

Full of Hot Air

By

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The hot air balloon represents the oldest successful form of air travel in our world. But what of the fantasy realm? Sure, there are *Fly* spells and potions, aerial mounts (if you're wealthy and skilful enough to handle them), for an elite and powerful few there's even the option to *teleport*. But what about the down-home cottage industry of hot air ballooning? Gnomes have been mining for lighter-than-air gases, like helium and grathilium, for years. And elvish manuscripts reaching back millennia speak poetically of exquisite airships wrought from gossamer and enchanted wood. Humans have also harnessed such powers in more or less sophisticated ways – from the remote mountain people of Leng, who use ropes dangling from hide canopies filled from natural gas vents to spot their animal flocks in the wilderness, to the Marchioness of Queto, whose passion for flight and generous patronage, catalysed the annual 'Aerial Joust & Aerostatics' competition in Fyleemia City.

In some quarters, closer to the wilds, shepherds and remote farmers occasionally tell of sightings of weird black craft floating in the sky, moving with jerky but definite control; some have interpreted these unidentified flying objects as rudimentary attempts at flight by humanoid nations – a nascent orc air force, if you will.

How such technologies (and their interactions with magic, arcane and divine) sit in any campaign world is of course a matter for the DM. However, here is a brief exploration of some of the considerations you may wish to riff on.

How?

Generally low density gases (helium, hydrogen, grathilium, heated air etc) are trapped in an impervious envelope (silk, burlap, taffeta etc) and some form of propulsion (open brazier, magical lift sphere, oars etc) and steering (rudder, basic wing structure etc) is added to the craft; this could be as simple as a basket suspended beneath balloon using ballast and the generation of heat to control lift. Or it might feature a more zeppelin-like vessel, with a gondola and sources of motive power (slave 'rowers' as in a galley, or animal power, some magical component or perhaps a rudimentary motor).

What?

Balloons, airships, zeppelins, individual contraptions to enable flight, gliders and parachutes – all have a place in this scope. Perhaps the industry is

entirely regulated and organised by nations, states or guilds. Or perhaps it is wildly illegal, or spontaneous, just springing up in remote places through the actions of mad inventors, visionary idealists, roguish con-men and zealous entrepreneurs. The knowledge exists, the will may be found, the cost (though considerable) is achievable, at least for some, and the necessary materials can indeed be assembled. So why not?

Whether it's a solo-flight, an attraction at a county fair or a tethered military reconnaissance balloon over a battlefield, whether a means of attempting long distance travel with speed and perspective, or part of an organised schedule of flights within a state's interior - the hot air mode is worthy of a little play.

What if?

Of course, having said that, the risks associated with this technology are also high - but what's adventure without risk?

Table of possible disasters

Roll 1d20

- 1 **fire**; the canopy ignites, the vessel plummets to the ground
- 2 **explosion**; the gas being used is flammable and on ignition, creates a massive fireball
- 3 **attack**; the vessel is aerially attacked by a young dragon, or a griffin, or any large airborne beast (or flock or swarm)
- 4 **ambush**; the vessel is attacked by aerially mounted outlaws or guardians on pegasi or hippogriffs or other steeds
- 5 **broadside**; the vessel is intercepted by one or more other air vessels - either in an act of piracy, or law enforcement
- 6 **gale**; the weather becomes cataclysmic and the winds tear apart the vessel
- 7 **error**; storms blow the vessel into unknown lands or territories
- 8 **leak**; the buoyant gas slowly leaks out and the vessel sinks to the ground (or sea) in some unplanned location
- 9 **accident**; the pilot is incapacitated or dies - no-one knows how to fly the ship...
- 10 **overboard**; a passenger (or other) falls from the vessel (carrying important treasure items or documents)
- 11 **mis-landing**; on coming to land at the destination the vessel crashes at the final moment (casualties aboard and on the ground at DMs discretion)
- 12 **fog**; the airship becomes lost in a vast sea of fog
- 13 **altitude**; the ship rises swiftly and uncontrollably - the ascent leaves the passengers starved of oxygen - where will it end?

- 14 **planeshift;** the airship encounters a dimensional pocket or aerial gate and, unbeknownst to the crew, passes into an alternative planar state
- 15 **becalmed;** the lack of any wind leaves the vessel becalmed in the middle of nowhere, barely moving – stuck...
- 16 **drunk;** turns out the pilot is an alcoholic – wouldn't you know it? Now you're lost, in erratic flight, and he won't let go of the steering...
- 17 **vertigo;** one or more passengers become terrified and desperate, thrashing about and howling, endangering all aboard
- 18 **revolt;** the slave 'rowers' on this air-galley somehow break free and revolt – fighting erupts, control of the ship is lost...
- 19 **ice up;** the vessel is caught at altitude or near mountains, or within a freezing weather-front. Either way, the canopy and components begin to ice up – increasing the weight and leading to a rapid descent...
- 20 **lightning;** whether naturally occurring or aimed at you by a foe, a bolt of lightning will shred your vessel, maybe ignite your gas...

Who?

Potentially, anyone with enough gold-pieces and the stomach for it may be interested in balloon travel. It offers novelty, excitement, (relative) speed and comfort, can transport cargo as well as beings, and, according to type and context, can be very flexible. Therefore it is a natural attraction for adventurers, merchants of luxury goods, a moneyed upper middle-class, and the intrepid. Crew for a balloon depends upon its size and type – there will be a pilot (perhaps the owner, perhaps an employee of a guild or company, or a member of a nation's armed forces), perhaps a navigator, and on larger vessels, attendants to increase the comfort and pleasure of passengers (purser, chef, waiters, maids, even guides to narrate upon the scenery flown over).

Some balloons may be fitted for expeditionary purposes, or for aggression or defence (as airborne archery platforms or floating vantage points for spellworkers).

Table of extent

Roll 1d8

- 1 air travel is *extremely* rare- a lost technology of the ancient past, even the stories of it have faded from the culture
- 2 a few researchers and fantasists have written about the possibility of non-magical flight, but they are mostly regarded as cranks

- 3 singular; there may be one or at most two active proponents or researchers into this mode of transport – perhaps one working prototype exists in secret somewhere in the realm
- 4 there is a history of rudimentary flight among the indigenous people (simple gliders, some basic balloons) and wealthier types are suddenly viewing this as potentially worth exploiting
- 5 most people have heard of balloons and even seen basic examples at county shows and the like; some entrepreneurs have begun organising a Guild to further this endeavour – there is a passionate buzz growing
- 6 the military has a well developed balloon and dirigible programme and makes use of the technology for defence; a spin-off is that a pool of trained pilots and engineers is available for hire or consultation, and a civilian industry is starting up
- 7 universities teach the subtleties of flight and aeronautics, there is a regular (though far from safe) seasonal traffic in internal city-city flights; the industry is established, the problems of gas extraction and storage are being solved
- 8 anyone with 15gp can visit a balloon station and take a flight; anyone with 500gp can hire a balloon and crew for their own purposes (taxed by the state and the Guild, naturally)

Enjoy!

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