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Balloonning

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RIGA VISION 2013

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Riga, the capital of Latvia. The city with clean parks, narrow cobblestone streets and a wide variety of traces from her Hanseatic past. This is the place where I ended up as a 19-year old student during my obligatory student exchange abroad. I wanted to break the tradition of Dutch students going to France or Spain for their foreign study experiences. I wanted to discover the undiscovered, and that's exactly what I did. Now, four years later, I'm still around in the area Latvia forms the heart of. The Baltic States, consisting of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became my beloved home, a source of adventures, self-development, historical eye openers and a quest for intelligence through my education mixed with valuable internships.

On every potential flight day I've been watching the sky, trying

to spot some exotic aerostats passing by. Unfortunately it hardly ever happened. What a delight it would be, to fly over my favorite city, is what I always had in mind. It was a long desired dream and with the end of my time in the Baltics being in sight I almost already gave up on it. Almost, until an invitation to 'Riga Vision 2013' from Latvian pilot Gunars Dukste made my heart skip a beat. "A balloon event." In Riga! Around 20 participants. I was warmly welcome. No matter what, I definitely had to go there!

Currently I live in Kaunas, Lithuania's second biggest city. After being assigned as the event's official photographer, English text writer and PR lady, I headed towards the north with a bunch of balloon minded Lithuanians. In around three hours we arrived in Riga and having lived there for around 1.5 years I felt a bit like being home again. All officials and balloon teams stayed in a hotel a

few kilometers away from Riga's busy airport. It was very convenient to have all of the fiesta's participants so closely together. The competition center was located in the very same hotel as were briefings, our well organized food gatherings and little parties were all held there.

Upon arrival room 112 was assigned to me. I had a roommate too, Viktorija. We met earlier in 2012 during the Junior Worlds where she provided the meteo info. This was her duty now again too.

The general briefing was followed up by a warm welcoming word from fiesta organizer Inga Igaune, a Latvian female pilot who even without hardly any sleep still manages to look fashionable and extraordinarily pretty. The Baltic States have been independent for around 23 years now, however, before that the Soviet regime was in force and the main language spoken was Russian. This facet of history still finds its traces in contemporary

life. Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians all have their own distinctive languages, but the easiest way for the inhabitants of these sparsely populated countries to communicate is still in Russian. English was spoken for the pilots from countries like Spain, England, The Netherlands and Switzerland while the ones from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus favored the Russian language.

The organization of Riga Vision clearly have a good bond with their sponsors. I never saw so many little additional prizes and fun and tasty gifts ever before at a balloon event. Upon my arrival a bag filled with chocolate coated fruits was waiting for me together with some souvenirs from Riga and a “media” t-shirt. The local pancake flour company provided pans and baking ingredients and also the Latvian sweets production companies were well represented.

Basically during every briefing people were awarded with small prizes. Some because they had won one of the assigned tasks, others because they violated the launch period time by taking off 15 minutes too early. These pity prizes show that this event was not aiming at hard core competition behavior but rather at pure enjoyment and relaxation. I personally really adore this kind of jovial atmosphere.

After our official welcome we immediately continued with the first briefing for Friday’s evening flight. The weather looked good and it was decided to launch from a small place just outside Riga. This village is called Ogre and when hearing this name I always depict some caves and wild troll-like figures hunting around with spiked clubs. Reality showed that this venue is actually inhabited by normal looking Latvians who were very curious about the mass invasion of balloonists in their otherwise quiet home town.

I couldn’t stop smiling when all the balloons started inflating. It was such a delight to see some envelopes I had never seen at any other event before. It was the first time I actually saw the Riga Racer which is even more beautiful in real life

than in pictures. Dutch pilot Hans van Hoesel was also present and pointed me to the new banner on his balloon stating ‘Greetings from Holland’, accompanied by a tulip in our national colors red, white and blue. Even though the Baltic States more and more feel like a place I call home, my true identity is still based on my Dutch citizenship.

During Friday’s evening flight I retrieved the Kubicek racer of my friends who brought me to Riga earlier that day. Spectators were found all over Ogre. I figured out once again how special the spring and summer evening light is in the Baltic States. I can hardly describe it, the comfortable warm color shines over endless fields; here and there an old wooden farm and a couple of storks nurturing their babies on their nests. As soon as we reached the landing spot the evening dawn spread over the fields, making Latvia’s beautiful nature look slightly mysterious but yet so pure.

On our way back to our hotel we quickly stopped at one of the three refueling stations. All are open 24/7 so that’s again a thumb’s up for this well arranged feature by the organization. Then it was time for the official welcom-

ing party. We were spoiled with an abundance of tasty snacks and there was a table filled with liver destroying beverages, from alcoholic mixed drinks to champagne and vodka to cognac. All officials and pilots were presented with a gigantic book with pictures from Latvia in the years 1987 and 2007. It’s amazing to see how Latvia quickly developed to a country, and now even belonging to the European Union. The collection of pictures certainly show how a random day in Latvia looked like in these two decades.

The conditions for the Saturday morning flight looked ‘too good’ as stated by Viktorija, my roommate and the “meto” officer for the event. When the wind was measured it said calm. No wind. A calm flight it would be and it was decided to take off at Rumbula Air Base, an abandoned military airport. A minimum and maximum distance as well as a hesitation waltz were scheduled for this flight. I didn’t really notice much of the competition spirit as pure fun and relaxation were what really mattered. The balloons crossed the Daugava river dividing Riga in two parts. I joined the Lithuanian chase crew once again and we took the scenic route in reaching the landing



An evening launch from the Village of Ogre whose residents (inset) look nothing like the images one might conjure up given the name of the place!



Top: The event's final flight launched from 'Freedom Park' on the morning of May 5. Soviet propaganda statues representing 'liberation' by the Soviets after Nazi occupation

Center: Flying over buildings dating back to Soviet rule.

Bottom: Some pilots and crew enjoyed a scenic paddle wheel boat ride between flights. Look closely at the name of the boat - does it look somewhat familiar?

spot of our pilot Zydrunas Kazlauskas. Ballooning definitely takes you to places you'd never thought of ending up. It's always fascinating to drive through ordinary districts and discover how locals slowly live their lives and smoke their morning cigarettes in their unfashionable bathrobes while enjoying the strong spring sun.

Back at the hotel I treated myself to a well deserved meal consisting of pasta, potatoes, pancakes and porridge. An interesting combination but I was clearly in need of it after all the fun in such a short time span. There was time for a half an hour nap before the next activities would start.

Saturday afternoon we headed towards Riga's beautiful city center to join an organ concert at Riga's Dome. After that some of the event's participants went on a boat ride on the Daugava while some Lithuanians joined me for a guided tour through Riga. I've been working for Riga's most popular tourist guide for a while so I know where to find the most fantastic places. In around two hours we saw the entire Old Town, the breathtaking Art Nouveau district, the central market (inside the zepelin halls) and a few parks where all flowers and trees were blooming like maniacs. Riga's weather was surely showing off for us.

Again Saturday evening's weather looked fine. This time we would start on a small embankment in the Daugava river with a perfect view on Riga's Old Town. The city was crowded with spectators where dozens of festive events were organized. May 4 is a special day for Latvia since on that day in the year 1990 the Declaration of the Restoration of Independence of the Republic of Latvia was adopted which made Soviet Latvia a free and independent state once again. I didn't really know how to feel during this day. Of course the Latvians were all euphoric, however, in the Netherlands, May 4 is kind of a sad day during which we commemorate all civilians and members of the armed forces of the Kingdom of the Netherlands who have died in wars or peacekeeping missions since the



Top: Estonian pilot Kalev Tikk just arranged some well needed help from a Latvian farmer (balloon stuck in muddy field) for a successful retrieval.

Center: A table of shiny strawberries and fresh pastries was on hand for the event's closing ceremony.

Bottom: Event organizer Inga Igaune (center front row in white jacket) and the pilots of Riga Vision 2013.

outbreak of World War II. Nevertheless, this evening made my day, my week, my month and possibly even my year. I joined the Estonians for a flight over Riga! This has been one of my biggest dreams ever since the first day I set foot on Baltic soil.

All muscle power was needed though to send the balloons up in the sky. The embankment was terribly small and the sea wind didn't make the inflation any easier. Latvian pilot Gunars Dukste took off first having a gigantic Latvian flag hanging under his balloon. What a fantastic goose bump moment.

A little later it was my turn to leave the earth behind. My intense 'whoohoo!' was probably heard by half of Riga's inhabitants. What a delicious delight, being in a balloon above my all time favorite city. Happiness filled my senses and rapidly all desired shots were captured by my camera. We headed towards the west missing Riga's city center, but the view of it was still very spectacular. The environment changed from prestigious buildings to Sovietic flats, houses with little gardens and eventually a rural area with swamps, lakes and if I'm not mistaken, a secret kind of espionage venue with suspicious looking satellites and abandoned military buildings. Before we reached the enormous forest ahead we decided to land. It was a heavy one. Pilot Kalev later on told me this was his first non-stand up landing in about a year. A ditch filled with some muddy water was coming closer and closer but eventually the basket stopped just in time. Unfortunately the balloon was already coming down falling straight over the ditch.

Even though we managed to stay dry, the balloon didn't. Rotten leaves were clinging to the envelope (built in 1990) which had developed its own kind of smell already without any wetness. Without too much effort we got the balloon to a dry place where we immediately did a hot inflation to save it from more unpleasant aromas. Back in the car this beautiful flight over Riga was celebrated with the only beer left, which we kindly shared, apart from the driver of course. Because of

our extra unexpected hot inflation after our smelly landing we missed out on the nightglow with music especially composed for this event. Some balloons were still standing however and created a colorful welcome in Riga where night had fallen already.

After a short night's sleep we headed towards the 'Freedom park' for Riga Vision's last flight. Ironically this park contains a gigantic piece of Soviet propaganda with statues representing 'liberation' by the Soviets after Nazi occupation. The weather looked fine once again, but we were advised not to fly after 09.00 because of increasing winds. On board were Kalev, Jaano (team member as well as prospective pilot) and a passenger from the organization. The direction was just too good to be true, right over Riga's old town. It was a calm early morning and all streets in Riga were still empty. The buildings of Riga's impressive skyline passed by us one by one. This is how a Sunday morning should be, even though a long weekend sleep has to be sacri-

ficed for it.

Away from the city we crossed some beautiful natural landscapes with little rivers crawling through the fields. We decided to land before having to cross the area of forest waiting for us. This happened to be a good decision since the wind got stronger every single minute after we touched down. Since we landed in the middle of nowhere our retrieve crew faced some difficulties reaching us. He was nearly there, about one kilometer distanced from us, when the road suddenly ceased to exist. He then somehow managed to drive 40km in order to reach a place where he could pick us up. This was not the only difficulty. We had landed in a muddy field in which our retrieve car would definitely get stuck. The thing I admire so much about the Estonians I joined is that they take all problems with a smile, don't stress and easily find an inventive solution for anything. Kalev hit the road in search of the next farm, asking for a tractor to pull the basket and envelope out of the field.

Meanwhile Jaano and I enjoyed the sun and a nice little walk in the area where we landed. Finally an old tractor came down the hill to the rescue with a smiling Kalev happily waving from the back.

It's amazing how so many activities can be packed within one weekend, while such a weekend flies by. The only thing left now was the closing ceremony held in Riga's botanical garden. A table filled with shiny strawberries and delicious pastries were waiting for us. One happy ballooning family gathered together and shared experiences of their exhausting but memorable time in Riga. All pilots and officials were once again overloaded with presents, hugs and smiles. Since the competition tasks weren't carried out that well it was decided to give championship prize by lottery. Farewells were said and memories locked deeply in our hearts, knowing we would all meet again someday for the next adventure.



This is the view the author was so excited to see, Riga's city center with the Daugava river flowing through it.

