

Hot Air Ballooning

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350 words

It's six a.m. on a September morning. You and five other people are clustered in the large wicker basket of a hot-air balloon. You've been watching its envelope transform from crumpled fabric into a vast, nylon bag, its colourful gored panels taut with hot air. There's a terse blast from the on-board propane burner as a jet of flame roars towards the envelope. Then the pilot cuts the flame. In utter silence, with no sensation of movement, the basket leaves the ground. You rise upwards easily as wind-borne thistle-down. The roofs of the sleeping town fall away. Far below, the crowns of orange-leaved maples are half-hidden in a sea of mist.

Hot air ballooning began in France in 1782, when the Montgolfier brothers sent a sheep, a duck, and a rooster into the air. Although hot air balloons were used by spies in the American Civil War, and lofted refugees away from Paris during the Franco-Prussian war, of the two types of balloons, it was the gas balloon that became popular throughout the 19th century, especially during the Belle Epoch in Paris, when races, long-distance flights, and eccentricities like women ascending in tethered balloons while playing violins created an aura of romance. Recreational ballooning as we know it today was born in the 1950's, when aviator Ed Tost invented a nylon envelope and propane fuel system, and made his first flight at Bruning, Nebraska.

Ballooning, like sailing, is a dance with wind and weather, a pursuit for those who love the adventure of a quiet, air-borne perspective, found in the earliest morning, or just before dark, when the air is calm, and the great thermal airship seeks wind currents to find its direction. It's for older people, who remember a slower pace; or children, thrilled by heights; or weddings -- bride, groom, and minister soaring skyward, the bride's bouquet tossed from the lofty basket.

Every summer and fall there are hot-air balloon events, among them the annual Balloon Fiesta in Sussex, New Brunswick; in Cornwall, Ontario, the Cornwall Lift-Off; the Festival de Montgolfieres in Gatineau, Quebec; and the Canada Remembers Balloon Festival in Saskatoon. At balloon festivals across Canada, people come either to serve as crew, to go aloft as passengers, or simply to gaze in delight at skies filled with the massive, colourful creatures, drifting gently as clouds -- without speed, and without purpose.