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5 Great
Roadside
Eateries

Flying
High

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LONG BEACH
KITE FESTIVAL

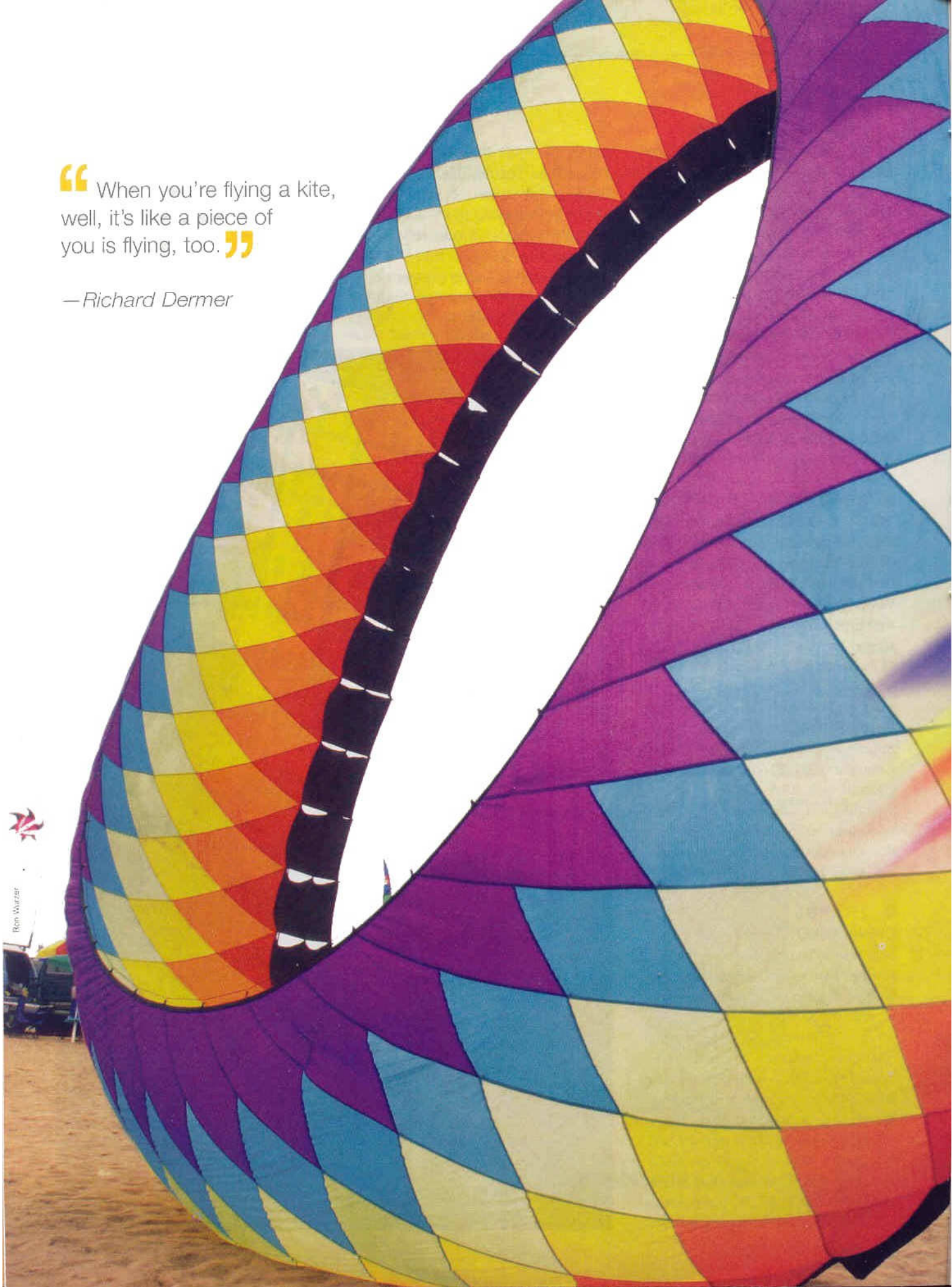
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“ When you're flying a kite,
well, it's like a piece of
you is flying, too. ”

—Richard Dermer





BY MARIA DOLAN

Lofty Pursuits

Shooting the breeze at Long Beach's high-flying International Kite Festival

My memories of kite flying as a Seattle kid are few, and they all have a common theme: My fingers froze. My father loved the challenge of launching our craft; I loved hanging out with him, something that would have been even more enjoyable somewhere out of the wind and drizzle. As an adult, I've never gone out of my way to hold a kite string. But while watching someone work to get a stubborn kite aloft, I wondered if I was missing something. Surely, there must be a hidden payoff to this challenging, digit-numbing pastime.

I got clued in at the Washington State International Kite Festival, a weeklong event held each August on southwest Washington's Long Beach Peninsula. The stretch of beach is famous for near-perfect kiting conditions. There are no cliffs, buildings, or big trees nearby to cause air turbulence. And best of all, no power lines to snag the kites.

Local residents started the festival in 1981 as a way to promote their string of cute beach towns. Their first event attracted only nine participants and a few dozen spectators—but from there the idea took flight. Today, the Long Beach kite festival is the largest of its kind in

A wind wheel catches the breeze as well as the eye.



North America, attended by an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 people over the week. In 2004, the Kite Trade Association named the festival the best in the U.S. for its popularity and for its lineup of events and international guests.

On the Long Beach Peninsula, it's not uncommon to see one or two kites in the sky, adrift on the blue backdrop like ships at sea. At the festival, however, the hundreds of kites overhead jostle for space like boats in a busy harbor. "It's colorful beyond belief," says festival participant Bill Cox. "In the middle of the week, when the festival peaks, there could be up to a thousand kites in the air at a time."

Enormous cat-shaped kites prowl among the clouds; sport kites swoop and dive like bats; and "ladders to the sky"—kite trains made up of several hundred small kites attached to one line—seem to stretch to infinity. Fluttering fabric flags and streamers known as "windfeathers" and "line laundry" decorate the tents of kite enthusiasts and clubs.

Cox and his wife, Jo Ann, both

retired, have attended a number of festivals with the Lilac City Wind Chasers of Spokane. Their club specializes in "trains." "We'll put 101 kites on a line, each six feet apart. Then we anchor the line in the sand or attach it to the boardwalk and let it fly," he explains. The Coxes also fly two-line kites. Jo Ann revealed what makes flying kites so appealing to her: "You have to concentrate so hard you kind of forget your troubles," she says. "You just . . . fly."

Activities fill each day during the festival. At a showcase of fighter kites, fliers maneuver the flat, lightweight, tailless kites so they swirl like loose pieces of paper. In some parts of the world, fliers battle with their fighter kites, attempting to knock a competitor out of the sky. Sometimes they coat their kite line with glass in order to cut an opponent's line. In North America, fighter-kite fliers win points simply by touching the other kite's line, or by demonstrating feats of skill.

Other events include the tiniest kite competition, where a design can be as small as a housefly. During the kite

ballet competition, fliers choreograph routines set to music. Some competitions even take place indoors at a local gym, where fliers keep their lightweight kites aloft with the constant movement of their hands.

The festival draws international guest artists from as far away as Japan, South America, and Europe, who show off kites and kiting skills rarely seen in our country. At booths, festivalgoers can view exhibits, shop for kites, or make one of their own. Enthusiastic spectators are even encouraged to ask for permission to hold or fly the kites on display.

For some people, flying a kite can be a spiritual experience. Richard Derner of Oklahoma, a former president of the American Kitefliers Association who has taught thousands of children the art of kite making and kite flying, says, "When you're flying a kite, well, it's like a piece of you is flying, too."

For others, designing and displaying homemade kites is the appeal. Retired engineer Sam Huston of Kent, one of the country's top kite builders, attends the festival with his wife, Ann, to show off some of his hundreds of

The word "kite" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "cyta," a kind of hawk.



Kite trains and sport kites (below right) are frequent fillers at the festival.

All Kinds of Kites

What do Charlie Brown, Benjamin Franklin, and Wilbur and Orville Wright have in common? They've all secured a spot in the World Kite Museum's Hall of Fame. (Charlie Brown never could keep his aloft, but he gets points for always giving it another try.) Their plaques are displayed alongside dozens of other important figures in kiting history, starting with "anonymous," who flew the first known "kitelike object" in the fourth century BC in China.

The museum, in Long Beach, is the only one of its kind in the Western Hemisphere. (Japan and other countries in Asia where kites have a long history also have kite museums.) The collection of more than 1,600 kites, including the most complete assemblage of Japanese kites outside Japan, moved last November from a Long Beach bungalow to its permanent home, a former fitness club next to the beach with 4,500-plus square feet of display space.

Now the museum can display larger kites, such as a 20-foot-long, hand-painted Indonesian shark kite constructed of bamboo. In an activity room, visitors can even try their hand at making their own kites. The museum is located at 303 Sid Snyder Drive S.W. For current exhibits and events, call (360) 642-4020 or go to www.worldkitemuseum.com. —M.D.

designs by flying them. "We spend the day putting kites up and taking them down," he says. Huston likes to work with historic designs and ancient symbols. At the 2005 festival, one of his kites resembled a Navajo blanket; another incorporated Celtic knot work. When making a kite, Huston first creates a prototype using sailboat spinnaker cloth. If the prototype is airworthy, he sews the actual kite from colorful ripstop nylon, the preferred fabric for modern kites.

Huston says the reason he loves to fly kites is ineffable, something one can only understand by holding the strings oneself. "If you're holding a line and someone asks why," he adds, "don't bother to answer because they won't understand."

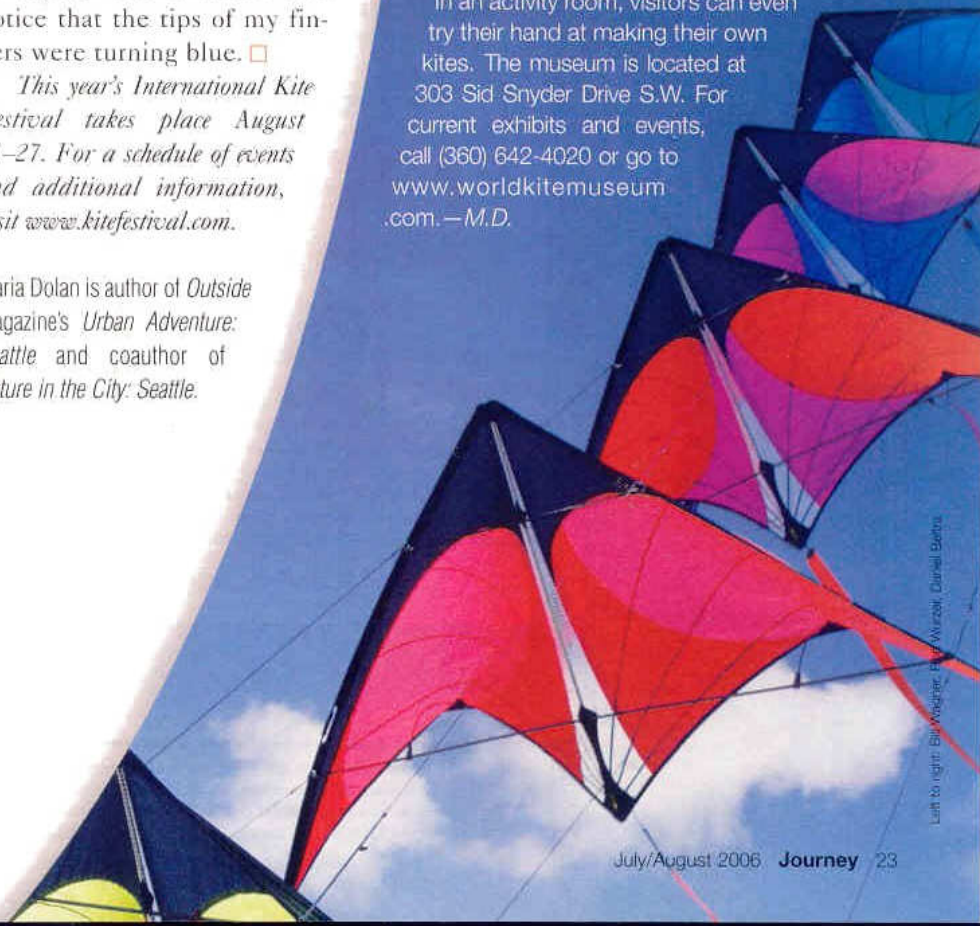
My own enlightenment came when kite designer Mark Reed, president of Seattle's Prism Designs, placed an ultralight, two-line sport kite in my hands while I was standing near the edge of the Long Beach surf. These models are made of aerospace materials such as carbon fiber and Kevlar, and weigh only a few ounces. Some can fly 70 miles per hour. As in figure skating, competitions for sport kites are judged on

detail, and experts can make their creations perform dazzling acrobatics.

I wouldn't win any competitions with my first efforts, which mostly involved trying to keep the bat-winged kite from nosediving into spectators' heads. But as I worked with the wind, my kite swooped and soared. I focused so tightly that I didn't even notice that the tips of my fingers were turning blue. □

This year's International Kite Festival takes place August 21–27. For a schedule of events and additional information, visit www.kitefestival.com.

Maria Dolan is author of *Outside Magazine's Urban Adventure: Seattle* and coauthor of *Nature in the City: Seattle*.



Left to right: Bill Winger, Peter Winger, Daniel Winger