

Aerial Images from a Hot Air Balloon

by

[Scott Pickard](#)



The other day one of my granddaughters (age five) was visiting us and she drew me a picture of a hot air balloon which she had just learned about at her daycare school. She was fascinated by the hot air balloon and its ability to silently fly over the countryside, so I told her a story of the time I flew over the Illinois prairie in a hot air balloon but with a specific purpose in mind.



At the time, I was the manager of the [Research Park](#) and Incubator (EnterpriseWorks) at the University of Illinois which when fully developed we projected would cover about 200 acres. There is no better way to show the scope and vision of a research park than with aerial [photography](#), but the trick is how to do that on at least an annual basis (since things are always changing) and do this in a cost-effective way. The aerial photos are quite useful since they can be used on a website and in all types of printed literature, videos, and PowerPoint and Prezi presentations. (Note that I was trying to do this almost 10 years ago before we had the [drone technology](#) we have today which can carry digital and video cameras to shoot spectacular flyover images.)

I talked to a few of my pilot friends to see if they would fly me over the Park but they said there might be some difficulties with getting clearance to fly low enough and slow enough while banking to have a chance of capturing some good photography.

Hearing what those problems were, my mind immediately jumped to the idea of flying very slowly (as slow as 5 mph) in a hot air balloon, and luckily I have a good friend in town (Max) who had been flying hot air balloons for many years. So a little sheepishly not wanting to impose, I asked him if he would be up for this and he said yes!

Then I asked another good friend (Brad) who specialized in panoramic photography, if he would join us up in the balloon and take photography and he also said yes. It helps to have good friends with skills!

Max figured the best time to fly over would be around 6 PM, so we agreed to keep our calendars open in the 5 to 7 PM time window late summer. Days went by until one day Max called and said the wind direction and speed were perfect. So my wife and I met him and his wife and Brad in the parking lot of a hotel which was on the northwest side of the Park about a half a mile away.

Under Max's guidance we were his ragtag crew. We got the balloon, lines, burner and gondola set up and within a half an hour we three amigos (Scott, Max, Brad) were in the gondola rising up into the sky and drifting on a perfect track toward the Park.



Brad the photographer had brought both a digital and panoramic camera. As we silently glided over the Park at 5 mph or less, Brad leaned over the gondola and I held him by his belt loops while he continuously shot photography switching back and forth between the two cameras. Because of the combination of flying very slowly on a peaceful summer evening, the images we collected were spectacular!



We flew about a mile beyond the Park and then Max slowly descended skimming the tops of the corn (just before harvest) until we found a clear spot and touched down.

Max's wife and my wife had been following us in the chase vehicle. They stopped on the 2-lane blacktop road not far from where we landed, jumped out and ran to our location. Brad and I got out of the gondola and the wives got in and they relaunched with Captain Max while Brad and I followed in the chase van.



They ascended and flew for about a mile and then descended and made a smooth touchdown in another cornfield farther south. Apparently the farmer and his wife who owned the property had been tracking the balloon and made a beeline to us on four-wheeled ATVs. We weren't sure what to expect when they arrived, but they were quite friendly and glad to see a hot air balloon on such a perfect evening since it didn't seem like people flew them much anymore.



To cap off a glorious experience, my wife and I were asked to kneel on the ground with our eyes closed and then to our surprise they poured a bottle of champagne on top of our heads to induct us as first-time hot air ballooners. We didn't mind – it felt and tasted pretty good – and we continued to party back at Max's house.

The aerial photography we collected that evening was outstanding and served the University well for many years. So in addition to accomplishing something in a very creative way, we had one of the most memorable life experiences which we will never forget. That's what I call a good day!

I had made a little video back then of the event not realizing that years later I would be able to show it to my granddaughter and encourage her to start thinking about the day when she will get to fly high in the sky in a hot air balloon.