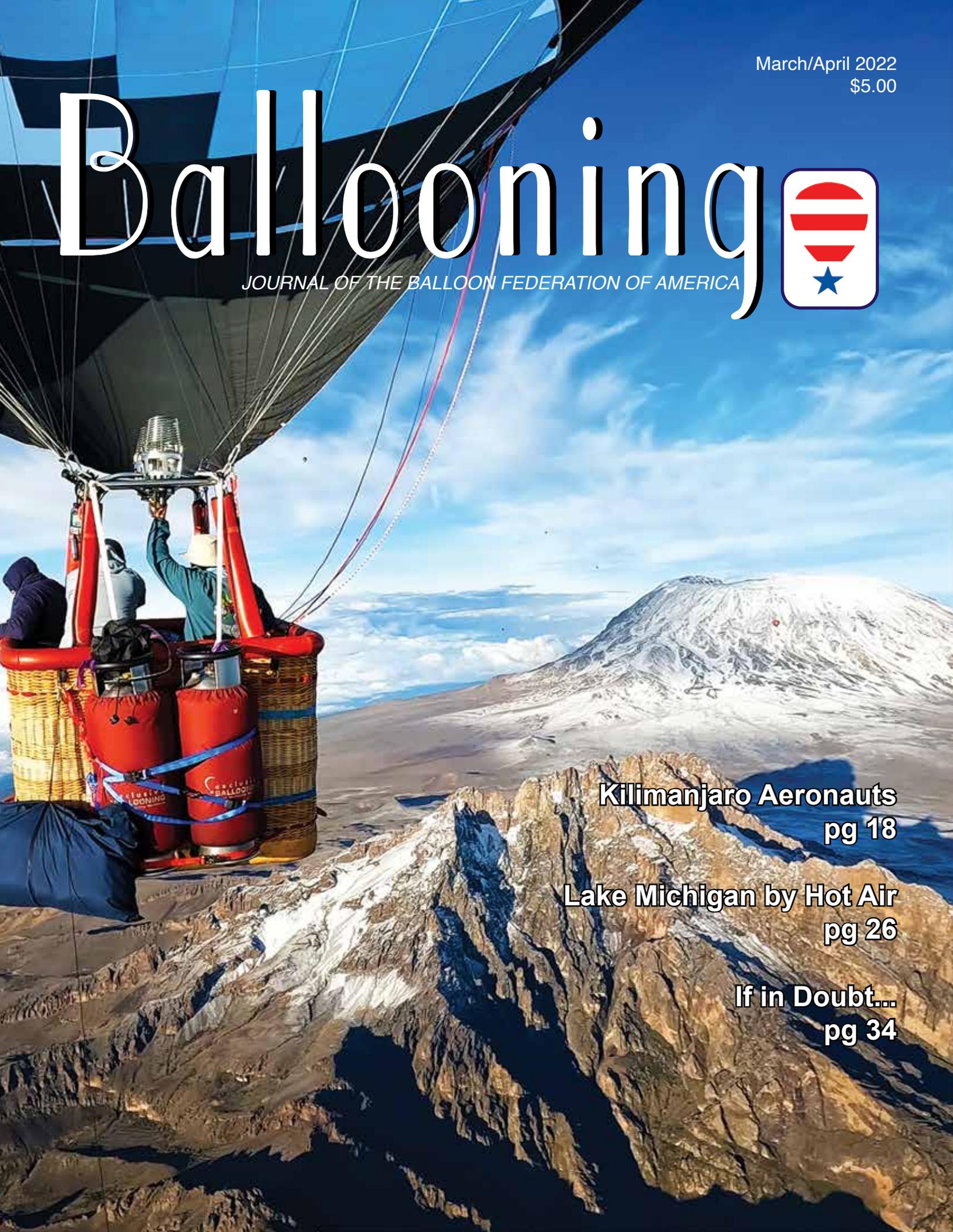


March/April 2022
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JOURNAL OF THE BALLOON FEDERATION OF AMERICA



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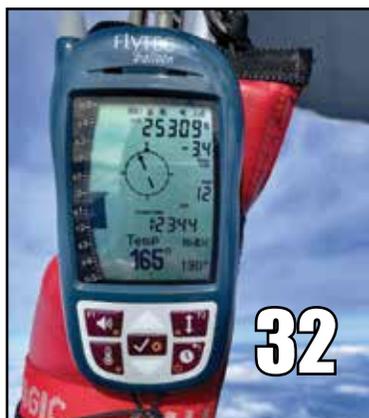
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BFA

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Approaching the summit of Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro

PHOTOGRAPHER:

John Petrehn





Go for Adventure

Last issue Mike Bauwens penned an article about planning adventure flights and this issue we're all about adventure. The stories of two dramatic flights made at the end of 2021 dominate our pages.

First is the incredible flight of 11 balloons over Africa's tallest mountain, Mount Kilimanjaro, made as part of the UltraMagic Experience. Pilot Toby Brown takes us along on his flight with Johnny Petrehn and Mike Myers. Not only did they conquer the mountaintop but they achieved a personal best altitude as well.

Meanwhile, another Petrehn, Paul, planned what he thought would be a team flight that proved to be a solo effort as he completed a successful crossing of Lake Michigan, the first in over 25 years.

Both Brown and Petrehn take us behind the scenes for the planning, including equipment and weather, for their thrilling flights.

Speaking of adventure, the BFA National Convention is now just a short time away. These periodic gatherings always prove to be educational and entertaining as well as socially stimulating for the balloonists attending from all across the country. My longtime friend and mentor, Dr. Bill Bussey, will be the keynote speaker and I'm looking forward to his regaling us with tales from his many world record flights, some of which I was fortunate to be a part of.

This national gathering will also be a prime occasion for all of us to reconfirm why we belong to the BFA and to discuss how we can best move forward to rebuild our membership ranks, hit hard recently by the Covid lockdown and economic factors. The BFA is nothing without members. Please encourage your fellow pilots, crew, and anyone you know who has a fascination with ballooning, to consider joining us.

Hope to see you at the convention. Topeka or Bust!



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Ballooning

Volume 55, Number 2

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Ballooning is published bimonthly by the Balloon Federation of America. This magazine is intended as a source of general information only. The advice or procedures described in this magazine are advisory only, inasmuch as there may be other procedures which are equally effective or better. To submit articles, photographs or comments; or to request advertising information, write: BFA Publications, 2585 Barron Rd., Keithville, LA 71047, Ph: 318-545-5055, email editor@bfa.net Return postage must accompany all articles and photographs submitted if they are to be returned. No responsibility can be assumed for unsolicited materials.

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Ballooning: Journal of the Balloon Federation of America (ISSN 0194-6854) is published bimonthly by the Balloon Federation of America, 1601 N. Jefferson Way, Indianola, IA, 50125. Application to mail at Periodicals Prices is pending at Indianola, IA. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Ballooning: Journal of the Balloon Federation of America*, 1601 N. Jefferson Way, Indianola, IA 50125



ULTRAMAGIC EXPERIENCE 2021

PART ONE · KILIMANJARO



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and I remember more than I have seen!*



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KILIMANJARO



Johnny Petrebn, Mike Myers, and Toby Brown above Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro

Ultramagic Balloons of Igualada, Spain, have been offering “experiences” with their first-rate products for over 15 years. These opportunities give the company a chance to showcase their balloons in unusual, dramatic locations throughout the world. High-hour pilots who fly their equipment are invited to attend providing they BYOB (Bring Your Own Balloon) for the experience. Complicating things is that the equipment is sent two months prior to the trip and will be unavailable for use two months afterwards, so we were asked to plan accordingly.

The invitation to attend was offered to me by Andrew Holly with whom I co-own DUMA, an Ultramagic B-70 balloon. We've been friends for several years and being familiar with the Ultramagic website, I was well aware of these excursions. They are typically planned for every two to four years, the last one taking them to Argentina in 2019 which was scheduled during the solar eclipse. For this trip, the plan was to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the previous Ultramagic Kilimanjaro flight of 2011 in which six teams successfully traversed the ancient volcano mountain. The plan this time was to have 12 teams from nine different countries including the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Spain, Belgium, France, Lithuania, India, and the United States. In total, almost 80 people signed-up to go, but only eleven teams of three to five people would fly over Kilimanjaro.



AERONAUTS

A MASSIVE EXPERIENCE BY TOBY BROWN

The Equipment Required

Early in building the team and assessing what equipment would be required, Josep Llado, the head of Ultramagic, emphasized that for the Kilimanjaro flight, a much larger balloon would be required for a planned three-to-four-hour flight at over 20,000 feet. In fact, if only two people planned to go, it would require at a minimum a 140k cubic foot balloon. For three people a 180; for four a 210, and for five a 250. At this altitude, the air is much less dense and requires a lot more fuel and a balloon that is not over-loaded for the duration required.

In the middle of last summer, Andrew informed me he would be unable to attend for the entire two weeks, but that he was willing to lend me his brand-new Ultramagic N-210 envelope. He also thought he'd be able to fly into Tanzania for the Kilimanjaro flight. At that point, Josep still wanted me to go but told me that I would need to assemble my own team of three to four for this experience. I immediately asked John Petrehn to not only fly with me but help me plan and "pull it all together." I've known John for 30 years. We met back in 1992 when we both were living in Kansas City, and he's been a good friend ever since. I also decided that with two pilots, the team just required two more capable, adventurous team members. Mike Myers I've known for 25 years and Christopher Galla for 20. And although neither are pilots, both have crewed and flown with me on several occasions. Also, both of them were fine with spending four to five days in a tent with no showers or running water. For

many people, this becomes a non-starter.

With the team assembled by early August, John and I only had six weeks to assemble the equipment. Originally, we thought about acquiring an older Ultramagic envelope and basket that would be okay to "beat up" bouncing across the savannah of Africa. Tanks we could borrow from Andrew along with several of my own that I store over in the UK. Calculations showed that we would require a minimum of 120 gallons of fuel for four people to fly. We ended-up taking three 20-gallon and four 15-gallon tanks for a total of exactly 120 gallons of fuel, which ended-up being a blended mix of 35% propane and 65% butane. This is typically what the ride operators in Kenya use for their daily flights with envelopes as large as 475k cubic feet. Crazy big!

We then started evaluating our basket and burner options. With no time to ship anything from overseas, everything had to be readily available within a reasonable distance to Barcelona, which is where the shipping containers would be on-loaded to a large cargo ship. It then would depart across the Mediterranean Sea, down through the Suez Canal into the Red Sea, around the horn of Africa to the port of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, a trip of over two months duration, and the December 1st arrival date of the entire group. For his part, John agreed to purchase a brand-new set of MK-32 burners from the factory. This became necessary because of a special aluminum milled block that would accommodate three separate hoses to one of the burners: one for the blast valve, one for a special vapor light filament, and

a third port for an oxygen tank hook-up. This all had to be done at the factory prior to shipping the equipment.

With the tanks in hand, the burner purchased and reconfigured, the decision was to go ahead with using the new 210 envelope. Complicating things further, it was communicated in early September that the date of September 30th would no longer work for the equipment to be onsite, and that the equipment had to be at the Ultramagic factory by September 20th, removing 10 days out of the schedule. If we wanted to go, there simply were no other options. In the interest of time, we told the factory that we didn't have a basket and they graciously offered to provide one for us to use. They could see that we were almost there, we just needed the final piece of the puzzle.

Departing for Africa

After arranging to have the equipment delivered to Iqualada from the UK (a trip that took two days including crossing the English Channel), it literally arrived just in time at the factory the morning of September 20th. With the equipment safely on its way and 10 weeks prior to the team's departure, we could then focus on our own preparations. The vaccinations included shots for typhoid, hepatitis A, and yellow fever. I was also given a supply of malaria pills, along with a short supply of amoxicillin for "just in case." A booster for Covid seemed to make sense, as well, and everyone on the team did the same. Finally, everyone had to secure visas for both Kenya and Tanzania.

Packing for this trip was also highly unusual. Tanzania is a jungle environment with December being right between the rainy and dry seasons of spring/summer. We needed shorts and shirts for most of it, but also beach wear for Zanzibar which was the third part of the trip. Also required was cold-weather gear for the two hours we'd be at over 20,000 feet while flying over Kilimanjaro. In fact, it was calculated that with a take-off elevation of around 5,200 feet and a standard lapse rate, a flight to over 20,000 would result in a temperature at altitude of around 20-30 degrees Fahrenheit. No doubt, the big suitcase would be required for a wardrobe accommodating three separate climates (along with clothes for living in a tent).

Around Thanksgiving, the Omicron Covid strain suddenly appeared, threatening to cancel our entire trip. Our conversations focused on whether we would get stuck in Africa unable to re-enter the United States if, in fact, they shut down in December while we were in Africa. We suddenly had to source testing centers for a negative test just prior to our departure. Four days before we're supposed to leave, I get a call from Christopher that he tested positive and would be unable to join us. After a weeks' worth of quarantining and a requirement of not having a positive test 14 days prior to the date of travel, there was no way he'd be able to make it happen. And with even more stringent requirements in the UK, departing and re-entering in a short time frame became unreasonable which means Andrew was also a definite no. My team was now down to three and if Ultramagic was determined to forge ahead, we would need to do the same. They were still going which means that if we didn't, we would simply lose out on the experience. John, Mike, and I decided we'd go for it. We considered: what's the worst that could happen? If we couldn't re-enter the U.S. (or failed a Covid test just prior to leaving), we'd be stuck in



Inflation and launch was accomplished under grey, rain filled clouds on an elementary school soccer field. (The author is flying the blue balloon)

the beach community of Zanzibar, which is nothing short of paradise. Not a bad place to be for a week or two if necessary.

The journey to Africa was a feat all its own. Most of the group were coming from countries in Europe and were departing from Barcelona to fly to Istanbul, where my team would meet them for the flight down to Nairobi, Kenya. In fact, out of the 80 some odd people attending, I was coming from the farthest away. My Turkish Airways flight originated from Los Angeles (LAX) on December 1st flying 13 hours to Istanbul. I then met-up with John and Mike, who were coming from Houston and Atlanta, and the rest of the group for the seven-hour flight to Kenya. When we arrived at Istanbul, we also met up with the other U.S. team of Rick Jones, Greg Winker, and Jason Fischer. After landing in Nairobi, we boarded a bus for a six-hour drive over into Tanzania, finally arriving at our lodging on Friday. It was two grueling days of travel, and everyone was anxious to get there so we could start flying. And first up was Kilimanjaro.

Flying "Kili"

The schedule for the entire trip was nicely laid out by Ultramagic with 3 distinct parts: Kilimanjaro (staying near Arusha), the Ngorongoro crater with camping in tents along its rim, and Zanzibar with flights across the island with accommodations in Stone Town for a total of six to eight flights during our two-week period. Because of all the technical aspects of flying over Kili, it simply made sense to conquer that first.

Fortunately for us, the equipment literally arrived just in time and the systems were brought over from the port in Dar es Salaam in three large trucks. On Saturday, we



On approach to the tallest freestanding mountain peak in the world, Kilimanjaro at 19,000 feet. Inset: The author's view of the summit.

moved over to the east side of the mountain, and we spent most of Sunday afternoon positioning and preparing the equipment on the launch field which was a borrowed soccer field of one of the local elementary schools. We decided to position five of the tanks inside the basket and hang two of the three 20-gallon tanks off the back with three of the tanks requiring nitrogen pressurization (one for inflation and take-off, the other two for decent and landing). The other four unpressurized tanks would be used to maintain level flight. Additionally, we had three oxygen tanks to position in the two-compartment basket with two going in one compartment for myself and the burner, and the third one for John and Mike to use in their compartment. We then had to cover the system with a tarp ensuring that the typical and expected tropical overnight rains wouldn't soak the envelopes.

Everyone got up at 3am on Monday morning to a downpouring of rain. We were assured that this was expected and that we needed to depart for the launch site, a journey that took almost an hour. After a pilot briefing confirming that we were going forward with the flight, we then proceeded to layout the brand new 210 in the wet field. Josep came around to each of the balloons, gave each of us a hug, and wished us an enjoyable and successful flight. All we had to do was follow him!

We were positioned towards the back so that we could take-off and follow the others off the launch field. Since John was busy with all the hanging cameras, he took the crown line and I positioned Mike on the mouth. Inflating the balloon is an experience I won't ever forget. It was right at that moment of standing the balloon up that the rain increased significantly and the water that collected on this large balloon came streaming off the envelope onto me and

the burners. It was at that moment that I knew we were committed to go. The thought of having the three of us to pack a wet 210 in the rain just wasn't going to work. The only way to get this balloon dry was to fly it out of here.

After standing the balloon up, we discovered a problem. The weight of the two additional tanks hanging off one of the envelope carabiners turned it sideways during inflation. We worked for 10 minutes trying to turn it upright again with no success. Now for a typical flight, I'd pull the system over, fix it, and re-inflate. But of course, this wasn't a typical flight. It was raining and almost all the other teams had already ascended into the clouds. John said, "We didn't come all this way to not fly because of a damn carabiner." I agreed. The gate was closed on it and although it might get damaged, we didn't care. We were going. So, we quickly changed out of our wet tropical clothes and put on our cold weather gear to prepare to go to 20,000 feet and 20 degrees temperature. And after a last-minute check of the cameras, John and Mike jumped in and we took off.

We were coached by Josep to maintain a climb of 400-500ft. per minute and that we could expect to clear the clouds at around 7,000 feet MSL. From the radio chatter,



Selfie time!

we knew that was accurate, and it was 15 minutes before we cleared the clouds.

The immediate clear sky was startling. I remember noticing how quickly the other balloons had departed the area. They were now only tiny dots way off in the distance. I also noticed how there were no contrails from any other aircraft. No airplanes, no helicopters. Nothing else in the sky. Just... us. Up to this moment, we had never actually seen Kilimanjaro. From our lodging we had seen the base of it, but for the three days prior to this flight, it simply jettisoned upward into the clouds and out of view, the entire top half hidden away until now. It wasn't until this very moment that the enormity of this task finally became apparent to us. We'd spent the last six months planning, assessing, preparing, and financing for this exact moment in time. Simply put, it was a massive experience. We gawked in disbelief, mostly in silence with an occasional expletive. "Wow" didn't quite cover it and there were just few words that could. I rotated the balloon around so that we could try to capture the moment with the back-hanging camera that John had mounted onto the envelope.

At 19,341 feet, Kilimanjaro is an unusual summit in that it is the tallest freestanding mountain in the world. Although there are many peaks that are much taller (the highest of course being Everest at over 29,000 feet), all of these are part of a mountain range. "Kili" stands alone clearly visible as to where it starts and ends. It's the highest mountain in Africa and figures prominently and proudly in Africa's history, art, and modern representation. "The Lion King" has it as part of its background. And trust me, it is significantly more prominent from the air.

Getting back to the task at hand, we still had a three-hour flight to fly. We were already at 9,000 feet and before us was a 19,000-foot peak. We needed to climb! We continued to do so steadily with our speed averaging between 15 and 25mph. It was at 14,000 feet that we remembered to put on our oxygen masks, and we started to bundle-up as the temperature slowly dropped down into the 40's and 30's. Prior to reaching the front side of the mountain, we "leveled off at our cruising altitude" of 21,000 feet.

One of the benefits of bringing along a two-time world champion was that John could help navigate to help ensure as close to a center crossing as possible. With his coaching and instrumentation, we subtly maneuvered so that our track took us that way. With three and a half hours of flying, we switched off frequently the "burner duties" so that no one's arm got too tired. After completing the crossing, we noticed we were at 23,500 feet. John then commented that we if wanted to climb to a higher altitude for a "personal best," now was the time to do it before we started our descent. He suggested that we go up to 24,000. Mike, this being only his 3rd balloon flight ever, commented, "I think 25,000 is a much better number." John and I looked at him and with an incredulous look. Then I said, "Okay, Mike. We'll go to 25,000 feet just for you," knowing full well that it was, indeed, a better number. We're here, so why not? John then commented, "Okay, let's climb up and get this done." What we didn't realize was that our instruments were still displaying the barometric altitude not adjusted by the GPS. It wasn't until several weeks later after John had downloaded the data from both his FlyTec Balloon4 and his Garmin GPS, both identically confirmed that we had, in fact, reached an altitude of 26,306 feet. (Mike is now just going to have to be happy with that number). And we were also relieved that we remained below the 26,500 feet we were permitted to go from Josep when he had secured the permit for this flight. Those were the rules.

One final comment about the altitude flying. The performance of the Ultramagic MK-32 burner designed by Paulo Bonanno was nothing short of extraordinary. We were told by Josep that we needed to "ease into" the blasting of the burners. A gentle squeeze was all that was required. This was because there was a split-second delay for the 35% propane, 65% butane, nitrogen pressurized fuel, to ignite at high altitudes. "Easy burns" was all that was required and both burners worked flawlessly. In fact, even at over 26,000 feet, the second non-oxygenated burner remained lit the entire flight. Neither burner ever went out.





tracker so that all the teams were accounted for, and no one would “get lost.” We quickly packed up with the help of some of the local shepherd kids who were tending their flocks of sheep and cattle.

The chase truck and bus arrived about two hours later and we were taken back to a group meeting spot, tired and weary, but feeling very accomplished. We had conquered Kilimanjaro in 3 hours 24 minutes using about 85 of the 120 gallons of fuel we had onboard. The maximum envelope temperature was 190 degrees. (In hindsight, we were very glad and fortunate that we flew that morning. We were only permitted to fly on one of a three-day window. On the first day which was Sunday, the equipment simply wasn’t ready. The second day we flew, and the third and final day, it proved to be too slow for the upper winds. It would have been very difficult to complete the crossing.)

Ngorongoro and Zanzibar

In many ways, we felt as if we could return to the U.S. following the Kili flight. We had completed the most significant part of the experience. Even so, we still had 12 days to spend in Tanzania! The entire group moved on to the Ngorongoro crater, a journey of six hours to the West. The park is contained within the 12-mile ridge of the crater, and we drove to a campsite just within the northern ridge. The following day, the entire group went on a traditional safari. In groups of six, we went down into the crater, which is a protected preserve to over 25,000 animals, and spent most of the day seeing the wildlife. Elephants, flamingos, gazelles, hyenas, rhinos, water buffalo, and hippos are just some of the animals we were privileged enough to see and photograph.

The tour concluded by the hippo pond which is where the equipment arrived to be positioned for the next morning’s, one-time only flight of the only balloons ever to be flown from the floor of the crater. Josep had been asking for over a dozen years to fly from the crater floor and for the first time was granted permission for our group. We had a windy take-off and quickly flew across the entire crater



*Top: packing up after a successful crossing of Kilimanjaro was assisted by a number of locals.
Above: The smiling aeronauts (left to right) Johnny Petrebn, Mike Myers, and author Toby Brown*

Descent and Retrieval

After crossing Kilimanjaro, ascending to altitude for a personal best, and flying for close to three hours, it was time to head down and land. We put the balloon in a 600-foot descent and quickly discovered that because we were so light, this was as fast as it would fall. It was at this part of the flight that we finally came close to one of the other balloon teams. The Virgin 250 balloon piloted by UK world champion Dr. David Bareford was close and we decided we would track along with him down between some clouds to our landing spot, which is exactly what we did, landing a short distance from them.

During the pilot briefing, we had reviewed a map which showed one major road cutting across the far West side of the mountain and it was virtually impossible to miss. If we could land close to that paved road, it would make for an easy retrieval. Surprisingly, there very few dirt roads and no fences, but we managed to find a well-worn path in a field. We came in and landed at about 6mph and being so light, we had to quickly deflate. Every team had a Yellow Brick GPS satellite



A flight from rim to rim across the Ngorongoro crater and a launch from the floor of the crater, the first ever allowed from this protected preserve, followed the crossing of Mount Kilimanjaro

continues on next page



Zanzibar, with its white sand beaches, palm groves, resort hotels, and unique retrieval vehicles, topped off the UltraMagic Experience.



exiting across the North rim and descending to a fast and hard landing, rolling through several wicked thorn bushes resulting in minor scrapes and scratches and minimal damage to the balloon. It was following this flight that we decided that the 210 was just too large a balloon for only three to five people. It simply doesn't stop when you want it to. Another flight from rim to rim of the crater was planned for two days later and it was much more enjoyable even though our team was split-up between three other balloons.

After two flights and four days of camping, we departed for the third and final part of the tour. It was well planned that prior to flying to Zanzibar from the Arusha airport, we would spend the night at a beautiful resort hotel where everyone enjoyed a much-needed shower. Zanzibar is a beautiful, white-beached island and our hotel there was first class. It was there that we enjoyed the ancient Stone Town with lots of shopping and fresh seafood options along with a visit to the childhood home of Freddie Mercury of the rock group Queen. We also had two evening flights that traversed the island with challenging but safe landings amongst groves of palm trees. Retrieval for the equipment required the help from the local kids borrowing the family's oxcart, which was critical to recovering our equipment and bringing it out to a main road for the trucks to pick up. Our final night there was a balloon glow to show appreciation to the local community and to burn off as much of the remaining fuel as possible prior to packing the equipment for shipment back to Barcelona.

Returning Home

On December 17th, everyone boarded a ferry to cross over to Dar es Salaam, where we would board three buses and go to a final farewell dinner including cocktails at a nightclub immediately next door to the open-air restaurant. A late-night ride to the airport would allow plenty of time

for the early morning flight back to Istanbul. This is where everyone split-up and with only a one-hour connection, I hurried off to board my return flight back to Los Angeles, thus concluding one of the most incredible experiences of my life.

These memories will last a lifetime and I couldn't have asked for a more perfect trip. John and I had commented how we both had dreamed of one day flying in Africa. And we'll be forever grateful to Ultramagic Balloons for making it happen.

