

A Hundred Things

by Bryan Quickmire

A Round Of Montgolfier

I'm in Boston, on the phone to Texas, talking to my company's biggest customer.

"Barry, thank you for the contract. It's taken us a while but I think it's good for both parties. When we meet in San Diego, why don't we go out for a nice dinner to celebrate?"

"Bryan, I've had a lot of nice dinners. How about doing something different? How about a round of golf? No, you know what I'd really like to do? To tell the truth, what I'd really like is to go up in a balloon. Can we do that? If it's awkward just say so."

A balloon? With a key manager from a rather conservative customer of a rather conservative vendor? Give me a break! What would the CEO think? How would I put it on my expense report? If I agree, Negotiation 101 would have me make the customer think it was a major concession, so he would owe me one.

It took a lot of deliberating, nearly a microsecond: "Yeah Barry, we could do that."

A week later, it's a typically perfect day in San Diego. Barry, his wife Audrey and I wait outside our hotel to be picked up for our balloon flight.

The Montgolfier brothers probably had this exact mission in mind in 1783 when they launched the first balloon, driven by hot smoke from a straw fire. Later they sent a duck, a rooster and a sheep aloft together, volunteers no doubt. Louis XVI and no less a dignitary than Marie Antoinette witnessed this act of animal bravery. Shortly after, de Rozier and Laurent became the first humans to fly, the brothers Montgolfier being a tad too timid to do it themselves.

The Montgolfiers thought it was the smoke that made the balloons rise. Furthermore, they came to believe that foul-smelling smoke had the most lifting power, so they stoked their fires with rotten meat and old shoes. Hopefully Sky Surfer, our hosts today, will burn propane!

A van painted with rainbow-colored hot-air balloons pulls up to the curb. The driver is a student balloon pilot. On the drive north he fills us with information and interesting stories. What was just a bright idea is now starting to take the shape of reality. Anticipation, excitement builds.

At Sky Surfer's facility we see various sizes of wicker baskets. They're much more substantial than I'd

imagined. Our pilot will be a calm yet enthusiastic European gentleman. Our chauffeur will drive the chase vehicle.

We release a couple of balloons, small helium-filled ones, to serve as wind dummies. Prudence requires that the winds aloft forecast from FSS be validated.

This is part of the process of selecting a launch site. If the winds are from the east, we don't want to launch from the seashore. Hawaii's a long way and there are no potties onboard! This evening the winds are westerly so we'll not have a problem.

Our launch area is an open field near a horse jumping arena, just inland from the coast, away from the seabreeze. We lay the balloon out on the grass and position the basket.

I'm assigned to hold up the skirt of the balloon, allowing a fan to blow air in to start the inflation process. The balloon undulates in the breeze as it fills.

Whooshrrroarr!!! A tongue of flame a dozen feet long and two feet wide shoots out of the burner and into the balloon, passing inches from my nose.

Meet the dragon! The dragon provides the magic that turns this assemblage of fabric and wicker into a flying entity. It breathes fire into the air, enough to heat an Edmonton apartment building in February.

Whooshrrroarr!!! I imagine my eyebrows becoming crispy in the inferno.

The balloon expands slowly. Then a giant bubble of hot air forms within, creating a huge cavernous space, large enough to accommodate a three ring circus, plus the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, complete with pipe organ.

A critical mass is attained and, awakened, the balloon struggles to stand up. After a few false starts it comes clear of the grass and slowly rises to its proper perch above the basket, towering many stories over us, bobbing in the light breezes.

Then it happens, a subtle but very definite change, comes over the entire collection of heavier-than-air parts.

"I'm ready to fly!" the balloon seems to whisper. "I'm ready to fly!" it says a little louder. "I'M READY TO FLY NOW!!!" Like taking Fido for a walk, it's ready and raring to go and we're not quite. We clamber into the basket. The balloon won't wait!

We're airborne, just as easy as thought. No bumps, bounces, bangs or scrapes. We drift in the wind, leaning over the side of the basket to take in the sights. The launch area falls behind and below. It's so smooth it's difficult to believe it's the balloon moving, not the earth.

There's a sense of effortlessness to the ascent. A sense of tranquillity. Broken occasionally by the roar of the dragon responsible for our buoyancy.

Steering a balloon is not a simple matter of aiming the pointy end where you want to go. For starters, there is no pointy end! The dragon's breath determines our altitude. Our altitude determines which winds we'll encounter. The winds determine our track over the ground.

We level off at a few hundred feet and savor the up close and personal views. As we pass over beautiful homes with luxurious properties, there's a sense of spying, of looking through a crack in your neighbor's fence. Here's the unfinished house of a famous get rich quick schemer who got poor quick. It must be at least an acre. The house, not the land!

We commence a climb to 5,000 feet to taste the view from on high. I enjoy the spectacle of the Pacific to the west and the mountains to the east for quite some time. When I return my gaze to the ground below I'm literally startled to see we are pretty much in the same place. This is quite unusual for me since, unless I'm doing aerobatics, I'm usually going someplace. Here we seem suspended in space and time.

We've encountered not the slightest jostle. It's too late for thermals and there's no wind shear. We could, in a bigger basket, play billiards.

Now we're over Pickfair, the estate at Rancho Santa Fe where Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks went to escape the klieg lights. Their house seems rather small, modest, unassuming. Their yard however was this entire valley. Progress has carved up the yard and now many homes occupy the former sanctuary.

By now the dragon's roar, at first loud and fierce, wanting to sizzle my whiskers, seems softer, almost mellow. More in keeping with the serenity, the spirit, of ballooning. Could this be Puff?

As we climb, another balloon, a mirror image of ourselves, closes in on us. Their dragon roars a greeting to ours. They launched after us but have cruised higher and used the stronger winds at higher altitudes to catch up.

We come together until our wingman is suspended in space nearby. We fly in formation for a while, dragons chatting, then the other balloon descends and falls slowly behind.

Soon we too start our descent. Cool air is swallowed by the gaping mouth of the balloon and hastens the loss of buoyancy. "Not so fast!" roars our dragon.

Down low again, migrant workers in the fields sense our presence and turn their faces skyward. A dog barks at this apparition in the sky. On short final, passing very low

over two magnificent homes, a small boy yells: "Man in a balloon! Man in a balloon!"

The balloon descends a little more steeply, our forward motion virtually zero in the calm near the surface. We touch down, quite gently, in a plowed field.

Throughout the flight our pilot had been directing the chase vehicle to follow us. Now it's only a couple of hundred feet away, but it can't get here from there. We made a little booboo, a ditch separates us from our ride back. Now I suppose we'll have to manhandle the heavy basket across the ditch. Wrong!

We actually taxi the balloon to the vehicle. It's amazing how much I've never imagined. Surely now I've seen it all! The dragon breathes just enough hot air into the envelope. We have the slightest, tiniest negative buoyancy. The chase pilot picks us up with one hand and walks us across the field, over the ditch and into the trailer. This is hundreds and hundreds of pounds of basket, burner, balloon and people!

One hand! Now that's finesse. I'm impressed!

Finally the dragon rests, the balloon keels slowly over and lies down on the ground, asleep once more. The wicker basket is once again just so much deadweight.

Faces flush with pleasure, voices full of enchantment, we drive back to the Sky Surfer lounge. What's this?

Champagne! Some nice wine if we wish. Freshly cut French bread. Pâté. Cheese. Carr's Table Water Crackers. This is very civilized. No muddy water posing as coffee. No microwaved sandwiches best used to calibrate carbon dating equipment.

We talk of ballooning. We look at a photo album of balloons crossing the Alps, much more adroitly than Hannibal's elephants. We feel as if we've been admitted to the inner circle. Later, back at the hotel, we go out for a nice dinner to celebrate our flight!

This, like many aviation experiences, has really been much more than an hour in the air. From the mounting anticipation through the pre-flight, flight and post-flight activity, like a fine painting hanging on the wall, this experience will be viewed and enjoyed for endless years.