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# Ohio Challenge to include balloon rides, pilot interaction

By [Eric Robinette](#)  
Staff Writer

Saturday, July 12, 2008

MIDDLETOWN — For six years, The Midfirst Ohio Challenge Hot Air Balloon Festival has flown hot air balloons in the Middletown skies, but passengers have never been able to ride in them — until now.

For the first time, the Challenge, which runs Friday, July 18, through Sunday, July 20, will allow visitors to go on balloon flights.

On all three days, visitors will be able to rise in a tethered balloon; and on Sunday only, visitors will be able to fly in a free-floating balloon, said Michael Gliatti, a Lebanon balloon pilot who helped organize many of this year's events.

The tethered flights will be 5-minute "hops" that ascend 50 to 80 feet. A balloon can accommodate four people, depending on weight. Tethered flights will cost \$10 for ages 13 and older; and \$5 for ages 12 and younger.

The full flights on Sunday will cost \$200 per person, with flights lasting about an hour and ascending up to 1,000 feet. That price includes meet and greets with the ground crew, helping to inflate the balloon, and a champagne or sparkling cider toast afterward. These flights must be preregistered by e-mailing [info@ohiochallenge.com](mailto:info@ohiochallenge.com) or downloading a form from the event's Web site.

For those who want to learn more about balloons, or who might be too squeamish to actually go up in one, on Saturday and Sunday, the Ohio Challenge will offer a course on how to be a pilot at 3 p.m., a primer called Ballooning 101 at 4 p.m., and a course on balloon teams at 5 p.m.

All this is part of a concerted effort to make the pilots more visible during the event, said Ann Mort, publicity chairwoman for the event.

"We had heard that people had asked 'Where are the pilots? Is there any way we can speak with them?' We really didn't interact with the crowd," Gliatti said.

Other expanded offerings include the musical acts. Organizers were given more free reign this year, allowing them to book more regional and national acts such as Howard and the White Boys, a blues band from Chicago, and Parrots of the Caribbean, a Jimmy Buffet tribute band, said Brian Humanic, who books the bands.

Many old favorites will return too, including the ballooning competition, a classic car show on Sunday, and Team Fastrax Skydivers who will drop a 7,500 square foot American flag once a day.

**How to go**

What: The Midfirst Ohio Challenge Hot Air Balloon Festival

When: 4 to 10:30 p.m. Friday, Noon to 10:30 p.m. Saturday and Noon to 8 p.m. Sunday.

Where: Smith Park, at Tytus Avenue and Verity Parkway, Middletown



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