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THE ONLY WAY TO FLY

GLIDING ABOVE THE TREE TOPS IN A HOT AIR BALLOON

BY KIRSTEN SMITH

I rise early that autumn morning, the sun still shy over the horizon and the crisp air sending a chill down my spine. With eager and quiet steps, I grab a quick cup of coffee and make the scenic drive to Charlottesville's Boars Head Inn. The warmth of my travel mug soothes my too-easily-frozen fingers, but the tingles of excitement through them remain unabated. I relish the promise of my adventure ahead.

As soon as I arrive, I'm greeted by Mandy Baskin, pilot and owner of Monticello Country Ballooning. A tall, friendly-looking woman, she seems to be well into her day, despite it being 5:45am.

She introduces me to my two fellow passengers for the day. A few warm handshakes later, we pile into Mandy's vehicle and listen in wonder as she speaks with her chase crew over walkie-talkies.

"It's southeast wind today? Cool, we'll meet you at the old Pepsi factory."

Mandy explains to us, "My guys go out and measure the wind conditions, which we then use to determine the best takeoff point." We arrive at our destination, and are greeted by two young men who are waving and smiling at us from the field outside the factory. They are our chase crew, the team in charge of many of the logistics of flying. Through transporting and setting up the inflation equipment, giving directions from the ground for takeoff and landing, and following the balloon in a chase vehicle to determine the best landing point, they are crucial to the pilot's success. "Ah, here we are!"

The whole team leaps into action and the process begins. Mandy and her crew quickly unload the balloon, attach the basket, and lay the entire apparatus on its side to begin the inflating process. As part of today's team, I get to help out. Mandy demonstrates to my fellow passenger and I how to hold the mouth of the balloon so that she can then send blasts of hot propane up into the balloon's inner body—called the envelope. At present, it resembles any normal kind of balloon before it's inflated—colorful and floppy—it just happens to be gigantic.

Soon, the balloon starts to lift upwards and its bright yellow belly swells happily. My flight partner and I release the balloon from our grasp and watch it slowly transition from flat on the ground to full and upright.

I notice that another hot air balloon is being inflated in an identical fashion just across the field. "Do you know them, Mandy?" I ask.

Mandy glances over. "Oh, of course! That's my friend Rick and his people over there."

Rick Behr, owner of Boars Head Ballooning, was the first commercial balloonist in the Charlottesville area. Decades later, Bonaire Charters, Blue Ridge Balloon, and Monticello Country Ballooning added their own spots of bright yellows, blues, and reds to canvas the central Virginia sky. I comment how funny it is that Rick happens to be taking off from the same point as we are.

"Oh, it's not a coincidence!" Mandy laughed."We pilots communicate a lot amongst one another. It's

PHOTO RICK STILLINGS

PHOTO RICK STILLINGS

THE HEAT IS ON: Hot propane is blasted into the inner body of the balloon to provide lift.

rare for one balloon to set up, fly, and land in isolation—it adds to the safety as well as the experience when multiple balloons from different companies go up together. Not only is it neat to see another balloon suspended in the sky across from you when you're in the air, but that way, we have multiple opinions on the weather and conditions before going up. When we have multiple balloons landing in one location, one crew may obtain permission from the landowner while the other crew members take pictures and provide assistance during the landings if needed. We're birds of a feather, so we flock together, you know?"

Sure enough, I watch as the different crews joke, laugh, and communicate among one another between sips of coffee as they prepare to embark. It crosses my mind that this must be a very special community; one that is united in its love for flying, and instead of fiercely competing, respectfully working together to double the knowledge, safety, and magic of the experience.

Now that the balloon is ready to launch, it's my turn to step into the basket. While I had eagerly awaited this moment for weeks, I'm nervous. Heights and I aren't too chummy. It's all so unknown. But I take a deep breath and clamber in.

My spirits begin to soar even before we leave the terra firma. I feel a little uncertain at first—*we are quite far off the ground now, aren't we?*—but one glance at Mandy's steady grasp on the valve cord sets those worries to rest. We are in good hands.

During flight, the pilot's only ability to steer the balloon is the ability to climb or descend into winds going different directions. The direction of flight depends on the wind, but the altitude of the balloon can be controlled by changing the temperature of the air inside the envelope. The pilot may open one or more burner blast valves to increase the temperature inside the envelope, thereby increasing lift, and thus ascend or slow or stop a descent. The pilot may also open a vent to let hot air

HANDS ON: Mandy Baskin prepares for her next flight.

PHOTO J R WINGFIELD

PHOTO W KYLE TATTON

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PHOTO JOHN RICHARD

escape, decreasing the temperature inside the envelope, and descend or slow or stop an ascent.

As we pass the treeline, a wide Charlottesville expanse begins to open in front of us. The Pepsi factory, sizeable on the ground, somehow has become a tiny Monopoly piece-sized building. Tiny, antlike cars drive down winding toothpick roads. To my delight and disbelief, we fly right over my neighborhood.

"Wow, that's my house!" I point and exclaim. It's a truly remarkable thing to look down on your city like this—and see, in one continuous gaze, the house in which you grew up, the park at which you played as a child, and the school in which you learned and grew. All so small that it looks like you could scoop them up and fit them in your hand.

Between the loud blasts of propane, we hear some excited squeals and look below. Students attending my middle school, Charlottesville Catholic School, are gathered outside on the pavement for their morning assembly. Miniscule children in white and blue uniforms wave their tiny hands up at us, and as we wave back, I realize how many times I'd been in their shoes. I have fond memories of waving and yelling at colorful hot air balloons passing over, hoping they'd see me, and getting a thrill when they waved back. Now, I'm the one in the basket.

Noticing we were directly between the school blacktop and the sun's beam, Mandy had a brilliant idea. "Watch this," she says playfully.

Expertly, Mandy steers the balloon so that we pass directly between the school blacktop and the sunbeam—casting a huge shadow over the group of children and teachers. We hear some "oohs" and "ahhs" float up from below.

"I call it a 'balloonar eclipse,'" Mandy winks. *What fun.*

We float away from the neighborhood and over a lush expanse of red and golden trees. Warm yellow sunrise shines through the misty morning air, creating an effervescent and sparkling vista that is, hands down, the most beautiful I've witnessed. Rick's balloon is suspended across the landscape parallel to us. It is calm, serene, and still—truly magical. I dare not blink lest the beauty disappear.

"This," Mandy sighed contentedly, gazing into the horizon, "is why I do this."

Mandy went for her first ride in a hot air balloon at age 19, and as she says, "it was love at first flight." Guided and encouraged by her mentor, balloon pilot Scott Cohrs of

"IT'S A TRULY REMARKABLE THING TO LOOK DOWN ON YOUR CITY LIKE THIS—AND SEE, IN ONE CONTINUOUS GAZE, THE HOUSE IN WHICH YOU GREW UP, THE PARK AT WHICH YOU PLAYED AS A CHILD, AND THE SCHOOL IN WHICH YOU LEARNED AND GREW. ALL SO SMALL THAT IT LOOKS LIKE YOU COULD SCOOP THEM UP AND FIT THEM IN YOUR HAND."

NANCY BASKIN

PHOTO BEN EPPARD

Bonaire Charters, Mandy got her first commercial license at just 23, an achievement which required 35 hours of flight time and 2 solo flights. Her infectious pasion for flying has only increased.

When the opportunity came to invest in her own company, she took it. In 2002, Monticello Country Ballooning was born. As the only female-owned and -operated hot air ballooning company in the area, it is a fresh, fun, passionate environment—one that Mandy shares with her daughter, Alex, who can boast over 100 hours in flight time while in the womb. It may have seemed a lofty dream at the time, but Mandy didn't give up—and now, every April through October, she is often found soaring above Charlottesville, sharing her passion with so many others.

We laugh, point, and soak in the experience with one another. I have never felt so light, in every sense of the word. I expected suspension in the air to feel rocky and precarious; instead, it feels motionless and impregnable. It truly seems as though we left our worries and cares on the ground far below.

All too soon, it came time to find a place to land. Mandy begins speaking with the chase crew over her walkie-talkie about our location.

"Do you land in the same place every time?" I ask.

Mandy shakes her head. "No, in fact, we can't really predict where we're going to land! It changes every time. We very much go where the wind takes us."

Sensing my unease at this answer, she pointed over my shoulder to a car down below. "See that grey car by the park entrance over there? Those are my chasers. They're finding a place for us to land right now, and measuring the wind on the surface to judge if it's a good spot. Then they'll help us descend once we get there."

Oh, okay. I feel better now. I say a silent word of thanks for the chase crew.

We gradually descend onto a field. Mandy throws ropes down and the chase crew pulls them, guideing the balloon as it deflates and lowers. More quickly than I had anticipated, we are on the ground once again. I exit the basket with none of the worries and fears I'd had when entering it.

A young boy stands a few feet away with his mother, watching in awe. At first, he peers out from behind her legs, but as Mandy gives her cheerful salutations, he cautiously ventures out.

After chatting with his mother for a few moments, Mandy bends down so that she is eye-level with the boy.

"Would you like to get into the basket?" she asks him gently.

He looks up with bright eyes. "Yeah!"

Climbing eagerly up the woven exterior, and with a helping hand from Mandy and her crew, the boy steps into the basket. Before leaving, his mother snaps some pictures, and he cheeses it up. "Mom, I'm going to have a hot air balloon one day."

Mandy's crew are on hand to tilt the balloon to let the hot air escape the interior. Once it deflates satisfactorily, they lay it entirely on its side, so that it looks much like it did as it was first being inflated earlier that morning.

Then, planting each of us in a spot surrounding it, we begin to fold up the balloon. This is a task that takes equal parts strength and perseverance, as the air is sometimes so lodged inside that, as Mandy says, "the only way is to sit on it." Many laughs are shared as the bright 9am sunlight illuminates the rosiness of our cheeks.

PHOTO RICK STILLING

BALLOONING OPTIONS AVAILBLE IN THE CENTRAL VIRGINIA AREA

Boar's Head Ballooning
www.2comefly.com

Monticello Country Ballooning
www.virginiahotairballoon.com

Bonaire Charters
www.bonaire-charters.com

Blue Ridge Ballooning
www.blueridgeballoon.com

Without too much trouble, we get the balloon securely folded and stored inside its basket until its next trip—later that evening at sunset, weather permitting. I fight a bit of inner jealousy at the thought that Mandy would only have to wait a few hours to be aloft again.

Last came the crowning ritual: sharing a bottle of champagne after landing a successful flight.

"I like to make them mimosas," Mandy winked. Handing me a glass, she explains that this time-honored tradition originates in 18th century France. As hot air balloons became a fad among the aristocracy, local farmers didn't much like rich people setting balloons down on their land. Toasting the locals with champagne became a way to thank the farmers, and acted as an apology for disturbing the land and animals grazing in the field. It certainly makes for the perfect capstone to such an incredible experience.

Mandy's business continues to grow. Monticello Country Ballooning has recently christened a new member of the fleet: a 2016 Cameron O-120. She has a unique shape that is more bulbous than smooth like other balloons. This makes her lighter and more fuel-efficient, and is the only one of its kind on the Eastern portion of the United States. I decide that I must make a return trip soon to try her out.

I drive home with a piece of my heart now won over for flying. I am so grateful that I didn't put this experience off—it is truly something to plan for and work towards, and over the course of a few hours, I made memories I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

No matter the reason you're in a balloon, whether it's for a birthday, a retirement, an excursion with friends, an engagement, or simply to quench that thirst for adventure we all have within us, may you never stop soaring high. *a*