

Gust for Life

London-based photographer **Jack Kenyon** looks to the skies and finds the windswept charm of kite-flying – and the therapy behind the spectacle.

by **Pete Whelan**

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It's a bird, it's a plane...it's-a me, Mario? When you see a giant plumber undulating in the Atlantic breeze high above a beach in Lancashire, you realise that truly anything is possible. Attracting scores of kite enthusiasts from around the world, the St Annes International Kite Festival lashes vivid colours onto the grey coastal skies, transforming this stretch of beach into a fever dream where ripstop nylon meets unrepentant whimsy for one wild weekend.

London photographer Jack Kenyon is often drawn to the more eccentric corners of British community life, counting giant vegetables, dog shows and an official swan census among the projects in his portfolio. When he accepted a commission to cover the kite festival, though, he did not find the polite pastime he expected. Rather, he was confronted with a very specific kind of misery: British weather.

"It was howling wind, lots of rain, then sunshine, then torrential rain," Kenyon says. "It's on this really long, muddy, depressing English beach. It's so bleak, and yet it was packed with hundreds and hundreds of people. You've got this grey backdrop, but then you look up and there's a giant unicorn. Some kites are 10 to 15 feet long – just humongous. You can't fly them by hand. People tie them to their cars. If you held on, you'd just fly away."

The kites aren't the only things getting carried away. According to Kenyon, attendees' budgets regularly blow out, too. "I was surprised at how fanatical people were. Their whole cars were filled with different kites," he says. "It's not a cheap hobby – they're spending all their cash on it." People travel from all over the world: "Texas, South Africa, Australia," he explains, "bouncing between these big international festivals like a summer road trip. I didn't even know this existed."

Things have certainly come a long way since the diamond-shaped wood and paper kites of yore. With designs driven by technology, creativity and daredevilry, the sky is the limit. "There's a whole range," Kenyon says, recalling the weird and wonderful kites on display over the weekend, including Tyrannosaurus rexes, whales and dragons. "You have mega pointy racer ones – stunt kites where you can do loops. And then you have people making bespoke kites from bamboo and bound plants, while others have 3D printers and are making their own high-tech ones."

Like their kites, the pilots on the ground pulling the strings aren't always what you'd expect. "It wasn't just sweet little children," says Kenyon. "It was definitely what you'd call an alternative scene. There was a guy there who was a roadie for big rock bands, and people flying psychedelic mushroom kites. It was quite eclectic."

Ultimately, though, all of these seemingly disparate groups are drawn together by the therapy of the upward gaze. "Compared to other hobbies that are solitary or competitive, there's no real purpose to this," Kenyon muses. "It's just a nice way to spend your day outside in the fresh air. You don't achieve anything – that's the point."

FLYING FISH (AND SHOES) IN LANCASHIRE

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A SERPENT SLITHERING
ABOVE ST ANNES BEACH



HOLDING THE LINE, AT THE
ST ANNES KITE FESTIVAL



ON CLOUD NINE...



...OR KICKING BACK, AT THE JOLLY UP
KITE EVENT IN BASINGSTOKE



BADGES OF HONOUR ON AN
AUSTRALIAN KITE FAN



A COUPLE OF ST ANNES VISITORS,
SHOOTING THE BREEZE