



Herald reporter Laura Crimaldi gets a bird's-eye view of the Boston Hub via the AeroBalloon.

What it's like to be full of helium...

By Laura Crimaldi

Saturday, August 20, 2005 - Updated: 08:37 AM EST

I've peered down on Florence from the top of the Duomo, gazed at the shimmering Parisian skyline from the Eiffel Tower and beheld the sunset behind the Taj Mahal from a roof deck.

But I've never seen a cityscape while floating on air.

That is until yesterday when I soared 350 feet aboard a highly engineered helium AeroBalloon hovering over Boston Common.

You're eye level with the Zakim Bridge at midday. The rooftops on the Back Bay's brownstones look like sidewalk cafes with a view. You don't have to crane your neck to take in the elegant golden dome that tops the State House.

And ssshhh! The city hardly seems to let out a murmur when you're soaring farther and farther away from the traffic snarl headed to Storrow Drive, the lunchtime rush and every-day hustle and bustle of Beacon Hill.

"This is the first time something like this has been offered in an American city. It's been all over Europe in Vienna, Paris," said Mary Hines, the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

The agency teamed up with Boston-based AeroBalloon USA to offer the rides at Boston Common and next month at Franklin Park.

There is one catch, literally, but it's a good thing: The balloon is tethered so no one will be swept away. But that didn't prevent a little gentle teasing about an aerial escape.

"When it does break free from the tether, where do you want to go?" Ed O'Connell of Melrose asked his daughter Isabella, 8, before her flight yesterday.

"To the Wizard of Oz!" said Isabella.