

Winds of Umbria



Inimitable organiser Ralph Shaw pulled off yet another spectacular balloon meet, the 34th consecutive Italian International Balloon Grand Prix in the beautiful Todi–Sagrantino wine-growing region of Umbria, as serial attendees **Gary** and **Julie Madelin** describe.

It was during the fine gathering one evening at the Cantina La Veneranda that Marisa D’Alessandro, event organiser Ralph Shaw’s niece, arrived at our VIP table for three (we are a two-fly, one-retrieve team) for the obligatory team photo. She said she had enough balloon photos already to fill a book and was planning an article for *Aerostat*, but had found nobody willing to write some words about the event, held on 29th July–7th August 2022.

In an unguarded moment, possibly as a result of the copious quantities of Sagrantino flowing, we agreed to help. What follows is not a blow-by-blow account (although the wind did blow quite nicely on a couple of days once clear of the inversion), but more a collection of thoughts, memories, old friends met and random jottings.

LOOKING BACK

Our first visit to Todi was back in 1998. We didn’t know anybody, least of all Ralph, who greeted us with a beaming smile, handed us a bag of goodies and two rolled-up maps. Very colourful and pretty, but as maps not that useful. Oh, and a Met forecast – “Looks like the wind is blowing that way.”

With no crew, we just strapped the bike onto the basket for the retrieve and went flying. Repeat every morning for a week and it became addictive. We can’t recall how many trips we’ve made since, must be twelve or thirteen. The simple essence of the meet is just the same now, but how the numbers have grown! Back in the day, balloon teams numbered in the high teens to low twenties, almost all from the UK and with a small handful from mainland

Above: Balloons take off from the Parco Acquarossa launch site.

Europe. This year’s 34th consecutive event saw fifteen nations present from Sweden to Slovenia, Lithuania to Hungary, and foreign teams outnumbering UK ones by almost 3:1.

SKY POLICE

In all the years we have attended Ralph’s Todi meet, I don’t ever recall my pilot’s licence or insurance details leaving the flight bag. However, about three weeks before this year’s event, we all received a seriously worded email from Ralph (who does not have serious in his nature), instructing all pilots to scan and email copies of their licences forthwith for inspection by the authorities.

All photos © Marisa D’Alessandro / Umbria Mongolfiere



Then, just a few days before departure, a NOTAM popped up, which changed several times in size and height within hours, and with the exact location still fluid as we left home. In essence, Perugia ATC had set an 11.5 Nm radius flying area with tops 4,000ft AGL. We gather there were some balloon infringements into their airspace last year, which had prompted the clamp-down. Fortunately, these restrictions in no way diminished the flying scope either in distance travelled or altitude required, although flights were restricted to a time window between 06:00 and 07:59 on most days.

LET’S GO FLYING

Every day was flyable, even on the rest day (more later), and wind directions gave a variety of options as to which launch field to choose. This year in addition to the familiar Pantalla, Ponte Naia and Parco Acquarossa sites, Ralph had added a fourth at Sismano, which would prove

Above: Balloons and water reflections go hand-in-hand with the promise of a dip.

ideal should the wind be coming out of the south. Fortunately for us, given the proximity of our Agriturismo to the Parco Acquarossa site, winds on most days were out of the northeast. This gave us potentially long flights that would remain within the NOTAM area.

We missed the first couple of days, but gather teams had great flights from both there and the microlight strip at Pantalla. Our first morning, Sunday, saw all teams lift off from Parco Acquarossa, and with almost ninety balloons it was a tight squeeze, especially given the hundreds of spectators, free range children, pushchairs etc, all in and around crown lines, vehicles, fans and trailers. It could have been an accident waiting to happen, which fortunately never did.

During one inflation, Julie, who was holding the mouth, was asked to hold



Above: Sleepy hilltop villages awake to the sound of burners as the morning mist clears.



Above: Team Madelin’s 2009 Cameron C-60 drifts over gently undulating fields of crop.



someone's baby for a photo opportunity! Obviously, it was not ideal to have a small child so near the burner at a crucial moment. There were also reports of five hundred or so spectators at the Pantalla launch site the following Saturday, which caused some delays for the retrieves getting out on the road. But from Ralph's perspective, the spectators all seemed extremely happy, except when the bar didn't open at Parco Acquarossa on the last Sunday, and they were deprived of their espresso!

For us, Thursday was a memorable flight in that it was the only morning with a

southerly breeze and saw us making the pre-dawn trek down to Ponte Naia for a wonderful flight over Todi town. We then flew right over the breakfast bar at Ponte Rio, where post packing up saw us with a slice of pizza and a cold beer. First one of the day and it was only 08:15!

REST DAY!

Cripes! A rest day at a balloon meet? Although some previous events had a rest day in the schedule, pilots often ignored it and went flying anyway. Not so this year. It was obligatory, as reinforced by a stern note

from Ralph, who doesn't normally do stern, to the effect that NO flying was to take place and all teams were to remain grounded. This inevitably started the rumour mill that Perugia ATC had something to do with it, but we will never know. Funny thing was, we felt more tired during the rest day than on all the flying days!

FAST AND SLOW

Most days gave wonderful opportunities for bimbling around the launch field, making use of ever-changing directions in the light lower-level winds. The first

morning we landed right by the trailer on the road out to Pozzo, having had every wind direction on the compass, and our final day saw us achieve the perfect splash-and-dash in the Acquarossa lake after many years of trying.

Other days saw a shallow jet stream above the inversion and on Tuesday we were clipping 17kt at gradient, but had a gentle stand-up landing in the surface inversion. Some wonderful contour flying was to be had, dropping down into deep shaded valleys, drifting along slowly and picking leaves off the

trees from the basket. Memorable for us was gently drifting through the densely wooded valley alongside Collazzone, and then to climb out over the town to the sound of church bells chiming 07:00. Less fun was to realise we'd all but lost the speed we had earlier in the flight, even climbing to 1,800ft didn't show any real movement. There are shallow bands of direction to be had, but they are tricky to find and stay in, which made the last thirty minutes of that flight interesting, trying to get to a suitable landing field keeping a close eye on power lines and

Above: San Fortunato church (centre R) stands atop the hill above the town of Todi, catching the early morning light as the balloons pass overhead.

the steeply sloping terrain. All looks quite flat from a safe height! It's what makes flying around Todi so interesting. You can be making a perfect approach to land, only to stop at 100ft, and then as you descend further drift back the way you just came from. The opposite can also happen if you stay aloft a bit too late, the wind can pick up from nowhere, and



you're suddenly doing 12kt just above tree-top height. Motto is stay vigilant, keep a watchful eye out for power lines and always have a Plan B.

FRIENDS MET, FRIENDS MISSED

Given the choice of take-off options and teams staying in various accommodations, opportunities to meet old and new friends were somewhat limited. The state of the world, inflation, cost of propane and everything else all featured

Above: R-L, Gary Madelin, sister Julie Madelin and Paul Sprague pose for the team photo.

in Ralph's 'welcome message', but the sentiment was clear. Events past where there was a social bash most evenings just wasn't on the cards this year, and quite understandable.

What Ralph did organise was a splendid social evening and BBQ at a local cantina, La Veneranda, with thirty teams on each of three evenings. You could select your evening, on a first come first served basis. This worked really well, and in fact in some ways we thought better than before, where some evenings used to turn into something of a 'bun fight'. We told Ralph how good we thought it was, so maybe this is the way forward.

So even during the social evening we missed catching up with folk, so it was left to who you set up next to on the launch field (in our case Ian Wadey and family on some days), who landed next to you in the same field, or who you rubbed shoulders with at refuelling. It was good to catch up with Peter Mossman, Keith Pierce, Mondovì residents Wendy and Dave Tree, and Abigail Bridge with her young enthusiastic team. And of course, those veterans with twenty-three Todi trips under their belts, Edith and Robin Mercer. One morning we watched Graeme Scaife's pretty Cameron 105, adorned with bees and wildflowers, lift into the sky, but we never saw Graeme or Judy the whole week.

REMINISCENCES

- The roadside pizza/bruschetta bar in Bastardo gets our vote for the number one place to eat in all of Umbria. Great food, good value and excellent service from the serving lady.



Above: Crowds gather at Parco Acquarossa, one of the launch sites.

- Contour flying. Just has to be done. The scenery in Umbria is lovely – we've always described it as undulatingly pretty – and one just can't grow tired of it.

- Coffee and pastries on landing? Why not – it would be rude to say no. On two mornings we were met by the happy faces of giggling children, who climbed into the basket for photo opportunities, while coffee and cakes were being prepared. One morning our deflated envelope had to be laid down over the access track to a house – there was no other option, it was a tight spot with power lines etc – just as the owner arrived home. No matter, take your time, she said as she left the car and walked to the house, only to return as we were piling the envelope into the bag with a tray of drinks.

- The last morning, Sunday, we decided not to fly so as to have a leisurely pack up and early departure after breakfast. Sleeping with the window open, and hearing the Dutch team set out in the pre-dawn darkness, I drifted back to sleep only to wake at 06:10 with the cockerels crowing and the sound of a balloon burner. I jumped into some clothes and jogged out to the end of the track and watched as a balloon slowly drifted overhead. There was something magical about watching that at sunrise,



Above: Satisfaction. Organiser Ralph Shaw (L) watches the event unfold, with cousin Roberto.



Above: Warm days, clear skies and like-minded balloonists return each year for their 'ballooning vacation' in Umbria.



Above: Hot work. Hannah Wadey gets to work deflating the envelope.

with the warm breeze and the scent of wildflowers. You can't knock it!

DOWNSIDES?

- The 2,400-mile round trip across a baking hot Europe
- Having to join a WhatsApp group – although this did bring some benefits later in the week
- Feeling like you need a holiday when you get home!

AND FINALLY

Despite all the things that could have gone wrong, nothing did. Thanks go to all the pilots and crew who complied with the Perugia ATC and NOTAM constraints. But most of all thank you to Ralph Shaw and his invisible small team of helpers who made it all happen, pulling off yet another 'relaxed ballooning holiday' in this beautiful region. We will be back... Big thank you Ralph, as always. Be good!



Above: Ian Wadey (L) ponders how even in a huge cut field the balloon is always attracted by magnetism to the single obstruction.