

TRAVEL

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History of hot air ballooning

The hot air balloon has played a great part in the imagination and ability of man to fly. It all began on a hot summer's day on June 5, 1783 in Annonay France.

Two brothers, Joseph and Etienne Montgolfier, had built the first hot air balloon out of linen and paper. Hot air and smoke from burning straw filled the balloon, which rose un-manned to a height of 1,800 metres.

Finally, on Oct. 15, 1783, the first manned flight was made by Pilatre De Rosier in the Aerostat Reveillon. The tethered balloon rose over 80 metres and remained aloft for 15 minutes, landing safely without incident.

The first manned free-flight was made by De Rozier and Marquis d'Arlandes in November 1783. The flight lasted 20 minutes and travelled over five and a half miles. Just two years later in 1785, a French balloonist, Jean Pierre Blanchard, and his American co-pilot, John Jefferies, were the first to fly across the English Channel. In these early days of ballooning, the English Channel was considered the first step to long distance ballooning, a large benchmark in ballooning history.

Many French people marveled at the height and distance the balloons could remain aloft. Eventually, some balloon flights landed in parts of France where the local peasantry were unfamiliar with the new technology. They attacked the crew, believing they were being invaded by an alien force. After numerous incidents, one group of aeronauts produced a bottle of wine from their local region and the peasants called off the attack. The tradition continues today where every balloonist carries a bottle of champagne onboard. In the event touchdown is made on unknown property, a bottle is offered to the landowner to celebrate a safe landing.

In the 19th Century, balloon gained strategic military value, especially during the Franco-Prussian War. Balloons were utilized to rescue and deliver personnel. They were also used for reconnaissance missions during the First World War. By the Second World War, barrage balloons were launched and tethered to confuse incoming enemy aircraft. Balloons would later prove indispensable as unmanned, meteorological research flights.

In 1987, Sir Richard Branson and Per Linstrand became the first aeronauts to cross the Atlantic Ocean in a hot air balloon.

History was made on March 20 1999, when the "Breitling Orbiter3" achieved the first nonstop round-the world flight.

Floating away with the wind

by KEVIN MILLS
Abbotsford News

LONG BEFORE the invention of the airplane, even before the Zeppelin, man was determined to find a way to float among the clouds.

Hot air ballooning has been around for more than 225 years and while it is a simpler form of flight, it's a magical experience that has been attracting people for two centuries.

Here in the Fraser Valley, you can still experience the unique feeling of walking the winds as Sundance Balloons offers you a chance to touch the sky.

Ballooning is a seasonal, weather-reliant activity that has been making a comeback in the past few decades.

So, when the opportunity arose to experience this oldest form of flight, I was quick to jump at the chance.

Sundance offers two flights a day, in the early morning and at sunset. While the take-off location can vary, due to wind direction, my experience began at the 264th Street freeway exit.

As dawn broke, I stood – my wife Pearl at my side – along with six fellow passengers, and watched as a large truck and trailer pulled off the road and into a nearby field.

Our pilot, Daryl McKee, and his one-man ground crew, Terry Gullison, came towards us and quickly put us all to work.

There is more to the ballooning experience than taking a ride! Passengers are encouraged to help unload the basket and balloon, help set up the lines and assist in stabilizing the balloon as air and heat are shot into it.

As the setup was taking place, our pilot went over a few simple rules – what to touch, what not to, no jumping up and down; common sense, really.

Sensing an air of excitement among his passengers, or maybe even a slight hint of nervousness, McKee tried to ease the tension with one last rule.

"Regardless of what type of landing we have, stay in the basket – until I regain consciousness," he said with a laugh.

With our nerves slightly calmed thanks to his humour, we went back to work.

As the balloon quickly – much quicker than I had anticipated – filled up, passengers were asked to jump into the basket, in order to weigh it down.

With the eight of us snugly in



Hot air ballooning is the oldest form of flight and has been around since the mid-1700s. Visitors to the Fraser Valley can see what it's like to walk with the wind.

place, we were ready for lift-off.

With seven tons of air trapped above us, we waited patiently for that rush of wind as we shot up in the air.

But it didn't happen.

There was no rush of air, and my stomach didn't shoot down to the bottom of my shoes. I actually felt nothing unusual. What was strange is that I looked out of the basket to see that our ground crew was rapidly getting smaller.

We didn't shoot up; the ground merely sank away!

There was no sensation of movement, rather a feeling of

weightlessness. We were floating. It was as if we belonged in the sky. As the wind began to blow, we went with it. You couldn't feel the wind on your face because we offered no resistance. The wind blew and we went with it.

The peace and calm was briefly interrupted by a roar of dragon's breath, as McKee fired up some heat to keep the balloon rising. But in between the shots of fire, silence surrounded us.

Although we were more than 1,000 feet in the air, you could hear dogs barking in their yards as people woke up and started

their day.

As we silently floated by, we were treated to an amazing view of the valley, farms, homes (I never realized how many people in Langley own swimming pools), and, of course, the mountains. It's a view you can't get any other way.

As if to drive home the point of how unique the experience is, a small flock of birds flew by, just beneath us. Travelling at roughly the same speed as our balloon, we got the chance to observe what they look like in mid-flight – from the top, rather than your normal viewpoint from below.

It's easy to see why so many people use this adventure as an opportunity for marriage proposals or anniversary celebrations. Hot air ballooning has a romantic aspect that can't be ignored.

In fact, Dave Parker, sales manager at Sundance Balloons, told me before the flight that many people book a balloon ride months ahead of time for just such an occasion.

"We get a lot of bookings in October and November from people wanting a summer ride. They buy them as Christmas gifts or anniversary gifts. We are really busy in the winter," he said.

Sadly, after an hour of flight, it was time to land – an experience in itself.

While our pilot was in complete control, he was at the mercy of the winds. There is never a set landing site on a balloon adventure. McKee can control our height, but not our direction.

As we sailed by homes and farmlands in Langley, our pilot calmly scouted around, looking for a suitable landing area. We gracefully touched down in a large field as dozens of cows stood by watching.

Our ground crew, which had followed us for the entire trip, quickly contacted the land owner and received permission to pack up the balloon.

Again the passengers were called on to take down the balloon, pack it up and load it back onto the truck.

Our pilot presented the landowner with a bottle of champagne (a tradition that dates back to the beginning of balloon flight) and we piled into the truck and were returned to the original meeting place.

To celebrate our hot air adventure, all the passengers and crew shared a champagne toast.

We also shared an experience that we can remember for the rest of our lives.

If You Go:

Sundance Balloons is a national company with offices across the country.

They are the largest manufacturer and operator of hot air balloons in North America and were established in 1985.

To find out more about hot air ballooning, call the B.C. office at 604-533-7552 or visit the website at:

www.sundanceballoons.com



KEVIN MILLS / The Abbotsford News

There's more to a balloon ride than just floating. Passengers are allowed to help set up and take down the hot air balloon.



KEVIN MILLS / The Abbotsford News

Hot air ballooning allows passengers to enjoy some spectacular views of the Fraser Valley.