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Soaring Solo



Balloonist Enjoying his Mystery Ride

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)

By Jonathon Lipman
 The Associated Press

CHICAGO, March 1 — Hot air balloonist Kevin Uliassi said he has enjoyed the first week aloft in his attempt to circle the world solo — even if his balloon hasn't gone exactly where he planned.

"This balloon flight is really no different from any balloon flight anyone's ever made," Uliassi said Tuesday in a satellite-phone news conference. "You start off the flight not knowing where you're going to wind up."

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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)

Uliassi was over North Africa early today. He crossed into Libya from Algeria late

Tuesday and by tonight could be over Iran, which has given him clearance.

Spokesman Bo Kemper said the balloon had picked up speed, reaching 80 mph at an altitude of 29,300 feet.

Uliassi has traveled more than 7,500 miles since he launched from a stone quarry near Rockford, Ill., on Feb. 22. He said children from all over have logged on to the mission's Web site, www.j.renee.iit.edu, and he has received calls and e-mails from people he passes over.

Uliassi, 36, an engineer who lives in Scottsdale, Ariz., is trying to be the first to circle the globe in a balloon alone.

Millionaire Steve Fossett has gone the farthest, traveling more than 15,200 miles in 1998 before a storm sent his balloon plunging into the sea off Australia.

Uliassi's previous attempt, in 1997, ended much earlier. The balloon ruptured over Chicago's O'Hare International airport, forcing him down in Indiana.

"My life is driven by the balloon," Uliassi said Tuesday between drawing breaths from his military-style oxygen mask. "It's like a living organism that I have to serve."

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