

The Big Red Balloon, right, prepares for takeoff from the University of South Florida campus in Tampa. During the early-morning flight, the hot-air balloon casts its shadow on the Carrollwood landscape.



Balloon business is taking off

The Big Red Balloon offers daily sightseeing trips over north Tampa.

By NANETTE WOITAS
Tribune Staff Writer

WHEN Phil and Melanie Sekora aren't working, they're as down-to-earth as two people could be.

But when the personable couple is on the job, there's never a shortage of hot air.

Since September 1992, the Sekoras have run a balloon ride business out of their Northdale home. Seven days a week year round, they schedule sightseeing trips over north Tampa for up to four passengers in The Big Red Balloon Inc.

Passengers and crew meet at 6:30 a.m. in the parking lot of Northdale Court shopping center at Northdale Boulevard and North Dale Mabry Highway.

If the weather looks good the night before, the morning's flight is a tentative go. If storms or fog are brewing, the flight is scrapped and rescheduled for another day.

For safety reasons, the Sekoras insist on perfect conditions for flight. Weather permits about 100 flights each year.

Passengers pay \$140 for the experience, which includes the balloon's 20-minute inflation to six

NORTHDALE



TODD L. CHAPPEL/Tribune photos

Jan Wyckoff, left, and owners Phil Sekora, center, and Melanie Sekora prepare The Big Red Balloon for a flight.

stories, a one-hour sightseeing flight and a champagne picnic at Lake Park.

Before sunrise, fliers pile into the Sekoras' van and, depending on wind direction, head to one of about a dozen north Tampa launch sites. With the moon still high in the sky and the sun peeking over the horizon, the crew inflates the 300-pound balloon with cool air.

Then, with the basket attached and lying on its side, Phil Sekora shoots 6-foot flames into the envelope and the

balloon takes on a life of its own, lifting into position and tugging upward.

It's a tricky business, but one he knows well. The couple decided to make a business of ballooning after Sekora's former employer bought a balloon for advertising. As the company's commercial pilot, Sekora was expected to fly the unfamiliar equipment.

After a reluctant introduction to

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ballooning, Sekora was hooked. But in 1991, he left his job — and the balloon — behind and moved from Delaware to Northdale.

However, the urge to fly still soared.

"A year later, we made the decision to sink our life savings into this business," Sekora said.

They figure they have about \$40,000 in balloon equipment alone. Thankfully, they say, with only one Tampa competitor, Sport Balloons Inc., they usually stay booked at least a week or two in advance.

Because there's no real way to steer the balloon or control its speed, Phil and the passengers literally go where the wind takes them. Melanie and the rest of the crew keep in radio contact with the bal-

loon and follow behind, ready to help with landing.

But one of Melanie's most important jobs is to reassure nervous passengers. One nervous customer was Jan Bryant of Lutz, who recently gave herself the trip as a belated birthday present.

"I was turning 50 and decided it was time to do something different," said Bryant, who had never even flown in a plane.

In the van on the way to the launch site, Bryant had butterflies in her stomach as she chatted with fellow passenger Roger Mays, and his wife, Gloria, who had opted to stay on the ground. Bryant had seen the distinctive red balloon many times as it sailed over her Lutz home.

The Sekoras have seen all types of passengers with varying degrees of apprehension, including about 40 who were either married or became engaged mid-flight.

But none they remember ever left without saying they loved it.