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LIFE & TIMES

NEWSUNDAYTIMES

Fired up for the ride

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simply can't get enough of it
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LIFE&TIMES FAMILY

Heavenly adventure

A family who gently floats over mountains and seas in a hot air balloon as a way to see the world together, tells **Aneeta Sundararaj** of their adventures, and misadventures

WHEN the time comes for you to redress your work-life balance and indulge in your hobby, what would you do? Perhaps you will play more golf, travel or do some cross-stitch. For Khairudin Abdul Rani, he bought a hot air balloon when he opted to retire from his government job as a civil engineer at the age of 40 and pursue his hobby.

Now 52, he says: "I was on a train in Switzerland when I looked out the window and saw a hot air balloon. I wanted to do the same in Malaysia."

So, together with two friends, Aziz Ahmad and Maj (Rtd) Abas Salimon, Khairudin set up AKA Balloons Sdn Bhd and bought its first hot air balloon from the UK.

His wife, Maimoon Mohd, 52, who is currently undergoing training to become a licensed hot air balloonist, says cheekily: "I thought his dream was to marry me. I didn't know it was to buy a hot air balloon."

Daughter Nur Izzati, 25, adds: "Some people buy cars or another house. My father? He buys a hot air balloon. My sisters and I are now known as the Balloon Sisters." It's obvious easy camaraderie runs in Khairudin's household.

A regular hot air balloon weighs some 300kg and consists of three parts: the basket, burner and envelope (the technical name for the balloon). Together with the burner, the envelope is folded into a 1.2m by 0.9m wicker basket and shipped to the buyer.

The moment Khairudin obtained his licence, he wasted no time hot air ballooning around the world.

He recalls: "One time, after Mount Pinatubo erupted in The Philippines, we took off from the Clark Air Base near Manila. All we could see were the rooftops of the houses. Everything else was covered with ash or lava. I quickly realised how powerful the force of Nature was."

On another hot air balloon adventure, he took three hours from Penang island to the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Butterworth.

He recalls: "In a hot air balloon, we rely on the wind to guide us. At 1,000ft (305m), the wind direction was towards India. At 2,000ft,



Khairudin Abdul Rani retired from his government job and pursued his hobby in hot air ballooning

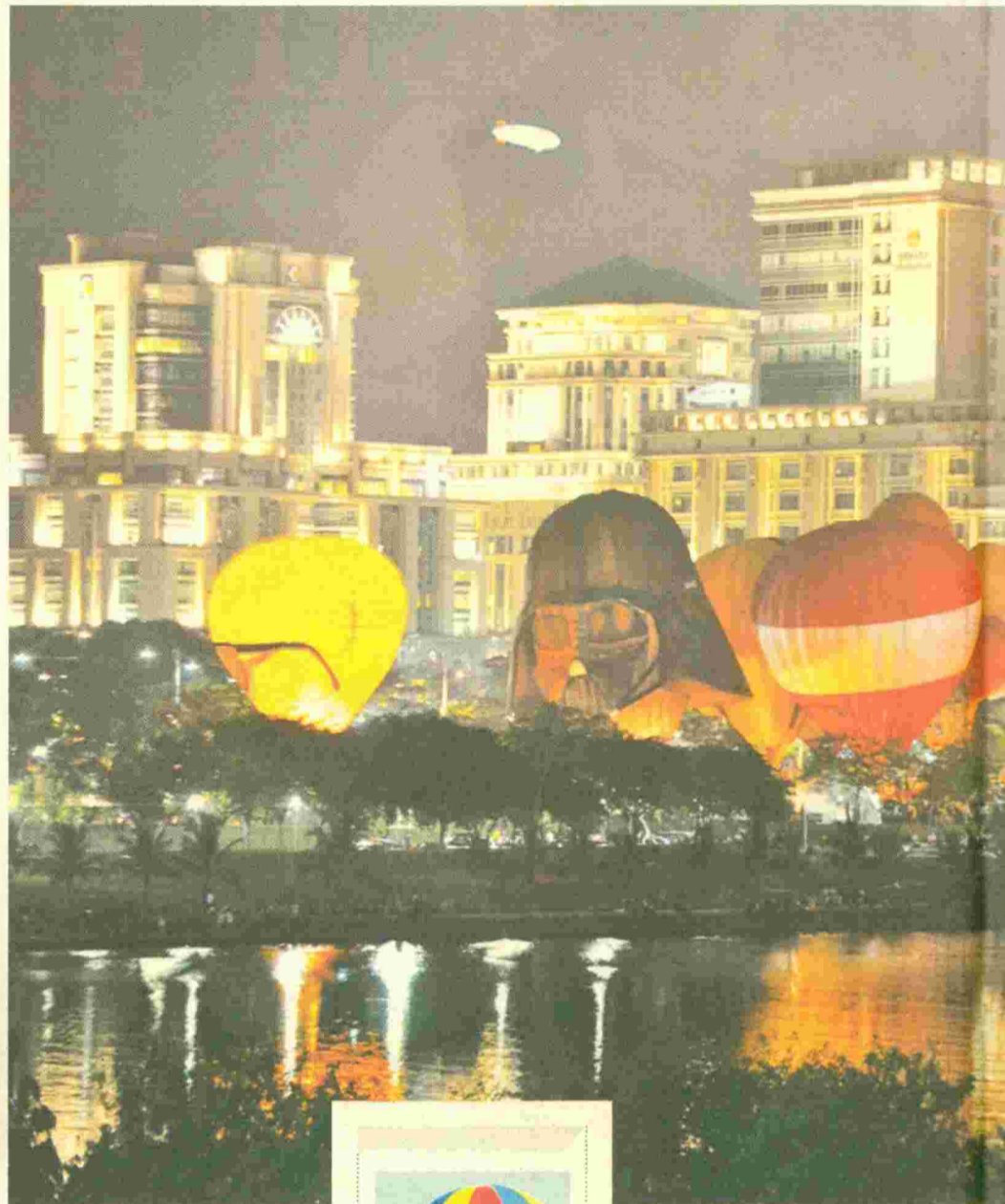


Maimoon Mohd is training to become a licensed hot air balloonist



"Some people buy cars or another house. My father? He buys a hot air balloon."

Nur Izzati Khairudin



it was towards Bangladesh, and at 3,000ft, Phuket. Only at 6,000ft did we get the wind direction we wanted."

Maimoon adds: "I thought we had lost him. The coast guards were already on standby."

A typical day sailing a hot air balloon starts early.

Khairudin reveals: "We have to be up by 6am. Then we load the balloon onto the lorry and go to a spot with open space such as Bangi. Once we get clearance from air traffic control, we can take off."

"Before 9am, we will have to land because it's too dangerous to fly in hot weather. After all, hot air rises."

He adds: "When you're up in a hot air balloon, you can start at point A but you never know where point B is."

To emphasise this point, he tells of a man his family likes to call Kamikaze.

Maimoon chips in: "He's a Japanese photographer. He's very impatient and one time, he just took off."

"We couldn't find him," adds Nur Izzati. "We knew he was somewhere near Shah Alam. What's more, he doesn't speak English. We had to find an American pilot who spoke Japanese to tell us about Kamikaze's situation. He told us there was a forest on one side and a river on the other. Forest? River? In Shah Alam? Then it got worse as he said he was chased by crocodiles."

need qualified and experienced pilots to sail the balloon. Remember, if things go wrong, there's very little time to sort things out before the balloon hits the ground."

Khairudin considers initiating the Putrajaya International Hot Air Balloon Fiesta in



4th International Hot Air Balloon Fiesta

Where: Grounds of Monumen Alaf Baru, Putrajaya

When: March 15-18

Tip: The highlight is an event called Night Glow. For one night only (March 17), all the balloons taking part in the fiesta will "glow" in the radiance of the fire heating up the balloons and "groove" to today's popular music.

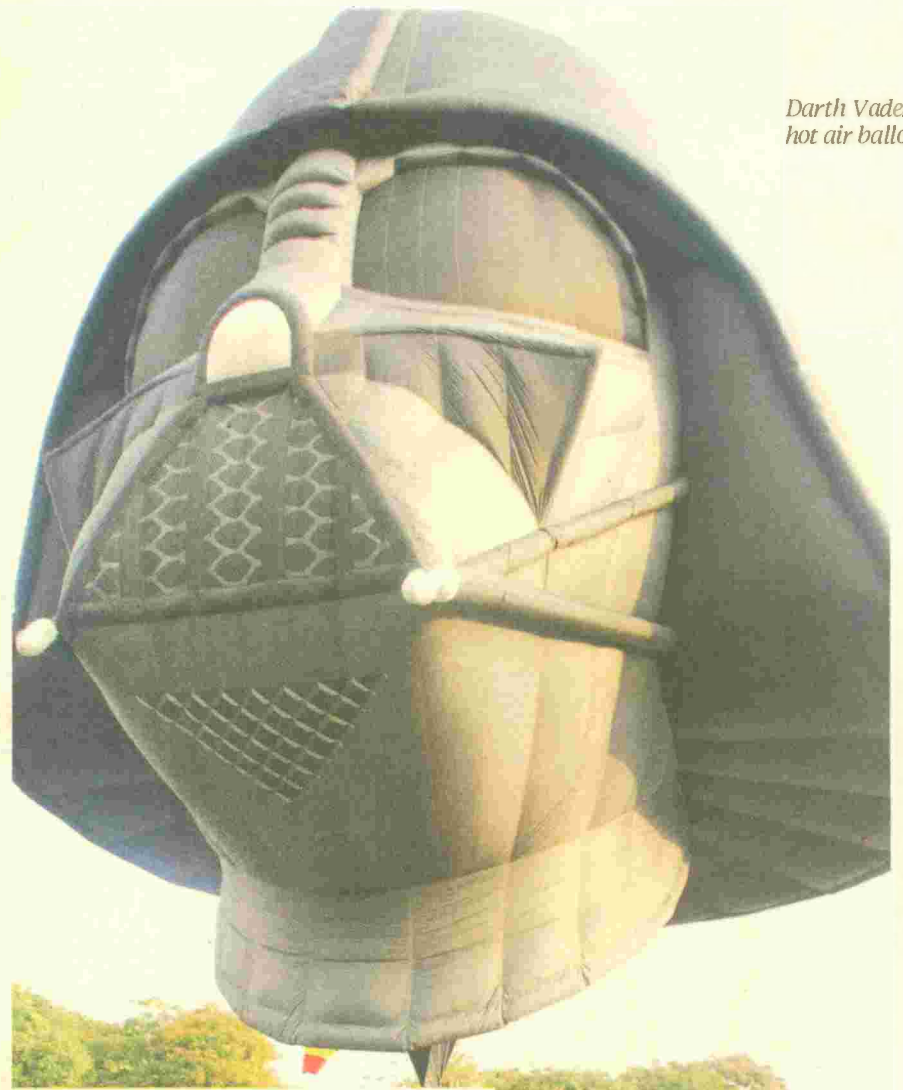
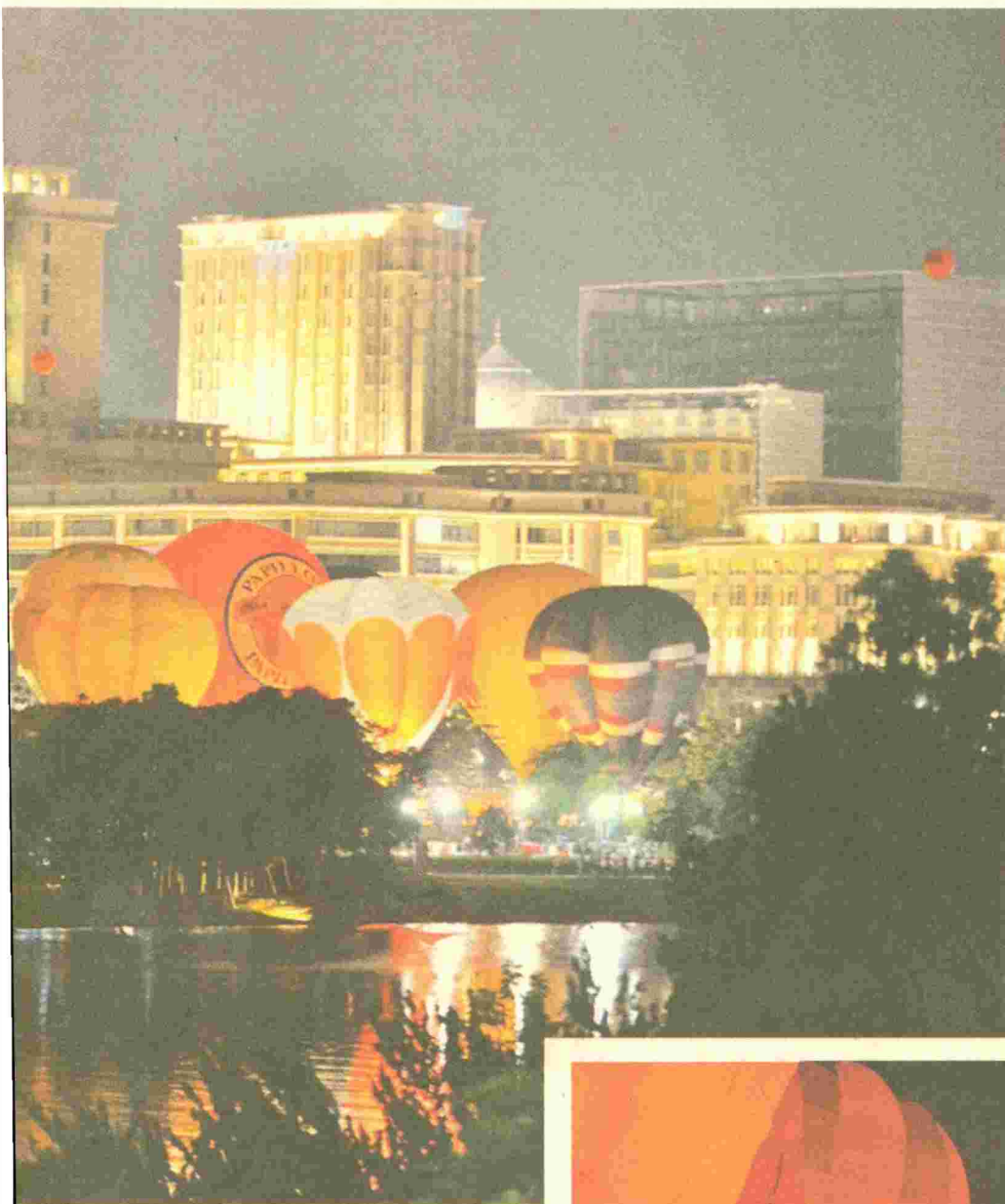
It turned out that Kamikaze was deep inside a palm oil estate and the "crocodile" was a biawak (monitor lizard).

The design of the hot air balloons also has been a subject of much drama in Khairudin's life.

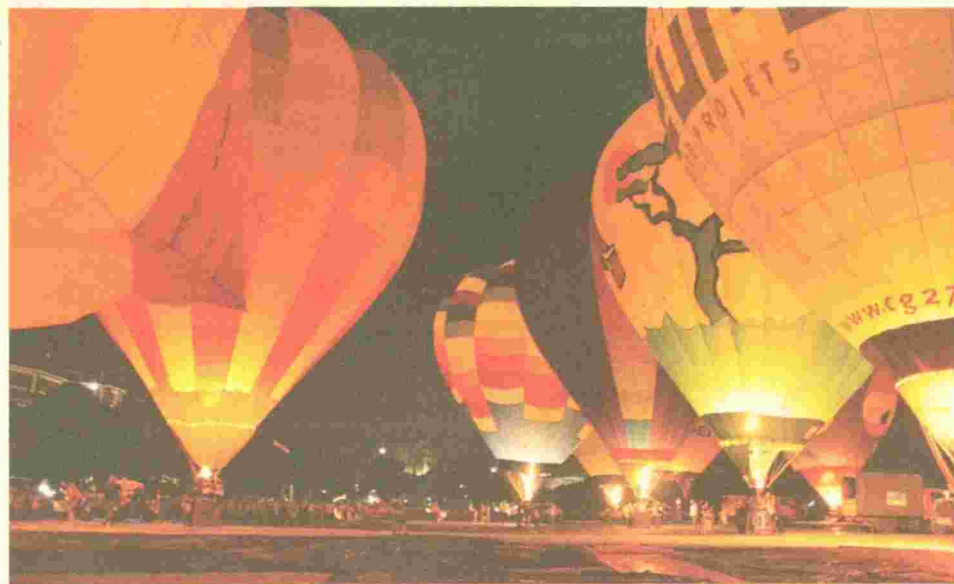
He says: "At one fiesta, there was a Darth Vader balloon. We asked the pilot for permission to inflate it. He agreed since it was not forecast to rain that day. Then, when the balloon was inflated, there was a thunderstorm. With lightning and thunder, Darth Vader did look pretty scary."

Nur Izzati adds that the next day, when they had to dry off the balloon, they found water trapped in the part of the nylon that made up Darth Vader's eyes. To release the water, a hole was made in the nylon. "It was the day we made Darth Vader cry," she says with a smile.

Khairudin emphasises the need for safety when piloting a hot air balloon, saying: "The standard operating procedures must be followed. There must be a rescue team in place and the equipment must be in good working order. Above all, you



Darth Vader hot air balloon



The much-anticipated night glow event

2009 as his greatest achievement. The fiesta has since become an annual event and Nur Izzati is always surprised at its huge turnout.

She says: "People are there the day before. One time, a pakcik told us he brought his grandchild all the way from Perlis to see the balloons. We feel bad whenever we have to turn some of them away because the tickets are sold out."

Khairudin's passion for hot air ballooning is obvious when he says gently: "In a hot air balloon, sometimes you can be above the mountains, and sometimes just 6 inches (15cm) above the sea. The beauty is, you're sailing with Nature."

DO YOU QUALIFY?

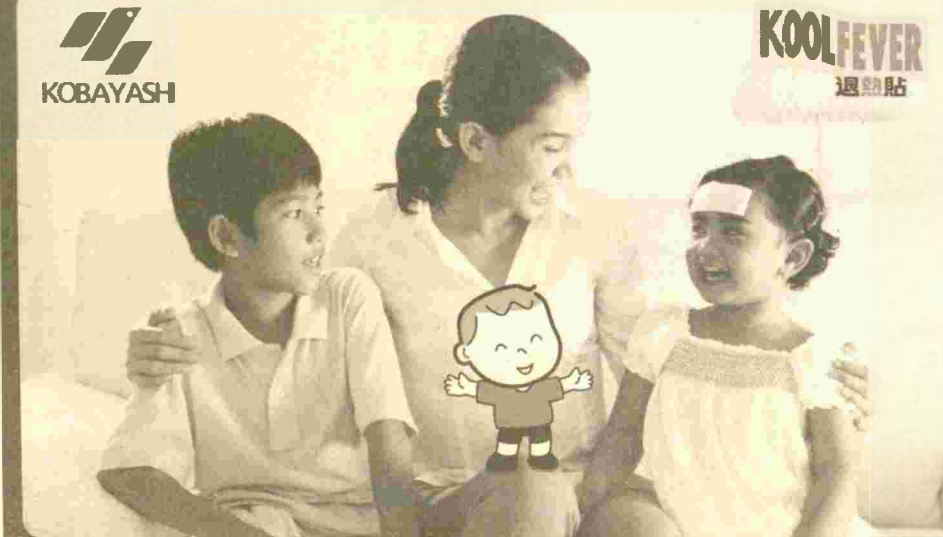
TO obtain a Private Pilot's Licence for a Hot Air Balloon, a candidate must:

- Have good eyesight
- Have a minimum qualification of Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (or its equivalent)
- Pass the examination with the Department of Civil Aviation of Malaysia in subjects such as Meteorology, Air Law, Navigation and Hot Air Balloon
- Complete 16 hours of flying with an instructor
- Complete one hour of flying solo
- Complete one hour of flying with an examiner



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