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“Hydrovision”

A European Gas Ballooning Holiday

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As Ballooning’s European Correspondent I always try to interlace my ballooning adventures with a hint of European lifestyle. Therefore, I’ll begin by reporting that the Pentecost weekend in Europe was not only marked by a cozy gas balloon meeting in Germany’s biggest industrial area, but foremost by the annual “Eurovision” song contest.

In the Netherlands people don’t like to admit they actually watch the multi-national musical competition between the members of the European Broadcasting Union. Nevertheless, the Dutchies wouldn’t be proper Dutchmen if they didn’t cast a critical voice over the either too sexy or too dull outfits, and the chronic dissatisfaction with the Dutch entry, while democratically having chosen the particular song. This year’s Eurovision was held in Austria’s capital Vienna, as a bearded man with fabulous hair, sumptuous lashes and a highly feminine body in a tight dress (I’m not kidding) managed to win the

2014 edition of the contest for his/her country, Austria.

Last year’s winning song “Rise like a Phoenix” marked the grandiose start of an evening filled with glitter, glamour and a hint of secretly rather entertaining cheesiness. While the spectators were fanatically causing a mini hurricane by constantly waving their countries’ flags, a group of balloon minded people in neighboring Germany couldn’t care less, and were satisfied to instead “rise like a balloon.” And so it began, the 20th gas balloon championship of the German Nordrhein-Westfalen region, taking place at the high tech gas balloon launch field in Gladbeck.

Something that characterizes gas ballooning in Europe is the use of hydrogen. Because of the launch field’s location right between some industrial giants, there is a direct pipeline offering this waste product for gas balloonists’ use. Thanks to generous sponsors, the entry fee for participating pilots was only 50 euros, which equates to about 55 dollars. This price includes

hydrogen, sand, launch field costs, weather briefing and a massive amount of food ranging from German sausages and cake, to the (in Northern Europe) beloved black gold, liquorice. What a bargain!

The Eimers family having made this championship possible definitely deserves two thumbs up for their organizational skills. With their solid cooperation they managed to create a gas balloon event with a family-like touch once again.

Gas ballooning is not something for those in a rush. It is best enjoyed slowly. My father Bennie and I arrived at the launch field a little after 1700, and while the pilots were comfortably detangling the first few of their many ropes, I had plenty of time to catch up with an international bunch of friends from countries like Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, England and even Lithuania, where I gained my master’s degree about a year ago. I also had the pleasure to meet Leonid Tiukhtyaev, who had just flown in from Moscow to Düssel-

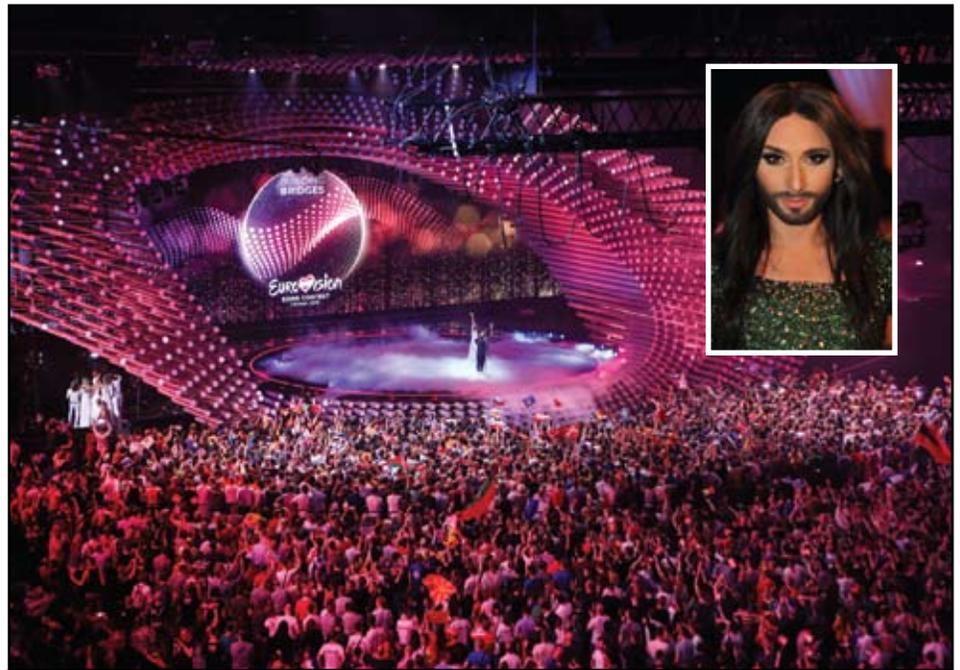
dorf airport. Prior to the briefing, only around 2200, he shared his adventurous story of crossing the Pacific by balloon, which he undertook together with his colleague, Troy Bradley.

Tiukhtyaev delivered his presentation in Russian, and Lithuanian pilot Robertas Komza was so kind to translate everything into German, which most of the Dutch and Belgians could understand. Just like many others I had watched the launch and tracking of the 'Two Eagles' online. Leonid's story was a welcome addition to my mental images. It provided a whole other dimension of fear and adrenaline; the unfavorable weather conditions a month prior the flight, the hesitation to continue suddenly becoming impossible as the giant open sea was already beneath them and the need of more ballast as they were quickly running out of the 5 tons they had brought with them. It must have been rough.

Leonid said that he didn't manage to sleep more than four hours a day and that he had lost about 7 kilograms (almost 15.5 pounds) in just a few days time. The landing on water was something they had prepared for, but once it happened, Leonid shared his sorrows as Troy fell seasick for a short time. Luckily we all know that both men eventually turned out to be fine.

The Dutch are known for their interest in how much things costs (preferably as less as possible, but expecting the best in return), but it was event organizer Wilhelm Eimers who dared to ask about the expenses of the entire Pacific adventure. My Russian language knowledge is terribly bad, but I did manage to understand. After a sudden "wow" and raised eyebrows from my side, Robertas translated Leonid's answer into German, which came down to "A lot of money... 2 million dollars," followed by about a hundred more "wow's" from the crowd consisting mostly of pilots, their crew members and a handful balloon enthusiasts.

The weekend's balloon competition was a single maximum distance flight. Pilots were asked to take a picture of their GPS exactly five hours after their starting time. Logically, the one with the furthest distance would win. They were asked to fly either very high, in order to catch the wind to the East, or to fly rather low, so they would head



Eurovision, is the longest running annual TV song competition held, primarily, among the member countries of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) since 1956. The competition was based upon the existing Sanremo Music Festival held in Italy. Each participating country submits a song to be performed on live television and radio and then casts votes for the other countries' songs to determine the most popular, winning song in the competition. The contest has been broadcast every year for sixty years, since its inauguration in 1956 and is one of the longest-running television programmes in the world. It is also one of the most watched non-sporting events in the world, with audience figures having been quoted in recent years as anything between 100 million and 600 million internationally

Winning the Eurovision Song Contest provides a short term boost to the winning artists' career, but rarely results in long-term success.[10] Notable exceptions are ABBA (winner 1974) and Céline Dion (winner 1988), both of whom launched successful worldwide careers after their wins.

(From Wikipedia)

Eurovision audience photo by Thomas Hanses/Eurovision; 2014 winner, Conchita (inset photo) by Ailura, used under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 license.

to the South-West, ending up in either the Netherlands or Belgium. Navigating southward was discouraged, as it could mean arriving above Düsseldorf airport just beginning its extensive flight activities at the dawn of a new day.

By nightfall, seventeen gas balloons popped up from the ground like giant mushrooms. I didn't observe any competitive behavior like in hot air balloon championships. Most pilots just seemed to participate out of pure fun. In a little over a year the Gordon Bennett will take place in Gladbeck after German gas balloon pilots Wilhelm Eimers and

Matthias Zenge won this prestigious gas balloon race in 2014. Therefore, their National Aero Club will organizing the adventurous challenge in 2016. I bet the competitive spirit will be alive by then.

When most of the balloons were filled I witnessed a painful accident which demonstrated that even the most experienced pilots still can't beat the force of a gas balloon containing enough hydrogen and being released from its contra weight. Belgian pilot Reginald Geerinck stood between the basket and the envelope when the men



Above: 15 inflated hydrogen filled gas balloons stand ready to launch at the site that will host the Coupe Gordon Bennett later this year.

Below: Event organizer Wilhelm Eimers and "Two Eagles" pilot Leonid Tiukhtyaev prepare to launch.

Opposite: Eimers and Tiukhtyaev fade from view into the night sky above Germany.



at the very end of the balloon released their weight from the fabric so the balloon would come up. An unluckily placed rope made Reginald fly for a second, after which he came down straight on his back. He remained on the ground, with worried balloonists surrounding him. He was alright, but he was in pain. His balloon was taken down immediately again and an

ambulance arrived within a couple of minutes. He eventually managed to walk to the ambulance, which took him to the nearest hospital in order to treat the injuries on his shoulder and hands. A lesson, even after all those years, it is of utmost importance to stay focused and be careful. With the knowledge that Reginald was in safe hands, sixteen balloons were prepared for take-off.

The stereotype of highly organized Germans is totally applicable when launching gas balloons from the launch field in Gladbeck. The procedure is led by Wilhelm Eimers himself and goes as follows. The pilots are start-ready, standing in their baskets, preferably holding a sand bag in order to ascend quickly when necessary. A group of helpers surrounds the basket while holding its edge with both hands. Then Wilhelm shouts: "Achtung! Loslassen! Festhalten!," which is the very effective and word-saving manner of "Attention! Let go! Hold on!" At the second step, imagine the group around the balloon all looking like criminals with their hands up high as if they just surrendered to the police. This is how it is decided if enough sand bags were removed in order to lift-off safely, or if more should be added or removed. When Wilhelm is satisfied, all that is left is "Achtung! Loslassen!." With the helpers now hesitantly letting go. After another commanding "Loslassen!" comes the inevitable "Nachtfahrtbeleuchtung!." being the signal for the departing pilots to deploy the rope to which blinking identification lights are attached, to ensure their visibility to other aircraft. One by one, the teams began their adventure through this procedure.

Leonid and I shared a smile, I got a supportive pat on my shoulder and together we agreed that departing gas balloons remain a magical sight. Now it was his turn. Together with Wilhelm he climbed into the basket of the white gas balloon adorned with a rather Russian looking logo of the Russian Records Factory. One of Wilhelm's sons took over the starting procedure and succeeded doing so in the exact same manner as his dad. Apparently it runs in the family. Off they went.

By shortly after 0300 in the night the launch field was empty again; in the distance only some blinking lights to be seen. Back to reality.

Before heading to the Netherlands again, a quick news-check showed me that Sweden had won this year's Eurovision with their song "Heroes." After a pleasant evening in Germany I discovered once again how important it is to surround yourself with positive, adventurous people: they are heroes of our time, hero-uh-o-o-oes, o-uh-o-o-



oh! Alright, in order to not leave you completely puzzled about this whole Eurovision thing, I'll end up telling that Wilhelm and Leonid eventually won the maximum distance, and therefore the 20th gas balloon championship of the German Nordrhein-Westfalen region. After five hours, they managed to cover 116.30 km (72.2 mi), closely followed by the German pilots Horst vom Hagen and Andreas Rath with 112.92 km (70.1 mi). Jurgen Dobbelaere and his father-in-law Gino Ciers secured third place in the ranking with a distance of 108.37 km (67.3 mi).

To come back to the Eurovision one last time: Dobbelaere and Ciers did better than their fellow Belgian countryman, singer Loïc Nottet, taking a fourth place in Vienna with his song dominated by solid beats and a fair amount of 'ra-pa-pap.' Nevertheless, Nottet did share some good news for all balloonists in his song too, "we can fly tomorrow, on the beautiful wind that blows", so that's nice.

A pleasant feature of our hi-tech times is that balloon fans everywhere could access to the balloons' online tracking codes, so that even back home the fun continued behind the screen. Good times in Europe, a fun-filled "Hydrovision" holiday weekend!



A highlight of the weekend gas event was the appearance of Russian pilot Leonid Tiukhtyaev who shared his first hand account of the world record setting Pacific Ocean crossing of the "Two Eagles" balloon.