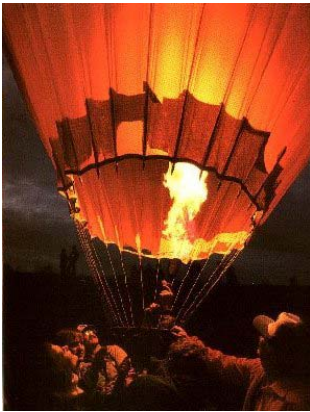


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Each fall, nature paints West Virginia's abundant forests with a variety of autumn colors. Such vivid beauty is difficult to match, but the Board of Park and Recreation Commissioners of Morgantown (BOPARC) has found a way to complement nature's display. This enhancement can be seen in October when dozens of colorful hot-air balloons rise from the Morgantown Municipal Airport, as the Mountaineer Balloon Festival gets underway

A hot-air balloon was the first aircraft that successfully allowed man to break the bonds of gravity and to experience flight. The first manned hot-air balloon flight took place in 1783 in Paris, France. The balloon was made of a silk and paper fabric by brothers, JacquesEtienne and Joseph-Michel Montgolfiers, who owned a paper manufacturing business and were looking for a new type of product. Their observation was that paper when burned in an open flame tended to rise. From this they concluded it was the smoke, not the heat, that provided the lift. The first manned flight in this balloon was on November 21, 1783, when J. R Pilatre Rozier and Marquis d'Arlandes ascended to 3,000 feet in the balloon, fueled by damp straw (to make smoke). They traveled five miles during the twenty-five-minute ride.

Modern hot-air balloons are made of ripstop nylon, supported by steel cables. Propane is used to fuel burners which can produce as much as 8 million BTU's of heat. The wicker baskets, which carry the propane tanks and passengers, are not just traditional, but serve a functional purpose in that in case of hard landings and high wind conditions, they tend to absorb some of the impact. Ballooning is, however, strictly a fair-weather sport and generally does not take place when there is a threat of thunderstorm or in winds exceeding 10 mph. Because low wind conditions are most common right after sunrise and just prior to sunset, most balloon flights take place at these times. Balloon festival spectators, who have risen before sunrise to see the morning launch, are usually rewarded with a spectacular ascension.

The idea for the Mountaineer Balloon Festival was formulated approximately six years ago when Dr. Van F. Anderson, director of parks and recreation in Morgantown, was vacationing in upstate New York and happened to observe posters of the Adirondack Balloon Festival held each August in Glens Falls. That August he returned to the area to witness the spectacular array of colorful globes drifting over the town, and was particularly impressed with the degree of community-wide involvement and excitement that the event generated. He noted that Glens Falls is similar to Morgantown, West Virginia, in that the population is similar as is the mountainous terrain. Anderson then invited Walt Grishkot, chairman of the Adirondack Balloon Festival, to come to Morgantown to examine the feasibility of having such a festival there.

Following Grishkot's visit, it was determined that a festival would be possible in the Morgantown area; but to secure balloonists a well-known aeronaut (balloon pilot) to serve as balloonmeister was needed. Bob Sparks from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, holder of numerous world ballooning records, filled the bill completely and has served as the Mountaineer Balloon Festival balloonmeister for the past five years. In addition to holding a number of world records, Sparks has attempted two transAtlantic balloon crossings and is a consultant for a number of national balloon museums. He constructed the three-fifths scale model of the Montgolfier balloon (first manned balloon) at the national Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

The first year of the festival, Sparks inflated his balloon inside the huge West Virginia University Coliseum and gave WVU basketball coach Gale Catlett a short ride, leaving the floor by about four feet. During that weekend, the balloon festival got underway in its entirety at the municipal airport with 20 balloons participating in a variety of activities. These included a hare and hound race and key grab competition.

The key grab competition is conducted by placing a pole in the middle of an open field. On top of the pole is placed a key ring with the keys to a new automobile. Balloonists then may go to any launch site of their choice outside a three-mile radius of the pole to launch their balloons and attempt to secure the keys, thereby winning the automobile. It must be understood that balloons only go in the direction that the wind takes them, and hence good directional control is greatly limited. As Bob Sparks says, "You don't go to anywhere in a balloon, you always go from somewhere." Because the wind cannot be predicted, the colorful globes usually glide off in a different direction during each ascension, which delights residents in their line of path. Landowners get involved by placing white sheets in their fields as "welcome mats," inviting balloonists to land. If such a landing takes place, the landowner, by tradition, receives a bottle of champagne from the balloonist.

Another popular balloon festival event is the hound and hare race. In this type of race, one balloon is designated as the "hare" and launches about five minutes prior to all the others. Other balloons give chase; and after a period of time, the "hare" balloon will land and lay out a marker on the ground. All the other balloons or "hounds" attempt to fly over this site and drop bean bags as close to the target as possible. Prizes are awarded based on the closeness for each race, and all points are compiled throughout the weekend to determine the grand champion.

Jack Roberts, president of BOPARC, is very enthusiastic about the special event. He claims, "It is the most colorful and unique festival in West Virginia." Such an event places considerable demands on a number of resources, so BOPARC requires community-wide support. Each balloon is sponsored by a business in town; in return, the business is permitted two riders in the balloon during the course of the weekend and two tickets to the awards luncheon at the conclusion of the festival, where the business representatives sit with their sponsored balloon crew, Major industries get involved by sponsorship of entire races, providing funding for prizes. Federal Aviation officials and airport staff work closely in coordinating airport use and vehicular traffic to and from the

festival site. A number of charitable organizations operate concession stands and use the festival as a fundraising event.

Because the festival takes place on a far runway of the airport, electrical service is not available. However, the West Virginia National Guard became involved in the festival and provides generators and does all the wiring for the many tents and canopies.

As the many balloons ascend (launch) from the festival, designated chase crews follow the balloon on the ground and recover it upon landing. Due to the mountainous terrain around the Morgantown area, there are times when the chase crew is unable to successfully track the balloon; and, in these cases, the Civil Air Patrol contacts a lost number where both balloonists and their respective chase crews can call back and attempt to locate each other.

Last year marked the fourth year of the event in which 46 brightly colored balloons participated. The festival drew approximately 20,000 spectators from the Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Maryland region, as well as balloonists from seven different states.

Of the original 20 balloonists at the first Mountaineer Balloon Festival in 1984, 14 returned last year. To help attract balloonists, BOPARC offered over \$5,000 in prize money last year, as well as a hand-carved wooden plaque of the festival logo for the grand champion. American Airlines provided two round-trip tickets to any location in the continental United States served by them. Other enticements included two rooms each night during the course of the festival for each balloon crew, as well as a bottle of champagne for the landowner at each flight. (The purchase of many cases of champagne by BOPARC always catches the eye of the state auditor.) Also included were travel expense money amounting to \$150 per balloon, free propane for the weekend, and the banquet.

The festival continues to grow each year. It is an example of a special event that is undertaken by a municipal park and recreation agency, but one which has managed to develop the support and cooperation of the entire community in conducting such a massive logistical exercise. Despite the many months of planning and preparation, there is no one in Morgantown who will say it isn't worth it when one of the Mountaineer Balloon Festival ascensions begins.