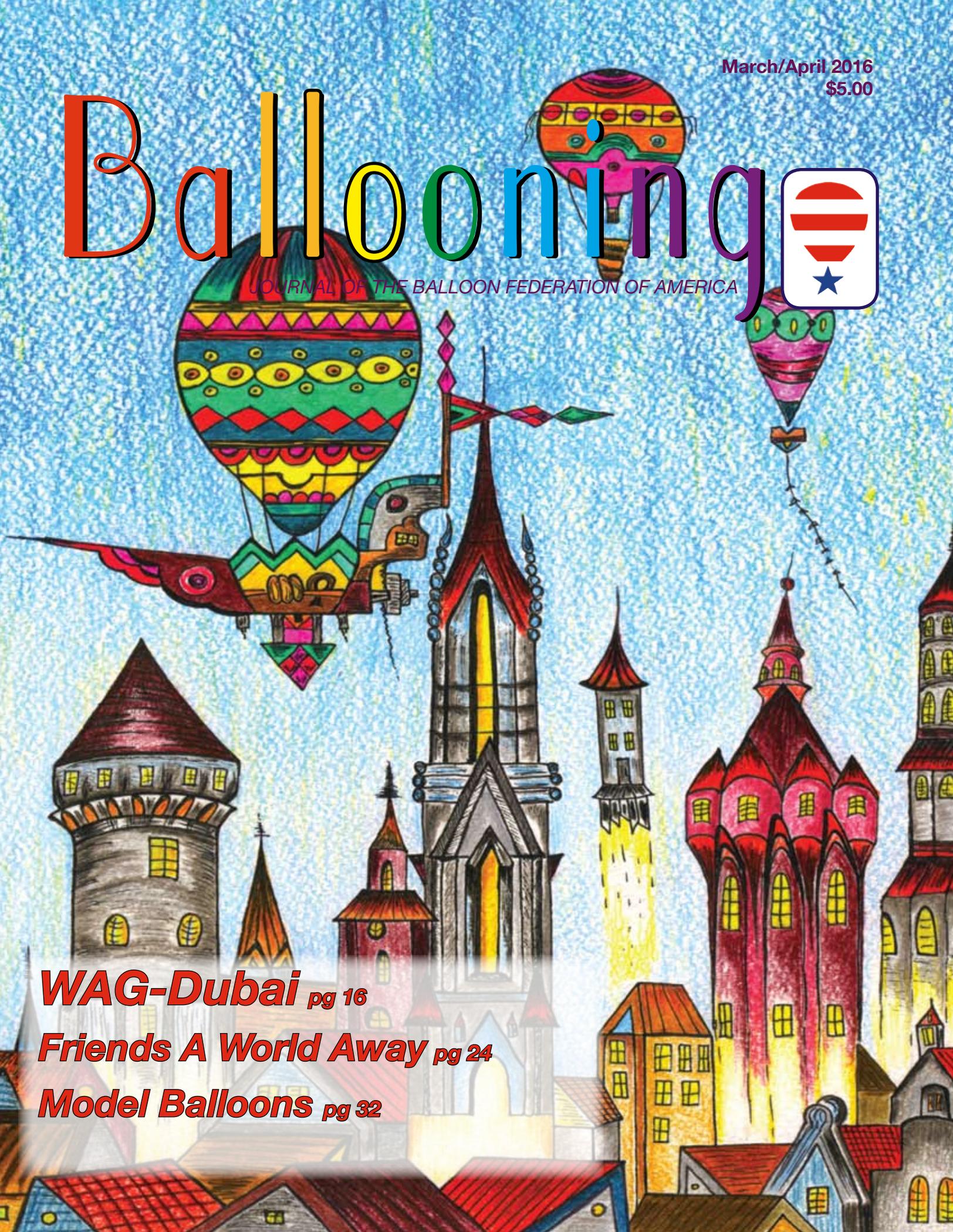


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Ballooning



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Model

Ballooning

by Ina van der Craats and Glen Moyer

Photo by Ina van der Craats

They look just like their ‘big’ brothers and when you see them in the sky from a distance there doesn’t seem to be any difference. But a radio controlled model hot air balloon is not a toy for kids.

When the first RC model balloon was built isn’t known but in some parts of the world like the Netherlands, Germany and the UK they are very popular. For most pilots it started because they were not able to fly a big balloon. For others it meant a step up from learning to fly an RC balloon at a younger age to become a big balloon pilot.

How it works is simple. You send a signal to the control box in the basket and that sets off the burners. You could compare it with an RC plane how the technical stuff works but flying an RC balloon is very different in practice. You have to have knowledge of how a regular balloon works to safely inflate and fly an RC balloon.

An RC balloon is built by hand and there are a few companies like Modellballone Bölling in Germany who custom make a complete set of basket, burners, inflation ventilator, hand burner and balloon.

What do I need to fly?

Starting off with the basket that is made out of the same materials as a regular basket. It contains 4 to 6 gas cylinders with 1 liter of gas each. The burner frame is already attached to the basket to keep it firm and easy to use. Also inside is the control box that is attached to the burners and gas cylinders. With your controller you send out radio signals to open the gas valve to burn. You can burn with one or two burners at the same time. There is also a pilot light setting.

The envelope is made of balloon fabric and built in the same way the big balloons are. There are programs available to calibrate the size. Most of the models don’t have a parachute. So deflating the balloon works in a different way.

To cold inflate there are custom made inflators or some pilots use a homemade one.

For hot inflation you can use the baskets burners but you can also use a special hand burner. This is a burner placed on top of a propane cylinder. It is used in the same manner as an ‘aux’ tank on a full size balloon so you don’t use all of your onboard fuel. Some

pilots find it easier to control the inflation of the balloon with a hand burner. Sometimes a hand burner will also be used during a night glow because it gives a flame with more light.

The conditions to fly a model balloon are at best with light winds at a maximum of 5 knots and no rain.

A hobby or profession?

RC model balloons are mostly flown just as a hobby. There are competitions where they will fly free without a line and have to perform certain tasks like dropping a marker or flying level for a period of time. At most balloon events they are flown as a side program or used to show the crowds some more insight on how a hot air balloon works because people can get closer.

Dutch RC pilot Geert Plukker has been flying rc model balloons for 18 years. He has 6 regular balloons, 2 special shapes, has built several balloons and does regular maintenance for other pilots. He is the official dealer in the Netherlands for Modellballone Bölling Germany.

In 2015 he was one of the organizers of the first open Dutch Model ballooning championship held during

Made in the **USA**

In the USA there is little to no official recognition of Radio Controlled (RC) or model ballooning. The odd one or three might appear at an event after flying but model ballooning here does not enjoy the same popularity here as it does overseas.

Here in the USA one of the most prolific builders/suppliers of radio controlled or “model” balloons is Bernard Smatana of www.modelballoon.com or www.radiocontrolledballoons.com. Smatana built his first RC balloon in 1986. He has since built and sold over 1500 models worldwide.

His introduction to the sport of ballooning was quite unique. Born and raised in Albuquerque, N.M., he was 11 years old during the 3rd Balloon fiesta. Smatana chased down a balloon one morning that featured a coyote on one side and a roadrunner on the other. The pilot was none other than Sid Cutter!

After that encounter he began building tissue paper balloons and by age 16 was building balloons of thin plastic sheeting taped at the gores. These models replicated the then popular Raven balloons and were complete with cardboard baskets.

In 1986 Smatana designed his RC burner and built his first RC nylon balloon shortly after. He has flown his balloons in Albuquerque at Balloon Fiesta, where in 2002 he held the first RC meet with 11 balloons.

Smatana offers 4 models in 3 sizes (1500, 2500, and 3500 cubic feet). Envelope pricing starts at \$1,000 and “ready to fly” systems start at \$1800.



the International Ballonfiesta Barneveld. Twelve pilots from 4 countries competed during the 4 days of the events. The victory went to Yves Gorbin from France followed by Bert and Ruud Broers from the Netherlands who came in second and third respectively.

A Growing Sport

Model ballooning is growing in the UK, so much so that proponents formed their own club, Model Ballooning UK as an affiliate of the British Model Flyers Association. There are just shy of 50 members who participate in both indoor and outdoor events, some limited to model balloons and others alongside the full-sized manned balloons. Some members are certificated balloonists while others are purely modelers. Andy Booth, Model Balloon Officer for the British Balloon and Airship Club says the modelers are working toward official recognition so they can set training, safety, and award schemes for the sport, eventually hoping to govern the sport in the UK as the BBAC does ballooning.

Another goal for the group says

Booth is to develop a starter kit for entry into the sport where the price could be as low as perhaps £500 or about \$750 versus the current costs of £1500 or approximately \$2000.00

An upcoming indoor event at Llangollen International Pavilion in Wales in March may well see over 50 model balloons participating, including special shapes, as they did last year.

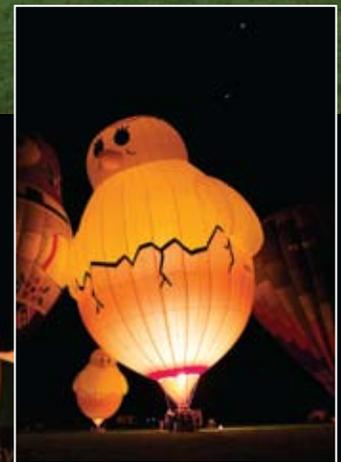
Like their big brothers, model balloons can be used for advertising, promotion and fund raising. For example, Dave and Rose Milkins' daughter, Leigh-Anne, was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis when she was 2. Now 26 and continuing to fight the disease, she and the family and friends operate a model balloon to help raise funds for a cure.

Booth also noted that model balloons can fill an often vacant "need" for balloon events noting the modelers can

Model balloons, like their full sized brethren can be used for competitions, or for balloon glows!

Inset photo: Me and Mimi Me in hot air!

Photos by Ina van der Craats



very often “hide below a tree line” to fly and put on a show for the public when the full size aerostats are grounded by winds aloft.

In Germany the sport is so large that there are model manufacturers (like Modellballone Bölling noted earlier) turning out equipment near full time, and model events can draw 50 or 60 entries.

Overall model ballooning is much larger and more well established in Europe than here. Booth estimates there are perhaps 1,000 or more model balloonists in Germany, France, Belgium, the UK, and The Netherlands, and growing around the world!



Photo by Ina van der Craats, Inset photo courtesy Dave Milkins

- The Bölling system at top looks very much like a type-certificated system - except for size.
- Inset - the Milkins' Cystic Fibrosis balloon.
- Model balloons flying at Llangollen

FOR MORE INFO:

- <http://www.modelballoonsuk.com/>
- <http://kjmodelballooning.com/>
- <http://www.modellballoneboelling.de/>
- www.modelballoon.com
- <http://www.cameronballoons.co.uk/faq/build-your-own- Cameron-hot-air-balloon>



Photo courtesy BBAC/Aerostat/Andy Marshall



Photo © Schönwaldeventfotografie

A World Record!

In October 2015 the Guinness Book of World Records certified a new record for the “largest display of model balloons.” The feat was organized by Richard Bölling of Bölling Modellballone in Germany at the 30th Brigachtal Model Balloon Meeting held in September.

Each balloon had to be accompanied by its pilot. All balloons were required to stand together airborne for 5 minutes. Imagine a model balloon event 30 years old!