

What's It Like

RIDING THE WIND

Blade reporter gets his first bird's eye view from a hot air balloon

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This is the ninth in a year-long series we call "What's It Like?" giving readers a first-hand look at some interesting activities in the region.

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I'm floating.

It's dreamlike as I slowly lift off the ground and see the earth fall away.

The scene is eerily quiet — except for intermittent blasts from the burners that heat this hot air balloon. It's called Reflections II, and it's a lighter-than-air patchwork of brilliant colors flying 320 feet above the ground.

Just moments ago, the basket I'm standing in was on its side lying in a grassy field. The balloon envelope was being filled with air — first from a high-powered fan, then by the propane-powered burners that sent flames shooting 10 feet into the air.

Within a couple of minutes, the balloon was full and rising. The basket was upright and I climbed in along with pilot Derrick Jones and another passenger.

On Derrick's cue at about 7:30 a.m., the burners went off again and we left the ground. Quickly but almost imperceptibly, we rode our air elevator into the sky. It was smoother than I ever could have imagined. If I hadn't looked down to wave goodbye, I might not have known we were moving at all.

Now I'm gripping the basket's leather border with both hands, but it's not necessary. There's no feeling of danger — well, only briefly when someone takes a step and I feel a slight shift — and the view is breathtaking (in a good way).

As we float above Findlay — the balloon was in town last month for a festival — I enjoy looking down at the still-slumbering city and its peaceful gridwork.

MULTIMEDIA

[Ryan Smith finds out what it's like to ride in a hot air balloon.](#)



John Gibbons follows in his chase vehicle as the balloon he crews for flies over downtown Findlay. (THE BLADE/ALLAN DETRICH)

It's perhaps the most intimate way to meet a town and its people. I can see into people's backyards, their swimming pools, their laundry hanging on a line. I can hear their dogs barking at the dawn.

I also can see, um, the Gulfstream jet getting ready to take off at the airport we're heading toward. (Derrick quickly gets on his two-way radio to make sure someone has contacted the control tower.)

"It'll be a slow flight this morning," he says.

The 28-year-old, who has the required pilot's license, has been doing this for half his life, so he should know. Apparently the winds are light, and that's all you have to push you around in these things. We're moving at a pokey 8 mph.

Most hot air balloon flights take place around sunrise or sunset because that's when the winds are calmest, he says.



Blade reporter Ryan Smith is ready to jump out of the balloon's basket after it landed at in Findlay. (THE BLADE/ALLAN DETRICH)

The balloon rises because it is hotter than the surrounding air. Today, we're flying at about 203 degrees. In the winter, it might only take 80 degrees because the atmosphere is so cold.

It's cool but not cold up here at the moment, though I've worn a pullover just in case. Things would be a little different at 10,000 feet, the highest my pilot has ever gone.

For Derrick, a Battle Creek, Mich., man who is general manager of a business that builds and services gas stations, this is just a hobby, albeit an expensive one. A typical balloon like this costs between \$35,000 and \$50,000 and will last 10 to 12 years or more (400 to 500 hours).

As Derrick tells me about himself, my thoughts turn to our eventual landing. I ask him what the members of his "chase crew" are doing right about now.

"They're right there," he says, pointing to the white van heading down the street below us (license plates: WERFLYN). It's easy to pick out because of the runway painted on the roof, a reference to the time a balloonist accidentally landed on it.

Most of the time when he lifts off, Derrick has no idea where he'll come down.

"In a nice field somewhere," he says hopefully.

Aside from checking the weather, he and his team digest maps of the area ahead of time, looking for swamps or large forests that could mean trouble. Once airborne, he just waits for a nice field to plop down in — even if it's one at a nudist colony, where Derrick has landed before back home.

"It's kind of embarrassing when all they've got on are their sandals," he said.

Otherwise, Reflections II goes where the wind takes it.

There are some ways to control it. On morning flights, going higher usually turns you to the right. Going lower often turns you left. Things are more of a crapshoot at night.

After about 45 minutes in the sky, Derrick has spotted a landing spot. It's a field at the Findlay Water Pollution Control Center.

Not quite the picturesque ending I expected.

As we cruise over the brown, churning waters of the sewage treatment plant, he gets on the radio and tells his team to turn around and head for the field at the end of the road.

They pass by a half dozen employees who stand transfixed by the incoming balloon.

We wave. They wave.

We're all kids again for a few seconds, excited by the miracle of flight.

As we start to descend, Derrick continues to hit the burners from time to time, but only enough to keep the balloon inflated as its air temperature cools.

When we land, it's just as gentle as when we started. Derrick's crew runs across the field to us, grabbing hold of the basket to ease us down. We get out and the basket goes back onto its side as we hear the rustling balloon fabric flutter down after us.

Then it's time to head back the three miles to the park where we started. As we travel, I notice a field that could



Pilot Derrick Jones of Battle Creek, Mich., hits the burners on his balloon to put some hot air into it and tip it upright. (THE BLADE/ALLAN DETRICH)

have made a pretty landing spot.

Then I see what appear to be prisoners doing roadwork there and think: Maybe the sewage plant wasn't such a bad place to land after all.

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