

AEROSTAT

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RUSH HOUR AT METZ

ALSO

THE FLIPSIDE OF BRISTOL BALLOON FIESTA
ICELAND ADVENTURE BY BEECHCRAFT & BALLOON
BIG IDEAS FROM THE WORLD'S SMALLEST AIRSHIP

SAGRANTINO ITALIAN INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGE CUP



Above: Sunflowers and sun-baked fields beneath cloudless blue skies. Sagrantino represents hot air ballooning at its most relaxed.



Above: Although laid-back, there's a competitive spirit at Sagrantino, with a shiny cup and generous prizes to claim. Participants ascend from the local airfield to make their mark!

We may have travelled twice as far as those who went from the UK to Chambley, but we were so glad we'd chosen to go to Italy – Sagrantino to be precise, 30 miles south of Perugia. The Sagrantino Italian International Challenge Cup scored a healthy nine out of ten, and that's not just the number of flying slots we were able to make during the ten-day festival. The scenery was beautiful and, apart from one day of thunderstorms, we basked in wall-to-wall sunshine and 35–37°C during the daytime.

Unlike the comparative formality and long, two-hour check-ins at Chambley we'd heard about, pilots in Sagrantino simply reported to the host, Ralph Shaw, who had organised everything perfectly – including the weather! – to chat about forthcoming flights over a beer and a pizza. That was as formal as it got.

At each 6 a.m. morning briefing we were armed with a cup of coffee/tea and a croissant and then, at the pilots' discretion, we launched in 2–3kt winds. No weather charts, QNH or Naughty Chair – just good old-fashioned flying, which is why we were there!

There were four pilots in our group, with three balloons in a team of six; we were going to be busy. I took two balloons: Bristol Blue and *Jerky*, my new Z-31 BWS hopper; and Peter Mossman took his T&C 31 hopper. Rob Bayly and Phil McChayne joined us, with Phil's and my wife making up the complement. I towed all three balloons out in my Shogun the 1,300 miles, which took four days and three nights. Ferry crossing, diesel fuel and tolls amounted to about £750 to get down there, plus accommodation and food, which totalled about £500 just one way. It's not a cheap journey, but the weather is reliable.

About 50 balloons had entered from numerous countries. The first morning's flying on the Friday was from the base of the event, the spacious Sagrantino Airfield, where we are able to lay out on the grass just off the runway. Take off was at our leisure amongst locals who had come to admire the spectacle. It's a perfect location for flying from and to, and gentle winds meant you never went



© Ralph Shaw

Above: With temperatures topping 30°C, pilots dipped their feet in cooling water!

too far, with lots of landing opportunities in the recently cut crop fields. Landowners are not precious about their land, either, and once you are down, the crew drive along local tracks to come and get you.

After the thunderstorms on the Monday, when we flew from Sagrantino Airfield on the Tuesday and Trevi Airfield on the Wednesday mornings, landing off the runway in the damp crop fields was tricky, with very sticky clayey mud, which clung to your shoes and car tyres. We thought we would need a tractor pull us out from one field, but Rob drove my car with the trailer better than I ever could and managed to release us from what would have been a lengthy and difficult carry out.

Another plus for this balloon meet over others is that, apart from the beauty of the area, the wonderful wine and the tasty food, during the day we had time to recover from the 5 a.m. starts by dozing around the magnificent swimming pool at our accommodation.

There were no evening flights – it's simply too hot – just more socialising, perfectly organised by Ralph with sponsors paying for virtually everything. On most evenings there were social events with both food and alcohol complimentary. The best gatherings were at the vineyards, where we enjoyed beautiful spreads of traditional local cuisine supplemented by their own harvested wine, with a chance to buy cases of it if we wished.

Another get-together was held in a



Above: The clear blue skies and gentle winds over the gorgeous Umbrian landscape proved to be an irresistible lure for around fifty balloon teams.

huge marquee with a six-course meal and entertainment, which meant you really didn't want to have to get up to fly again the next morning!

This event used to be known as the Todi Balloon Meet, but Ralph moved from that location about three years ago to Sagrantino. However, we still managed a flight over the picturesque hill town of Todi, 25 miles away, with a nearby launch site to please the locals. There were also a couple of balloon glows in the charming town squares, and another at a large airfield with about 20 balloons participating, although the wind that night was brisk and challenging.

What with the free entry, free propane available on the launch site after flying, free cases of wine to participating teams, a beautiful personalised ceramic plaque for each pilot, complimentary polo shirts and caps, an amazing 1,000 bottles of wine to be won by one pilot in a single competition (see page 4), plus trophies for other competitions, this was a generous, easy going, cost-effective, balloon meet. Why wouldn't you go and enjoy the hospitality of Ralph and the spectacular Umbrian region?

Derek Maltby

Next year, 2018, marks the 30th year of this increasingly popular event. See the advert on page 43 for further details, or visit the website www.sagrantinocup.it



Centre and above: Flying isn't everything. Part of the allure of this meet is its vibrant social programme, whether it's a shady spot for teams to chew the fat and sip a cool beer, or a musical treat in one of the quaint town squares.