Festival of Ballooning ends on high note

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READINGTON - With sunny, cloudless skies, the last day of the 35th QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning in Association with PNC Bank sailed into the record book of success. Dozens of hot air balloons launched and the weekend's itinerary went off without a hitch.

As if to make up for the rainout and flooding of 2016, the weather this year held out throughout the weekend, granting thousands the opportunity to attend the popular event.

First-timers John Sztramski of Spotswood and fiancee Rebecca Route of Jamesburg excitedly took advantage of every opportunity the festival had to offer. Freebies galore from a multitude of service, food and beverage and entertainment promoters — including the Broadway show "Wicked," Route's favorite — started off their day.

They tried out London broil cheesesteaks from Mom's for lunch — and loved them — and bought a pair of matching polarized sunglasses as they checked out the many crafts, food and merchandise tents.

"There is such an eclectic multitude of things to see and do," Route said. "I've wanted to come here for years and today's weather was perfect. I'm having a fantastic time. Everyone is very friendly and it's a great atmosphere in which to spend our Sunday afternoon. This could become a yearly event for our new life together."

The engaged couple celebrated their upcoming 2018 nuptials with a helicopter ride.

"That was superexciting," Sztramski said. "That was

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The 35th QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning and the weekend's itinerary went off without a hitch.

definitely a bucket list item I have now crossed off. It's a beautiful area around here. We could see a lake with mountains around it, multiple farms, lots of big houses

and crystal-clear pools. It was an exhilarating feeling going up and when he was banking the helicopter."

Indie rock band Running Late was right on time entertaining the festival-goers with a 1 p.m. set, followed by the alternative rock band Plain White T's at 3. The band, around since the early 2000s, had the crowd on their feet with hits such as the No. 1 "Hey There Delilah," as well as "1234," "Hate" and "Rhythm of Love."

As visitors checked out the offerings on the circular festival route, some of the longest lines of the weekend belonged to the M&Ms, Yasso Frozen Greek Yogurt and Carolina Rice spots — giving away full-size portions of their products. Progressive Insurance also had popular swag bags many were seen carrying.

For the second year in a row, the Bimbo Sweet Baked Goods hot air balloon stopped at the festival on its annual Rise & Shine tour, which takes it across the country with stops from California to Georgia to New Jersey.

Piloting the Bimbo Balloon was John Petrehn, a two-time world champion in hot air ballooning. Earlier this month, he won the 2017 United States National Hot Air Balloon Championship for the fourth time.

Flown by veteran balloon pilot Chris Sabia, the iconic red, yellow and blue Wonder Balloon took to the skies in support of Children's Miracle Network, the North American nonprofit organization that raises funds and awareness for 170 member children's hospitals.

For every photo of the Wonder Balloon taken and shared during the event using the hashtag #SpotThe-Wonder, Children's Miracle Network Hospitals — such as Children's Specialized Hospital in Mountainside — receives a donation from Wonder Bread

For more information, go to www.balloonfestival.com.

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