

Sinbad by Balloon 2025 - Dondra to Toamasina

Report and thoughts - Renegade

March 2025

During my race prep and pre-race long range routing I looked for stable and variable wind areas. Also, where are the best approach winds to Toamasina and how could I get to them.

I noticed two options. The best winds were northwest of Dondra leading to Africa and then swinging south to Madagascar. I gave this option a lot of thought because it seemed there were optimal winds to carry a balloon almost to the finish, if only we could get to them. Leaving from Goa it would have been a different race since we would have been in the winds from the start. But, leaving from Dondra they seemed out of reach and only a very long slow route west would maybe get you to them. And who knew if they would still be there if you did make it to them. A phrase kept repeating in my head.

The winds to the west are a mirage at best.

So, I looked for another option. In the long-range routing an option showed up to head south, floating an S curve keeping the Maldives to the west and ending up heading east past Dondra's longitude to catch a ride south on the second part of curve thanks to an approaching cyclone. The hoped for result was to end up in the somewhat stable-looking easterly trade winds heading directly at Toamasina. A 2000+NM highway to the finish.

The third option was to head through the Maldives to somewhere in the middle and head south hoping a disruption in the winds would open a drain to pull the balloon across the doldrums to the southern trades. This option looked the most dangerous.

I opted to chase the Cyclone at the start with my last pre-race routing indicating a high chance of success. I set DC's and tweaked to head a bit more east initially to try and keep in the winds that would better pull the balloon south and east faster to try and catch the storm.

When I logged on in the morning after the start it was already a disaster for me. All the other balloons attempting the cyclone had a full 180 heading from Dondra. Sure, I was a bit more east with my TWA 175-ish but as we were already curving the top of the S to the west I was behind a lot. Deflating to say the least. It only got worse when I routed and found the cyclone could no longer be caught. Scratch plan A.

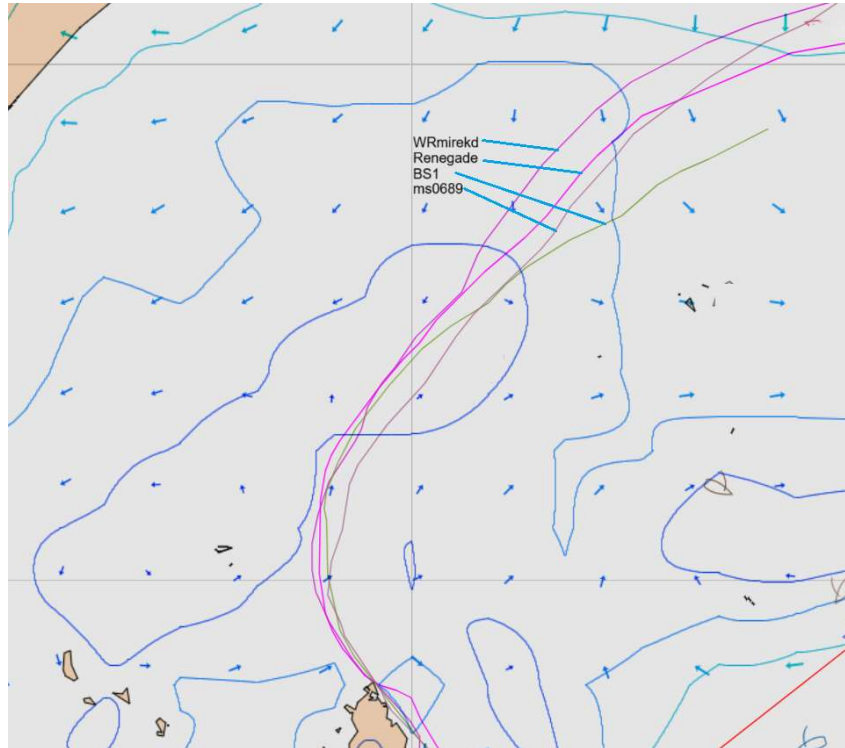
I opted to try and head west by taking the high road instead of the low road. I was very behind now having gone east and south initially. Typical of my balloon races. Sigh. Anyway, I started routing a west route and determined to stay at the highest latitude I could while hoping for a path to get more north if possible into better winds. I dropped a routing point to the west well north of the Seychelles. Days and days away. As the drift was on a great many boats opted to follow the S curve south and away at a high speed, making a lot of distance. I could not compete on that route and continued west through the Maldives. Luckily, I didn't get BBQ'd (popped) on one of the thousand or so pins in the water. Onward west for days. More boats took a southern heading and peeled away. North of me was WRmirekd, BS1 and a little behind at that point but more north was ms0689, bmd, and Siaki. I could not get further north, so I had to stay in my latitude lane and wait. I kept monitoring for an opening in the doldrums, but none emerged, and it was reassuring that I was not the only balloon heading west.

Maybe it was a week or so, but eventually BS1 passed south toward the Seychelles in front of me and bmd, ms0689, and Siaki were tending a bit south as well. Only WRmirekd and I stayed consistent on our latitudes as we drifted further west. Routings were now indicating going west of the Seychelles even past the longitude of Cap d'Ambre. In fact, long range routing had me landing on the far west side of Madagascar opposite Toamasina. I

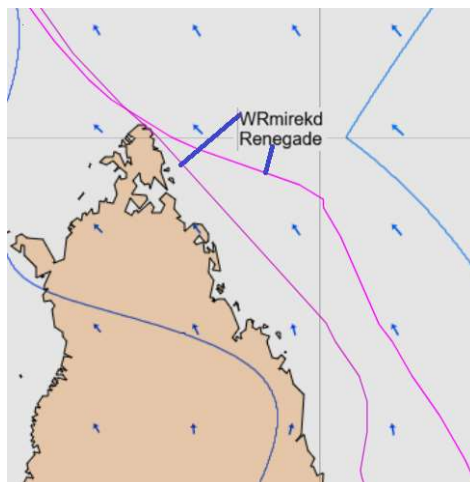


added a barrier to prevent this since I could not do a land portage, and continuing around the west side of the island hoping for a southern approach was crazy, even for me. Although I admit, I considered it.

As we approached a turning point somewhere north of the Seychelles, routes ranged from as far west as the Cosmoledo group to closer to the Seychelles. Adding a mark near Cap d'Ambre optimized the routing and avoided further SLI's keeping me safe. By this point BS1 had gotten stuck too far south and tried to get further west, allowing ms0689 and Renegade to pass. WRmirekd caught the breeze early and was too far ahead to the SW at this point. I got passed to the east by ms0689 who had opted for more speed but that changed a day later when Renegade was passing him back by virtue of being further west in optimal breeze. Tracks below.



The wind speeds and directions were optimal for a course to Cap d'Ambre, and distances expanded between our balloons. WRmirekd had good winds when he got there to go south immediately, a few hours later when Renegade arrived winds shifted to push me further east with a turn to head south about 25 NM east of WRmirekd. I opted for that route rather than hit the brakes to follow him. The reason is the winds offshore were stronger and I could make up distance. We needed to get more east anyway, and there might be a chance I could catch up and possibly pass him. I chased for days getting closer by distance to the finish but heading more and



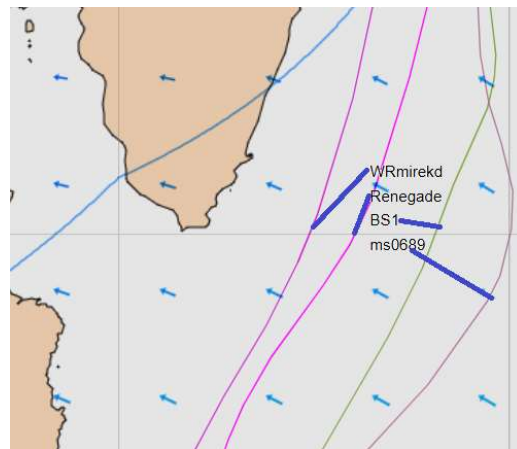
more east to have a slight edge in speed. It worked, I got closer, but a passing lane did not open for me. We drifted south excruciatingly slowly for days.

Danger came when ms0689 and BS1 arrived north and routing showed a passing lane for them opened up to pass me if they came south between WRmirekd and Renegade. 😞 Gulp. This polar is dangerous.

My hope was the lane would close because the pass would not actually happen until days later and only in the final 2 hours before the finish line. So, I monitored with fingers crossed for a day until it was clear both had passed up the lane and headed further east. Whew!

During the slow days when drifting slowly far in the north and along the coast of Madagascar I took to monitoring the fleet to see what was going on with the other balloons. Kastor managed a hefty separation from CriticalHippo and others to be the first to find his way south to the trade winds, kudos', but the winds deteriorated quickly resulting in chaos in the east. I wondered if they had all abandoned their routers opting to follow a honeybee waggle dance to the finish. Balloons were going in every direction for days. Chaotic Balloony.

As the finish approached in the final days the key was to stay west and wait for the winds to build that would carry us to the finish. This worked and as expected WRmirekd kept the lead. Kudo's for staying west along the coast. It worked. Unexpectedly ms0689 went too far east, allowing BS1 to pass to the west and take third to complete the podium.



This was the most challenging balloon race to date. I am really glad to have finished at all, to say nothing of managing a second place after a disaster of a start. Looking forward to the next leg.

David / Renegade

PS: Here are a couple pictures from the journey. The first of the Maldives, the second the Seychelles.

