

Desert Kaleidoscope aka 2016 MI Balloon Fiesta Rally

The 2016 Monaco International Rally at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta (AIBF) held October 5th through 9th, 2016 was another outstanding MI Balloon Fiesta Rally.

The Rally had the maximum 80 coaches (80% were MI members) in attendance and all observed a Kaleidoscope of over 600 hot air balloons, including over 100 Special Shapes and 80 flying foreign flags. For the first time in many years, there was still a Wait List for spaces at the start of the Rally.

This year's rally was dedicated to the memory of David Piper, a Past President of MI, who headed the balloon rally for at least a decade, and passed away just after the the 2015 Rally. We were privileged to have Kay Piper attend this year as an Honorary Hostess. We arranged for a white streamer with David's name on it to be flown over Balloon Fiesta Park on Fiesta's Memorial Sunday, the first Sunday of Fiesta. The streamer was presented to Kay during one of the Social Hours, along with a framed picture of David at a prior Fiesta. We also enjoyed David's favorite appetizer - shrimp.

The weather was extremely pleasant during the rally, dipping below fifty degrees on only one night. The balloons were able to fly three of the four mornings of the rally and seven of the total nine days of the whole Fiesta. Balloon Glows occurred on all scheduled evenings, although cut short one night due to winds. Following the Glows an enormous and spectacular Fireworks display followed a laser light show. One attendee commented that the fireworks show was better than they experienced in the highly publicized Sydney Australia New Years eve celebration. They were truly outstanding and we had front row seats!

Monaco again had The Best parking location that could be had at the Balloon Fiesta. We were located in the first five rows of the premier VIP West Parking facility, immediately adjacent to the launch field. We were less than one hundred yards from the launching balloons and countless balloon flew directly over our coaches at 100 feet, close enough to talk to the pilot and passengers.

We were privileged again to have a hot air balloon pilot of over twenty years talk to the rally group on the first night before and after one of our excellent provided meals. He provided a great history of hot air ballooning and explained the fundamentals of Lighter Than Air flight. He also brought his balloon system, and while he could not inflate the envelope, he set out the basket and partially assembled the system so all could see the instruments. Many took advantage of having their picture taken while standing in the basket and experienced the thrill of operating the powerful, thundering burner.

A number of rally attendees took advantage of a very special opportunity to watch the spectacular midnight launch of America's Challenge, a gas balloon race. This only occurs once a year. The winning team flew for over 54 hours and landed 866 miles away near Hannibal, MO. The winners will now represent US in the Internationally known Gordon Bennett gas balloon race, the oldest and most prestigious aviation event in the world.

Several MI rally participants took the opportunity to crew for a balloon. Several indicated they planned to return next year to crew for the same pilot in hopes of getting a balloon ride. This is common after crewing for a pilot a number of times.

Almost eighty percent of the attendees were first time attendees at AIBF and for a few this was their first MI rally. From the latter, we again heard the traditional comment that it should be retitled the Ten Pound Rally, as with most MI Rallies. Yes, we ate, and ate. In addition to the catered BBQ dinner on the first night, we had two exceptional lunches and outstanding Texas size, New Mexico style, breakfast burritos one morning and of course, daily Social Hours with appetizers. The overwhelming response on the Rally Critiques was to return and to return again to El Pinto restaurant for the outstanding luncheon buffet.

We also experienced outstanding volunteerism from the Parking and Greeting Crew to the numerous volunteers who helped prepare daily appetizers and to the photographers who captured the Rally. Mega thanks to volunteers who were essential in making the rally a success.

Pictures of the Rally will be posted on the MIRVCLUB.com website under Past Rallies.

If you have not been to the AIBF, it should be high on your Bucket List. MI rally dates for 2017 are October 11th through 15th and you can sign up at MIRVCLUB.COM under Future Rallies. Only MI members can apply now through mid-April. On April 15th, registration will open to all FMCA members on a first-come basis. Apply early!

Submitted by Co-Host:

Sandy and Harry Hentschel
De and Marvin Pitts