



Rainbow Riders
Hot Air Balloon Ride Co.

1993

King of the Thrill

With every world record he breaks, professional balloon pilot Troy Bradley reasserts Albuquerque's title as the Hot-Air Balloon Capital of the World and shows his critics the sky's the limit.

Albuquerque hot air balloon pilot Troy Bradley says he wasn't looking for fame. And yet, fame always seems to find him. In January, the world learned Bradley's name when he took off from Saga, Japan, in *Two Eagles*, his custom-made gas balloon. He and his Russian counterpart, Leonid Tiukhtyaev, set the record for the longest and furthest gas ballooning flight in history during that journey.

"It helped bring Albuquerque back on the map as the Hot-Air Balloon Capital of the World," Bradley says of the record-breaking flight from Japan to Mexico earlier this year.

Bradley has broken at least 64 ballooning world records, and with more than 6,400 flight hours, he's regarded as one of the best professional balloon pilots in the world.

"I've broken more world records in balloons than anyone in history. ... It's my whole life. It's what I do," Bradley says. "I'm always looking at the record books and seeing how things can be improved."

BALLOON BELIEVER

Bradley's fixation with balloons began while growing up in Colorado, where his grandparents were some of the first hot air balloonists in the state.

He looked up to Ben Abruzzo and Maxie Anderson, early record-setters, and

as he grew and gained experience (he flew solo at age 14), Bradley realized he could make a living as a pilot. So he moved to Albuquerque 31 years ago to work for Cid Cutter, the founder of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta.

Ballooning even introduced Bradley to

his future wife and fellow pilot, Tami.

"Bradley actually taught my dad how to fly balloons," Tami says. "Knowing him as long as I have, breaking records is just sort of who he is."

But first, Bradley had to oversee the construction of a custom envelope and capsule that could withstand the epic journey over the Northern Pacific Ocean.

To handle the weight of the ballast and equipment, Bradley designed a balloon 350,000 cubic feet in size, which was 50,000 cubic feet smaller than the previous record holder, the *Double Eagle V*.

The capsule was constructed out of two inches of foam sandwiched by a Kevlar and carbon fiber composite, which kept it bulletproof but light, Bradley says.

"Basically, it was like a big flying cooler," Bradley says.

Bradley transported the balloon to Japan for an attempt in 2007, and waited



two months for the right conditions to take off.

"We never got the right weather, so we shut down the whole project," he says.

He warehoused the balloon in Japan for years, until he ran into Tiukhtyaev at a balloon meeting in Switzerland, in 2014. When Tiukhtyaev agreed to help fund the excursion, the two were poised to make history.

GOING THE DISTANCE

After spending more than two weeks waiting for the right weather patterns to develop, Bradley and Tiukhtyaev lifted off from Saga, Japan, on Jan. 25 of this year.

Once over the Pacific Ocean, the duo ascended to an average of 17,000 feet above sea level, where the temperature ranged from a brisk 20 degrees to negative 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

The two took turns maintaining the balloon's altitude, discussing strategies, and sleeping on the comfortable mattress in the cozy seven-foot-wide and five-foot-long capsule.

The flight also served as a valuable research opportunity for Dr. Steven Shope, the director of *Two Eagles'* ground-based support team and physicist with Sandia Research Corporation.

One of his company's current tasks is to analyze "cognitive readiness."

"It's not very often that you get an opportunity to have two people isolated in an aircraft for ... seven days," Shope says.

Shope had Bradley and Tiukhtyaev perform cognitive tests to gauge their mental fatigue.

"They may be fatigued physically, but are they also fatigued mentally?," Shope asks. "These are very important issues

that the military is looking at now."

As the balloon splashed down for a record-breaking landing in Puerto San Carlos along Mexico's Baja coast—six days, 16 hours, 37 minutes and 6,646 miles later—Bradley says he was surprised at how big the news had become.

"We weren't sponsored," Bradley says. "We were just as a couple of guys out for an adventure and going for some records."

Though the unexpected worldwide media attention was almost overwhelming, Bradley says he couldn't be happier with the flight.

"At times, I wasn't really sure if he could pull it off, but he did, and it was exciting to see him make it happen," Tami says.

For a complete recap on *Two Eagles'* journey, visit pacificballoon.com.

—TOM SANDFORD

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