

Fairfield County Weekly

Going With the Flow

By Larissa Lytwyn

June 11, 2009

Hot air ballooning is one of those life experiences people check off somewhere between skydiving and seeing the Grand Canyon.

Like many, I've always been transfixed by the rare and almost magical sight of a rainbow-hued balloon drifting above the trees on a lazy June afternoon. My motivation to spend 60 minutes in a five-foot-wide basket 1,000 feet above ground was to conquer a fear of flying. Hot air ballooning was my way to literally embrace new heights.

A Yankee Balloon, LLC, is one of several ballooning companies based in Connecticut. Flights depart out of the Southbury area. "There's a lot more open space there than in lower Fairfield County," explains owner and operator Bill Colyer, a Fairfield resident. Colyer is an FAA-certified commercial pilot and flight instructor with more than 30 years of experience. He first became intrigued by ballooning during a visit to Greece in 1973, where he heard about someone attempting to cross the Atlantic in a balloon. Colyer's curiosity became a passion and eventually a career.

A Yankee Balloon was founded in 1992. Colyer offers service to at least two passengers at a time. Individual trips cost about \$250. In addition to his company operation, Colyer provides tethered balloon experiences for events, from birthday parties to corporate banquets to town fairs. He primarily uses one Lindstrand model balloon. Lindstrand, a leading balloon manufacturer, gives balloonists the opportunity to pick their balloon's design and colors.

Colyer also enjoys competitive ballooning. He attends about a dozen balloon events a year, from the world-renowned Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta to the Waiarapa and Waikato Festivals in New Zealand. He's served as balloonmeister (lead organizer) of many ballooning events in the northeast and has won top prize at the Great New England Balloon Festival, New Jersey Festival of Ballooning and Connecticut's Goshen Fair. He has sailed over fields in Ireland and traversed the snow-capped edges of the Austrian Alps.

I met Colyer and his longtime partner Pat Anderson in a commuter lot in Southbury. Flights are usually held at daybreak or twilight, when winds are calmest. I'd chosen a twilight trip. The team was easy to spot: The giant wicker basket affixed to the back of a van was sort of a giveaway. Hanging from the basket was a placard titled "Last Penny," a nod to the expensiveness of balloon equipment (averaging \$35,000 for both basket and balloon, costs rise even further with routine maintenance). Surrounding Colyer and Anderson were several veteran balloonists who would serve as "balloon chasers," helping us launch and land. Also on board: my old college roommate and her mother. Ever since seeing the film adaptation of *Around the World In 80 Days*, my roommate's mother had dreamed of going ballooning.

Shortly after meeting at 5 p.m., we piled into the van to find the ideal launch spot. We first stopped at an old airfield in Roxbury. After a few minutes of measuring wind strength and direction, however, Colyer and

his colleagues decided another place might be better. We soon reached a giant pasture in Southbury. The deflated balloon was stored in the back of the van. It took about 30 minutes to fill it. A gasoline-powered fan is used to blow outside air into the envelope (the balloon itself). Typically balloons weigh about 275 pounds. The cold air partially inflates the balloon to establish its basic shape before the propane-driven burner flame is aimed into the mouth to heat the air inside. By the time we climbed into the basket, it was after 6 p.m.

Our ascension was very rapid. It felt like we were on a reverse roller coaster, racing up instead of down. Colyer seemed to read my thoughts — or perhaps my petrified face. “You’re experiencing something new and your body is getting used to it,” he said.

We’d just leveled at 800 feet and I was witnessing the most spectacular views I’d ever seen so close. At that moment I realized it was all worth it. The silence was markedly peaceful. The only sound was propane burning. The sound of propane shooting through the burner is sudden and noisy, accompanied by a burst of heat and flames. Colyer told me pilots must be cautious about operating burners too close to livestock, since the sound can startle them. Fortunately, we were high enough to avoid scaring the horses, cows, chickens and deer we spied.

Later, in a heavily wooded area, we descended to treetop level. The branches actually scraped the underside of our basket. “Going through trees could look dangerous to passerby,” Anderson said. “We’ve gotten 911 calls from people afraid we were crashing.” During balloon festivals, balloons sometimes drift close enough to each other to “kiss,” or touch fabric.

There is no formal steering mechanism. Pilots can navigate up and down based on altitude and wind speed. But there is no way to select a specific destination to land. The only way to operate is to pack plenty of propane (40 gallons on average) and launch in the direction of known “soft landings,” away from power lines, water, swamps, buildings and houses. This is why our hour flight lasted over two hours and covered nearly 20 miles. Our target fields were either too distant or so close we couldn’t land safely at the relatively high wind speeds.

As we drifted fairly low to the ground, wondering when we might land, we marveled at how excited people were to see us. Children got off their bicycles to stare and wave. Cars stopped along the road to watch. One family invited us to dinner.

We finally landed on some grass outside an office building, a hillside blocking the wind. The landing was more slam and bounce than slow and soft. Ballooning’s unpredictability is precisely what makes it so exciting. We ended the evening with the traditional champagne toast, complete with fruit, cheese and crackers served on plastic plates adorned with drawings of, yes, hot-air balloons. We each received honorary certificates and keepsake wine corks and pennies.