

Ballooning strengthens a relationship

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Managing Editor
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Albuquerque couple reflects on years of piloting

This year at the Red Rock Balloon Rally there will be 124 hot air balloons floating among the red rocks at Red Rock Park, but there will also be one gas balloon.

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Peter Cuneo and Barbra Fricke will be the pilots flying the gas balloon. They've been together for nearly 40 years and flying for almost 35.

GETTING INTO BALLOONS

Fricke was the first one who became interested in ballooning. Before she retired, she worked as the Director of the Medical Technology Training Department at the University of New Mexico. One of her colleagues invited her out to go ballooning one day, and she was instantly hooked.

But finding time for her new hobby proved to be difficult. Ballooning requires early morning wake up calls, and with a full-time job that can be near impossible. But when Fricke became the director of her department, she began setting her own hours, and was able to take a week off to volunteer for a pilot as a crew member.

Fricke was soon assigned to a pilot from Las Cruces in 1982, and she became one of his crew members. After a couple of years, he began giving her flying lessons. It was a slow process though, as the pilot was only able to give Fricke about one lesson a year.

Soon after Fricke began taking lessons, the couple bought a used balloon in 1988.

PATH TO PILOTING

In an interview with the *Sun*, Cuneo said he initially wasn't really interested in his partner's new hobby, but he was willing to support her.

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“We were going to go 50/50 on it, and she was going to be the pilot on it and I was going to be the silent partner,” he explained.

After buying the balloon, the next step was for Fricke to receive her pilot’s license. In order to get a pilot’s license you must go to ground school, where you get all the information needed to pass the written test that the Balloon Federation of America requires.

Cuneo said that while he was watching Fricke go through ground school, he began to have a change of heart.

“I said, ‘well geesh, I could do that, I’m an engineer, I can learn all the technical side of things and I still wouldn’t have to fly the balloon,’” Cuneo said.

After ground school Fricke started taking flying lessons from another pilot in Rio Rancho and Cuneo decided to tag along.

“I thought it would be a good idea to go along and protect my half of the investment and make sure nothing bad happened to [the balloon],” he said.

Fricke received her private pilot’s license, and Cuneo soon followed suit.

“Eventually I decided it wasn’t such a bad thing, and it’s grown on me since then,” he said.

Fricke said her favorite part about ballooning is bringing new people up in the air.

“I love taking new people up who get really excited about it,” she said. “Flying our crew is also

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wonderful, and I love giving them the chance, but for me it's somewhat the adventure that it is, because you never know quite where you're going to land or what exactly will happen at the landing site, because you're at the mercy of the winds to take you someplace, and you can change the altitudes, you can try to get the right winds, but you're still at the mercy of the wind to go where you're going to go."

BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

While discussing his favorite aspect of ballooning, Cuneo talked about the social aspect of the sport.

"You can take a plane and fly the whole thing solo and never see another person besides the person who's refueling the plane, [but] ballooning is a much more social endeavor," he explained. "It takes five or six people to get the balloon in the air and then a chase truck to follow along underneath the balloon and a couple of passengers. It becomes a family."

Cuneo continued the airplane comparison by talking about the different experiences between the two modes of transportation.

"Maybe this is why RE/MAX has a balloon as their logo, but when you get up in the air you have time to very slowly observe everything that is beneath you since you're going maybe three or five miles per hour as opposed to 150 miles per hour in an airplane," Cuneo said. "It's a very different feeling, there's no glass window between you and the outside world, there's no vibration from the engine."

The couple goes to about eight balloon festivals a year with their gas balloon, and they say they have no plans of slowing down any time soon.

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During this year's Albuquerque International Balloon Festival in October, the Fricke and Cuneo competed in the 66th Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett race, otherwise known as the FAI World Long Distance Gas Balloon Championship.

Named after Gordon Bennett, who initiated the race in 1906, the race awards the balloonists who fly the longest distance. Fricke and Cuneo placed fifth in the competition, with a score of 1947.68 kilometers, or just over 1,200 miles.

GOING WITH GAS

The competitive trip lasted 66 hours, but the couple have spent much more time up in the air together. They said the most time they've ever spent is 72 hours.

Their gas balloon allows them to do that.

Unlike hot air balloons, which use propane to lift up into the air, gas balloons use helium or hydrogen. Hot air balloons also use colorful fabrics and a lightweight fabric. A gas balloon is usually white, and a heavier fabric.

The balloons are also used differently. Hot air balloons can only fly for a couple of hours and are usually used for entertainment and can usually hold up to 12 passengers. Although the gas balloons' baskets are bigger than a hot air balloons, they are not typically used for entertainment purposes.

Instead, since gas balloons can fly for longer amounts of time, they are often used to transport items or people.

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Fricke and Cuneo have traveled all over the U.S., Canada, and Europe. They said the long journeys are like “camping in the sky,” and they have to bring many supplies with them, including food, water, comfortable clothes, and a pot to use the bathroom.

The gas balloon’s baskets are slightly bigger than a hot air balloon’s basket, which allows the couple to stretch their legs and get comfortable during long trips.

BUILDING TRUST

A 72-hour trip is a long time to be in a small space with someone. But Fricke said it hasn’t caused any problems in their relationship.

“It definitely hasn’t harmed it at all,” she said. “It’s kind of neat to have done this all with Peter.”

Traveling for that long requires excellent communication. A single person cannot fly a balloon for that length of time, and Cuneo said communication is key.

“There’s definitely a joint decision-making process. We kind of have an understanding that when we’re in the air if either one of us says it’s time to get on the ground we don’t question it, we just get on the ground,” he said. “So there’s a lot of trust because half the time you’re sleeping and the other person is flying the balloon and you have to be able to relax enough to go to sleep. If you’re a control freak and you want to be flying the balloon all 72 hours that it’s up there, it’s not going to work out.”

Cuneo believes he has the best partner to be taking on this adventure with.

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“I can’t imagine doing it with anybody else but Barbra,” he said.

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