

Flying colours

Take to the skies in a majestic hot air balloon and experience the Arabian Desert's breathtaking beauty first hand

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The UAE is a land of many experiences – you can bump your way over the desert in a 4X4, shop in the luxury of vast malls or sail around the spectacular coastline. But few things are more memorable than a hot air balloon trip over the sprawling and majestic Arabian Desert.

Gliding above the dry, arid wilderness might seem like a distant fantasy, but eager to start my own airborne adventure, I was on my way to making this far-off dream a reality.

MAKING TRACKS

Still tired from the early rise (we meet at 4.30am), I can't help but feel a thrill of excitement as I climb onto the minibus in Dubai and set off for Al Ain in the emirate of Abu Dhabi.

Our pilot-to-be, Peter Kollar of Balloon Adventures Emirates, is no less excited than we. Even though he's piloted hundreds of flights over the desert, his eyes still light up as he describes the sun rising over the sand dunes and radiating onto the scenery below.

"You'll absolutely love it," he enthuses. "The winds in the desert pick up with the sunrise and they can get quite strong throughout the day, lasting well into the night." So, it's best to combine the beauty of the rising sun with weaker winds and pleasantly warm weather.

The minibus journey is taken up by a few formalities, questions from eager passengers and a form on which we must state our weight in kilograms. "This is so that we know how to balance the ▶



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balloon properly and can make sure there's enough load to weigh down the basket," Peter explains, scuppering any ideas we have of tampering with the answer!

The first glimpse of the balloon is no disappointment. Even lying on its side, A6 Boy, our carrier for the morning, is a bright kaleidoscope of colour in the dusky light.

Although I had been expecting something big, I hadn't foreseen anything on such a grand scale.

Even partially inflated and on its side, the envelope (techie term for the bag in which the hot air is contained) is a sight to behold. "This is one of the biggest balloons in the world," Peter informs us as he lines us up on either side of the vessel and prepares for her airborne adventure.

Peter talks us through the landing position before a quick count reveals there are 16 passengers, and three pilots who'll be joining us for the flight.

For a few minutes, it's all a rush as he transforms the partially inflated balloon into a vertical masterpiece. Jumping into the centre of the basket, he expertly aims blasts of propane fire into the cold-inflated balloon, causing the air inside to expand and slowly lift the vessel into a standing position.

UP, UP AND AWAY

In what seems like a matter of seconds, we are ready for takeoff, scrambling into the basket in a bid to get airborne in time for sunrise.

The balloon gradually rises as Kollar fires up again and again. First a few centimetres, then a few metres then ascending at a rapidly increasing pace until it's clear that any chance of escape is gone and we're in it for the long haul.

The excitement of take-off over, I'm looking forward to a peaceful flight over the parched landscape, surveying the dunes from above. ▶

FUN FACTS

- The first tethered hot air balloon ride with passengers took place in October 1783 at the Folie Titon in Paris. It was the mastermind of Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier, Jean-Baptiste Réveillon and Giroud de Villette
- The first free flight with human passengers was in November 1783, also in Paris
- There are approximately 7,500 hot air balloons in the US alone
- The world record for the highest hot air balloon flight was set on November 26th, 2005, by Vijaypat Singhania from India who reached a thrilling 21,027 metres
- On January 15th, 1991, the Virgin Pacific Flyer balloon completed the longest hot air balloon flight when Per Lindstrand and Richard Branson flew 7,671.91km from Japan to Northern Canada

But I'm not banking on Peter's alternative plans for a spot of 'contour flying', "where the balloon follows the shape of the land but stays as close to the ground as possible without actually crashing," he laughs pointing to the looming red dunes ahead.

Our smiles fade when we realise just how close to the contours

Meanwhile, the sun is rising quickly, bursting over the mountains in a moment – its orange disk illuminating the dusky desert landscape. Although the vista is still a little hazy, I can now appreciate the full scope of the view. One glance shows a smattering of Bedouin villages and camel enclosures.

"You see why this is such a great place to go ballooning," Peter says.

Between blasts from the propane, a calm silence descends on the balloon. Everyone has been drawn into the calming peace. There's not a sound to be heard, not even the rumble of distant traffic.

But I soon get an inkling of how quickly we are actually moving. We had reached a speed of 34km per hour, a testament to

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of the huge dune in front of us Kollar intends to get. Metre by metre, we skim the climbing slope, almost, but never touching the sandy incline. Although assured of our safety, I can't help but feel a glimmer of adrenaline and fear when I see just how close we are.

Moments later, we peacefully sail past the summit of the dune and continue to ascend until the beauty of the desert 1,000 metres below, is laid out in front of us.

"There are so many different things to see, plus the awesome beauty of the desert, which is very difficult to appreciate from the ground."

As we admire the scenery from the edge of the basket, I glance down and see two herds of racing camels being put through their paces over the sandy tracks way below.

Dressed in blue jackets, the ships of the desert cut a striking figure as they trot along the path at the behest of their trainers.

Peter's expert guidance and the firm breeze blowing us along.

We catch sight of a few early risers who wave enthusiastically and we faintly make out their welcoming tidings of 'as-salaam alaykom' floating up from the ground far below. Many are tending to their camels in the outdoor enclosures, the calm creatures barely paying attention to the noise of the burner as it fires up and the stares of the balloon's passengers. ▶





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DESERT DESCENT

The time to descend comes around quicker than I thought and the haze makes it difficult to ascertain the precise location of our desired landing point. So Peter puts in a bit of guesswork and steers us to the left where the harder sand is perfect for landing. "If you land in soft sand, you can get yourself into trouble. You might not get out again," he warns.

With a few short radio messages to let the ground crew know where we are going to touch down, Peter indicates it is now time for us to adopt the landing positions he'd taught us earlier in the flight.

Strangely enough, I've been a little worried about this. Gliding hundreds of metres above the ground had felt completely safe, but now we are descending rapidly, I have a few qualms about a very undignified exit.

My fears are ungrounded, however, as we touch down with nothing more than a small jolt and a couple of shakes to either side before the basket settles firmly on the ground. And with that, the flight is over and we are back on terra firma. One short scarp over the wicker frame and I am free to watch in awe as they open the



top of the envelope and it slowly deflates as all the hot air seeps out.

Cold refreshments are hurriedly laid out on a table – a welcome sight to all as we recognise how thirsty we are. Sipping my drink, I suddenly realise that I've had a wonderful experience and it isn't 8am yet!

A rare achievement for most, we are even handed certificates, personally signed by Peter, to prove it. Then, after a short hiatus, we all troop back onto the minibus and set off back to Dubai, sleepy but exhilarated by the morning's excitement. ■

For more information, call Balloon Adventures Emirates on 04 2854949 or visit www.ballooning.ae

