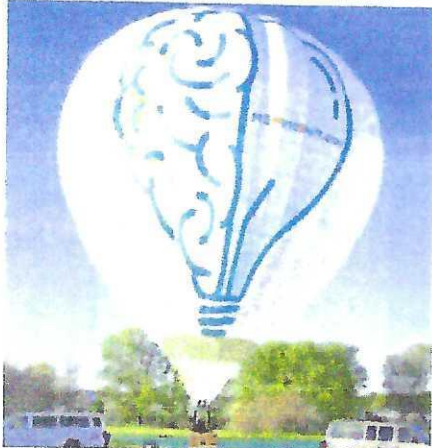


SUNDAY, JULY 21, 2019



The MS MindShift Brain Bulb wheelchair accessible hot air balloon will be at the festival. COURTESY PHOTO

NJ balloon festival still evolving

Jenna Intersimone
Central Jersey Courier News
and Home News Tribune
USA TODAY NETWORK - NEW JERSEY

READINGTON - The QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning continues to evolve during its now more than 3 1/2-decade life.

The annual summertime event, which draws more than 150,000 people to Solberg airport the last weekend in July, has seen its fair share of firsts - big-name concerts, one-of-a-kind



High Kitty has appeared at the QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning. COURTESY OF QUICKCHEK NEW JERSEY FESTIVAL OF BALLOONING

Festival

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shows and unique balloons. This year's affair, the 37th edition, will be no different, with a handful of elements making their debut.

Extreme trampoline show

Throughout the weekend, festivalgoers can catch Flippinout, which utilizes top trampoline artists in the country, in the Family Fun Pavilion where they will fly as high as 20 feet above the ground, performing death-defying single, double and triple flips.

Even skis and snowboards will be part of the show, which is also stuffed with plenty of comedy, action and a high-energy soundtrack. Flippinout has performed its heart-pounding entertainment for the NFL, NBA and NCAA, as well as at fairs and festivals all over the world.

Special-shaped balloons

Perhaps the most unique feature of the festival is its twice-daily mass ascensions of about 100 hot air balloons, which take flight 6:45 p.m. Friday and 6:45 a.m. and 6:45 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Each year, the festival brings new special-shaped balloons to the lineup, and 2019 is no different. Visitors can check out a pair of cops and robbers (the 86-foot-tall Keystone Cop and the 84-foot-tall Con Air); a 100-foot-tall High Kitty Japanese cat of good fortune; and the 98-foot-tall Kermie The Frog, which are all part of the 10 special-shape balloon lineup.

Biggest-ever major headliner returns

In this case, it's a return of the first. The Beach Boys were the festival's first major headliner when they performed here in 2000, and after 19 years, they're back in action at the festival, making them the biggest headliner to ever play an encore at the festival.

The Rock & Roll Hall of Famers have performed more concerts than any major rock band in history, selling more

If you go

QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning

When: 7 to 10 p.m. Friday; 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday; 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday

Where: Solberg Airport, 39 Thor Solberg Road, Whitehouse Station

Mass ascensions: 6:45 p.m. Friday; 6:45 a.m. and 6:45 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, weather permitting

Cost: \$12 to \$15 for kids, \$30 to \$35 for adults

Information: balloonfestival.com

than 100 million records. Plus, according to festival executive producer Howard Freeman, they also make for a show that appeals to all ages.

"You've heard of them, your kids have heard of them and your parents have heard of them, so they're multi-generational and just the perfect summer band," he said.

Wheelchair-accessible balloon to offer tethered rides

Thanks to the MS MindShift "Brain Bulb" hot air balloon, those in wheelchairs will now be able to experience the joy of ballooning firsthand thanks to the balloon's first-ever offering of tethered rides at the festival.

The 75-foot-tall, 120,000 cubic-foot MS MindShift Brain Bulb wheelchair-accessible hot air balloon will be featured at the festival "as a way to literally elevate the importance of having a 'brain first' perspective in MS," according to a release.

Presented by Celgene Corporation and the Multiple Sclerosis Association of America (MSAA), the organizations hope to raise awareness of multiple sclerosis (MS) and the importance of brain health through the balloon rides.

Jenna Intersimone has been covering food, drink and fun in the Garden State for the USA Today Network New Jersey since 2014, after becoming a blogger-turned-reporter following the creation of her award-winning travel blog. Born and raised throughout every corner of NJ, she's a true and true Jersey girl. Contact her at jintersimone@gannett.com or follow her @Jintersimone.



The Beach Boys are headlining this year's QuickChek New Jersey Festival of Ballooning. COURTESY OF THE BEACH BOYS