

Jet-pack man soaring above California waters

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There was James Bond. There was the Rocketeer. And now there is Bob Wilson, self-described "handyman, inventor, whatever," who is inspiring awe by donning a water-powered jet pack and soaring high into the Orange County, Calif., sky.

The 51-year-old Seal Beach, Calif., man for a few weeks has been buzzing around Huntington Harbour, where tests of his "H2O Jet Pack" have led to rampant rubbernecking among motorists, impromptu crowds among passersby and at least a little attention from a police helicopter.

"The coolest thing ever," said Costa Mesa, Calif., resident Margie Do, who pulled over to snap photos after seeing a man flying in circles while

propelled by twin columns of surging saltwater.

"Really the coolest thing I've ever seen," added Huntington Beach, Calif., resident Staci Guillen, who had also pulled over and who watched for two hours as Wilson's friends zoomed about the bay.

Various versions of the contraption have long been the stuff of fantasy for woefully wingless humans. Bond glamorized the concept in "Thunderball," the armed forces have studied military applications, and at the 2007 Tournament of Roses Parade, a "rocketman" blew away onlookers with 25 seconds of airborne action.

Wilson conceived his gizmo less than one year ago after seeing a similar device (known as Jetlev) advertised on YouTube. It's priced at a cool \$99,500, putting hydro flight out of reach for all but the very wealthy or, in Wilson's case, the very clever.

"I said, 'Well, shoot, I'm going up to the farm in Idaho in August,'" Wilson recalled. "'I'm going to build one out of muffler pipe.'"

In Seal Beach since 1985, Wilson has made his living fixing things - sprinklers, plumbing, electrical - with leftover income supporting a fascination with tinkering.

"It pays to buy the parts and equipment," Wilson said of his profession. "Kind of like how the Wright Brothers were selling bicycles so they could build an airplane."

Inspiration for the H2O Jet Pack comes from Raymond Li, a Chinese Canadian who spent a decade researching, designing and marketing the Jetlev, which is patented and which hit the market this month.

A key difference between the machines is Jetlev's use of a pilotless

device that propels the rider and likely contributes significantly to a nearly six-figure price tag.

Wilson simply attached his jet pack to a tube hooked on the back of a personal watercraft; a pilot on the watercraft hits the throttle to power the jet pack, whose occupant then steers by pulling and pushing two handles.

"I'm not duplicating it," Wilson says of the Jetlev. "I'm making it better."

[youtube.com/embed/sRwXf6WpsCc?rel=0](https://www.youtube.com/embed/sRwXf6WpsCc?rel=0) frameborder="0" allowfullscreen>

Construction of the jet pack had humble origins - besides the muffler pipe, it has at times involved a rubber swing seat and a \$6 climbing harness purchased at a swap meet. Early tests were, not astonishingly, less than smooth.

"This thing started in a ditch up in Idaho with a jet ski and (me) almost drowning because I didn't have enough flotation on (the jet pack)," Wilson recalled.

Progress continued slowly in the spud-loving state, with tests barely budging Wilson, much less sending him aloft.

Back in California, Wilson hung out at a Long Beach boat dock, where he found a stranger willing to donate use of a Jet Ski.

"He got me up to my knees," Wilson said. "I said, 'Wow, this is kind of cool.'"

From there, Wilson bought his own personal watercraft. With local law enforcement not keen on him rocketing around Long Beach's waters, he

wound up at Lake Elsinore.

He recalled the first ride: There was a "rusty hand-built jet pack mounted to my back" and "someone on the Jet Ski that I had never met before in my life, and I told him, 'My life is in your hands - you can kill me with this thing.'"

Wilson's caution proved wise, as he climbed 10 feet into the air but found himself with an unfortunate inability to steer. "Every time I went up to that altitude, I would crash, do a belly flop," he said.

But he kept at it. Kept at it despite being booted from the jetties dividing Seal Beach and Long Beach. Kept at it despite blown-off hoses and broken welds. Kept at it despite the jet pack sinking and taking a day to find at the bottom of the bay. Kept at it despite all those belly flops.

"Testing this thing was incredibly fearful," Wilson said. "It's like getting on a wild bull, and you have no idea what that animal's going to do to you."

Now, as he sends friends aloft in Huntington Harbour, Wilson proclaims to be "past the stage" of mishaps, the jet pack reliable as long as it's respected.

"Safe, but still incredibly dangerous," is his equally reassuring and terrifying description.

Riders have flown higher than 30 feet, and with a more muscular watercraft about to be tested, Wilson and friends have designs on reaching 50 feet.

"You don't want to go any higher than you're willing to drop down," said Larry Simmons, affectionately known as "Crazy Larry" for his

daredevilry.

Caution, though, seemed far from riders' minds during recent flights. Each time Simmons splashed down unexpectedly, he quickly surfaced and emitted a stoked cheer.

"Almost like you're weightless," is how rider Ken Eatherton of Fountain Valley, Calif., described the sensation. "Like you're flying; totally unbelievable."

Brandon Briscoe, a Huntington Beach resident, offered this account: "It's kind of controlled floating; it's not like anything you've felt before."

And it doesn't seem like many others will feel it for themselves. Wilson says he's open to selling rides, but he doesn't envision mass production or sales. So, locals might have to settle for stumbling across the jet pack in action and squeezing in amid crowds that inevitably form.

"He's got a fine machine there," Simmons said to Sue Smith, friend of Wilson's, as a recent test concluded.

"That," she replied, "is an understatement."

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