

The Sky Blooms with Color at Chambley!

by Mark Rowlee

The warm Summer, afternoon sun beat down on the French countryside of Lorraine. Over 500-hot air balloons were getting ready to ascend into the sky over the old NATO airfield at Chambley-Bussier.

It was 5pm and there would be nearly 5-hours more of daylight in this part of France. The flight briefing had just ended and inflator fans were starting up in unison creating a low roar that would only end with the sound of the burners firing up. And then the sky bloomed with color as the balloons lifted off.

Every two years the Mondial Air Ballons takes place. Attracting balloonist from all over the world the event is only rivaled by the Fiesta each October in Albuquerque, New Mexico. But this isn't the American Southwest. This is France! Where ballooning began over 200-years ago. Escargot, creme brulle, wines you'll fall in love with and views of chateaux.



As the balloons float effortlessly from the launch field the retrieval crews busy themselves with packing up the equipment in the van or truck. The narrow roads and even more narrow town roads are soon clogged with cars, van and other forms of chase vehicles. From crews to sightseers, everyone is trying to get a better view, get closer, get the right photo.

It's a festive time! People all doing the same basic thing...enjoying the balloons, the weather and France. For nine-days the area around Metz abounds with people all having something to do with the ballooning event. And twice each day the balloon take to the sky, both in competition for many and just plain fun for others.

One of the American balloons was flying just "for the fun of it." Competition for them amounted to dropping their marker on a target if they should happen by. Their main concern was taking all of their crew and friends for rides to enjoy a balloon ride over this special area of France.

Hotels are in abundance and a room can always be had if you book far enough in advance. The little B&B's known as chambre d'hotels are also available. Since none are at or nearby the launch field it is necessary to have a car for transportation.

The American team had rented a van for balloon transport purposes but also had the foresight to rent a small car for general transportation. Gas is over-priced here and, when not chasing their balloon, the balloon sat at the launch field locked in its portable "hangar." The car was used for general transportation to and from the hotel, sightseeing, etc. The overall savings and convenience were worth this bit of extravagance.

Morning flights were equally magical. Arriving in the dark the balloon vehicles jockeyed for

position on the launch field. After the pilot briefing the fans once again began their roar. This time as the balloons lifted off they floated through wisps of low clouds giving them an eerie, ethereal appearance.

Take offs are always beautiful. The landings can be even more spectacular as a balloon can land in many different areas. Some were landing in open, freshly cut fields, some were landing behind 300-year old churches in villages whose names were only on the most accurate maps, while others landed near the homes of local residents.

Meeting people this way was an easy thing to do. The entire family would come out to enjoy the spectacle of a hot air balloon, 80-feet tall, landing and then collapsing into a long, colorful streamer of fabric. Bottles of wine appeared out of nowhere as the event was toasted by the family and balloon crew alike. And, many times, the family would invite the crew back for dinner. Making friends is easy when you have a balloon as the central conversation piece.

Each day brought the same routine except when bad weather caused cancellation of a flight for safety reasons. And as the event drew to a close the American team congratulated themselves for having been able to get over 40 people into the balloon during the extended week they were there. They had the names, addresses (snail and email alike) and phone number of so many people it would be major undertaking to organize and keep in touch with them all. But the number of memories is unlimited.

This year the Mondial Air Ballons will happen all over again. From July 25 to August 3, the balloonists from over 60-countries will again descend (and ascend from) on the old airfield again. An international event of this magnitude, with a thousand crew people alone from all walks of life and over 500-balloons is an event to behold. And it's easy to be a part of it.

Hotels:

Hostellerie Lion d'Or in Gorze. Phone from the US: 011.33.3.87.52.00.90, fax to 011.33.3.80.52.09.62.

Hotel Campanile in Jouy aux Arches. Phone 011.33.3.87.38.39.69, fax to 011.33.3.87.38.39.76.

Car: Auto Europe at 800-223-5555 or <http://www.autoeurope.com>.

Event Info: <http://www.pilat-re-rozier.com>