



WAITING FOR THE SUN SINCE.... 1926

Pilatus PC12 air-to-air photoshoot

Iceland July 2017

The cast

Jerome Zbinden - Pilatus Aircraft, Switzerland

Fridgeir Gudjonsson - CEO, Reykjavik Helicopters

Gabriel Fest - AS350 pilot, Reykjavik Helicopters

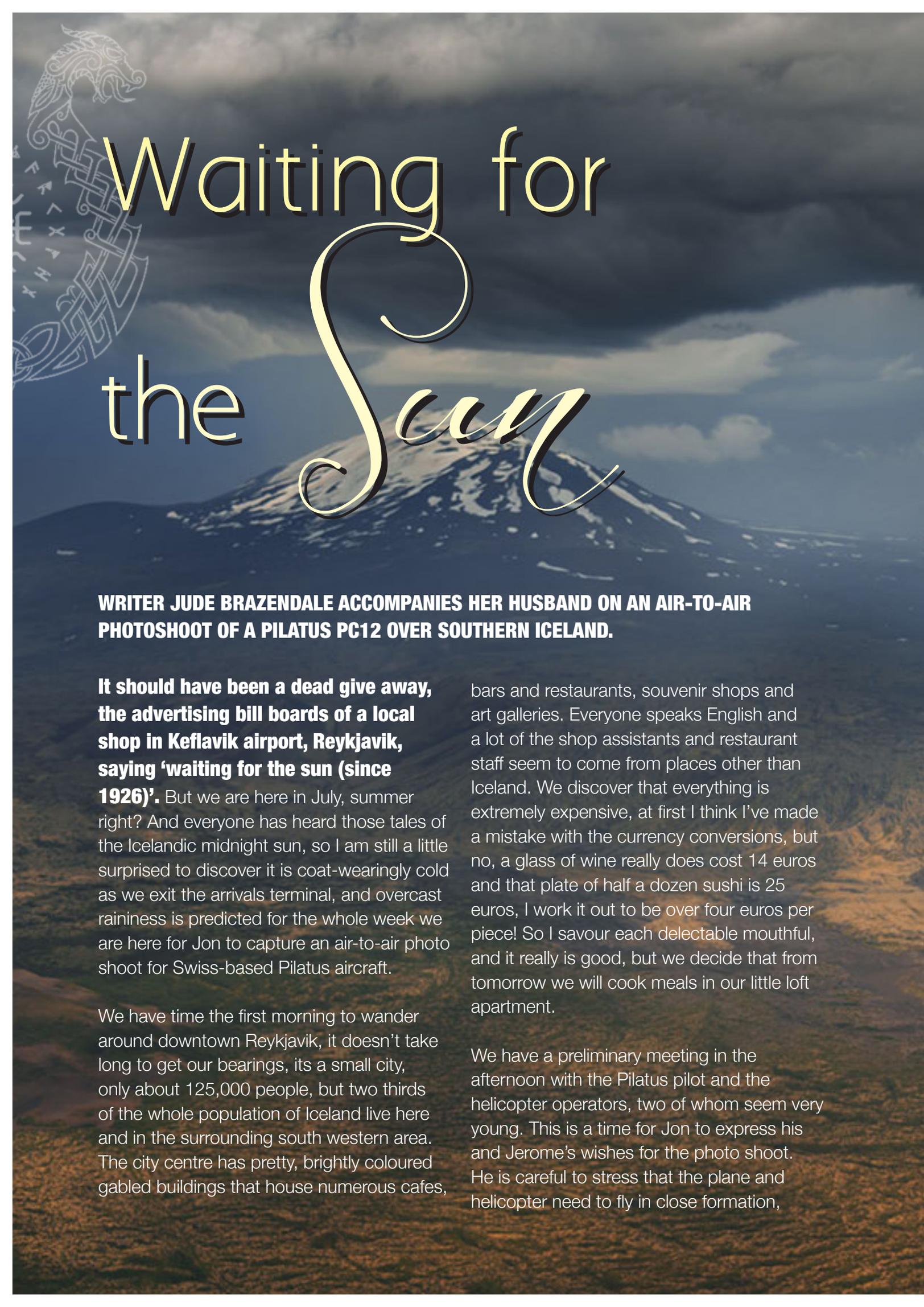
Martin Mendel - PC12 pilot, Pilatus

Jon Davison - A2A Photographer, Eye in the Sky

Jude Brazendale - Writer/assist photographer, Eye in the Sky

Story by Jude Brazendale
Photography by Jon Davison

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Waiting for the Sun

WRITER JUDE BRAZENDALE ACCOMPANIES HER HUSBAND ON AN AIR-TO-AIR PHOTOSHOOT OF A PILATUS PC12 OVER SOUTHERN ICELAND.

It should have been a dead give away, the advertising bill boards of a local shop in Keflavik airport, Reykjavik, saying ‘waiting for the sun (since 1926)’. But we are here in July, summer right? And everyone has heard those tales of the Icelandic midnight sun, so I am still a little surprised to discover it is coat-wearingly cold as we exit the arrivals terminal, and overcast raininess is predicted for the whole week we are here for Jon to capture an air-to-air photo shoot for Swiss-based Pilatus aircraft.

We have time the first morning to wander around downtown Reykjavik, it doesn’t take long to get our bearings, its a small city, only about 125,000 people, but two thirds of the whole population of Iceland live here and in the surrounding south western area. The city centre has pretty, brightly coloured gabled buildings that house numerous cafes,

bars and restaurants, souvenir shops and art galleries. Everyone speaks English and a lot of the shop assistants and restaurant staff seem to come from places other than Iceland. We discover that everything is extremely expensive, at first I think I’ve made a mistake with the currency conversions, but no, a glass of wine really does cost 14 euros and that plate of half a dozen sushi is 25 euros, I work it out to be over four euros per piece! So I savour each delectable mouthful, and it really is good, but we decide that from tomorrow we will cook meals in our little loft apartment.

We have a preliminary meeting in the afternoon with the Pilatus pilot and the helicopter operators, two of whom seem very young. This is a time for Jon to express his and Jerome’s wishes for the photo shoot. He is careful to stress that the plane and helicopter need to fly in close formation,



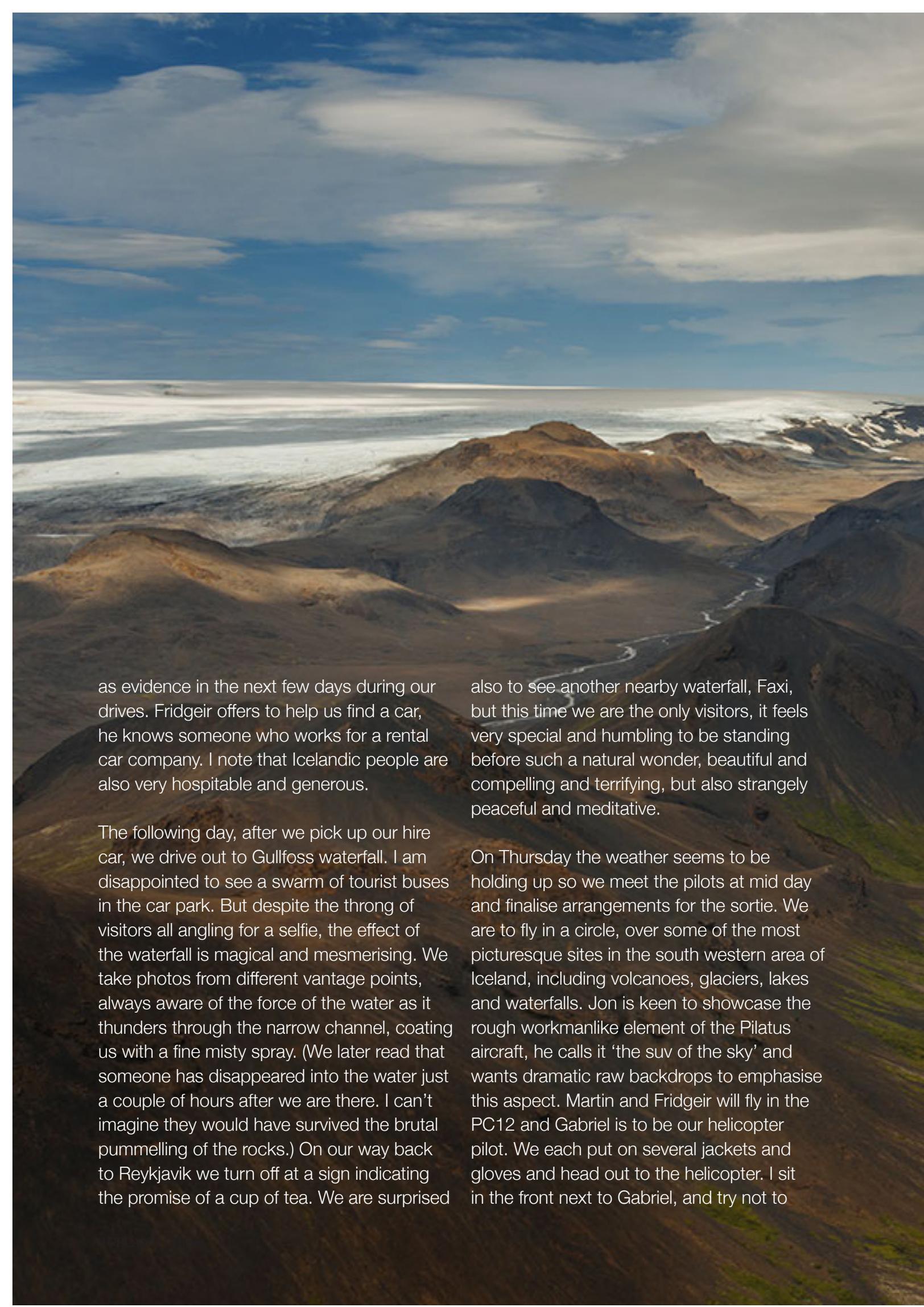
The PC12 approaching Mt Hekla

ideally only a wing-width apart, in order to achieve the perfect shot. I wait for the pilots' reactions. They all nod calmly and agree it can be done. This is good, sometimes the pilots look a little panic stricken at this request. Martin, the Pilatus pilot, emphasises that it is 'safety always first', and he and the helicopter operators, Fridgeir, Gabriel and discuss aspects of the sortie such as how they will indicate who will be the lead and when this will change, always ensuring they maintain sight of each other, what height to fly at and other technical aspects such as wing waggle (banking). I am reassured, these guys are intelligent experienced careful strategists, but not averse to a challenge.

Fridgeir checks the weather forecast for the next few days, there may be a small window of blue sky on Thursday, two days time. Other than that, the weather is not looking

too promising. We head over to hangar number 6, the first purpose built hangar for sea-planes, dating from 1938, now home to Reykjavik Helicopters. We take a look at the ecureuil (AS350) that we will be flying in, and discuss removing the back door so Jon can get out onto the skids if need be to get the best shots.

Fridgeir drives us back to our apartment and gives us some insight into Iceland, it's a very safe country, nobody locks their cars or houses, he agrees with our shock at restaurant prices and says people mostly entertain at home. He explains the effects of the collapse of the Icelandic economy in 2008 due to the corruption of the banks and how so many people lost their homes as a result, but he is very philosophical and says he loves Iceland, it is his home. We are to see several abandoned houses and farms

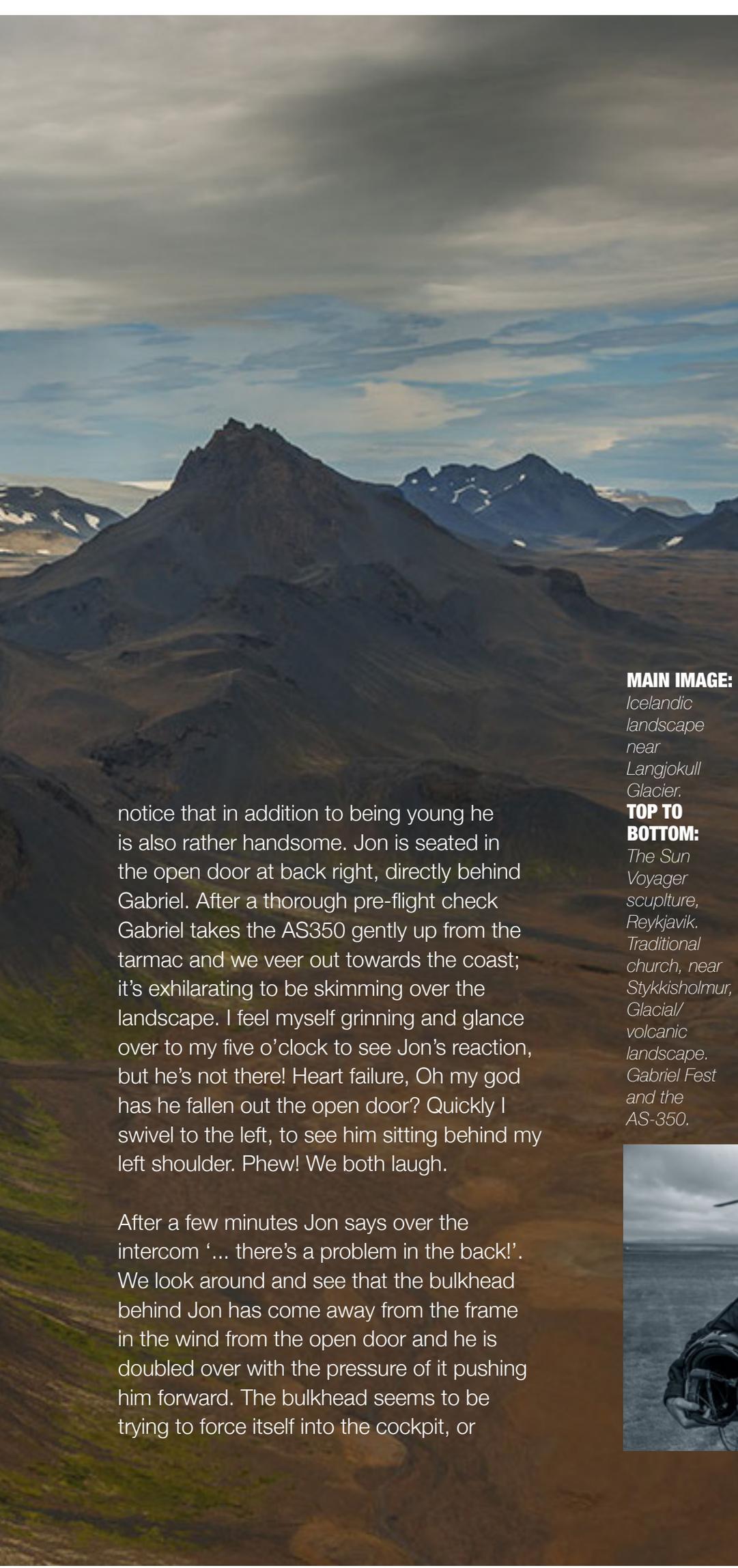


as evidence in the next few days during our drives. Fridgeir offers to help us find a car, he knows someone who works for a rental car company. I note that Icelandic people are also very hospitable and generous.

The following day, after we pick up our hire car, we drive out to Gullfoss waterfall. I am disappointed to see a swarm of tourist buses in the car park. But despite the throng of visitors all angling for a selfie, the effect of the waterfall is magical and mesmerising. We take photos from different vantage points, always aware of the force of the water as it thunders through the narrow channel, coating us with a fine misty spray. (We later read that someone has disappeared into the water just a couple of hours after we are there. I can't imagine they would have survived the brutal pummelling of the rocks.) On our way back to Reykjavik we turn off at a sign indicating the promise of a cup of tea. We are surprised

also to see another nearby waterfall, Faxi, but this time we are the only visitors, it feels very special and humbling to be standing before such a natural wonder, beautiful and compelling and terrifying, but also strangely peaceful and meditative.

On Thursday the weather seems to be holding up so we meet the pilots at mid day and finalise arrangements for the sortie. We are to fly in a circle, over some of the most picturesque sites in the south western area of Iceland, including volcanoes, glaciers, lakes and waterfalls. Jon is keen to showcase the rough workmanlike element of the Pilatus aircraft, he calls it 'the suv of the sky' and wants dramatic raw backdrops to emphasise this aspect. Martin and Fridgeir will fly in the PC12 and Gabriel is to be our helicopter pilot. We each put on several jackets and gloves and head out to the helicopter. I sit in the front next to Gabriel, and try not to



notice that in addition to being young he is also rather handsome. Jon is seated in the open door at back right, directly behind Gabriel. After a thorough pre-flight check Gabriel takes the AS350 gently up from the tarmac and we veer out towards the coast; it's exhilarating to be skimming over the landscape. I feel myself grinning and glance over to my five o'clock to see Jon's reaction, but he's not there! Heart failure, Oh my god has he fallen out the open door? Quickly I swivel to the left, to see him sitting behind my left shoulder. Phew! We both laugh.

After a few minutes Jon says over the intercom '... there's a problem in the back!'. We look around and see that the bulkhead behind Jon has come away from the frame in the wind from the open door and he is doubled over with the pressure of it pushing him forward. The bulkhead seems to be trying to force itself into the cockpit, or

MAIN IMAGE:

Icelandic landscape near Langjokull Glacier.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

The Sun Voyager sculpture, Reykjavik. Traditional church, near Stykkisholmur, Glacial/volcanic landscape. Gabriel Fest and the AS-350.







Tourists at Gullfoss waterfall

worse still, the tail rotor. Immediately I start inwardly panicking, imagining all sorts of disastrous scenarios, none ending well, but I try to reassure myself that pilots are used to the unexpected and have training for these situations... don't they? I glance questioningly at Gabriel, who appears remarkably calm and says he will look out for a suitable place to land. He soon spies a flattish rock at Kleifavatn and we make a smooth landing, the guys pull out the bulkhead and leave it on the ground under a pile of rocks. We will return after the sortie to retrieve it. Crisis averted.

Left: *The crater of Eyjafjallajokull.*
Below: *Thorsa river delta*



The weather seems to be crowding in all around us as we take off again, and Gabriel has to adjust direction to avoid flying into huge black clouds. Our first view, as we head up the coast, is of rugged beaches, milky lagoons and geometrically framed farms. We turn inland and fly along the delta of the god Thor, called Thorsa. I like the abstract meandering of the river inlets and outlets and the shadows that are conjured up, but I can see that although Jon shoots a few frames he isn't very inspired by this landscape.





*She is the
quintessential
symmetrically
shaped
volcano,
lightly dusted
in snow,
surrounded
by several
smaller
attendant
cinder cones.*



The brooding bulk of Mt Hekla

We fly on over Thorsmork (god of the forest) a wilderness reserve popular with tourists who want to hike into the highlands. It is here that we first view the unpronounceable Eyjafjallajokull to the south east (Fridgeir later tells me that 'eyja' means island, 'fjalla' means mountain and 'jokull' is glacier, Island Mountain Glacier). The visual effect of this combination is raw and powerful, as the full intensity of the dominating mountain and its spreading blue ice cap, and the green shadowy lower reaches, stepping sharply down into the valley and deltas below, all unfolds in a 180 degree panorama before us. Jon takes advantage of this perfect backdrop, and shoots several frames, as Martin, in the PC-12, and Gabriel try to maintain close formation in the turbulent air. Eyjafjallajokull is the volcano that unexpectedly erupted in 2010, meltwater floods from its crater rushing down nearby rivers and forcing local inhabitants to flee their houses, while an enormous spreading cloud of volcanic ash grounded European air traffic for days, stranding millions of travellers worldwide.

We continue flying eastwards through increasingly darkening cloud and spikes of rain towards another sub-glacial volcano, Katla, beneath the Myrdalsjokull ice cap. Katla is much bigger and more active, and in fact, I'm told that it is expected that Katla will erupt any time soon, as historically, eruptions of Eyjafjallajokull have preceded an eruption of Katla. So I'm relieved when Jon decides that, due to the bad weather, it isn't worth travelling any closer.

We veer away to fly north west towards Hekla, another famous and extremely active volcano. The helicopter and PC-12 begin an aerial ballet over Landmannalaugar, the sharply sloping hills and valleys between Katla and Hekla. The sky is clearing so





there is an opportunity for some fancy ‘wing wagging’! Now flying in echelon, Gabriel moves in closer to Martin, who turns and banks steeply up the valley. A lovely sight, Jon captures the poetry of the moment on his camera.

Soon we are aware of Hekla looming in the background, majestic and brooding under a mantle of heavy cloud. She is the quintessential symmetrically shaped volcano, lightly dusted in snow, surrounded

by several smaller attendant cinder cones. I am immediately reminded of ‘skin eruptions’, because they look strangely like giant pustules on the skin of the earth. As we continue to fly around Hekla, Jon is photographing the connection between plane and volcano from different angles. I am also trying to get some shots, but am frustrated by the little blob of bird poo right in the middle of the windscreen that keeps ruining my photographs.

Our next point of view is Gullfoss, the huge



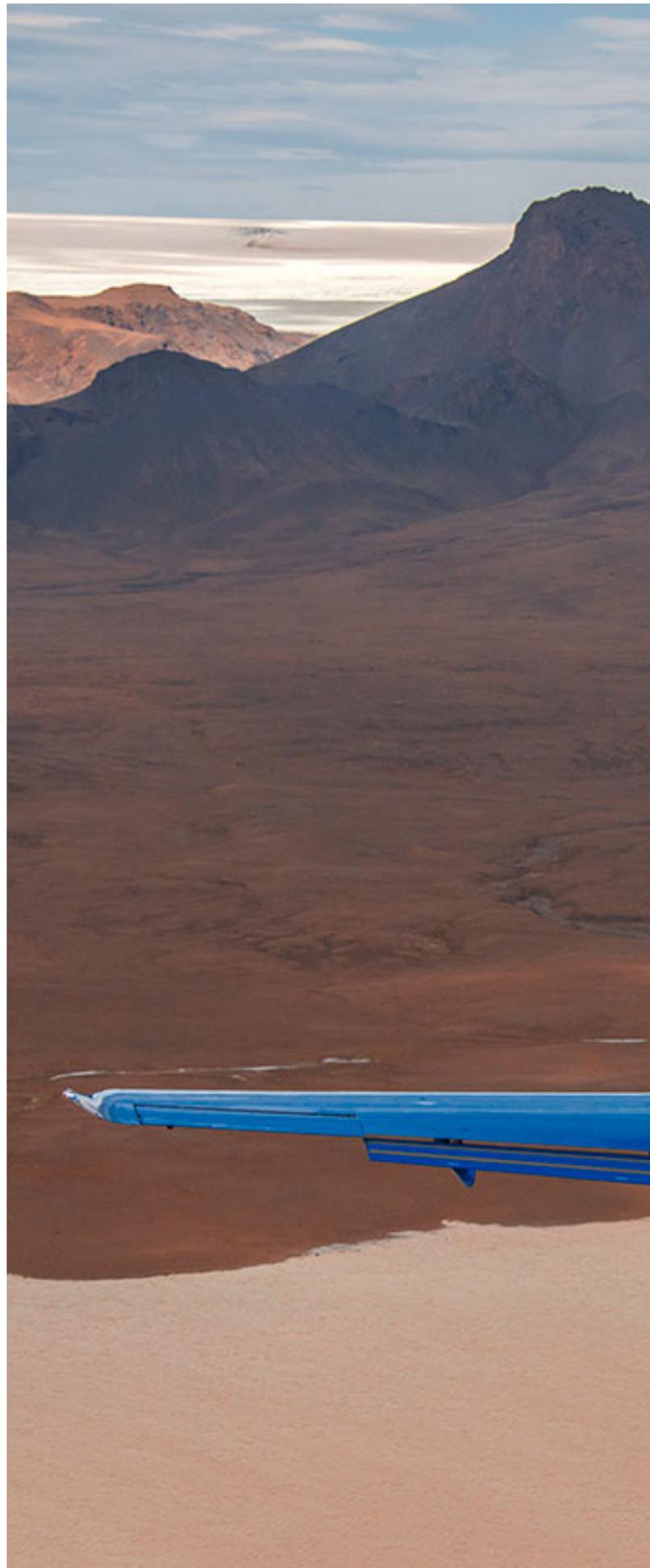


waterfall we drove to yesterday. We cross the Thorsa river and are flying above a huge gash in the earth, a deep and jagged ravine that spreads to the horizon. I see some mistiness ahead of us and realise it is the spray from Gullfoss, rising in plumes to the sky, then suddenly we are flying over the waterfall. But the PC-12 is too far ahead to photograph, so plane and helicopter regroup and do three circuits together over the rampaging fury of Gullfoss. It is exhilarating to witness from this aerial perspective and I compare it to yesterday's experience and think of the tiny dot I must have created then, amongst other tiny dots, insignificant in sight of the raging torrent.

We leave Gullfoss to her visitors and head towards the glacier behind, Langjokull, which true to its name is long and expansive. We fly very close over the escarpments of the steep rift valley for several minutes, looking for the most dramatic views. Gabriel suggests a lake called Thingvallavatn, in the Thingvellir National Park, which has a small island in the middle, that he thinks would be another suitable backdrop for the PC-12. On our way, we fly over a pretty little crater, perfectly circular and cloaked in green yellow moss, rising out of the valley floor. We soon spy the calm blue green lake, a handful of rural villages dotting its shores, and the island is indeed worthy of some shots, there is even a tiny lake within the island within the lake!

Jon decides that Jerome will be happy with the content he has captured of the PC-12, so we begin our journey back to Reykjavik. Gabriel needs to return to Kleifavatn to pick up the bulkhead, so we break off from the PC-12 and head back in that direction. Unfortunately the weather is still bad and we abandon hopes of collecting it today. We also

Rear end view of the PC12 approaching Langjokull Glacier





discover, while we are circling the outskirts of Reykjavik, that because of the weather, Reykjavik airport is only allowing aircraft with IFR (instrument flight rules) to land and not only is the AS-350 not configured for this, but we can't even see nearby Reykjavik through the ground level clouds. (Fridgeir later tells us as they were landing the PC-12 they came out of the cloud just under 400 feet above the ground and there was the runway!) So Gabriel decides to land at Sandskeid, a small airfield about twenty minutes from the city, mainly used for gliders and pilot training.

It is only when I am out of the helicopter that I realise how stiff and cold I am, having stayed in one position for the past two hours. I am feeling euphoric though, after witnessing so many amazing and beautiful natural sights, and start to prattle to Gabriel as we wait for confirmation to continue in to Reykjavik. We learn that flying was a boyhood dream for him, he has been a pilot for six years and has had stints in Iraq (at which point Jon compares his Iraqi experiences) and Afghanistan, providing air support in rebuilding the countries infrastructures. Gabriel is worried about leaving the bulkhead, but Jon and I reason that the weather is still prohibitive and the helicopter needs the back door replaced before he can re-attach the bulkhead. Fridgeir arrives at the air field to give us a lift back to town, I feel guilty at leaving Gabriel waiting alone with the helicopter, but he assures us it is part of his job.

Sitting in the back seat of Fridgeir's immaculate Mercedes, I begin to reflect on the afternoon's experience. Iceland certainly is visually powerful and magnificent, especially from the air. It's not hard to imagine trolls lurking menacingly in shadowy crevices or Vikings striding boldly up frozen glaciers, impervious to the elements. And it turns



out that the overcast weather is actually a bonus, as the threatening dark clouds add an exciting element of drama to Jon's images.

... Late that night, as we are walking back to our apartment in the lingering 2am twilight, I start thinking: Maybe you don't need the sun after all to complete your palette, maybe just the promise of sun is enough...



Opposite: Hallgrimskirkja church, Reykjavik, at 2am; **Clockwise from left:** One of many small craters; abandoned homestead; Turning away from the murk in the AS-350; waiting at Sandskeid; Fridgeir's shot of the AS-350 from PC-12; buildings at twilight along Laugavegur, Reykjavik's main street; flying above Gullfoss.





