

a new worldview



Photos by KYNDELL HARKNESS • kharkness@startribune.com

Lois Ostrem's first-grade class pointed to where they thought Roseville was in the world inside the big balloon of the Earth at Parkview Center School in Roseville. Earth Adventure will be bringing its inflated Earth to the Festival of Nations celebration in St. Paul to share with thousands of students.

Quick, what's the tallest mountain? The biggest desert? A geography lesson in the 20-foot-high "Earth balloon" at St. Paul's Festival of Nations offers a truly global view.



Ostrem's class made its way toward the 20-foot diameter balloon. The first such balloon was built by a group of Minnesota architects for the U.S. bicentennial in 1976.

« IT WAS KIND OF SCARY, LIKE YOU WERE [AT THE NORTH POLE] IN REAL LIFE. IT'S SO SUPER-BIG. »

First-grader Angel Escobar, on entering the Earth balloon

By JEAN HOPFENSBERGER • hopfen@startribune.com

Angel Escobar was a little wary about traveling to the center of the Earth. But on Tuesday, she and her Roseville classmates stepped inside a 20-foot-high globe and stared up at the North Pole in awe.

"It was kind of scary, like you were there in real life," said Escobar, a first-grader at Parkview Center School, after stepping out of the globe that consumed a quarter of the school gym. "It's so super big."

The "Earth balloon" that Escobar explored Tuesday is one of the new attractions at this year's Festival of Nations in St. Paul, which opens Thursday. Minnesota's largest event about world cultures draws about 100,000 visitors to the St. Paul RiverCentre each year for four days of dance, music, food, crafts and entertainment.

The giant globe, which has a long and quirky history, gives visitors a chance to literally see on a map where their food and entertainers hail from, said Steve Heckler.

Earth continues: An exciting way to learn. **B10 ▶**

A NEW WORLDVIEW

◀ EARTH FROM B1

Heckler coordinates the annual festival, sponsored by the International Institute of Minnesota.

"It makes learning about the world exciting," said Heckler, who was busy setting up the mock village and storefronts in St. Paul this week.

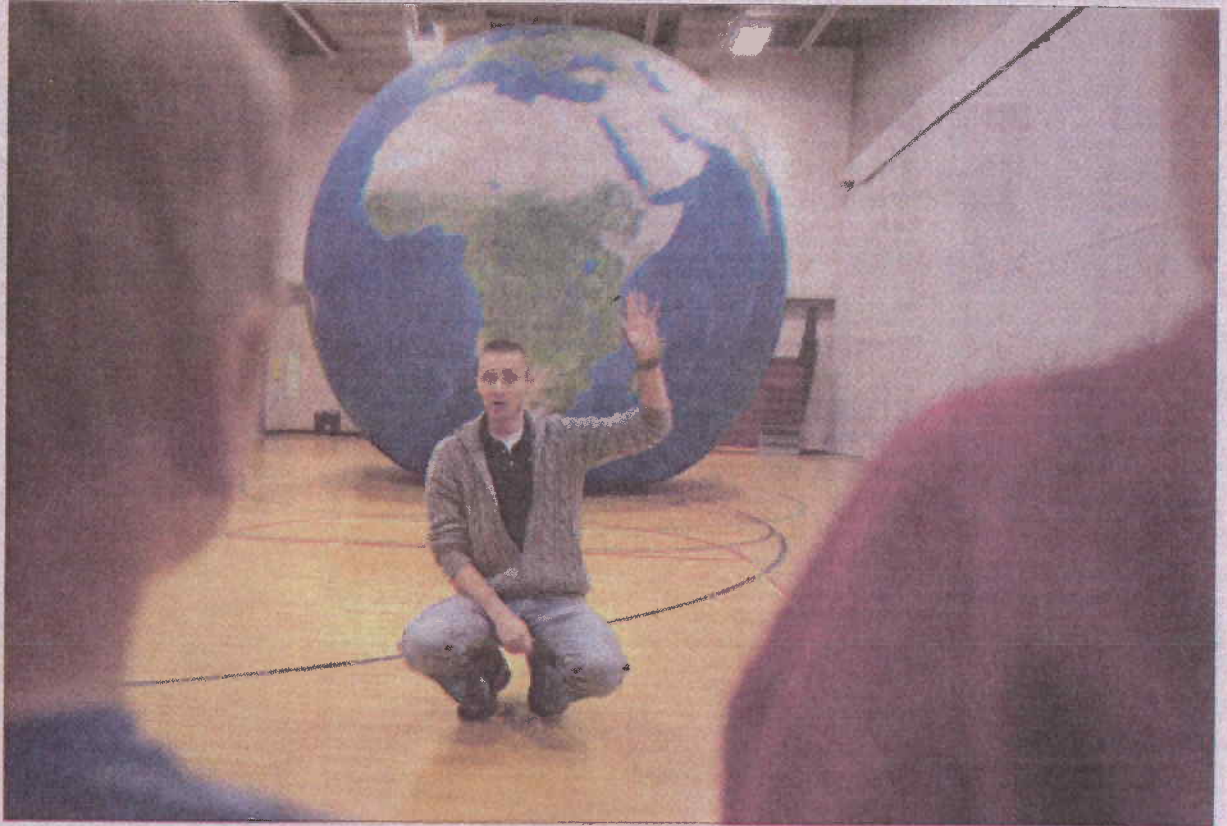
Heckler said he heard about the balloon from colleagues who run a similar festival in Indiana. He was surprised to learn that the owners of the globe and its educational curriculum — Audrey and David Knutson — live in Circle Pines.

In fact, the first "Earth balloon" was built by several Minnesota architects as a traveling education exhibit for the U.S. bicentennial, said Afton architect Jerry Allan, one of the original designers of the balloon. He had no idea it would endure for three decades, "but I hoped so."

The original version was handpainted, using a slide projector to project the green continents and swirling blue seas, Allan said. Today, the oceans and land images come courtesy of satellite photographs taken by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, said David Knutson.

After the globe's debut in the 1970s, the Earth balloon started traveling to classrooms around the country, even landing in the hands of famed ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau and the United Nations, Allan said. Since the Knutsons took over operation of the balloon about 15 years ago, they've slowly ramped up its presence. Now there are six balloons.

More than 32,000 schoolchildren around the nation toured a balloon in the 2007 school year alone, said



KYNDELL HARKNESS • kharkness@startribune.com

Stefan Knutson, program facilitator for Earth Adventure, asked Lois Ostrem's first-grade class what continent was at the bottom of the Earth before entering the balloon at Parkview Center School in Roseville. Earth Adventure will be bringing its inflated Earth to the Festival of Nation celebration to share with thousands of students.

IF YOU GO

The 2008 Festival of Nations will feature more than 90 music and dance groups, 35 ethnic cafes and 51 international vendors at its world bazaar.

It opens Thursday for school groups and Friday to the public.

Hours: 4 to 10 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday.

Location: St. Paul River Centre, 175 West Kellogg Blvd., St. Paul.

Cost: \$9 for adults, \$7 for children.

For more information: www.festivalofnations.com

David Knutson. But the 15,000 schoolchildren expected to see the balloon Thursday and Friday at the Festival of Nations could be its biggest wave ever. The Roseville class offered a preview into what the

others will see.

After squealing over the sight of the balloon, about 20 first-graders crawled inside and sat cross-legged on the snowy Antarctica, the floor of the balloon. Using a flashlight

to point at the world overhead, teacher Stefan Knutson showed the students some highlights, such as the driest place on earth (the Atacama Desert in Chile.) and the world's largest desert (the Sa-

hara in Africa).

"What's the longest river in the world?" he asked the students.

"The Nylon River," responded one boy, in earnest.

"Yes, the Nile River," said Knutson.

Afterward, the kids had a lot of questions. Did volcanoes still exist? Where is China? Is there really lava inside the Earth?

"That was really fun," said first-grader Akash D'Souza as he filed out the door. "I liked it all."

Jean Hopfensperger • 651-298-1553