

Up, up and away

VILLAGE PEOPLE



Mike and Deborah with balloon manufacturer Don Cameron, in front of G-2020

By Claire Cooper

Three years ago, Lindfield balloonists Deborah and Mike Scholes were putting the finishing touches to their ambitious record-breaking attempt to fly non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean in a Roziere balloon.

Supplies were being packed, equipment tested and flights booked - and then Covid struck.

Despite the frustration of being grounded, Mike and Deborah remained un-deflated, and their desire and determination to float into the record books grew even stronger.

When restrictions lifted, it was 'game on' and, in just a few days' time, the couple will leave Lindfield for their record-breaking bid - with Deborah aiming to become the first female pilot-in-command of a balloon to complete the 3,000 mile flight, and Mike the first blind crew member to complete the epic journey.

"It's now been six years in the making, so it really can't come quick enough," said Deborah. "We are incredibly excited."

It's been an eventful three year wait, which has brought further twists to the couple's fascinating story, making their world record bid even more remarkable.

In November 2021, as the pair were preparing for their winter wedding, Mike was diagnosed with bowel cancer. "We got married on 30th December and the following week, when we should have been on our honeymoon, Mike underwent major surgery at Worthing Hospital," said Deborah.

The surgery was a success and, after months of recovery, which included a re-scheduled honeymoon, Mike is now fit and back flying.

"In some ways we are even more motivated and well prepared than last time," said Deborah.

The adventure begins on 1st June, when Deborah and Mike will travel to Canada, to prepare for the record breaking flight. Their 88ft Roziere balloon, specially

built for them by Cameron Balloons in Bristol, will travel separately and is being transported courtesy of Virgin Atlantic.

On arrival at Sussex, in New Brunswick, Mike and Deborah will make the final preparations before weather conditions determine the date and time for take-off.

The flight is expected to take between five and ten days, during which the balloon will be lifted, by a combination of helium and hot air, to altitudes of up to 17,500ft.

And on reaching the European mainland, and if conditions permit, the couple may decide to continue flying.

It's a daunting prospect, but Deborah and Mike are taking it all in their stride. With many years of balloon travel under their belts, combined with experience of long distance running (both have completed many marathons), Deborah is an accomplished triathlete and Mike has completed a trek to the North Pole, the pair are used to stepping well out of their comfort zone.

Preparations have included learning to fly gas balloons in Germany with world renowned pilot Wilhelm Eimers. Gas ballooning is the oldest form of manned aviation.

"Modern forecasting methods mean that hot air balloon travel is not as dangerous as it once was," said Deborah. "But we will only take off if the conditions are right."

Hairdresser Deborah, who owns Hairworks in Cuckfield, got her first taste of hot air balloon travel after meeting Mike at the Haywards Heath Harriers. Mike, a former Royal Navy helicopter pilot, gained his hot air balloon pilot's licence in 1992.

Before losing his sight, due to Leber's Hereditary Optic Neuropathy in 2007, Mike had set five British duration records, was one of only seven British pilots to have flown a balloon above 31,000 feet and ran his own

passenger hot air balloon company. "I gave up running the balloon company because passengers felt more comfortable with a pilot who could see," he joked!

Deborah soon shared Mike's passion for flying and, when he began to lose his sight, she began her pilot training.

Since qualifying and becoming one of only a handful of female pilots in the country, Deborah has won the Great British Long Jump balloon competition twice, is the first person to have flown East to West offshore along the south coast from Eastbourne to Devon, flown above 23,000 feet [an unofficial female record] and is the only British female to hold a Roziere balloon licence. Her longest flight so far was from Selkirk to Woburn - 264 miles, just 12 miles short of the British record for a woman pilot of a balloon of that size.

Home for Deborah and Mike, during their week-long flight across the Atlantic, will be a cramped, 1.8m x 1.4m super-light, British-made wicker basket complete with a small bench for sitting and sleeping and the all-important portalo!

"It's like camping in the sky," said Deborah. "There's no room for luxuries - we can only take what is really essential and that's food, water, sleeping bags and clothing. The heaviest items will be the fuel tanks, water and sand, the latter could be thrown out if we need to fly higher."

Meals will consist of dried, self-heating expedition food. "It will be nice to have something warm to eat as the temperature can vary from 30 degrees in the day to minus 15 at night," said Deborah. "We are packing merino wool underwear, down jackets, hats and gloves and thermal boots, but also taking our sunglasses!

"Being cold is my biggest fear but we have some amazing gear for the cold weather including big fat 'rab' boots which are like sleeping bags for your feet!" she added. "The cold depends on the height but the moisture in the air will always make it feel colder."

She added that the basket also has a canvas cover with polythene windows that can be pulled down at night or when it rains.

The pair will take it in turns to sleep - Deborah during the night and Mike in the day. While Deborah sleeps, Mike will monitor the radio instruments using a specially designed talking computer.

"We can set the balloon to keep it at a level altitude - thanks to a special auto-burner which was made especially for us by a group of enthusiasts who wanted to help with the project," said Mike.

Deborah adds: "I couldn't make the Atlantic trip without Mike. Although he cannot land the balloon, his experience is invaluable. When we fly, we work as one."

Boredom definitely won't be a problem. "There's always something that needs doing while flying!" said Deborah. "We have to complete a flight log every half hour, recording our speed, height and direction and we are in constant contact with Mission Control."

Deborah and Mike have been lucky to attract some of the world's top hot air balloon experts to support their record-breaking attempt, including a highly accomplished meteorologist.



Their balloon on a test flight

He will effectively 'steer' the balloon by studying weather conditions and advise Deborah on the flight altitudes throughout the journey. "He's our third crew member and will be constantly monitoring all the current maps and data," said Deborah. "We will do exactly what he tells us."

Their flight director is Kevin Stass, former Flight Technical Support manager for Virgin Atlantic, who has worked on several record-breaking ballooning and aircraft projects.

After taking off, the balloon will travel for around 160 kilometres over land, then around 4,500km over the sea, before looking for somewhere to land.

As the date gets nearer, the excitement is building. "I'm really looking forward to seeing the night sky with no light pollution," said Deborah. "I've been told it's absolutely fantastic with lots of shooting stars."

Mike added that he is looking forward to the peace and tranquillity.

"We feel really fortunate to be able to do this,"

Deborah added. "It's not something many people can do for their summer holiday!"

Deborah and Mike will be using the flight to raise awareness and funds for the Blind Veterans UK Charity which supported Mike following his sight loss.

To find out more and make a donation, visit:

www.justgiving.com/fundraising/transatlanticballoonchallenge

For more information, and to track Deborah and Mike's journey, visit:

www.transatlanticballoonchallenge.com or search the hashtag #balloonthepond

