

Floating on a Breeze

Fans who gather in Statesville for the National Balloon Rally savor a high life in the slow lane.



Morning fog caresses the Carolina pines like a thin veil of wood-smoke, and a lovely stillness hangs in the air. We hang too—pilots and passengers in wicker baskets under a bustling flock of hot-air balloons, bobbing along just above the treetops.

Our floating fleet's bright colors and gargantuan shapes serve as bulbous billboards for the National Balloon Rally, a 30-year tradition in the skies over Statesville in May. For the moment, though, drifting over woods, meadows, homes, shops, and roads, we simply enjoy the Piedmont views.

Children playing outside a school wave and cheer. Skittish horses bolt toward the far ends of their pastures. We pass close to a church steeple, briefly unsettled by its needle-like sharpness and the thought of getting popped. Backyard dogs erupt in barking fits, freaked out by the balloons' sheer size and the periodic roar of the propane jets that keep us aloft.

Startled homeowners, peeking from windows, register first surprise and then curiosity as they notice our slow-motion parade. The teardrop-

shaped aircraft among us look familiar, but variations formed in the shapes of a penguin, cactus, jack-in-the-box, and soccer ball mischievously tweak expectations.

For regulars at such balloon gatherings, a bit of mischief goes with the territory. After all, any pastime that involves waking up insanely early, dropping sandbags on giant "X" targets for fun, and chasing each other hare-and-hounds style above the landscape calls for a good sense of humor.

We Have Liftoff

"I love the unique perspective ballooning gives you on the world below," says Statesville's Marsha Neal, a National Balloon Rally veteran. She now enjoys flying just for fun after 15 years of steering ad-plastered balloons as a commercial pilot. "Once you're off the ground and floating silently across the countryside, it's a wonderfully peaceful feeling," she says. "It's challenging, too, being dependent on weather conditions and never knowing exactly



PHOTOGRAPHS: J. SAVAGE GIBSON

top: A hot-air balloon punctuates the sky over Statesville. **above:** "I love the unique perspective ballooning gives you on the world below," says pilot Marsha Neal.

where you're going to be able to land."

Marsha, a one-time national champion gas balloonist with a long list of other competitive honors, likes to take her 14-year-old daughter, Margaret, along when she can. "She's been flying with me since she was 2," Marsha says.

Ken Draughn of Burlington, a past president of the Carolinas Balloon Association, gives both philosophical and technical reasons why he goes ballooning. "I like the serenity of just

rise and shine

The National Balloon Rally this year helped commemorate the centennial celebration of the Wright Brothers' first powered flight at Kitty Hawk. An additional smaller ballooning event will be held in Statesville the third weekend of September. For details call Sam Parks at Parks Balloon Aviation, (704) 873-0080, or visit www.carolinasballoonassociation.com.



being up there," he says. "I also like the challenges—things like figuring out how to get where I want to go, choosing the right altitude to catch the breeze, calculating fuel supplies."

Some of the association's 140 members live in other states, including Virginia, Tennessee, and Georgia. "The Statesville rally is one of the oldest and most respected ballooning events in the country," Ken says. "Our members especially like it because it's so close to home."

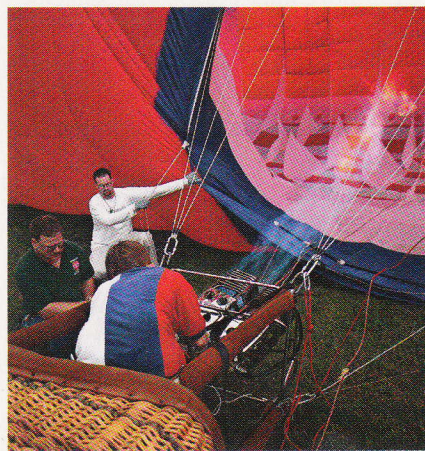
Sharing the Joy

Valerie and Paul Morlock moved from Connecticut to Mooresville on Lake Norman specifically for the area's ballooning-friendly weather.

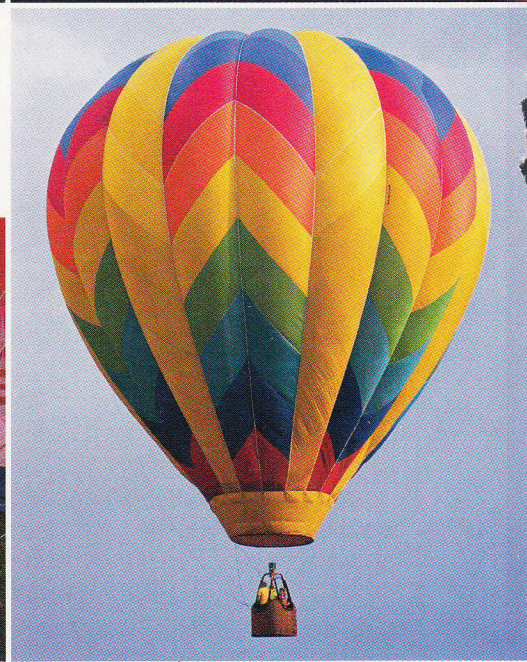
"The thing we like most about this is sharing people's first flights," Valerie says. "I always ask, when we're back on the ground, how it compared to what they expected. Invariably they say the experience was a lot better—and not as scary—as they thought it would be."

"I tell people the first balloon flight is always the least expensive, because then you get addicted and start paying for lessons and equipment. A bal-

loon costs about as much as a boat. If you do this for pleasure and don't need to carry expensive commercial insurance, it's not out of sight," she continues. "Festival promoters provide the propane and sometimes cover motels and some meals. Then



above: Whimsical aircraft rub shoulders as they're inflated. **above, right:** Wherever it goes, this rectangular flag balloon is the star attraction during after-dark events known as "moon glows."



above: A gas-powered burner heats the air in a balloon. **above, right:** Would you like to ride in my beautiful balloon? **right:** Going nowhere: A passenger enjoys a brief tethered flight with a cooperative pilot, just to see what it's like.

you can just have fun traveling to great places, talking about ballooning, and going up in your balloon."

Balloonmeister at Work

Sam Parks, a Statesville pilot who flies corporate balloons all over the



"I like the serenity of just being up there....I attended my first rally 14 years ago, knew this was what I wanted to do, and I've been ballooning ever since."

Ken Draughn, pilot



United States, works as this rally's balloonmeister. His tasks include coordinating pilots and liftoff times, mapping potential landing zones, conducting safety lectures, and safeguarding the highly flammable fuel supply. He also tracks weather conditions, monitors radio communications, rescues lost balloons, and drafts judges for competitions involving speed and accuracy.

Like the balloonists and the volunteers who chase them in vans, Sam arrives on the scene well before dawn. He and his companions busily unfurl gear by headlights as a cricket symphony chirps. "The best times to fly are at dawn and dusk, when the wind is calm," he says, "so we have to be out really early to get ready."

Sam pairs me with pilot Bubba Winston of Richmond for a sunrise flight from the Iredell County Fairgrounds, the rally's home base. Crew chief Lisy Williams helps Bubba roll out the balloon, secure the burner and basket, and straighten ropes.

Once aloft, with Lisy chasing us on back roads below, Bubba launches into a monologue about flying. He explains the gauges, hoses, and tanks crowded into the basket. He points out parking lots and roofs that create warm air updrafts. He interprets drifting mists, flapping flags, clothesline laundry, and other factors that hint at wind speed and direction.

Bubba calls back "hellos" to people who wave up at us. He tells funny stories about nude sunbathers he's surprised, the purse snatching he witnessed (he radioed for police), and fishermen who've nearly fallen out of boats when he sneaked up on them.

"The trees are our brakes," he says. "In a pinch, when rough weather moves in unexpectedly, one way to slow down is to drag along the tops of the trees and grab at branches."

I can handle trees for brakes or even a bumpy landing in a field where guard dogs bare their teeth at us. Please, though, I beg, don't skewer us on any church steeples. Ballooning may be heavenly, but that's no way to get there. JOE RADA