



The Adventures of Pixel, the Stowaway

Hot Air Ballooning

"Hi, remember me? I'm Pixel, the BYTE with strong Image Smarts. My Kid-Bit friend Al was going to a hot air balloon festival to take a ride and take some pictures. As usual, he let me stow away in his camera. We went out to the hazy, old Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia and got there just before the sun came up. Al wiped the dew from his camera lens, so I could see. It was chilly in the camera in that early morning mist, but Al said the weather was just perfect. The hot air inside the balloon would make the balloon rise easier because there is cold air on the outside of the balloon.

When spread out on the ground, the hot air balloon was as wide as two basketball courts. The camera lens couldn't open wide enough for me to see the whole balloon, but in the morning moonlight, I could see that this one was as colorful as a bright, orange sun. There was a large, open, passenger basket called a gondola attached to the balloon. I've ridden to outer space before, but my sprouts started to shake a bit when I realized we were going to ride in a balloon! Inside the gondola was a propane gas tank like the ones used on some barbecue grills and a lightweight burner to heat the air. The bottom opening, called the throat of the balloon, was made of special fire-resistant cloth just like in firefighters' coats.

The crew used a powerful fan to fill the balloon with cool air. Once the balloon was inflated, they turned on the propane tank to let the fire heat the air inside, and that made a loud 'whoosh'. The balloon stood up! Wow, was it high! If ten people stood on each other's shoulders, the top person still couldn't touch the top of the balloon! My friend Cu-Bit would have liked to measure it! Luckily there were ropes from the ground attached to the balloon to keep it from floating away.

Then I heard the words I'd been waiting for - 'All aboard!' Al climbed in the gondola, and I got jostled around a bit inside his camera, but soon we were settled in the basket. The pilot and two other people were riding with Al. People on the ground loosened the ropes, and the pilot turned on the propane tank again. Whoosh! The air inside the balloon got hotter, and we began to rise slowly. I wondered how that happens. Al said that there are molecules in the air. When the air gets hot the molecules move around faster and get farther apart which makes the air inside lighter. The air outside the balloon is cold and heavy. Light things rise - and off we went! Whee...



Courtesy of Al Giraldi



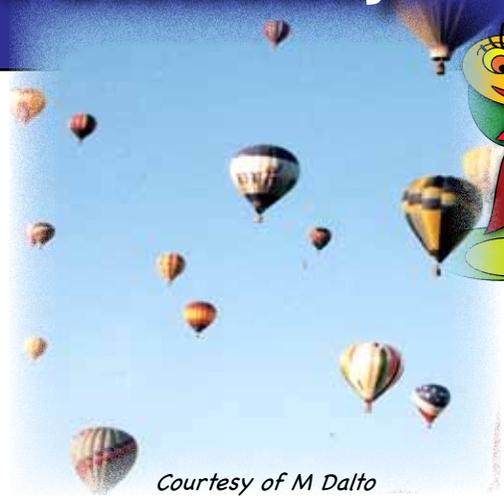
Courtesy of Al Giraldi



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We floated along slowly with the breeze. When Al pointed his camera, I could see deer scooting in and out of trees, their white tails flashing. I also saw fields with rows of corn. One lady in the gondola reached out and grabbed some leaves off a tall tulip poplar tree. Sound travels up, so I could hear dogs barking and even some people on the ground talking! I even saw the chase crew on the ground that was following our balloon. They would pick us up wherever we landed. Al said part



Courtesy of M Dalto

of the adventure is never knowing quite where the balloon will land!



Courtesy of Wikimedia

Al knows a lot about history too, and he told the passengers all about the two French brothers, Joseph and Jacques Montgolfier, who invented the hot air balloon in 1783. They got the idea from watching the ashes from a fire swirl and rise above the colder air around the fire. On the first flight with living beings, they put a sheep, duck, and rooster in the gondola. I bet there was a lot of baaing, quacking, and cock-a-doodle-dooing as the balloon rose an estimated 1,500 feet above Versailles, France traveling about 2 miles in 8 minutes. The first flight by humans went about 3,000 feet above Paris, France traveling about 5 miles in 25 minutes. The early balloons used charcoal fires to heat the air inside the balloons, but the fire had to be left on the ground when the balloon went up. After awhile, the air inside the balloon got cooler than the air outside, and the balloon would sink towards the ground. The balloonists couldn't reheat the air once they left the ground. So, in Nebraska in 1960, a man named Ed Yost built a hot air balloon and used a portable kerosene heater to warm the air inside the balloon. He took his fire with him to reheat the air in the balloon when it got cool. This meant he could stay up in the air much

longer. After this invention, hot air ballooning became a popular sport, and now there are almost 9,000 hot air balloons in the United States and many more all over the world.

Well, Kid-Bits, our fun came to an end too soon. The pilot saw a big open field, and we began to drift down. The landing was a bit bumpy as the gondola hit the ground, but I hung on inside the camera and landed safely. Everyone (except me!) had to help bring down the balloon, deflate it, and fold it up. Then, the passengers all celebrated a successful trip with a toast. The Montgolfier brothers would know about this tradition - after all, they started it!"



Courtesy of M Dalto

If you could ride in a hot air balloon, where would you like to travel, and what would you hope to see?