

A HISTORY OF THE BALLULE
 By Gilles Ebersolt, architect-inventor
 (April 2008)

Summer 1974 : After making a 400-sq. m inflatable structure with Philippe L. and Pierre M., we presented the object at the Tabarka Festival in Tunisia. Marc P. joined us and we met a group of Dutch plastic artists, the Event Structure Research Group. They were experimenting with an elongated object that floated on the sea with a person walking inside it. Marc P. and I thought that we could move from this shape to a sphere and make an all-terrain device.



30 september 1974 : My first design for an all-terrain inflatable bicycle. I was 17 years old, lived in Paris with my parents and, after school, worked on the design of what would become the Ballule. Marc P. and I had an aim—a descent of the Cadélique at Vébron in an inflatable object (48).



THE BALLULE

1975 : I started to make the first Ballule in the underground car park—unused at night—at my family home.
29 January 1976, 4.30 p.m : I found the note 'it's almost finished' on an assembly diagram. It was doubtless true but I had no proof. The Ballule was inflated for the first time in my grandmother's flat on Quai Voltaire in Paris. This showed me that the ceiling was at a suitable height: 3.20 metres!



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18 June 1977 : Inauguration of the Ballule at a memorable event: 'Agre à Grez'. Pressure was maintained by a set of 4 reversed vacuum cleaners.



It took me two years to finalise the prototype of the Ballule, pass the Baccalauréat and a beekeeping diploma, launch La Montagne Molle and install amateur hives in the Seine-et-Marne department. At the same time, I moved to Batignolles with Marc P. and started work.

18 April 1979 : The design was registered at the Conseil des Prud'hommes. First professional contacts for the technical and commercial development of the Ballule.



August 1980 : First article in *Presse Pratique*, a magazine for students. Christophe d'Yvoire, a friend of Nathalie C., wrote the article.



30 October 1980 : Patent application filed at the Institut national de la propriété industrielle (INPI). The administrative constraints of the descriptive part led to fairly profound reflection on the design. Thanks to Marc P. for his linguistic and strategic advice.

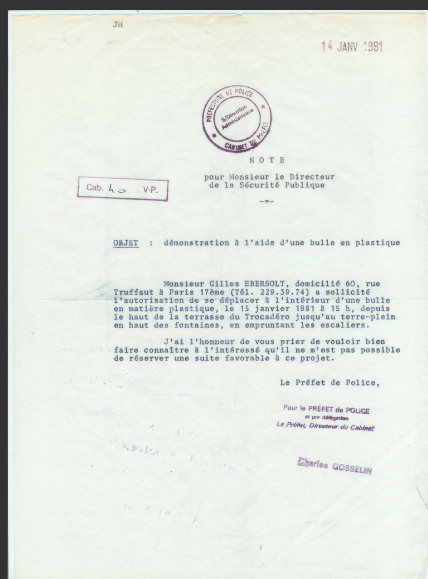
5 December 1980 : Delivery of the prototype of the second generation Ballule in PVC. This was made by the Nausicaa company for FF20,000, that is to say about EUR3,000.

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January 1981 : Recognition of the existence of the Ballule by the public authorities. The Prefect of Police of Paris, Mr Charles Gosselin, officially forbade me to go down the terrace of the Trocadéro in Paris. I was formally questioned.

February 1981 : First commercial contract for Radio Monte Carlo's *Tournée des neiges* (snow tour). I made three prototypes in clear PVC and managed the tour. I didn't earn a penny and went through hell but kept the prototypes for future use.



March 1981 : First TV coverage for the programme 'Incroyable mais vrai' hosted by Jacques Martin. Participation by Jean Lefebvre as a stuntman.

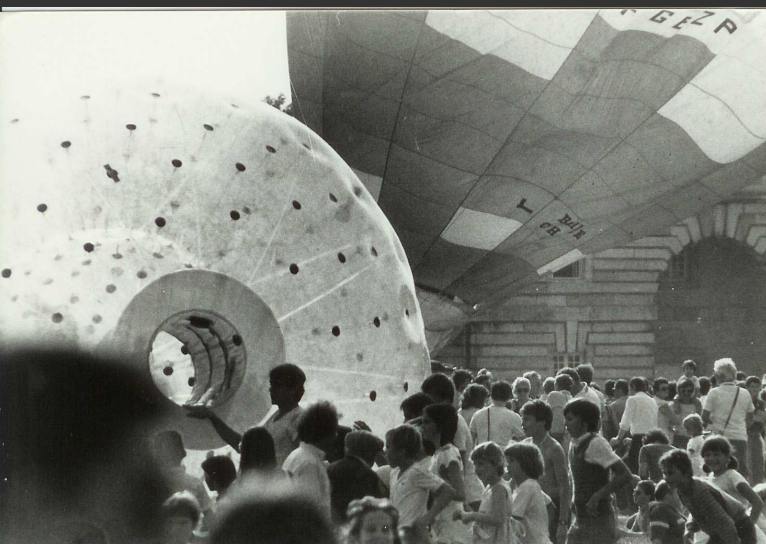


April 1981 : The beginning of the 'events' career of the Ballule in Tel Aviv. This became routine but I perfected a new prototype, the third generation Ballule.

31 March 1982 : The third generation Ballule was ordered, with new materials that are still secret today! I prepared extremely daring sports exploits and needed exceptional elasticity! Pierre Vibert at Etablissements Dumoutier Décré in Châteauroux handled manufacture. I stayed in Châteauroux to monitor manufacture. Pierre V. taught me how to trace templates and use beam compass to mark points at a constant distance.

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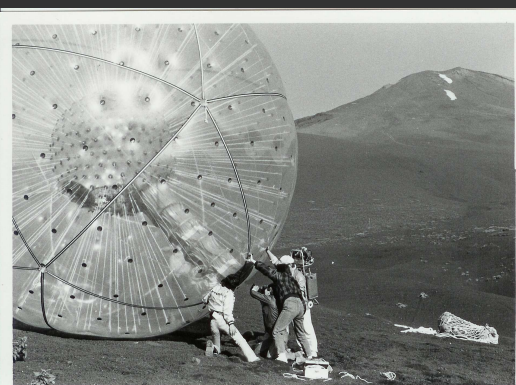
1982 – 1985 : I participated in numerous events and in particular in filming for the programme 'That's Incredible' for ABC in the United States:

La noire de Peutrey (Hautes Alpes) ;
Les chutes du Hérisson (Jura).

My two friends Eric S. and Eric B. came with me. We discovered rural France and the beginnings of 'sports involving sliding'. François Garcia lost a tooth in the waterfalls.

We tried the Ballule and a giant toboggan on the 'Kilomètre lancé' ('flying kilometre') course at Les Arcs 2000 for the filming of 'Apocalypse snow'.

19 March 1985 : I signed an exceptional order with NHK—a descent of Mount Fuji in a 6-metre super-Ballule! I developed the fourth generation prototype with PTS and in July 1985 this was beneath the Buddhist monastery at the summit of the mountain. A grand moment on the steep slopes of the volcano, covered with black ash. The Ballule finished the descent in a military installation and I finished up between two NCOs. I discovered sushi and the warm welcome given by the Japanese.



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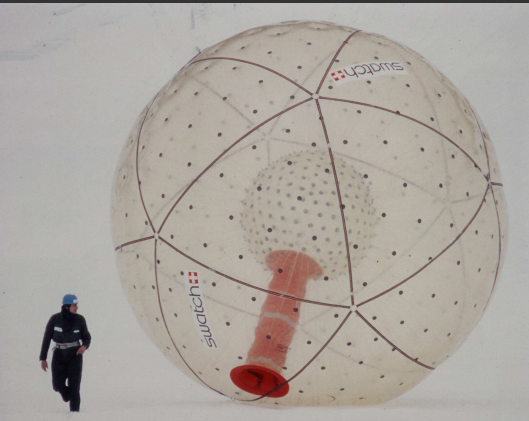
1986-87 : Thirteen years since I launched the product. In spite of considerable media coverage every time I participated in an event, the Ballule was called a novelty. I was almost embarrassed, because I felt that the novelty was beginning to show a few wrinkles. In addition, I did not really find commercial outlets and I decided to qualify as an architect, have a child and concentrate on a project that was even more audacious than the Ballule—making a platform float above the trees for scientists: the Treetop Raft kept me busy for 20 years!



1990 : In contradiction with my forecasts, the Ballule was still of interest! Jackie Chan contacted me for his film 'Operation Condor', which was released the following year. I started production of a new Ballule and took the job of stuntman for spectacular shooting in the Philippines.



1991-2000 : I built various Ballules but above all spent a lot of time on the most beautiful forest canopies in the world in West Africa, South America and the Indian Ocean. With my friends Francis H., Dany C-M., Patrick B., Olivier P., Laurent P., François C. and Jean D, I developed astonishing contraptions: the Treetop Raft, Skimmers, the Nacelle Pendulaire, Ikos and various Bulles. Up with forests and their users!



2001 : : Incredible. Journalists discover a novelty in New Zealand, the Zorb! A precise copy of the Ballule wrapped up in a high-performance marketing concept. Twenty-six years after the creation of the Ballule, the New Zealand product curiously profited from perfect virginity! The 'novelty' card played once again by poorly informed communication people! The legal procedure is ongoing.



2008 : It is 31 years since the creation of the first Ballule and web surfers on Wikipedia wonder whether it dates back to 1999 or 1994 and whether it is a question of 'zorbing' or 'sphering'. The story has no mysteries. Let the legal professionals decide about the extent of the infringement. Meanwhile, with a team of inspired architects and passionate designers, I am developing sustainable ways of living for users attracted by playful creations that respect the environment: habitats off the ground (anchored in the treetops), efficient houses, an arts research centre and a plantation of oaks in the Limousin, but without forgetting " **THE RETURN OF THE BALLULE** "!