

Ballooning gives earth a new look

By Sue Mason
staff writer

Now I know what's meant by a bird's eye view — trees that look like fuzzy mounds of moss stuck haphazardly on a Lionel train board; sailboats that look like white slashes on an artist's canvas; roads that resemble streamers of gray satin ribbon.

The world certainly does look different from 6,500 feet, especially when the only thing between you and the ground is the gondola of a hot air balloon.

It's serene and peaceful. Gone is the noise of cars rushing by, dogs barking and children laughing. The only sound to interrupt the solitude is the sporadic whoosh of the propane burner pilot Phil Glebe operates to heat the air in the balloon, or envelope.

The sun dances around the rainbow colored envelope, casting a shadow on a layer of haze that hovers thousands of feet above the ground. The lakes act as mirrors, offering a crystal clear reflection of the balloon as it slowly passes overhead.

IT HAS to be the closest thing to flying like a bird without all the wing flapping. Glebe, 35, has been ballooning for 12 years and the thrill of the sport and his respect for nature is reflected in what he says and does.

While at the helm, if there's such a thing as a helm in a hot air balloon, he points out the sites as the balloon lazily moves northeast from the Island Lake recreation area to Millford.

He had launched his \$24,000 balloon as part of a promotion for the Channel 2 Great Balloon Festival Friday-Saturday, Sept. 9-11. The gods are smiling on Glebe's greenhorn passengers, including yours truly. It's ideal ballooning weather. The winds are less than 10 miles an hour; the temperatures balmy.

With a whoosh, the balloon quickly pulls away from the Meadows balloon port, a small open area set aside in the Island Lake recreation area for balloon launches. The port is the only such facility in the country that is state-owned and is the result of lobbying by Glebe and fellow balloonists.

Within minutes of lift-off, the balloon clears the trees ringing the port and is climbing to its cruising altitude of 6,500 feet. At 650 feet, the ground resembles a Lionel train board. By the time it is a mile high, the view

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resembles an architect's scale model.

As the balloon reaches the mile high marker, the greenhorns struck up a ragged chorus of the Fifth Dimension's "Up, Up and Away." Many of the words were replaced by da-da-da and the quality of the performance is a good candidate for vaudeville's rotten tomato salute. Glebe just cracks a smile.

While the view is spectacular at 6,500 feet, the thrill of ballooning doesn't hit home until you skim along at treetop level, so low you can reach out and pick the leaves from the trees and hear the children hollering as they run along waving.

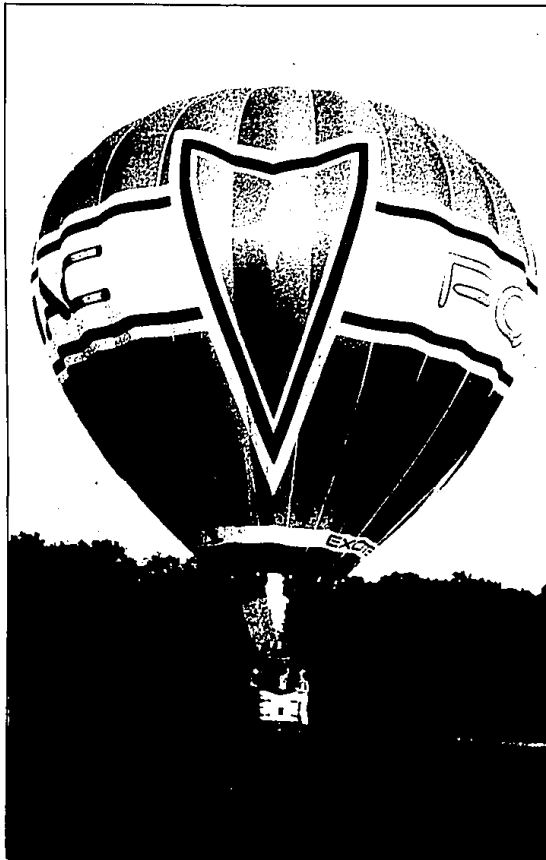
One of the greenhorns remarks about feeling like Miss America. "Smile and wave, smile and wave," he says as he waves to a youngster, who returns the salute then turns and runs into the house, screaming "come and see the balloon."

HOT AIR ballooning is a gentleman's sport so to speak. Balloonists are polite. They can't be in a big hurry because their mode of transportation depends on the fickleness of Mother Nature. They can't be rude because they depend on the good nature of farmers and property owners for places to land.

As gentle as the ascent is, landing is a completely different experience. The gondola touches the ground with a bump and if you're lucky, stays put. If not, it bounces as few times, giving into the envelope's urge to keep moving forward.

For the greenhorns, the gondola bumps and bounces three times before coming to a rest on its side. The greenhorns are stacked like so many pieces of wood, howling with laughter as they try to untangle their legs.

A slight cross wind had caught the balloon as it neared the ground, making for the bumpy landing. But the greenhorns don't care. They survived their first hot air balloon ride and found the landing to be great fun. Up, up and away.



With a whoosh of flame, Phil Glebe prepares the Pontiac racing balloon for lift-off. Helping with the preparations is crew member Jan LeGarde.

Balloonists to compete during fest

First there was the Detroit Grand Prix, followed by the Thunderbolt hydroplane races.

Now, there's the Channel 2 Great Balloon Festival.

Sponsored in part by Auto One, Health Alliance Plan and Thorn Apple Valley, hot air balloons will be the center of attention at the festival Friday-Sunday, Sept. 9-11.

More than 60 balloonists from across the country will participate in five National Balloon Racing Association races.

The "bound and hare" races — the Channel 2 balloon will be the hare that will race ahead and mark a spot the other balloons (bounds) will race to — will be at dusk Friday and dawn and dusk Saturday and Sunday.

NBHA points will be given to those balloonists who come closest to the target marked by the "hare."

The festival will be held on a 200-acre site in Green Oak Township. It will include helicopter and tethered balloon rides, air show, arts and crafts, a food extravaganza and plenty of entertainment.

Heading the entertainment will be Chuck Barry, who will perform at 4:30 p.m. Saturday. There also will be a 1960s show with the Shirelles, the Crystals and the Shangri-Las at 3 p.m. Saturday and 12:30 and 3:30 p.m. Sunday.

In addition, local group Bugs Bedow will perform at 4 p.m. Friday.

The festival gates will be open from noon to 8 p.m. Friday, and 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Admission is \$10 per car Friday and \$8 for adults, \$4 for children under 12 and free for children under 5 on Saturday and Sunday. For balloon enthusiasts who want to watch the launchings, admission is \$3.

Advance tickets are available at all TicketMaster outlets and discount tickets can be purchased at all Auto One stores.

The festival grounds can be reached by taking I-96 west to U.S. 23 south (exit 148) toward Ann Arbor. Get off U.S. 23 at Lee Road (exit 58), turn left on Lee Road to Ricket Road.

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