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Hobbyist Shoots Earth From Edge of Space With Used Camera From eBay

NASA Spends \$450 Million for Shuttle Flights; Robert Harrison Uses Weather Balloons, Duct Tape for \$750



By NED POTTER

March 26, 2010

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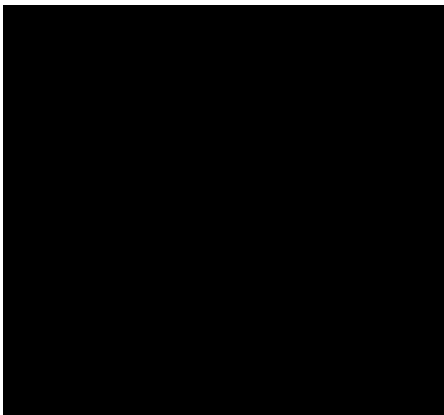
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A typical space shuttle mission flies 200 miles above the earth's surface and returns beautiful pictures on the way, but it involves 1,500 people, puts six or seven astronauts at risk and costs, depending on who's doing the counting, close to half a billion dollars.



Robert Harrison got some pretty good pictures too. He did it with a weather balloon, a used digital camera he picked up on eBay and some duct tape.

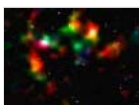
"I thought I was going to get some nice pictures," said Harrison, a computer engineer from the British town of Highburton, West Yorkshire, "but I didn't realize I'd see the curvature of the earth, the blue band of the atmosphere and the blackness of space."

His camera rises to altitudes of about 20 miles over the English countryside. The price per flight: about \$750.

A British inventor uses a camera, balloon and duct tape to photograph space.

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Harrison began his hobby two years ago, figuring it might be fun to get pictures of his house from above. The project has, er, ballooned since then.

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He has tried it 20 times since 2008. He named his project Icarus, after the young man in Greek mythology who flew too close to the sun.

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Harrison is quick to say that what he's doing is not nearly as complex as what NASA does ("NASA's done a phenomenal amount of work."), and he is, to borrow Isaac Newton's phrase, standing on the shoulders of giants. He buys weather balloons from a supplier in the United States; pictures from balloon-borne cameras long pre-date the space program. He uses an off-the-shelf **GPS locator**, which gets signals from U.S. satellites, so he can track the balloon on Google maps. He bought a **Canon pocket digital camera** (a model discontinued in 2008) and attached a circuit board so that it would take pictures every five minutes.

The results you see. The camera shoots randomly, turning in the wind. Some of the images are ruined by sunlight; others are quite striking.

The balloon rises, carried randomly by the wind, until it bursts. The camera then parachutes to the ground in its housing. Harrison put his phone number and a printed label on the outside: "Harmless Scientific Experiment."



West Yorkshire, from about 20 miles up. Courtesy Robert Harrison.

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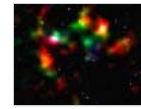
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