

Questions with a Pro: David Lawrence

By Lily Barber January 8, 2018 Questions with a Pro, Strictly Business Blog

This week's *Questions with a Pro* features David Lawrence.

David is a Florida based photographer with a passion for aerial photography. He is a licensed and insured FAA uUAS (drone) pilot which vastly expands his horizons for capturing truly captivating images. Here, David outlines some of what he captures with aerial photography, the process of obtaining a drone pilot's license, and his thoughts on motion photography.

We asked: Please describe the aerial work you do, and what you try to capture with this type of photography.

David said: I photograph architecture, transportation, construction, aviation and environmental projects for engineering, architectural and marketing agency clients. Images of buildings, airports, bridges, highways, rail systems, energy projects, ports, industry, natural resources and agriculture.

Photographing large-scale projects often requires aerial work. From ground level I often can only see a small portion of the project. From above I not only see the entire project...but more importantly, the subject becomes an interesting montage of shapes, colors and textures. Something that looks ordinary on the ground can look extraordinary as an aerial.

I like to create aerials when the light comes from a low angle (near sunrise or sunset). A subject has more depth and I can often find interesting elongated shadows and graphic patterns to work with.

Successful aerial photography also requires patience and planning. Composition is as important from the air as it is at ground level. Catching peak action...like an airplane lifting off from the runway...makes an aerial photograph of an airport more interesting. It also makes the photography more of a challenge. It takes careful timing to be certain the helicopter is in the correct position the moment the airplane is lifting off the runway. This also requires successful communication between the photographer, the helicopter pilot and the control tower. And a little luck that a cloud doesn't move in and block the sunlight.

I try to capture views of our world that might help people see something in a different way.

We asked: How did you develop your passion for aerial photography?

David said: I am an aviation buff from way back. In a quest for capturing the spirit of flight, I have stood at the end of runways as jumbo jets roar overhead and mounted cameras on the wing tips of a Cessna. I have ridden in the jump seat of a 747 and the basket of a hot air balloon along with ultra lights, glider planes, helicopters, WW2 war birds and a German biplane. And my camera has been right along with me.

I have photographed from the flight lines and ramp areas of busy international airports like Tampa, Boston, JFK, Orlando, Denver and Sydney Australia. I have flown solo in a Piper, jumped out of a perfectly good sky dive plane and "landed" a 737 flight simulator. I love to photograph "flying machines". And I love a "birds eye view" of the world.

We asked: What did the process of getting your drone pilot's license entail? What new doors has this license opened for your business?

David said: Under Part 107, drone pilots (officially known as UAS unmanned aircraft system pilots) are required to pass an **FAA** Aeronautical Knowledge exam. The cost to take the knowledge exam is \$150 at a **licensed** testing center. A license is valid for 2 years – you must pass a recurrent knowledge test every two years. The exam consists of 60 multiple-choice questions. Test questions include real world situations like "you have been hired to photograph a wetlands project along xxx river". You will need to locate the project on a provided sectional chart, understand the air space involved and any other special restrictions around that area to answer the questions correctly. I found that taking an online course like remotepilot101.com was well worth my time and money. You really need to understand how to read sectional charts, flight rules and weather to pass this test. And they are all good things to know when out flying a drone.

Having an FAA 107 sUAS license enables me to create aerial images from lower altitudes and also be able to take advantage of unique weather and light conditions. A lower altitude allows for composing with a variety of new and interesting camera angles and I am shooting through less haze and humidity. With pre-scheduled helicopters and airplanes, it is difficult to take advantage of really nice light on a short notice. By having a drone with me "ready to fly" I can create images that would not have been possible otherwise.

A door has been opened so that I can now offer "an aerial option" to most of my location photography clients. Especially for projects where there isn't a budget to charter a helicopter. This leads to additional interesting photographs available to my clients and more revenue to me, as well.

For some projects a drone works best. For others, a helicopter might work better. Offering multiple options allows me to help educate a client on making the best choice for their individual project.

We asked: What are your thoughts about motion photography? Do you think your business will begin to emphasize motion in the future?

David said: I think for some projects motion can tell a better story. For example, think about a drawbridge...a short clip showing the bridge opening up with a boat cruising under it. Or a wetlands project viewed from the vantage point of a bird slowly gliding between the trees and approaching the water.

Years ago I filmed 16mm motion picture clips for The Image Bank (a stock photography and film agency that was based in New York). Trying to shoot with a heavy 16mm motion picture camera in a vibrating helicopter was more than I could hope to do at that time.

The quality of the motion video that I can now create using the latest generation of drones is pretty amazing! It is no secret that more and more web searches include the word "video". I believe the demand for motion is only going to increase.

Yes, motion is a tool I am going to continue to emphasize. For me it's going to be creating drone video motion that includes interesting composition angles and cinematic techniques.

We asked: How has your ASMP membership as well as membership in other organizations affected your business?

David said: I joined ASMP in 1984 soon after starting my photography business. Over the years I have learned a lot of important information from the ASMP publications, meetings and website about running my business. However, to me, the biggest benefit has been meeting and getting to know other ASMP members.

How great is it to be able to call on a fellow member photographer for a recommendation on locating a good helicopter pilot in San Juan? Or chatting with a member in LA about tips before purchasing a drone?

I am also a member of the National Press Photographers Association, and the North American Nature Photographers Association.

I believe that a photographer needs to constantly evolve and grow to remain successful. Professional organizations are a great growing medium.

Find more of David's work on [his website](#).

If this article was of interest to you, take a look at some of the other articles in the [Questions with a Pro](#) and [Questions with an Educator](#) series.



Aerial view of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge over Tampa Bay © David Lawrence