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Cruising Toward Africa



Balloonist Flying High, Still On Course

Renee Uliassi, center, wife of Kevin Uliassi, the solo balloonist who is in transit around the world, listens to project director Todd Litle at the balloon mission's headquarters. (Stephen J. Carrera/AP Photo)

By Dave Carpenter
The Associated Press

Feb. 26 — A man trying to make the first solo around-the-world voyage in a hot air balloon hopes to reach Africa soon.

Adventure balloonist Kevin Uliassi is flying high over the mid-Atlantic at an altitude of about 25,000 feet.

A spokesman says he's hoping to reach the African coast by Monday. Uliassi is striving to complete the first solo around-the-world balloon flight.

Dropped Balloon to Stay Course

Kevin Uliassi dropped his balloon from 24,000 feet to 14,800 feet over the mid-Atlantic early today to avoid an air current that would take him too far south, said spokesman Peter Fay.

"If he stayed at his original altitude, he would be swung toward South America, rather than remaining on course for Africa," Fay said.

The spokesman said Uliassi was about halfway between the Bahamas and the

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African coast at 3 a.m. CT, and was moving northeastward at 20 mph.

"It seems like we've worked the kinks out," Uliassi said this morning. "But I'm knocking on wood — luckily we have some wood in the capsule."

Uliassi finally got some much-needed sleep last night after threatening thunderstorms dissipated, voyage spokesman Scott Lorenz said from the flight command center in a Chicago suburb.



Kevin Uliassi lifted off Tuesday in his 160-foot balloon from a stone quarry near Rockford, Ill. (ABCNEWS.com/ Magellan Geographix)

Partying Down Under

Uliassi took off from Rockford, Ill., early Tuesday in his 160-foot-tall balloon.

The 36-year-old engineer and architect from Scottsdale, Ariz., has had comparatively smooth flying. Even so, a series of potential storm systems kept him up for 28 straight hours while he steered the balloon around the clouds. He also was kept busy fixing stuck valves on a propane tank and maneuvering to get the balloon higher, he said.

Uliassi didn't seem eager to predict the chances of succeeding in his second around-the-world attempt; the first failed soon after takeoff in 1997. But he did say the winds will have to gain strength at some point if he's to make it.

In the meantime, he was chatting on the phone with crew members, family and friends, gazing down longingly at Caribbean islands and enjoying the solitude. He said he particularly enjoyed the beautiful views of Hispaniola and

Puerto Rico, where he could hear what sounded like a party in progress.

"There I was at over 21,000 feet and I could hear music from the ground," he said.

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