

Update #3 - June 2, 2003

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Reporting from: Kyndill Search & Rescue Center

It is 6:30 in the morning and I am sending this from a rescue center where we have been staying for the last couple of days. We had a bit of an epic three nights ago and had to abandon our boats on a beach at 1am and hike to an emergency shelter in a force ten gale. But more on that later.

Our last update was sent from Neskaupstadur in east Iceland where we had been staying with Ari Benediktson and his family. Ari had arranged for us to teach a kayaking class for the local club and then offered his home to us while the weather turned rather nasty for two days. Unlike any other expedition that I've been on, I think I've gained weight rather than lost any due to the continual flow of food and hospitality that Ari's family showered on us while we were in town. On the 19th of May the winds subsided just enough for us to load up and paddle across the fjord with Ari along as our guide. The local newspaper came down to do a quick interview and take some photos that eventually appeared in the Iceland Eastern paper. As the rains poured down we finally waved our farewells and pushed off into the fjord.

We had hoped to actually get out along the outer coast but the winds and seas were harder than we had anticipated. We wound up staying at an old farmstead perched above the rocks of the fjord. As we slowly approached, we could make out a herd of thirty reindeer grazing in the meadows around the house. Quite a site to spot them from the sea and with a dramatic rise of the mountains behind them. Ari arranged for permission for us to stay in the converted cow barn- now a tidy bunk house with wood stove and windows looking out over the fjord. A fine choice of accommodations as the winds kept us land bound for another two days.

When we did finally get out around the headland and heading southward we were treated to a rather large tidal race off the 800 foot cliffs. Eight to ten foot standing waves that occasionally crested and swept white over the sea. After years of solo paddling it was a thrill for me to look over and see what a sea kayak actually looks like on a well developed sea. Many times I would catch a glimpse of Shawna or Leon or Ari on the face of these big waves and think how insignificant we really are when surrounded by such power and natural beauty. From the cliff tops we probably wouldn't even be visible- just tiny slivers set on a vast and open sea. If we could be seen from land- and if there were anyone out on the barren cliffs staring out to sea- we would probably appear to be barely moving at all against the enormous scale of everything. But from

the cockpit it is, of course, a different story. Each paddler is taking one stroke at a time, feeling the pull on the paddle shaft and the rise and fall of each massive swell. Heads turn every few minutes to check on the position of the team and of Ari, and then its back to the work and the joy of paddling and of being immersed in a psychological sense into our world of sea birds, cliffs, winds, musings of the mind and the pull of the paddle.

Coming around the headland was a brilliant introduction to what we would see for the next three days- sheer colored cliffs banded in red, rust, brown, tan and black volcanic rock interrupted with ledges of greenery where the puffins and fulmars nest. Hundreds of puffins, razor bills, murres, gullimonts, the ever present and curious fulmars, gulls and even some arctic skuas wheeled over head, flew within yards of the boats, climbed, soared, dove into the waters around the boats, and cartwheeled a thousand feet about us. It was a three dimensional world of life on the move in every sector of our vision. Words seem to lack the ability to capture the emotion and the moment of being a part of those precious miles.

Ari seemed to know most of the fishermen and farmers in the fjords and along the coast we were paddling. We spotted a twenty five foot fishing boat up against a cliff with two fellows bottom fishing for cod. After a few minutes of conversation with them in Icelandic, one of the fishmen handed Ari two beautiful fish for our dinner that night. Ari stuffed them into the cockpit of his Nordkapp and filleted them at our lunch stop. Dinner that night was cous cous and Icelandic Cod cooked in an old stone ruins a hundred yards from a lighthouse. Ari of course knew the farmer on whose land we were camped.

Our next stop was in Breiddalsvik where we were met by some of the folks who had been in the kayaking class in Neskaupstadur. Ingo, Helga and their children, Oscar, Mala and their children, and Ari's wife Svanhvit and their adorable three year old Jo'na Maria all welcomed us with typical Icelandic generosity and warmth. Ingo is a member of the local Search and Rescue team as well as the ambulance driver. Helga is the only female certified machinist in Iceland and works in her father's garage along with Ingo. Oscar... well now there's Oscar. He is a police inspector who has an unbelievable sense of humor and who kept us in stitches with his antics. He gave each of us a laminated card with his photo and contact numbers on it. "All you have to do is rub this card three times and I will show up." I wish I had taken a photo of him in uniform as he helped us carry the boats up the beach when we landed. We visited the village's heated, outdoor pool and soaked for an hour in the hot tub then returned to Ingo and Helga's home and sat down to a

huge feast of the most succulent leg of lamb that I've ever tasted. The last hour of the evening was spent catching the last of the news and finally the weather report for the next four days- northeast winds which would help us along our way to the town of Höfn- the start of the south coast. Ingo then drove us down to the rescue center where we stayed the night- our own space to spread out the gear and get ready for the next leg of the trip.

Every team that has attempted a circumnavigation of Iceland seems to have run into trouble on the south coast. It is a land of almost continuous black sandy beaches with little or absolutely no relief. The surf has pushed the sands into steep ten foot high banks that force the swells to break in dumping arcs of power rather than nice slow off shore breaks. In addition to this there is simply no place to hide once you are ashore. Needless to say we had been very concerned about this stretch and had been asking everyone who had had any experience with the coast for advice. Our plan was to paddle to Höfn, get a weather update from Ari and then wait for an opportune time for pushing on.

A note on the weather forecasts.... Up until two years ago there had been an English speaking forecast broadcast via the VHF every morning. Unfortunately, this service was discontinued so we are now relying upon phone calls to Ari who has been fantastic in keeping us updated with weather reports.

The paddle to Höfn couldn't have gone any smoother. We had the winds and the seas mostly at our backs and had the time to sort out a paddling routine that seemed to work for all of us. We had learned early on in the trip that the winds seem to build around noon or 1pm so we had begun getting up at 4:30 and getting on the water no later than six. From the time the alarm beeped, until we were taking the first paddle strokes, we were all moving- making breakfast, tea, hot water for lunch tea, packing away the tents, making certain we all had water and food available from the cockpits, and then using a strap, we would lift the loaded boats- one person on the bow and two back by the rear hatch- splitting the weight evenly between us.

Once on the water our routine was to paddle independently for two hours, take a snickers break for five minutes and then paddle another two hours before taking an early lunch break. If the winds were kind, by lunch time we could have twelve to fourteen miles behind us.

It is interesting how smoothly the early days of the trip have actually gone. Yes, we have had some down days due to weather, but for the most part, the down days have come at times when we needed the rest break to recover. With the exception of Shawna who did some swimming in order to train a bit for the trip, none of us really had sufficient time

prior to the trip for any serious training. Knowing this, we had planned on doing ten to twelve miles for the first week and then slowly move the mileage up as our bodies grew accustomed to pushing loaded boats. Our paddling styles, naturally are quite different from each other and we agreed from the start that Shawna and Leon would paddle together and, if I wanted, I could move at my own pace. As it has turned out, my pace is a bit faster so that I am often out in front. We usually meet up for breaks and again for lunch. On a long trip such as this it is a balance of meeting the teams needs in terms of safety, and meeting the individuals needs in terms of what we each are expecting to get out of the paddling experience.

A very large part of the beginning of any long journey is dealing with all of the unknowns- the weather issues, the distances, the camping, the availability of supplies. And then on a more detailed level; where does the tent and the sleeping bag, and the stove and pots and pans, and the first aid kit and all the dozens of other items go? The packing routine, as with the actual paddling routine, takes time to sort out. Living out of an 18 foot boat is drastically different than that of living at home. It is an adjustment for all of us. As the days have progressed and all of these details of paddling styles and routines have been developing, the three of us have been talking about how the trip feels to each of us and what questions, stresses, doubts or concerns we've each had. Keeping this kind of communication open is very important.

I think it is fair to say that I have an advantage in that this trip feels very much an extension of my previous trips. Because of what I have done in the past, there is a part of me that knows what to expect physically, mentally and psychologically. My advantage, I think, is that I have all of the same concerns and questions going through my mind but I have my previous trips behind me that have trained my mind to let the questions be there but not necessarily try to answer them all. It is the familiarity which I feel with all of the little parts of the journey that makes these early days a little easier for me.

Our approach to Höfn was a good introduction to what we would be seeing along the south coast. Just east of Höfn are several eight or ten mile stretches of the same black beaches that stretch for over 120 miles from Höfn to Vik. The saving grace of this coast and the south coast, are the massive glaciers that are all part of the Vatnajökull glacier- the largest glacier in Europe. On the day we arrived in Höfn, the clouds lifted and for the first time we could see the four glaciers arms reaching within a few miles of where we were camped. Off in the distance we could also see the ice cap of the Vatnajökull- a smooth expanse of white so vast that at first it seemed like it must be a weather frontal system

moving in. As the skies continued to clear it became obvious that we were actually seeing miles and miles of ice and snow.

On May 27th, after a day off for rest, laundry, showers and a careful look at the weather from Ari, we set off for the first leg of the south coast. The forecast called for four days of southeast, and south winds- nothing strong enough to be of a concern to us. This was the window of good weather we had hoped we would get. Every day of mild winds was one more day closer to the shelter of Vik. This is a coast that is so unforgiving yet so beautiful in its extremes of barrenness. With the exception of the carcass of a humpback whale and then, surprisingly, another carcass of what we think was a minke whale, there was very little to entertain the eyes as the black line of sands accompanied us along our route.

Day two found us at Jokulsa where a narrow river flows from the base of one of the glaciers. Bergy bits floated out into the sea and made us realize what a contrast this coast is-- miles of desert-like sands that breed chunks of pure crystalline ice. Leon and I paddled up against the current and into an inland lake filled with the shapes and fantastic colors of icebergs. Later that night we camped still within sight of the glacier but surrounded by miles of fine rippled sands. Shawna made the comment of how different this beach was from one that we had camped on earlier-- on the previous beach we had found bones of seals, a dolphin carcass, bits of wood and fishing floats. Here there was nothing but miles of black sand. In two days time, we would learn first hand why there was nothing to see... it was all buried by the winds that we were to experience.

Our plan for traversing the south coast was to use the emergency shelters as places to hide behind in the event of a gale overtaking us. This was exactly what we were shooting for on the morning of May 30th. After getting up at 3:30, we were on the water by 5:15 and paddling with a ten knot wind at our backs- perfect sea conditions for cutting away at the 23 miles between us and the lighthouse and rescue shelter at Skaftaros. It is quite difficult to attempt to share all of what happens on a normal day at sea. Each wave, each puff or blast of wind has its own character and effect on the paddler. No two minutes are the same and there is a constant interpretation and assessment of what the senses are taking in. What the reader must try to appreciate in this next portion of the update is the conditions that we found ourselves in and how we best dealt with them given our circumstances.

The first two hours of paddling were nearly as perfect as they get. With the wind and tide running with us we were making well over four knots. At the two hour break period I had moved well out in front of Leon and Shawna and could no longer see them. After a five minute break I

continued on, a quarter mile out from the beach and just beyond the outer surf break.

By hour three the barometer had dropped three points and the wind and swell had picked up. The swells were now quartering in from astern which decreased the speed of the boat and forced a fair bit of corrective strokes.

By hour four it was clear that the weather forecast we had received was wrong. The barometer had dropped another point and the winds were steadily climbing to around 20 knots. I stopped and waited for Leon and Shawna but couldn't see any sign of them. Twenty minutes later I barely made out the outline of the lighthouse through the sea mist but decided that the effort and risk to keep pushing wasn't worth it. I had just put the helmet on when an offshore breaker hit me and sidesurfed me for quite a ways. It was definitely time to head for shore.

The surf landing went very well- caught some nice waves that rocketed me in and deposited me cleanly on a flat long expanse of beach. After waiting another half hour and glassing the sea with binoculars for Shawna and Leon, I started hauling the boat and gear to high ground and setting up a camp. An hour and a half later, after dragging a couple of logs and bits of lumber for anchor points, I crawled into the tent and waited. Another hour went by before I heard Leon calling out my name. I opened the tent doorway to see them both dressed in dry suits- they hadn't started the day in them- and looking nearly exhausted.

While the winds drove the sands in around our feet, Leon told me what had happened.

Just about the time I had landed- 9:30- an offshore wave had hit them both. Shawna was out a little deeper and managed to cut over the top before it broke and buried Leon. He was able to side surf it a long way but eventually got rolled. With the shock of the cold water and the exertion of four hours of paddling in increasing wind he tried three times to roll, switched and attempted a roll on the other side, was hit by a second wave, and then regrettably wet exited in the surf zone. Shawna was able to get a tow line attached and towed Leon out beyond the outer break. After struggling to empty the flooded boat and restowing all the gear they made the decision to run the surf, get into the beach igloo- a nylon dome used for emergency shelter- and get into their drysuits. By this time Leon was very cold and hypothermia was a growing concern. They eventually got warmed up, changed into drysuits, ate lunch, and came back out into the surf. By the time we met up, they had been working for over seven hours. We carried their boats to my tent site, set up their tent, anchored everything to the boats and the logs and crawled back into the

tents for some rest. At 7pm we had a communal dinner in their big tent and then sperated again for what we thought would be a night of sleep. By ten o'clock the winds had built to a point where the wind driven sands were burying the tents and boats. Every half hour we were getting up and shoveling the tents off with our paddles. Anytime we leaned down below waist level, the sand would blind us and blast our faces. With each passing hour the barometer dropped another point and the wind seemed to be increasing. By 1 am we decided the tents couldn't take the continued loading of the rain and sand. Through the howling wind we yelled from one tent to the other and came up with a plan. We would get dressed in full paddling gear for wind protection, take the tents down and stuff them in the boats, then take food, water and clothing and attempt to reach the emergency shelter at the light house. Taking the tents down in winds that we later learned were over 50 knots was a job- to say the least. Before we set off for the lighthouse at 2am, we took a compass bearing from the quickly dissappearing boats, stood a log up on end to help us locate the boats later, and then set off.

The one problem with approaching the lighthouse from the land was that there was a river we would have to cross. I had brought a paddle to use as a probe and we agreed before we entered the river that if the water reached our waists, we would abandon the plan. Amid the shriek of wind, the blowing sand and the waves on the river, we started across. All of this might sound crazy. And I can assure you that we would not have been in these conditions if we had had any other choice. But what we were dealing with in the faint light of the early morning was purely survival. In these instances you do what you have to do and you do it in the best way you know how. This is what we doing.

Less than a quarter way across the river, I felt the bottom drop sharply away. There was no way we were going to cross it on foot. We turned back. When we got back to the river bank we had a hasty and I think fair agreement on what to do next. I said that these were conditions in which people die- our decisions had to be made fast and accurately. We had two options- one, get the beach igloo and try to sit out the storm, and two, go get a boat and try to raft all of us across. The igloo was in my opion the wrong option.

The plan--- Leon would stay with all the bags of gear so they wouldn't get blown away. Shawna and I would go for the boat. We set off on the reverse compass bearing we had taken and found the boats. We then dug one boat out, hooked up two tow lines and started the brutal work of dragging a loaded boat back to the river - to leave any of the gear behind which was in the boat, would have been to have lost it to the wind.

While Shawna and I were pulling the boat, Leon was attempting to find as much shelter as possible behind the bags of food and clothing. He later told me he was freezing and had to put on more clothing and keep getting up to warm up and then get back down and try to bury his face from the sand.

After stopping every twenty feet for rest, Shawna and I finally met up with Leon at the river's edge, set up the beach igloo for a quick rest and snack and devised the next plan for crossing the river. Being inside the igloo was actually worse than being out in the storm. The billowing nylon provided more surface area for the wind to act on and it was incredibly noisy inside it. If anything the igloo heightened the stress we were all feeling. Given the conditions, the igloo was not the answer.

The plan for the crossing was for me to be in the cockpit while Shawna and Leon, who had dry suits, would wade out until they lost their footing. They would then hang on and attempt to kick while I paddled us across. The river was only 200 yards wide but it was the longest two hundred yards I have ever paddled.

We got to the far side of the river, dragged the boat to high ground, turned it into the wind and rolled it over. Shawna found a fishing float that she attached to one end to help us see the boat at a later date. Leon thought that he would never see that boat or his precious gear again. At this point, we left once again for the lighthouse and the emergency shelter a mile away.

When we finally reached the shelter and pushed the door open we were all exhausted. It was 5:45am. After checking for water, food and the condition of the shelter's radio, I tried making contact with the radio to let Ari and our friends know that we were OK. Over the next hour I tried several more times but got no response. We all then climbed into the bunks and got a couple hours of sleep. At some point, Leon tried the radio again and managed to get a response from a coast guard helicopter in flight from Reykjavik to Höfn. After a quick discussion and ascertaining there was no immediate need for assistance, they decided to contact the local search and rescue team, and ask them to bring us out some water. We had enough food for two days if we stretched it and we knew we could get water from the river but we didn't know how long the storm was going to keep us pinned down in the shelter. The helicopter pilot told us he had made contact with the local team and that they would be out in two to three hours.

Three hours later fourteen guys from the Kyndill Rescue team were standing in the now crowded shelter. They had brought water with them as well as three of the biggest trucks imaginable. Broddi- the lead fellow who spoke very good English listened as we explained what had taken

place for us over the past 12 hours. I explained where we had left two of the boats on the far side of the river, where we had left the boat we used to cross the river and that our plan was to continue as soon as the weather broke and we could retrieve all of our gear. There was a brief discussion in Icelandic and several of the younger men started getting dressed in drysuits. When we asked what was happening, Broddi explained that they would swim the river, find our boats and bring them to us!! I quickly explained that the boats were buried, loaded to the hilt, and that our only real concern was for the boat that we had left at the river's edge. If we could get that boat before it blew away, we would be very grateful. Another exchange of Icelandic had everyone heading for the biggest truck that they had- a 1984 Russian built monster that had originally been built for the East German Army. With Broddi at the wheel and Leon and I in the cab, Shawna and half the team jumped up on the flat bed and we started across the sands. Broddi explained that he could deflate the tires so that we wouldn't sink into the sand and that all six massive wheels had power to them. In super low, mountain climbing gear we lumbered across the flats and into the sand storm. In less than fifteen minutes we found the boat where we had left it. Everyone jumped out, hauled the boat up and held on as we headed back.

By the time we had returned to the shelter Broddi suggested that we just come back into town with them, stay at the rescue center and when the storm abated he would send a truck out on a different road and we could get the boats we had temporarily abandoned. The winds hadn't dropped at all and Broddi's offer sounded too good to be true.

So here we are in the Kyndill Rescue center- warm, dry and a lot more comfortable than we would have been in the emergency shelter- thanks to the help and once again the hospitality of our host country. The guys here at the center have all been fantastic. There has not been a single suggestion that what we are attempting to do is either foolish or futile, perhaps by nature the Icелander's seem to have an adventurous spirit of their own. We have insisted on paying for the fuel that the team used in coming to our assistance and have once again made some great friends.

The plan now is for a driver to help us retrieve the other two boats, possibly this afternoon, and bring them here to the center. I think we'll be able to find them given we have a compass bearing and hopefully the log that we stood up- if it hasn't blown down. We'll have a bit of work digging for them and then loading them on the truck but then we can get them all cleaned up here at the center. When the weather stabilizes- possibly by Friday, we can then put them in the river here in town and paddle back 12 miles out to the sea.

Well that pretty much brings everyone up to where we are at present. We are all doing well and in hind sight have no doubt learned a great deal from the last three days. Broddi has told us that any forecast we receive which is more than 6 hours old is really not dependable. That doesn't leave us much leeway, but that is the nature of paddling this coast. If we can get two more days of good weather we'll be in Vik where the coastline offers more shelter. If all goes well we will email again from Vik. All the best to everyone who is following us along on our Icelandic journey.

Chris, Leon, and Shawna