



Cy-Fair residents Madiha Basit and Irfan Patel celebrate their anniversary on board the Bule Drifter

*The balloon emerges like a fabric snake from its bag. The sun peeks above the rooftops and everyone revels in the glorious sunrise.*

# Sky High Fun

## Cy-Fair Couples Find Romance in the Skies

*Written and Photographed by Gail Collins*

**H**olding a compass in one hand, Doug Watson releases a purple helium balloon with the other, noting the currents at various altitudes as it floats away. As chief pilot and owner of Air Texas Balloon Adventures, he will use this information to steer his craft – a hot air balloon – and plot the direction of an upcoming trip. “The whole idea is to get us airborne in a safe manner,” he says. He then unrolls a map to check angles. “When flying in an urban area, we look for places to land in an hour’s time, so the crew can pick us up,” he says, noting the crew as myself, Watson’s wife, Kathryn, and Dixie Turner. We will chase the balloon during an upcoming trip, welcoming Watson and the other passengers back to earth upon landing.

### Preparing for Flight

In a parking lot, we drag a heavy, four-by-five-foot woven basket with a leather base from Watson’s trailer. Next, an enormous fabric package is brought out. Everyone helps prepare for the flight, and for the excited couple who booked the trip, helping out adds to their happy energy. “I run a cheap airline – no restrooms on board, no seats, or seat belts,” Watson jokes, adding, “And yet, they come.”

At 120,000 cubic feet, Watson operates the largest balloon in Houston. Sport models range from 55,000 to 90,000 cubic feet in size. The basket weighs 300 pounds, as does the envelope, or balloon. None of it feels lighter than air. The balloon emerges like a fabric snake from its bag. Balloons, like boats are christened, and once unfurled, Blue Drifter’s checkerboard pattern of dominant blue, pink, black, and white is revealed. The sun peeks above the rooftops and everyone revels in the glorious sunrise. “We pick the morning for rides, because we get the calmest winds. Afternoon flights are rare,” Watson says.

### Lifting Off

Madiha Basit and Irfan Patel are celebrating their second anniversary with this ride. Basit confesses, “I’ve just always wanted to do it, and Irfan surprised me, hinting, ‘Your anniversary gift will come when the weather clears.’” While Turner hangs onto a rope

at the balloon’s crown, the couple holds the throat open with Watson and where a large fan inflates the massive sphere. This is cold-packing the balloon. Then, propane burners in the basket fire up, and she’s ready.

“We use the heat to fly,” Watson says. Prior to lift-off, the couple literally learns the ropes that secure the basket and how to stay safe. “These are the things you can hold,” Watson says pointing out handles. Patel puts a reassuring arm about his wife and says, “And me.” With a whoosh from the burner, the basket and balloon gently float up, up, and away. The crew waves and Turner shouts, “The sky is yours!” The colorful craft tracks toward a local reserve where they will admire wildlife and the landscape.



Blue Drifter measures  
120,000 cubic feet in size



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## Chasing the Craft

The crew packs into the truck as the radio crackles to life. "We're moving at 17 to 18 miles per hour," says Watson, making a ground check. As Kathryn hits the road, she outlines her husband's flying history. Watson always wanted to be in the aviation business and when the air force turned him down for his age, he found another route to the skies. "He started flying gliders in 1976 and got a 'fixed wing' in 1979," she says. Fixed wing is flight lingo for a pilot's license. To please Kathryn, Watson reluctantly took a balloon flight on a trip and cottoned on to that, too. They began their business in Fredericksburg and moved it to Houston in 2003. "It's a wonderful job," says Kathryn. "People are happy when they see us at the start and happier when they come down."

## Bump and Drag Landing

We tail and often trail the balloon, depending on where the wind blows. Earlier, Watson proposed two landing possibilities and is true to his prediction. We park and dash across a field anticipating their bump and drag landing. This is standard stuff. As Blue Drifter comes to rest, the unbridled force of such hot air grace jolts us. We grab and hang on, so the couple can exit, and the basket is laid down. Quickly, the balloon is deflated, a fabric river spilled across the dirt.

Words tumble out of the couple's mouths. "People are so excited when you're in a balloon. They waved and talked to us from the ground," Patel says. Basit chimes in, "And people having breakfast in their backyard offered us coffee and bagels. We saw an owl hawk, deer, and a hog - all kinds of wildlife - and golfers!" A traditional toast in a nearby park celebrates their safe landing. "We always carry champagne to ward off any angry landowners," says Watson. He laughs, adding, "Ballooning is natural. It brings joy to the passengers and folks on the ground call hello. There are big smiles on everyone's faces." CFM

GAIL COLLINS enjoys meeting people while writing for magazines, but flying in Blue Drifter was above it all.

## Balloonist's Blessing

Before trips, many balloonists recite this blessing with a traditional champagne toast:



The winds have welcomed you  
with softness;

The sun has blessed you with  
its warm hands;

You have flown so high and so  
well

That God has joined you in your  
laughter

And set you gently back into the  
loving arms of mother earth.



Doug Watson started his business after flying in a hot air balloon with his wife, Kathryn



Before every flight, the balloon is cold packed with air using a fan



Every trip is celebrated with a champagne toast afterward



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