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Death of a Drone

What happens in Iceland stays in Iceland—this time.



The last known location of the ill-fated drone, which crashed at the summit of Dynjandi Waterfall in Iceland's Westfjords.

"You are not going up there," my usually calm Mrs. exclaimed as I scoured the cliffs above for any semblance of wreckage. Our mission was to explore the Westfjords in the far northwestern reaches of Iceland. The island country has fewer than 400,000 inhabitants, but the Westfjords are even more sparsely populated than the coastal regions to the south and east. For transportation, we chose Land Rovers from Isak 4x4 Rental in the capital city of Reykjavík. Two days before, we had struck north out of town with images of crashing waves off the North Atlantic, shipwrecks, and ghosts of Vikings dancing through our eager minds.

Our travel buddies Chris and Laura Moxley occupied the leading rig, and we brought up the rear in an almost identical white turbo-diesel-powered Defender. With fuel costing more than $10 a US gallon, the 27-mpg 4-cylinder powerplants held a lot of appeal. Just as we were settling in for the drive, the Moxleys' Defender began slowing and easing to the shoulder of the two-lane blacktop. Our two-way radio crackled and Chris's voice confirmed an unhappy truth. Their motor had signed off, taking with it all electrical power and our hope of an uneventful cruise to our evening's accommodations in the remote village of Djúpavík. At least we had a tow rope. Our first unplanned adventure was unfolding. It would not be our last. Thankfully, Isak was quick to bring us a replacement vehicle, this one with only 250,000 kilometers, 100,000 less than the ill-fated unit lying dormant by the curb. We didn't complain. These harsh lands are brutal on machinery, and we were grateful to have rugged transportation for our explorations.

We had been fortunate with the weather so far, but the outlook for the next several days was ominous. As much as we would have liked to take a side trip to see the active volcano west of Reykjavík, we crossed our fingers for another opportunity and set off immediately for our primary targets in the nether regions where volatile weather and fishing ruled. There was no shortage of scenery to photograph. Grass-roofed fisherman's huts, Icelandic horses, sheep, and rotting relics of a seafarer's life were sprinkled like Easter eggs poorly hidden across the verdant fields between fjords. Snowmelt streams and waterfalls sliced the landscape like scars from a cosmic scourge, glimmering in the sun and projecting rainbows in the most unlikely places. Everywhere we looked were images worth framing.

Part of our kit for capturing the moments was a drone. My wife, Susan, had just purchased a DJI Flip, known for its excellent camera, enclosed rotors, and light weight. Making it our mission to explore all the rugged fjord roads we could, we planned our assault

on the infamous and overdramatized Road 622 to coincide with low tide. About a half mile of the road is underwater during high tide, so wise travelers watch the tide tables to ensure safe passage between the cliffs and the relentless ebb and flow of the icy ocean. This was a perfect spot to deploy the drone and capture this magical scene as we descended to what had just been below the waterline. The road, such as it was, was strewn with loose rocks, washed smooth and round by millennia of turbulent brine. Wheel traps were hidden along this stretch, and a miscalculation could leave us stranded, watching our transportation sink beneath the waves as the moon drew a blanket of sea over our path. Susan launched the drone and hustled along behind our rigs, capturing images impossible to contemplate otherwise without climbing gear or a pet seagull trained to hold a camera. As we closed in on the narrowest portion, two Mercedes Sprinter vans blocked the road ahead. The forward vehicle was just getting mobile again while the second van struggled with traction boards to extricate itself before the window of safe travel slammed shut. Fortunately, they were soon gone, and we were able to slip on through between tides, climbing back to the relative safety of the cliffs.

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After a welcome night's sleep in a fjordside guesthouse a dozen miles down a grassy two-track road, we stopped at Dynjandi Waterfall for a hike. Naturally, the drone came out, and Susan began shooting video as the drone approached the massive cascade. Always kind and trusting, she asked me if I would like a turn at the controls. I had only flown a drone once or twice before, but as a fixed-wing aircraft pilot and flight instructor, I confidently answered in the affirmative. I first flew to within a few feet of the falls itself, then began to climb, trying to see the source of the falls above the cliff. The altitude ceiling feature prevented my getting the drone high enough to clear the cliff, so I began to turn around and head back. I was hand flying rather than using the "return home" feature and, with my lack of experience, flew the drone sideways into the rocks. Susan realized my mistake before I could assimilate the horror of what I'd just done. My first thought was, *Did she download the images we had already taken?* She had not.

Inexperience with the drone and my cavalier attitude had just cost us two days of work. I searched the rocks above for the wreckage, but it was too far away—too high up. Susan seemed to read my mind and immediately began forbidding me from taking a step toward the crash site. I was overwhelmed with the knowledge of what I'd done and could not leave without a fight to recover the drone and its valuable cargo. Against her reasonable protests, I said I'd be careful, and I dug into the slope, scrambling for footing and handholds from the first step.

Iceland was violently formed by volcanic activity and glaciers, grinding away every cut and crevasse. Every rock surrounding the waterfall was loosely piled on the others, making for a shaky climb at best. I could reach through the thick moss, grasping at whatever was underneath the void between moss and stone, and found the surface was rotten and insecure. I scrambled closer with each step, but each step also took me deeper into a situation I might not easily escape. I had rock climbed enough to know that coming down was always harder than going up. It began to mist and then rain, making an already dangerous situation worse. Finally, risking enough, I reluctantly started back down. As predicted, it was sketchy. Several rocks let go beneath my feet, and some pulled loose as I tried to grab them with my hands. By the grace of God and gravity, I managed to get back down without a catastrophe. I was relieved when Susan was too occupied with the controller to scold me. She was using the drone's last bit of battery to download as many still images as possible onto the controller. We would lose some image quality, but the stills would still be of high enough resolution to use. Cheating death a little, and with the exertion and realization that the drone was, in fact, gone for good, I found myself grateful for what we could retrieve. Just as we turned to finish the descent, I saw a fit-looking young man nearby. "Are you by chance a climber?" I asked.

"Yes, I am," he replied with confidence. My new friend was French and quite eager to help. I felt some trepidation at sending him off on such a dangerous mission, but I reconciled my guilt by thinking of all the times a younger me had successfully completed similar risky tasks. We watched with diminishing hope as he too struggled with the loose rocks, wet moss, and steep terrain. I hoped he would throw in the towel before getting himself injured. His judgment proved better than mine, and he turned around 20 feet below the point I had begun my retreat. My sadness over losing the drone was quickly being replaced by relief that neither of us had taken a tumble there, miles from any hospital or rescue service. We thanked our would-be savior for his attempt and took the walk of shame back to our Defenders, waiting below. Ironically, the weather took a turn for the worse, and the rest of our trip would not have been suitable for the drone—a minor consolation for having bashed ours on the rocks.

Back home, we finally received our new drone after jumping through a maze of hoops to honor the replacement insurance policy. The system is anything but user-friendly, but we learned a valuable lesson. Before attempting a technical flight again, I will make sure my flying skills are at least equal to my enthusiasm. Yes, much was left in Iceland, but our memories and the still photos Susan rescued from the stranded drone will suffice. We are better for the experience. And my trusting wife may watch me a little closer the next time I fly her drone—if there is a next time.

EDITOR'S NOTE Legalities surrounding drones vary by country and location, including licensing and registration requirements, protected no-fly zones (such as national parks), and regulations regarding maximum flight height and operating near people or property. Check with the local authorities when in doubt. Illegally flying a drone can have serious consequences, and user negligence can negatively impact future collective utility. In Iceland, a license and exam are required to fly most drones, and those exempted by weight (under 250 grams), such as the DJI Flip, still need to be registered by the user at *flydrone.is* before flying.

FOR MORE ON THIS STUNNING LOCALE, VISIT PAGE 101 FOR KATIE HARRIS' DESTINATIONS, ICELAND'S WESTFJORDS.

SEE WHAT RICHARD GIORDANO HAS TO SAY ABOUT THE DJI MINI 5 PRO DRONE (SIMILAR MODEL) ON PAGE 60, AND LUISA BELL'S REVIEW OF THE DJI MAVIC MINI ON PAGE 41.

