

# MASTERING *The Art of Photography* WITH A DRONE



## PHOTOGRAPHER: TIMOTHY MOON

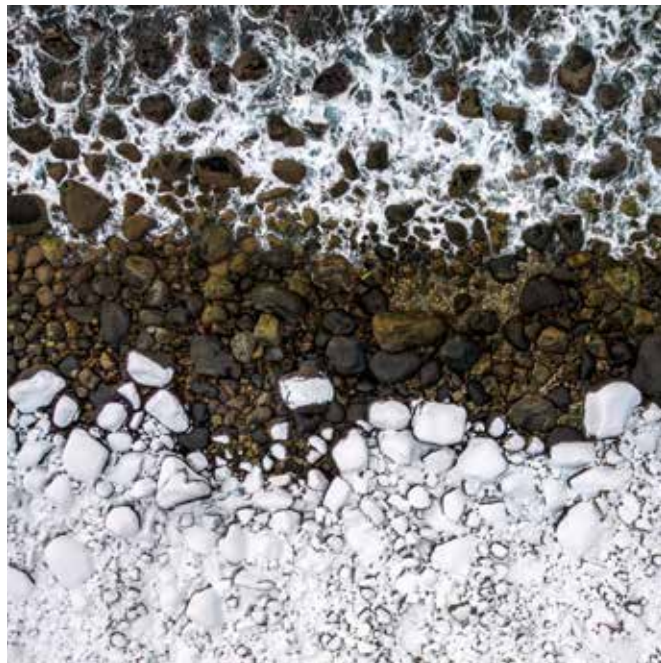
Aerial photography is incredibly popular, but also very expensive if you're paying for flights with a fixed wing, helicopter or even a balloon. A great option is a drone, even though there are lots of rules and regulations surrounding their use. Some countries ban them. Some have regulations that make them just plain difficult to use. But in Australia and New Zealand, there are many places where a drone is a wonderful device for exploring the landscape from above. Buying a drone should be a lot cheaper than hiring a plane and although the results can be significantly different, the romance of aerial photography is easily accessible to any photographer willing to give it a go.

*Better Photography* approached photographer and instructor Timothy Moon for his thoughts on drone photography – and how using one fits in with his overall approach to photography.

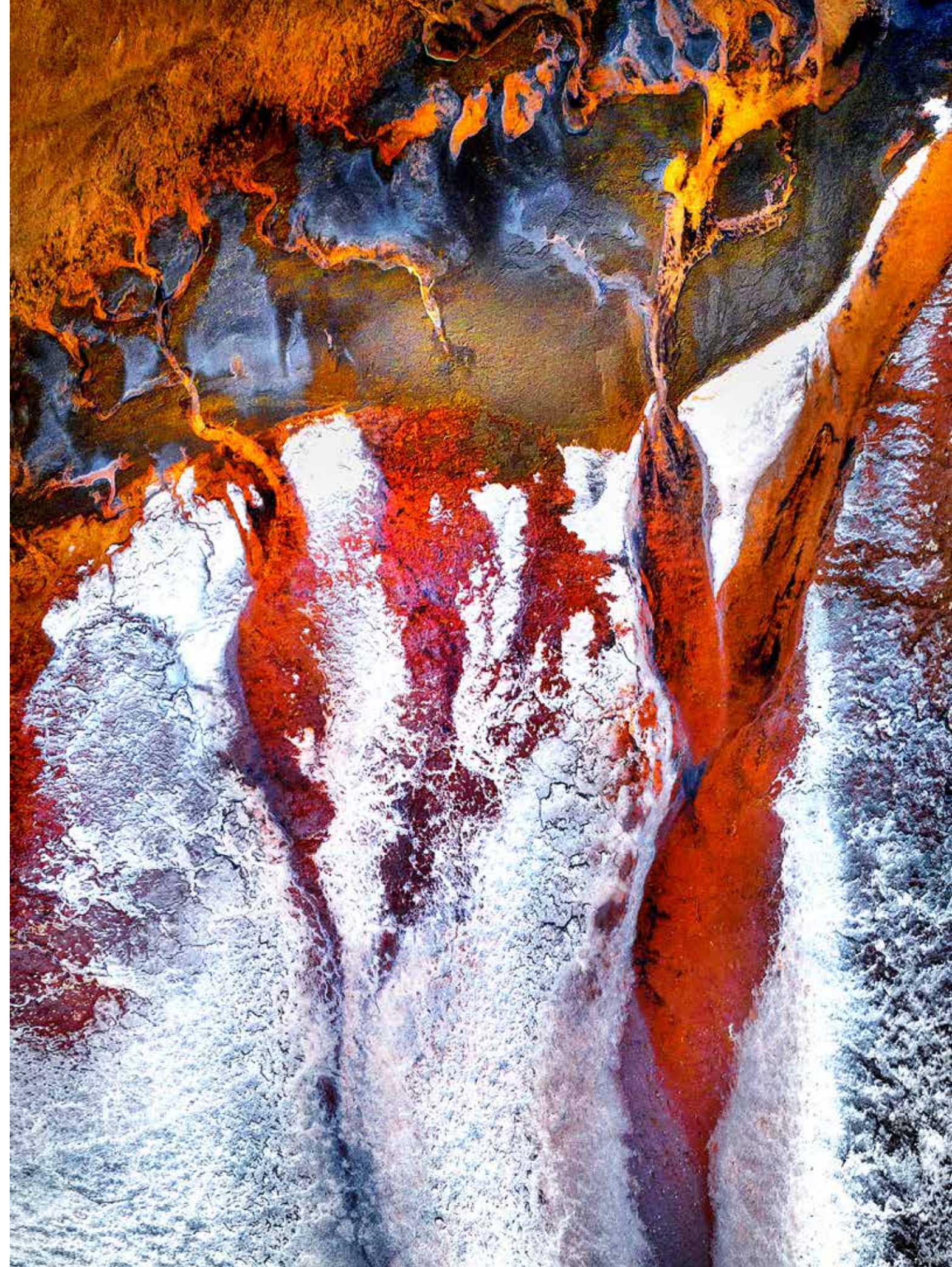
### Insight

Talking generally about photography, Tim explains that, "Every image is an adventure.

"I like a quote attributed to Pablo Picasso: 'I begin with an idea and then it becomes something else.' There is an 'extraction' that happens in the photographic process, as a scene is selectively isolated. What I see is never what the camera sees, so there is a need to be flexible in the capture process. I am a willing participant and I like to explore."



**Pebble Beach Norway** – Taken on a shoreline with large rounded 'pebbles' in the Lofoten Islands of Norway. Fresh snow had fallen at high tide, so as the tide receded, I could capture the transition between snow covered rocks and the ocean moving between the rocks on the foreshore. An ND filter was used to slow down the shutter speed to emphasise the 'draw' in the water.



**Ironstone Soak** – Groundwater from dark, iron rich soil, washing into a salt lake in the Victorian Mallee.





**The Wave – Surfers and a wave at Bungan Beach capturing the various stages of the sport. One is on the face of the unbroken wave, one clearing the wash and the others positioning themselves and paddling for the next wave in the set.**

Tim says he's comfortable shooting all types of photography, although his main subjects are travel, architecture (completely understandable as he was an architect before he retired) and landscape.

"I enjoyed drawing and painting at school, so I chose architecture as a career to provide an outlet for my creative side, running my own practice for 25 years. Photography and architecture are happy companions, so I was not without a camera during those years, but my photographs were directed more at recording information."

All that changed in 2015 when Tim's wife, Robin became interested in photography. "Robin introduced me to post-processing, visual narrative and travelling to a place 'just to take photos'. Now I see taking a photograph as part of a process of revelation. I'm trying to see a familiar subject with new eyes, or an iconic location in a new way."

You can understand Tim's interest in drones because of how they allow him 'to photograph familiar subjects with new eyes', but it's all wrapped up in his love and interest in photography.

"I also visit art galleries and exhibitions to see what other artists capture and how they represent subject matter and learn from their expertise. I get the most satisfaction from an image when it brings back special memories of what I was

experiencing when I took the photo, but this is something only I can experience.

"If I am capturing an image to share, then I need to consider an element of storytelling."

### Setting Up A Drone

While Tim shoots all types of images from the air, you'll have no doubt noticed some of his aerial abstracts accompanying this article. They are all shot using a drone – and as he explains, the process is not too difficult.

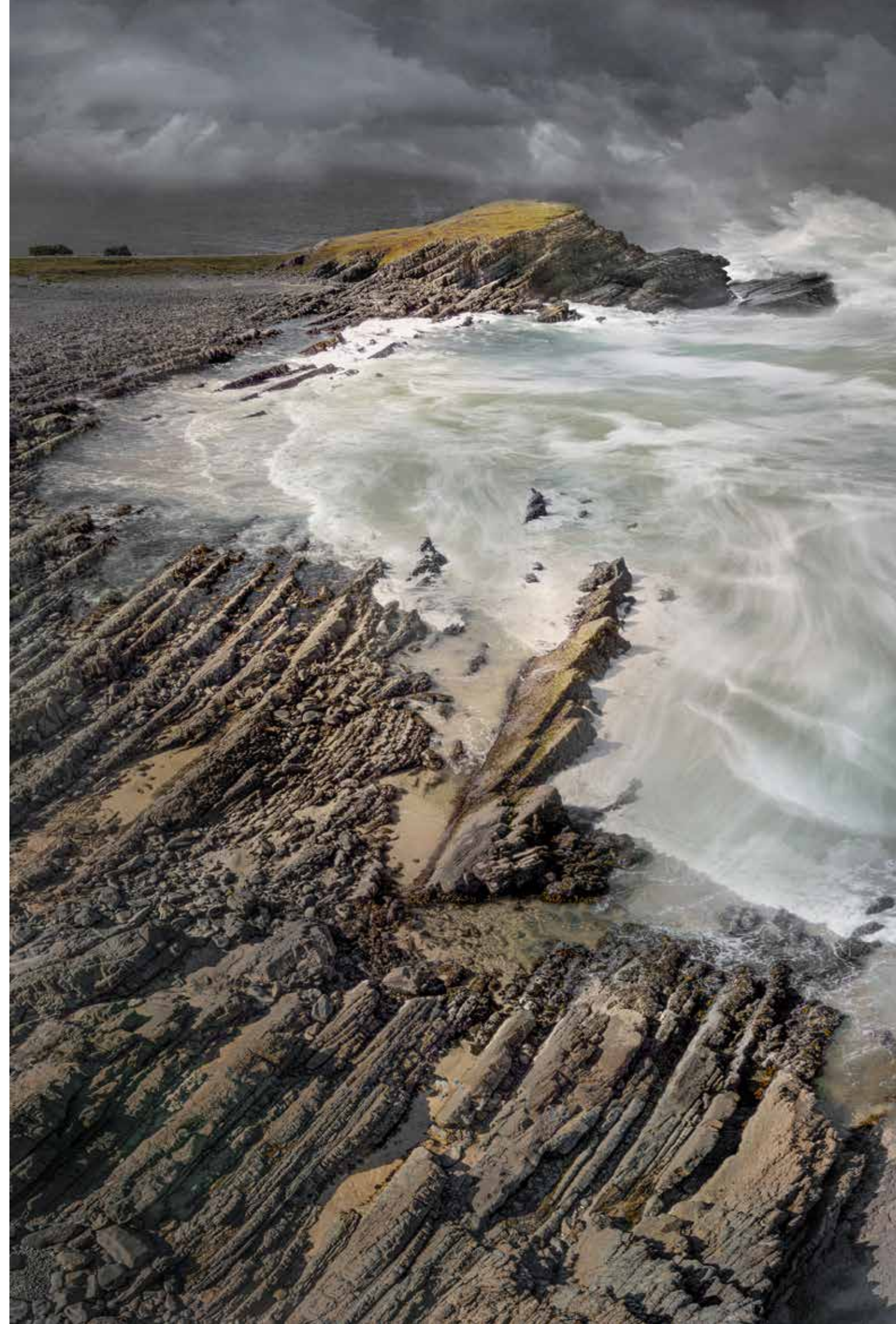
"As I am always moving and adjusting the drone's location, exploring compositions and angles-of-view, it makes sense to at least begin with the camera's auto settings. Then, if I find a location I want to explore further, I can swap to manual settings, but this usually only happens if I attach an ND filter and want to slow down a shutter speed. Generally, automatic exposure control works just fine.

"I keep a polarising filter on for all flights, so I will often need to move the drone around to the correct angle if I want to make use of the filter.

"Drone images on a clear day are full of blue, reflected from the sky, in which case my first step in post-processing is neutralising the blue. However, I find the best conditions for shooting are with an even, overcast sky. The reduction in light intensity seems to produce better colour in the images – it's a



**Lord Howe Island – A vertical panorama taken over Clear Place Point. The vertical panorama enables the underwater reef to take prominence in the foreground of the image. Opposite: Crescent Head, NSW, using ND filters to achieve a longer exposure with water movement.**







**Heart of The Salt Flat – Groundwater comes to the surface in some salt lakes in ‘mound springs’. The image captures two circular mound springs on the right of frame and an outcrop of springs which provide a mixture of minerals to flow over the white salt.**

bit like shooting waterfalls in that respect.

“I have two drones, a DJI Phantom 4 Pro and a DJI Mavic 2 Pro. Both have a 1” sensor. The Mavic 2 Pro has the Hasselblad lens – probably the only Hasselblad lens I am likely to own. However, the image size of 20-megapixels from both drones is ample. Many of my images are stitched, so a final blended size of 100-megapixels before post-processing is common.

“The choice between which drone to use comes down to location. When travelling from home by car to a destination, my go-to is the Phantom 4 Pro. With a larger blade, I find it more stable in windy coastal conditions and it provides a better range. The Mavic 2 Pro is the ‘travel drone’ as it packs up into a compact size for plane travel, or into the backpack with my other camera gear.

“When flying the drone to and from a location that I am exploring, I record video, as I often produce short location videos for those attending workshops. However, when capturing a still image (photograph), I make sure the drone comes to a complete stop, before pressing the shutter button. Even at 120 metres altitude, there can be movement blur of the drone’s camera during exposure if you’re not careful.

“I often have discussions with ‘doors-off aerial photographers’ about the capture process and the fact I am ‘only using a drone’, but a lot of my motivation is to show what ‘only a drone’ can produce. I have shot my fair share of aerial images from a plane with a full-frame sensor camera at 3,000 feet, so I well understand the process and limitations. For instance, in a plane or even a helicopter, the subject or



**Creation Eye – An island of golden sand in a salt lake in the Victorian Mallee. The water levels vary daily in the salt lakes. Groundwater flows in overnight and evaporates during the day. The amount of flow varies with rainfall. Each episode lays up a new salt layer.**

composition passes by quickly. Sure, there is sometimes the option to ask the pilot to circle around, but compare this with using a drone. The drone enables a much more relaxed and less time dependent exploration of the landscape, with the ability of fine-tuning a composition in a way not afforded by capturing images from an aircraft or helicopter.

“The other discussion usually centres on image quality. Yes, a full-frame or medium format camera is capturing 50 – 150-megapixel images, but they are also shooting from maybe 3,000 feet. I can be shooting at 100 feet with 20-megapixel images, so add in a stitch or two and I have an image that can be far more detailed.

“The other use for the drone is fine-tuning my landscape photography compositions. How often do you find yourself

on the side of a mountain, wishing you could get your camera location five metres further out into what is thin air? Or perhaps you’re wishing you were two metres taller? A drone can be the answer.

“From a drone expedition, I will end up with a number of different types of images:

1. Video
2. Broad landscape view with an oblique camera angle
3. Abstract landscape view shooting straight down
4. Panorama view (both horizontal and vertical), stitched in post-processing.

“The vertical panorama views often provide the most interest as I capture a scene from straight down up to the horizon using three to five images. The straight down shots





**Salt Lake Flames – Captured in a salt lake in the Victorian Mallee showing water emanating from salt spring and the patterns created by the flow. The colours are a mixture of soil colour and a red colour provided by bacteria.**

can be full of texture and abstract interest. Then, as the image blends up to the horizon, context and location is added.

“Photoshop does a great job blending the images for a panorama shot. DJI provides its own software for the process, but I prefer the control I have and the choice of how the images are blended in Photoshop.

“Whether blended or a single image, my approach to post-processing is the same. I try to enhance the lighting conditions and the colour in the file. The aim is to compensate for the inadequacies of the camera and the capture conditions. An image will often benefit from dehazing or adjusting saturation of certain colours. The blue shadows mentioned earlier often end up a natural cobalt, but a general blue desaturation would adversely affect the turquoise in blue waters or the sky itself, so colour adjustments need to be quite selective.

“Drone images can also suffer from the old film day mauve / purple haze, which also needs to be neutralised, to let the underlying colours shine.”

### Fitting It All In

Like most photographers, Tim doesn’t shoot exclusively with a drone. He also sports a Nikon D850, a Fujifilm GFX100S (medium format), a Sony RX100Vii and an infrared converted Sony A7r2.

“I love the Nikon D850, but recently I have started making quite large prints, so I’ve supplemented my landscape and architectural imaging with additional pixels, using the Fujifilm GFX100S. However, for street walks the Sony RX100 is very versatile with a 24-200mm lens and the 20-megapixel sensor is all that I need for this type of photography.”



**New Life – A groundwater seepage line into a salt lake in the Victorian Mallee. The surface is salt encrusted sand, with the iron rich soil showing through this translucent layer. The mineral colours are enhanced by the pink colour in the water produced by a bacteria.**





**Orbit** – Salt crust on the edge of a salt lake in the Mallee District of Victoria. The pink colour in the salt is caused by a bacteria and the fingers between the white salt are caused by seepage of groundwater from the sand.

Tim uses Adobe Bridge to import, manage and review images and Adobe Photoshop for post-production. "I have dual monitors in a PC environment, an EIZO and a BenQ. The monitors have been selected for their ability to be accurately colour calibrated, so that what I see on the screen can closely approximate what appears on a print. The available space on two monitors enables emails, word documents and Photoshop to all be displayed at once.

"To this is linked an Epson SureColor P906 printer which enables me to print high quality images up to A2 size. The wi-fi connection on the SureColor P906 enables Robin's Mac system to share the printer.

"I'm not a slave to the capture process and accept that the camera offers a limited version of what my eyes see and a poor version of what I am experiencing. My interest is in the finished image and how well that captures the event."

In this way, Tim sees the capture process in a similar way to how a painter might sketch in the field. His work in the studio is then one of fine-tuning composition, colour, lighting and visual balance.

"I get the most satisfaction from the printed image, whether it is a single image or a page in a book. It is a more exacting medium requiring attention to detail, but it's also more visually tangible."

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These two images show the straight capture from the drone (left) and the finished result after Tim's post-production (right). When it comes to abstract aerals, the post-production is equally as important as the capture.

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