One of the great surprises about travel is that you never know who you are going to meet. Some weeks ago I was just getting settled into my aisle seat on a flight from Chicago to Philly when I struck up a conversation with a woman in the window seat.

“Are you traveling for business or pleasure?” I asked. When she replied, “A little bit of both,” I knew there had to be a story behind the comment. Sure enough, there was. I soon learned I was talking to Susan Skinner, President of the American Kitefliers Association. Before long I was introduced to a world that I never knew even existed: the fascinating world of kiting. Yes, kiting.

Perhaps it was my obvious curiosity which caused her to hand me a “Join the American Kitefliers Association” brochure which explained, “The American Kitefliers Association (AKA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating the public in the art, history, technology, and practice of building and flying kites.” (www aka kite org)

Founded in 1964, the AKA has over 4,000 members in 35 countries of the world. Over 100 affiliated local kite clubs participate in more than 100 sanctioned events in the United States alone. Competitor ranking and world record tracking of achievements are available within the sport. There is even a National Kite Month – April.

A kite is defined as a “tethered aerodyne deriving all its lift from ambient winds and unassisted by any ‘booster’ such as a rocket, balloon, gas, motor, electricity, explosives or other applied devices.” And there are at least 15 recognized flight categories, from altitude by a single kite to most kites flown on one line, and from longest kite tail to greatest weight lifted by a kite.

In the history of flight, the first lighter-than-air balloon (1783) and the first powered aircraft (1903) are very recent when compared with the age of kites. The exact date and origin of the kite is not known but it is believed that they were flown in China more than 2000 years ago. You can also find references to kiting in the historical records of Korea, Japan and Malaysia. Marco Polo carried stories of kites to Europe around the end of the 13th century.

Benjamin Franklin immortalized the kite with his 1752 electrical experiment during a thunderstorm. His findings were legendary.

How do you build a bridge to span the great gorge of Niagara Falls? In 1847 Homan Walsh, a 10 year old boy solved the dilemma when he flew a kite over it. Progressively heavier lines were
fed across until a steel cable connected the cliffs. From that cable a bridge was constructed. A lesser known fact was that hundreds of years before Homan, Leonardo da Vinci had also devised the use of kites to help in bridge construction.

We all know that Wilbur and Orville Wright are credited with the invention (1903) of the airplane. But the Wright Brothers were also skilled in kite flying and riding. It was their years of kite flying that directly led to the invention of the airplane.

The best time to fly a kite is when the wind is between 4 and 12 miles-per-hour. If the wind is less, then most kites have problems flying. If the wind is more, then most kites will lose control.

Technical terms like “Yaw” and “Pitch” and “Roll” are used to describe the science of kiting.

Kiters are passionate about the art and science of kiting. “We love to fly,” one kiter exclaimed. “I can’t begin to explain the overwhelming joy that I feel from the entire flying experience.”

Susan Skinner really did introduce me to a whole new world. I wonder who I might meet the next time I travel. As Lauren Bacall said, “Imagination is the highest kite one can fly.”

Think about it.

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