



Joanna Lumley and the Human Swan



Press Pack

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On the 18th September 2021 Dan Burton, adventurer, photographer, campaigner, tragically lost his life in a mid-air paramotor collision with fellow campaigner Sacha Dench, who was seriously injured. They'd almost completed their pioneering Round Britain Climate Challenge expedition, which this documentary had been following. Dan's family, Sacha herself and all involved are keen that their story is told and their urgent message spread. This film is dedicated to Dan.

Joanna Lumley and the Human Swan

"Of all the brave people I admire, few are braver than the airborne adventurer, Sacha Dench. Dubbed The Human Swan, she's flown her tiny paramotor thousands of miles to help save a threatened species. Now, Sacha's taking on the greatest challenge of all, the climate emergency. She's ditching diesel for an electric motor to fly all around Britain. It's so easy to wring our hands in despair, but, I promise you, if we all act together, it's not too late to make a difference. Sacha's rising to the challenge, shall we follow her?"

Joanna Lumley

TX Monday 1st November 2021, 9pm, ITV (TBC)

Embargoed until 00.01am on Tuesday 26 October 2021

This inspiring film sees Joanna Lumley travel around the UK following adventurer Sacha Dench as she takes to the skies with just her electric paramotor to attempt an epic journey around the British coast whilst raising awareness about climate change.

As Sacha takes flight, Joanna will be tagging along by land, and, on one occasion, by air, as the pair meet environmental heroes along the way who show them surprising and fascinating ways to live more planet-friendly lives and, in this crisis, find hope.

Dubbed The Human Swan, Sacha Dench first hit the headlines when she flew with endangered swans from Arctic Russia to England. The film sees Joanna head to Scotland to meet Sacha, to see her green, clean electric paramotor in action for the first time and to hear about her latest challenge – to fly around the UK and arrive in Glasgow ahead of the United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP26, being held there.

Sacha says: *"I could just do this in an ordinary paramotor, but to try to do it in an electric is a metaphor for the way we need to approach the challenges of climate change."*

As Joanna helps Sacha to strap her paramotor to her back, she explains that in order to have enough battery power for each flight, the weight of the paramotor is 35kg. Then, once she is airborne, she will be able to ride on the winds like birds do.

Joanna says: *"It's not often you get to meet a superhero, but for me today was the day."*

Joanna watches as Sacha takes off and explains that, flight by flight, Sacha will make her way down the west coast to Swansea Bay in Wales where the pair will meet again.

In Swansea, Joanna and Sacha learn about the plight of kittiwake seabirds whose numbers fell dramatically due to them struggling to feed in more frequent extreme storms. As they watch the birds huddled together on Mumbles pier, scientist Alice Edney explains the importance of saving the species.

Joanna and Sacha then go to Rhossili Bay where they meet the woman who started a beach cleaning group in the area to reduce plastic in the ocean.

Later Sacha says: *"If all of us do something, it's massive. I think change is definitely coming and we can adapt to it, but we need everyone from governments to individuals to go, 'This is what we need to do'. We know exactly what has to be done, now we just have to be bold enough to do it."*

As Sacha sets off on the next leg of her journey, Joanna explains that the batteries for her motor last for approximately half an hour, which can take Sacha 30 miles. Joanna joins the support crew who track Sacha's movements and run to meet her with a new battery every time she lands – wherever that may be.

Next stop for Joanna and Sacha is Bristol, where the pair meet Aman, who is using vertical aeroponic farming to grow food in shipping containers in an attempt to shrink food carbon miles to almost nothing. Powered by renewably sourced energy, the system can grow plants twice as fast.

Joanna says: *"This means we could grow much of what we need, almost on our own doorstep. Inside the box you realise it's not your average greenhouse. It might sound like science-fiction, but it could help future-proof some of our crops against storms, floods and droughts."*

As she tastes the herbs, Joanna says: *"It's gorgeous isn't it? I could just put my face in and chomp my way through all of it."*

As Sacha takes to the air again and heads for the White Cliffs of Dover, Joanna follows her in a microlight. As the pair swoop over the spectacular cliffs, they see the devastation that is caused by wild storms accelerating erosion which leads to huge chunks of the cliffs falling away.

Back on land, they meet the residents of the Isle of Sheppey who tell them how they have watched neighbouring homes fall into the sea at an alarming rate.

Sacha and Joanna next meet in London at BEDZED, the UK's first zero-carbon eco-village. Homeowners show the pair around their eco-friendly homes which are fully-insulated so they don't need central heating and also have plants on the rooftops. They explain how everyone in the community shares things so they have as little waste as possible.

As Sacha heads further north, Joanna catches up with her on the North Yorkshire coast at the site of one of the 40 offshore wind farms in the UK. They take a boat to get up close to one of the turbines and learn that, in 2020, for the first time Britain generated more electricity from renewables than from fossil fuels.

Finally, Joanna and Sacha head to Alladale in the Scottish Highlands and meet the land owner who is planting trees to rebuild forests which have gradually disappeared after centuries of logging and grazing.

As Joanna helps plant a tree, she says: *“Trees do much more than provide shade, they’re nature’s great weapon for hoovering up carbon.”*

Joanna and Sacha also visit the Scottish Wildcat enclosure on the reserve, home to wildcats which are part of a captive breeding programme for this critically endangered species with the ultimate aim to reintroduce them to the wild.

Joanna says: *“Adorable, of course, but many hope that these little predators may yet roam free along, perhaps with boar and even wolves in a restored British wilderness.”*

As filming comes to an end, Joanna explains that Sacha and her team made it around the north of Scotland but then the expedition was cut short just days before the finish line, due to a devastating mid-air collision between Sacha and her support pilot, Dan Burton. Tragically, Dan lost his life in the accident and Sacha was seriously injured.

As the COP26 conference approaches, Joanna pays tribute to Dan and Sacha’s extraordinary determination and vision and reflects on the importance of continuing to spread their urgent message.

Joanna Lumley and the Human Swan is produced by Wingspan, for ITV. The director is Ian Leese.

Press Pack Interview: Joanna Lumley

What inspired you to make this film?

I'd heard of Sacha and knew of her extraordinary flight with the Bewick swans. A mutual friend of ours told me that Sacha was planning this new, extraordinary journey around Britain and I said, 'This is incredible, this is exactly what I'm looking for as COP26 comes up'. So I took the idea of following Sacha and her climate challenge expedition around the country on this new electric powered paramotor and I said to ITV, 'Could we follow her and see some of the things she is doing?' Sacha was already planning to be stopping and talking to all kinds of inspiring projects and people, more than we could possibly film, but I thought it would be magic to catch up with her in certain places to see what her extraordinary leadership and opinions could bring to the world. She is a woman of huge courage and it was a great thrill to be able to link up with her and follow her.

How is Sacha and was it a difficult decision to finish the documentary after the tragic accident and loss of Dan?

Both Dan's family and Sacha, and everybody involved were so keen that we still got to tell this story and in time for COP26. Sacha remains in hospital and is being cared for brilliantly. Dan was such an exceptional man, he was so funny and so full of life and such an adventurer, such a huge personality. Rather like mountaineers, they are always aware of the danger and the downfalls that can await them. Dan, like Sacha, was a free diver which means he can swim for minutes under water without coming up for air. Sacha at one point held the freediving record - 6 minutes 25 seconds under water. So we are talking about phenomenal adventurers here, incredibly skilled and experienced. Ghastly though this accident was, and it's unbearable for Dan's family and for Sacha struggling with her colossal injuries in hospital, they were absolutely adamant that we went ahead with it. So that's what gave me the courage to go on and to finish the film and to show it as they wished and as we longed to do.

What did you think when you first met Sacha and learned about her paramotor? In the programme you describe her as 'Superwoman'?

I thought she was thrilling, I knew how bold she was because, firstly she's Australian, and I find Australians seem to be bold and far-seeing. They don't see small problems, they go for the bigger pictures! And to have seen her previously flying with the swans, landing in all sorts of extraordinary places, Dan also flew with her on that trip because he was her cameraman as well as her co-pilot. She landed everywhere and found ways to speak with people, even if she didn't know Russian or the Baltic languages, she persuaded them not to shoot the Bewick swans. She is a scientist but a compassionate ecowarrior and hugely experienced at what she does. She struck me as a Viking with a great warm smile and a great sense of power about her. She is an exceptional woman in every way, so knowledgeable, so kind and caring and so good at communicating with people. Everybody we met during this film - whether they were old or young or however much knowledge they had - she just wanted to engage with them and talk to them. She would always want to know how they managed in terms of carbon footprint, always researching and being scientific about everything. Massively impressive.

How did it feel to go up in the microlight?

Well, initially I said, 'No, I'm not doing this'. Our director felt it would be really good but I said 'No, we'll let Sacha be the one flying'. Then Sacha said to me, 'Won't you come up and fly?' And immediately feeling like the school drip, I said, 'Yes, of course I will!'. Then I met the man who would be flying this tiny microlight and he was so good and experienced that I just thought, I've got to try this. I can't be a coward all my life! And do you know, I loved it. It feels a bit strange, literally like riding a motorbike in the air and of course you put on helmets and the noise is so huge. It gave me a different feeling to see Sacha flying and also, unless you're flying close to the white cliffs of Dover, you can't see them from the top or from the sea, but flying quite close to them you can see how fragile they are, how fast they are eroding, how fragile our earth is, you know? So I'm terribly pleased that she persuaded me to do it!

What was the most surprising thing you discovered during filming, in terms of how we can make a positive impact on climate change?

The first thing that struck me was this huge container painted pink, which was growing plants and vegetables inside it. The container could be picked up and put anywhere, as long as you've got renewable clean energy, water and nutrients you can grow food literally anywhere, in a great big tin container! I thought that was something we should all be thinking of. Not only in this country because we've got a lucky climate and the soil is good, but in countries where desert has taken over. So that looked like a real leap into the future and if people can back these kinds of ventures, it will make such a difference. It tasted delicious too, it was fresh, beautiful produce.

During the programme you meet some incredible innovators who are already making a difference, from cleaning plastic from the beaches, eco-housing, tree-planting and low carbon clothing. Who or what impressed you the most?

You can't really put a pin between them! I mean, the clothes - which I had seen before when I met Will.i.am, but making clothes out of plastic bottles! Incredible - the cloth feels like, in this case - it was like a waterproof fabric, but I've seen it feel like soft cashmere or silk or mohair. The fact that we can turn plastic back into something useful and wearable was thrilling. I love the idea of a whole community deciding to live carbon neutral in the BEDZED cooperative in South London. Not only did they live like that but they shared things to help each other and re-use and there's so little waste. There is a different energy about it.

Sometimes the news can depress you and the issue feels overwhelming, but the fact that every one of us clearing up the beach reduces the plastic in the sea, which makes the world a healthier place, it's worth doing. So, what we're trying to say is that every single thing, whether you plant one tree or a million trees, do something, a little something.

But I think the most important message we are trying to put over is that, for all we as individuals can do, it's also got to be the governments. It's got to be global with all nations deciding and in legislation, it has to become the rule of how we do things. We can't keep relying on the goodwill of people because maybe half of the people will do everything they can but maybe the other half won't. It's got to become law. Like seatbelts! We all said, do we need seatbelts? Yes, we do, that's the end of it. Wear them or you'll be fined. I'm afraid we have to do the same thing now, if we are going to save this planet.

You say that many people ‘wring their hands and think there is nothing they can do about climate change’ – what would be your top three things that you would urge people to change?
Hopefully people will be inspired by what they see in the film. Let’s stop talking about it and do it, do it, do it. Don’t give up hope because hope is everything. We’ve got to keep going and know that we have all done our best each day. Run away from single use plastic, carry your cloth bag, drink tap water, eat less meat, pick-up litter, or better still don’t drop it in the first place! Mend, repair, reuse. We can all do our bit but equally, Sacha’s message is that we’ve got to work together on this globally, we’ve got to force the governments to act.

Is there anything you have personally changed as a result of what you saw/discovered?

There are lots of things that I have been doing forever and it reinforced my determination to keep on doing them. Quite a lot of this is making the effort. I’ve always been using linen bags and cloth bags or reusing plastic bags. Don’t keep buying them or being given them. Make an effort, have that bag with you. Find somewhere that can recycle cellophane. I reuse cling film and foil, I take elastic bands back to the post office, I take all the wire hangers back to the dry cleaner to reuse then. I switch lights off. I don’t eat meat or fish. Make more delicious food for friends without meat! Try to spread the word with everything you do, it doesn’t need to be preachy. I pick up litter when I go out in the streets. Just do your best. Reuse clothes, sew on buttons. It’s not going to happen without us, each one of us has got to pull our weight and play our part in this.

Please credit:

***Joanna Lumley and the Human Swan
is on Monday 1st November at 9pm on ITV***

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