeing it, I was hooked.”

Unsure of whether he would be able to control the drone’s remote with his reduced hand function, Jaimen took the plunge. “The first video I created was basically a 360-video, turning the drone around in circles. When I uploaded it to Instagram, I got 90 likes – a big amount back then. People connected with it. I kept practising, taught myself how to fly the drone properly, how to edit the videos and was forever in search of wildlife,” he says.

One of his most popular videos shows a man on a paddle board being followed by two southern right whales. “That was probably the first time a drone ever captured something like that. The sheer size difference between the whale and the paddle board really astounded people,” he recalls. Some of his favourite footage catches dolphins playing in waves, seemingly wanting to fly. “Dolphins are the most playful creatures; they seem to have such a great time. Capturing scenes and magical moments like these makes me happy.”

Asked about his favourite wildlife encounter, he mentions filming a juvenile great white shark swimming through a pod of dolphins. “The dolphins almost part like Moses parts the sea when he swims through the middle. They keep an eye on him at all times and two of the bigger dolphins follow him to make sure that he’s not going to cause any harm. That’s probably the rarest moment I’ve ever captured.”

Technical advances in drone technology mean that operating a drone has become much easier and intuitive. Only a couple of years back, drones had GoPros attached to the bottom of them and you would either set it to do a timed shot or it would take a photo every ten seconds. “The latest drones are amazing. You are able to change camera and video settings while they’re in the sky. A touch-screen tablet can do everything for you; that’s why drones are so great for me. I don’t have any dexterity in my hands which means I can’t open and close my fingers. The tablet therefore allows me to change all settings very easily, including the aperture and shutter speed. And in a sense, the rest is history really,” Jaimen explains.

While Jaimen does depend on help in many areas of his life, he has managed to get some of his independence back by getting a specifically designed car that enables him to drive independently for the first time in 13 years. “I went out there the other day, tried to get the drone out the backseat and get out the car. It was a real struggle. I thought if people could see all the stuff that I go through just to get these videos for them, they might appreciate them a bit more,” he laughs.

Undeterred by the hand that fate has dealt him, Jaimen’s stunning footage reaches millions of people across the

world, advocates for the protection of the natural world and catches media attention from the likes of *National Geographic*, *BBC* and *Discovery*.

With growing media interest came a growing interest in his life story, one that is ultimately tied in with an undeterred love for nature, the overcoming of adversity and a breath-taking ability to showcase the natural beauty of Western Australia. Alongside underwater filmmaker and director Leighton De Barros, a documentary about his life story soon came to life.

Called *From Sky to Sea*, it touches on Jaimen’s childhood, the family days spent on the water, his love for the ocean and his accident. The central narrative and ultimate aim of the film is to get Jaimen back into the water for the first time since his accident. *From Sky to Sea* is a love letter to the Western Australia coastline impressing with spectacular footage of natural beauty and special wildlife encounters.

“We went up north for the documentary to try to dive with whales off a boat. On the first day, I was suddenly in 40m-deep water, 5km off the coast. Spotter planes circled above and told us where the whales were. There was a bit of adrenaline going and I thought to myself ‘wow, we should’ve probably practised this in a lagoon first before heading out to the middle of nowhere,’ he laughs.

“They pushed me off the back of the boat in my dive gear and I couldn’t wait to spot the wildlife. When you share the water with these impressive 30 to 40 tonne humpback whales and you’re eye to eye with them, it’s out of this world. Being back in the water was amazing. Floating around, I had that special feeling of weightlessness again that I’d lost for so long.”

Jaimen has come full circle, he has managed to get back into his happy place, the ocean. His story shows us what unconditional love for the sea and a determination to make a difference in people’s lives can achieve. While drone photography has changed the face of wildlife conservation and has given researchers new insights and exciting possibilities, Jaimen’s images and videos show a different dimension of drone photography. They reconnect people from all over the world to the ocean, they advocate for the protection of Western Australia’s coastlines and speak for the many charismatic species that live in this region of the world.

And it seems to work: The comments under his popular ‘Dolphin Haze’ video seem to speak for themselves – “I think this is one of the most beautiful videos I’ve ever seen in my life”, “this was so incredibly beautiful, it brought tears to my eyes”, “I got goosebumps watching this”, “nature at its best”, as well as “everything was all right in the world there for a moment”. And these are just a few examples.

“I’ve been very lucky to have a great life, one that I would have never imagined possible. I’m married, have a son, run a business and do wildlife photography,” Jaimen says. “I think the mind is the most powerful tool any of us own and if we use it to our advantage, we can achieve great things.” 