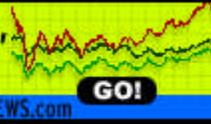




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Over Africa



Balloonist Trying to Circle Globe Gets Help from His Alma Mater

Renee Uliassi, wife of Kevin Uliassi, who is currently attempting to fly a hot-air balloon solo around the world, tracks his progress on a map with push-pins marking the progress of his balloon. (Ted S. Warren/AP Photo)

The Associated Press

CHICAGO, Feb. 29 — Balloonist Kevin Uliassi continued his shoestring-budget quest to become the first person to circle the globe alone in a hot air balloon with help from his old high school.

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Kevin Uliassi lifted off in his 160-foot balloon from a stone quarry near Rockford, Ill., early Tuesday. He hopes to complete the journey in 14 to 20 days. (ABCNEWS.com/ Magellan Geographix)

On the seventh day of his journey, Uliassi reached Mauritania, on Africa's west coast. The Illinois native has traveled almost 6,200 miles from his liftoff point near Rockford, and was floating at an altitude of about 30,000 feet as of 6 a.m. this morning.

He passed into the country of Mali late

Monday.

As Uliassi approached Mauritania, volunteers at his flight center in Homewood had trouble communicating with air traffic controllers in Africa.

Uliassi's mother quickly called the Chicago Heights high school Uliassi once attended and had a French teacher in the command center ready to translate within 15 minutes. The interpreter cleared things up and explained Uliassi's flight plans, flight spokesman Scott Lorenz said.

Flower Delivery

To celebrate his arrival to the big continent, Uliassi contacted a florist from his balloon and sent African violets to his ground crew members, Lorenz added.

"That was pretty nice of him," he said. "Especially since he spent much of the night awake because the lens on a detection device had frosted over and was indicating that there was no flame on the balloon when in fact there really was."

Uliassi's expedition is costing \$500,000, raised through loans and donations. Other ballooning attempts, like the aborted voyage by Chicago millionaire Steve Fossett, have been funded by personal fortunes or corporate sponsors.

Pete Fay, another flight spokesman, expects Uliassi to spend about three days crossing Africa. The projected flight path takes him over Niger and through parts of Chad, Libya and Egypt.

Uliassi has received clearance to pass over those countries and others in Africa, including Sudan, Fay said. Uliassi's uncle, a former State Department employee, is working on the clearance rights for the balloonist.

Uliassi then will head toward Saudi Arabia. Fay said the flight command center is prepared for what lies ahead with Arabic, Chinese and Indian interpreters.

Picking Up Speed

Uliassi picked up speed Monday as he moved closer to a fast-moving jet stream, Lorenz said. As the balloon travels across Africa, it is expected to reach speeds of around 100 mph, he added.

Uliassi is traveling in an enclosed 7-by-5-foot capsule attached to a 124-foot balloon. The balloon has two sealed nylon compartments which contain helium and hot air.

Uliassi, an engineer and architect from Scottsdale, Ariz., is on his second around-the-world attempt. On his first flight in December 1997, the bottom of his balloon ruptured over Chicago's O'Hare International Airport and he was forced down in Indiana.

The 36-year-old has been chasing the solo title along with several other balloonists over the last few years.

Fossett, who has gone the farthest, broke his own distance record in August 1998. He traveled more than 15,200 miles before a storm damaged his balloon, sending it plunging into the sea off Australia.

Last March, balloonists Bertrand Piccard and Brian Jones became the first to circle the world nonstop in a hot-air balloon.

Uliassi's second attempt has gone fairly smoothly so far, said his wife, Renee Uliassi, after whom the balloon is named.

His biggest scare was a series of potential storm systems that kept him up for 28 hours. He had to steer the balloon around the Atlantic storm clouds, before finally getting some much-needed sleep Thursday night.

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