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# Such a very fragile beauty

**The refuse-strewn desert** between Sharjah and Dubai forced a balloon tour company to switch its operations to Al Ain. 'From the air, instead of pristine desert we would see blackened campfire sites surrounded by a 30-metre circle of rubbish,' says one pilot. **Anna Seaman reports**

**"It's clean"**  
—TE Lawrence (*Lawrence of Arabia*)  
on being asked what attracted him to the desert.

AL AIN // Winds change, temperatures fluctuate and the desert sands shift. But the one thing Peter Kollar knows he can rely on is the sun.

"Don't worry, ladies and gentlemen," he said cheerfully as he fired the propane-fed plume of flames to heat the air that would lift the basket with his passengers into the dusky, predawn sky. "The sun will rise. It does so every day."

Watching it come up over the Hajar mountains in Oman from a balloon floating one kilometre above the undulating dunes of the Al Ain desert is all in a day's work for Mr Kollar, 47, a hot-air balloon pilot who set up shop in Dubai six years ago.

The natural beauty of the desert, he said, was a sight many people in the UAE have never experienced.

"Although we are in the heart of Arabia, a lot of people in Dubai and Abu Dhabi wouldn't even know this place is here," he said. "We want to spread awareness and allow people to appreciate the country they are living in."

There is a subtext to all this: pollution. From his vantage point, Mr Kollar has been a pained witness to the gradual accumulation of waste scattered across the sand.

Mr Kollar started his company, Balloon Adventures Emirates, in 2003. With his team of four pilots, he used to conduct daily flights over a patch of desert between Dubai and Sharjah, but last year litter on the ground compelled him to switch his focus to Al Ain.

"It got to the point where anywhere we landed in the dunes was

**Although we are in the heart of Arabia, a lot of people in Dubai and Abu Dhabi wouldn't even know this place is here**

Peter Kollar Balloon Adventures Emirates

like a rubbish dump. From the air, instead of pristine desert we would see blackened campfire sites surrounded by a 30-metre wide circle of cans, bottles and even sun chairs that people had just dumped. Customers began to complain."

Mr Kollar emphasised that his indignation at the impact of so much careless pollution went far beyond a few disgruntled customers.

"The desert is a fragile ecosystem," he said, "and it is very easy to upset it. Rubbish does not rot away and there is no vegetation to hide it. It is not only an eyesore, it is very detrimental."

Dr Ulrich Wernery, the scientific director at Central Veterinary Research Laboratories, Dubai, who has written three extensive papers on desert pollution, said the problem was getting worse.

"Twenty years ago we never saw plastic in the desert. Now it collects in the valleys made by the high dunes, swirling in the wind like a plastic soup. The damage to the environment is huge.

"I'd estimate nearly every second animal found dead in the desert has a ball of hardened plastic in its stomach that contributed to its death. Hundreds of camels and gazelles die each year because of it."

Dr Wernery said that from the balloon Mr Kollar would have a greater perception of the problem.

"I only see the litter from the ground, but from the sky they can see much larger areas. I expect they see that the whole country is turning into a rubbish tip."

Mr Kollar said he saw part of his job as getting the message across that the desert is as much of an asset to the UAE as oil.

"In the long term, this is the only sustainable asset we have here," he said.

"People come to the UAE to see the landscape; desert safaris are the most popular tourist activity in Dubai. No matter how many skyscrapers and glitzy buildings they build, they have to look after the desert."

Mr Kollar began flying his balloons over the Al Ain area in April. Until last week he only offered tours out of Dubai, but now the company minibuses collect customers from Abu Dhabi every morning at 4.30 to arrive in Al Ain for the Dh950 sunrise flights.

At 40m high, the multicoloured balloons are some of the largest in the world, and when loaded with the capacity of 24 passengers, they weigh 3,000kg, including the five 80-litre propane tanks needed for the one-hour flight. They can rise and fall at speeds of up to 600 feet per minute and travel at between 10 and 15kph. "It might not seem very fast but we cover quite some distance," said Mr Kollar.

The time shortly before dawn is the coolest time of the day, which is why the flights leave so early. "Cold air is heavier, therefore it doesn't move and there is less wind. As the sun warms the air, it circulates more



Boundless and bare, the sands stretch far away as a balloon glides over the Abu Dhabi desert. Sammy Dallal / The National



Peter Kollar prepares a balloon for flight, blowing hot air into the canopy. Sammy Dallal / The National



Rubbish dumped in the Liwa desert near the Saudi border. Courtesy CVRL, Dubai.

quickly, the wind picks up and the balloon is more difficult to control," said Mr Kollar.

As there were no maps of the Al Ain area when Mr Kollar began flying there, he and his team spent three weeks in vehicles using GPS navigation to make their own.

With names such as Water Pipeline Road, Helicopter Lake and Parellel Road, the maps are simple

but helpful to the pilots, who steer using ropes to open vents in the sides of the balloons.

Hay-making farms and settlements lie to the north, the Jebel Hafeet mountain can be seen due south, the sun rises in the east and the haze of the night disappears to the west.

Often wild gazelles and camels can be spotted running across the dunes, which look like rippling

waves of the sea. An ancient sea bed, a large space of flat land, clearly visible from the sky is often used by local people to fly and train their falcons and many Emiratis regularly come to exercise their horses.

"When ballooning you are as close to nature as you can get," said Mr Kollar.

Sir Wilfred Thesiger, the British explorer who made several long

journeys by camel with the Bedouin tribes of Arabia, said "how terribly boring it would be to rush about this country in a car".

Mr Kollar couldn't agree more: "From the air, the desert looks completely different."

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