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Round-the-world balloonist sailing over Africa

February 29, 2000
Web posted at: 3:50 a.m. EST (0850 GMT)

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Kevin Uliassi

From staff and wire reports

CHICAGO (CNN) -- Kevin Uliassi hopes sometime Tuesday to pass the halfway point on the African leg of his epic quest to become the first solo flier to circle the globe by balloon.

Late Monday, the seventh day of his journey, Uliassi reached [Mauritania](#), on Africa's west coast. The Illinois native has traveled almost 6,200 miles (10,000 km) from his liftoff point.

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

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

Balloonists 'still trying' after 100 years

He has said he wants to snatch one of the few remaining chances to be a "first."

"There are so few things to do that are firsts anymore in the world. The earth has gotten really small. But it's interesting, too, because people have been flying balloons for over 200 years, and it's been over a hundred years since

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...flying balloons for over 200 years, and it's been over a hundred years since someone first said they should fly a balloon around the world, and we're still trying to do it," he told CNN in a 1997 interview.

Uliassi's second attempt has gone fairly smoothly, said his wife, Renee Uliassi, after whom the balloon is named. His biggest scare was a series of storm systems last week that kept him up for 28 hours.

So far the only other problem this trip has been a language barrier that hampered communications between his Illinois flight control room and French-speaking air-traffic controllers in Africa.

Interpreters needed for rest of journey

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

Fay said the flight command center is prepared for what lies ahead with Arabic, Chinese and Indian interpreters.

The 36-year-old has been chasing the solo title along with several other balloonists over the last few years. Chicago millionaire Steve Fossett has gone the farthest. Fossett broke his own distance record in August 1998, traveling more than 24,400 kilometers (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.

The [Associated Press](#) contributed to this report.

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