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A Picture is Worth...



Le Petit Prince and the Mondial Air Ballons 2015

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This is the story of Lorraine Mondial Air Ballons 2015. Indeed, balloons with just one single 'o'. This was my 8th consecutive visit to Europe's biggest biennial balloon event. In this period of time I've grown from a silent little 11-year old to a life loving, laugh-out-loud 25-year old, including the height that comes along with my Dutch genetics.

Just like during my previous reports, I would like to tie my European balloon adventures to something typically European. We'll leave the Eurovision song contest behind and switch to literature; French children's literature to be more precise, also being adored by adults. In between the flights, cancellations and food feasts, I managed to read a big part of French aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* (The Little Prince).

De Saint-Exupéry wrote "The Little Prince" during his stay in North America, as he fled France after the outbreak of the Second World War. The story

has a philosophical touch, and features a Little Prince with a hair color resembling mine. He's from a small planet the size of a house: Asteroid B 612. All this planet offers are three volcanoes and a variety of plants. He has one single red rose with four thorns, being rather demanding. She is vulnerable, protected from the wind by a glass dome. One day, the Little Prince decides to explore what else the universe has to offer. He visits several other planets, all inhabited by rather foolish adults occupying themselves with rather useless matters. Only on earth does the little prince manage to find some wisdom.

De Saint-Exupéry describes and criticizes the fascination grown-ups have for numbers through an observation by the Little Prince himself. The curiosity of a child is praised, leading to the conclusion that adults would not even think about randomly asking "How does the voice of your friend sound like?" or "Does he collect butterflies?"

As the cancelled flights turned out to be massive socializing gatherings, I decided to observe if adults are really

so into asking questions that involve outcomes with numbers. In fact, the book is right.

When observing get-togethers of grown-ups that haven't seen each other for several years, the most often asked questions after a polite 'How are you?' are: 1) How long are you staying?, 2) How far is your accommodation located from the launch field, and 3) How many hours did it take you to get all the way here?

Funny, isn't it? We do in fact seem to be a little obsessed by numbers. There is one number this story can't live without though, being 433. The real start of Mondial Ballons 2015 came on a quiet, sunny Sunday morning when the silence of the early dawn was suddenly stirred by the sound of 433 inflator fans buzzing into action across the former Chambley military airbase. Pilots were at the ready for the now-famous runway line-up, and the bi-ennial attempt to set another mass ascension world record. I felt like a tiny creature stuck in a bee hive.

On this morning, my father, Ben-



nie, and I joined the Thai balloon team. Rapee, the Thai pilot, would climb to an altitude of 2 kilometers (just over 6,500 feet) for the first time in his flying career, which he considered to be a special experience, as it's not a common thing to do in Thailand.

Up there, the massive amount of dots of balloons interlaced with all the round hay bales laying across the fields. From our perspective, the whole spectacle seemed to look like an abandoned area with solely some colorful confetti laying around on the ground, being remains of a grotesque carnival parade. In fact, the whole showpiece was still up and running, which became clear when we descended and blended in with the rest again. The grand finale was yet to come. It had been a while since I made such a sporty landing. My elbow and knee turned from snow white to blue in just about a day, and my lips didn't need lipstick anymore, as I created a rich red color myself: blood. It was a memorable flight (and landing!) for sure.

In search for a spot where the retrieve vehicle could enter the field, I encountered another exciting moment. I stood in the middle of a French pasture that was connected to our landing spot. Some gigantic cows and bulls had just finished their meals, and were eager to greet the Dutch visitor crossing their land. They all went running towards me, which is not a very comforting matter. I put up a high voice and started talking to them in order to calm them down. That helped, for about ten seconds. On the one hand I didn't want to trigger their enthusiasm by starting to run myself, but on the other hand I felt I really had to, in order not to be hurt by their well-meant enthusiasm.

I ran to a rusty old van standing a little further away on the pasture and hid behind it. I heard the cows coming after me, sniffing loudly. At that moment I screamed out my most helpless sounding "Dad?!?!!" ever, and luckily superhero Bennie came to the rescue.

When the coast was clear, I observed the bulls from a safe distance. Goodness, they were massive, and their horns too. I ended up being laughed at during breakfast, but that was fine, as a breakfast beer and a fresh baguette made up for that. Later on we heard that the pilots and crewmembers all together had set the world record



Above: "DAAAAD!"

Below: A new world record mass ascension as 433 balloons lined the runway at Chambley airbase before launch.



concerning the longest balloon line-up once again. Whereas the previous record set in 2013 counted 408 balloons, we now managed to increase the number to 433.

Now that we've seen how we attach quite some value to numbers, it could easily be thought that this edition of Mondial Air Ballons was a rather bad

one. Only seven out of nineteen possible flights actually happened. Nevertheless, I considered this edition to be one of the better ones. It's a classic example of quality above quantity. The flights that did take place were singularly unique.

We probably all saw the pictures of the rather foggy morning flight, causing



"I actually consider foggy days to be very cozy..."

a mysterious scene of vague silhouettes of churches and houses, combined with pastel colored balloons dissolving on a never-ending canvas. When the sun managed to burn through the first layer of fog, it was as if a hint of yellow was added to a dreamy aquarelle painting. This was one of the few mornings I observed from the ground. I joined my friend Sarah on her retrieve with Grand Britannia. This Head balloon remains an everlasting beauty, with her Union Jack still being as vibrant as when new, more than 15 years ago.

We picked up a random Swedish student pilot from the runway, whom instantly got along with our sense of humor. While stuffing ourselves with chocolate filled iced croissants, we drove towards the unknown. As a Dutchman often overusing the word cozy, I must say that I actually consider foggy days to be very cozy, as the world suddenly becomes so small and 'overviewable', almost like the Little Prince's Asteroid B 612.

This year's edition was different for me. I normally roam around the runway and cover quite some distance every single day. Because of the limited amount of flight possibilities and the luck to be able to fly with pilots from five different nationalities, the soles of my shoes remained unharmed.

During a flight with Peter George and his before mentioned Grand Britannia, I realized once again how much the

refueling area improved in the last few years. We flew straight over it. (Watch out, here comes a number again!) You can probably imagine how well this area functions when knowing that 150 gas bottles (fuel tanks) can be filled simultaneously. We were surrounded by random special shapes, including an impressive champagne bottle, a red heart and a stubborn looking fish. We came down in a field which seemed to be specially made for hosting the landings of all departed balloons. Everywhere around us, balloons came down like drops of colorful rain on a relaxed sunny morning.

That evening our hopes weren't too high that the wind would calm down. We took it slow and already begun a little tailgate session when I suddenly spotted a fancy red Volvo in which I drove from cold Sweden to snowy Austria once, together with a bunch of balloon minded Swedes, all being employed by Volvo. I greeted them in my best Swedish and before I knew it I was in their car, off for a fly-in!

We found ourselves a calm spot where the wind didn't bother us. The white fabric of a gigantic medical glove was spread out over the grass, and we all helped to close the velcros on each of the fingers. The middle finger is attached to the parachute. Pilot Per Lesser recently modified his balloon with an extra gimmick. On board he has five different ropes, all attached to

one single finger. When pulling one of the ropes, a finger goes down. In this way, if you're not amused, you can pull down the two outer fingers on each end to convey a rather powerful message of disapproval.

Of course, we didn't do that, as we had absolutely nothing to complain about. We flew towards the camp side next to the launch field, where balloon teams from all over the world had claimed their little territory with an abundance of flags. One of the biggest joys in ballooning is flying low, and greeting the people fanatically waving from the ground. We had the luck of having a clearly visible hand above us, easily sending regards to all the neighboring villages. Our smiles took care of the people a little closer by.

Speaking of numbers, I've somehow developed a strange fascination for license plates. I basically look at all the different plates that I come across. My aim is to spot foreign ones (and Dutch ones when being far away from home). This can be somewhat confusing for people not sharing this interest, as I often leave people puzzled when out of the blue I exclaim, "Wow, all the way from Russia!", or simply "Switzerland!". I guess it can be compared to you Americans noticing license plates from the various States in your expansive country.

In France I discovered that this somewhat weird obsession also works for balloon registrations. When enjoying the sight of hundreds of balloons heading upwards, I suddenly noticed a rather uncommon and exotic registration number, starting with LY. My eyes got bigger and a smile appeared: Lithuania, the country that hosted me during my master's degree coursework! I had a look if I could spot some typical Lithuanian faces on board, but that was not the case.

I scanned the sky once again for some potential proper pictures, when suddenly I heard someone yelling my name. Apparently there were two Dutch guys aboard the balloon with the Lithuanian registration. "Nienke! Wanna fly?" Always! One minute later I was drifting-towards the clouds. Only after takeoff did the pilot and his crew member introduce themselves to me. That's one of the magnificent joys of ballooning; it's one big community of like-minded





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The box winds took us back and forth over the landing strips of the former military airbase of Chambley. The high speed train from Paris honked fanatically. The inhabitants of the tiny sleepy villages slowly but steadily headed to the bakery in order to fetch themselves some breakfast. In the meanwhile, the guys were making fun of my Northern accent, while I did the same concerning their Southern accent. Interesting, how one language can sound so different in just about 200 kilometers distance. After a flight of almost two hours we came down softly to earth again. Through some proper team work we efficiently packed the balloon together. The Lithuanian registration number ran through my hands and disappeared in the bag with the rest of the fabric.

On earth, the Little Prince finds himself a friend. This friend is a fox, providing a lot of wisdom. He explains the concept of 'taming', being that some time has to be invested before a connection between people, animals, flowers, or any other matters become of an indescribable value. The fox states that corn fields don't specifically remind him of anything, as he doesn't eat bread. To him, corn fields don't have any value, as they don't spark

emotions whatsoever. Nevertheless, by spending time with the Little Prince, the fox's view on corn fields change, as the color of a corn field resembles the hair color of the Little Prince. The otherwise meaningless corn fields now provide a feeling only the fox is able to experience. The Little Prince comes across a bush of roses on earth too. He's devastated. He'd always thought that his one single rose was the only one in the entire universe. Now it suddenly seemed she wasn't even that different from all other flowers after all. The fox, however, tells the Little Prince that his rose is in fact very special, as taming had made her unique and valuable. Because of all the love and care the Little Prince had given her, she did become irreplaceable. She meant more to the Little Prince than the roses he had no connection with on earth.

I thought about this when watching hundreds of balloons above the fields of Northern France during the last morning flight before heading home. German pilot Hinnerk Röhrs was so kind to offer me and my father a ride. The balloon with the Lithuanian registration flew next to us. For others, this is just one of many balloons. For me, it is a fond memory of the adventurous time I had while schooling in Eastern Europe. A bit further away I spotted the Thai balloon. For others, this too is just one

of many balloons. For me, it's a balloon of memories - of a fantastic flight over the Rio Grande during the AIBF 2014 (having become a symbol of my very first visit to the United States), and the balloon from which I still carried bruises on my body because of the sporty landing earlier on that week in France.

On the way home I glimpsed new Volvo's cruising the German highway. For most, these Swedish autos were of little importance. For me, they sparked a memory of my Swedish balloon friends. Once home I prepared myself a cup of tea. Again, it is just a cup of tea. For me, it's a memory of my English friend Sarah, being an expert in cozy tea time sessions, too.

What I want to say with this is that we all see the world with different eyes, through events that somehow connect one matter with another. If you - the reader - and I, should see ten balloons lift-off, we would see the same scene, but deep inside we might observe and report something totally different based on the emotions and memories that scene would spark within each of us.

That's exactly the secret the fox shares with the Little Prince: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential, is invisible to the eye." This is why every edition of Mondial Air Ballons adds more value to my vision.

