

Friday, July 18, 2008

Photos: Great Park balloon begins night flights

Inaugural riders enjoy an evening and night view 400 feet above the former El Toro base.

By SEAN EMERY
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

IRVINE – The sun had set, but the Great Park balloon was still rising above the Irvine landscape Thursday evening as riders enjoyed their first taste of the new night flights.

Nearly a week after Great Park leaders celebrated the iconic Orange balloon's return during the "Festival of Flight," the public was invited on the inaugural public night flight. The free flights are to run from 7 to 10 p.m., Thursdays through Sundays.

Dozens of riders climbed aboard the tethered helium ride, which rises 400 feet above the surrounding 27.5-acre preview park. As the newly lit balloon gently swayed in the night breeze, families looked out over after-hours landscape, from the mountains and agricultural fields in the distance to the bright lights of nearby shopping centers, residential development, and freeway commuters.

"It's nice to see the sunset and the colors change," said Matilde Barrows, an Irvine resident. "Things stand out more at night."

Spotlights surrounding the balloons launching pad lit up the ride, giving the balloon an even more pronounced Orange glow. Flashing lights on a nearby landing strip helped outline a time line of the bases history.

Riders can choose whether to take flights during the early evening hours, as the sun sets, or later in the evening, when the contrast between the night sky and the city lights is more pronounced.

"I think they are a really different feel," said Laura Kirchner, a Great Park program specialist of the night flights.

Park operators hope the new flight schedule will help draw people to the park after dark, especially as they gear up for weekly concerts and dances beginning in early August.

The balloon ride has drawn more than 40,000 passengers since opening in July of last year. The balloon was a gift from Lennar Corp., the city's partner in developing the Great Park and surrounding commercial and residential developments.

The balloon was grounded in February, as the FAA looked into alleged safety violations brought by a former balloon pilot, who claimed that that the ride's operators were flying it higher than 500 feet and flying with less than the required 5 miles of visibility.

The FAA investigation uncovered no safety violations, but inaccuracies in the balloon's flight permit delayed its return, forcing Great Park operators to re-submit applications.

In the meantime, Great Park leaders moved forward with construction of the preview park around the balloon ride. The preview park is but a slice of the 1,347-acre Great Park, but is meant to provide a taste of the larger development, as well as address criticism regarding the pace of park development.

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